

Wristcutters brings comic flair and visual contrast to world of the dead

You have to delve deep into your imagination to find enough comic relief in suicide to make a humorous love story about it, but that's exactly what director Goran Dukic and cinematographer Vanja Cernjul have done.

Wristcutters was one of two films lensed by Cernjul that was featured in the main competition at the Sundance Film Festival this year. It follows characters who commit suicide and find themselves in a world that's much like ours, yet "just a little bit worse," as one of them describes. They continue to struggle to solve the same problems they had in life.

Cernjul met Dukic in the 1990s while the two were students together at the Academy of Dramatic Arts in Zagreb, Croatia. "He was a star student," Cernjul recalls. "After his thesis film, he was declared the future of Croatian film."

Fast-forward a decade, and they are both toiling in the world of independent film in the United States. Dukic, who wrote the script based on Etgar Keret's novella 'Kneller's Happy Campers', originally wanted to capture the afterworld on color infrared film. But as the production approached, he and Cernjul decided the logistical challenges of shooting infrared film in the desert were too great.

Instead, they opted for a drab, under-saturated look that was created in a digital intermediate (DI) suite at FotoKem in Burbank, California.

"The more we digested the story, the more we realized that the differences between the world of the living and the afterworld had to be more subtle than originally intended," Cernjul explains. "A more realistic environment worked better with the magical realism of the story."

After initial tests in Fotokem's DI theatre they brought production designer Linda Sena and costume designer Erica Nicotra into the planning process, to replace some props and costumes with brightly colored alternatives emphasizing primary colors. Later, when the scenes were desaturated in the DI, the process yielded a half-dead look with only isolated accents of bright color.

The movie was shot in six weeks largely in the California desert. Cernjul kept lighting to a minimum. "We were simply moving too fast. We rarely spent more than one day on the same location and we were scouting for new locations as we were shooting," he says. His film palette included three Kodak VISION2 color negative films in Super 16 format, 7212 100T and 7205 250D for day exteriors and 7218 500T for night and interior scenes. It was composed in 1.85:1 aspect ratio.

"We were going for a feeling of urban decay," Cernjul says. "We worked with a lot of utilitarian light sources, including various kinds of fluorescents, tungstens and mercury vapor, all with different color temperatures, and just let the colors collide. We thought that in the world that was populated with people who committed suicide no one would concern themselves with pleasant lighting."

Other visual cues to the difference between the two worlds had to do with movement. In the world of the living, there is ample camera movement as well as motion within the frame. In the afterworld the compositions were more static and geometrical.

In addition, the world of the living was depicted with a wider-angle perspective, using Cooke 21-35mm S4 prime lenses on an ARRI SR-3 camera. In the afterlife, they used 40-60mm S4 prime lenses.

Cernjul started the project in pre-production, by communicating with the production designer and the makeup artist Sherri Simmons through visual references — typically paintings and photographs. "It's a good way to create a visual vocabulary with the director," he notes. "I've always liked using paintings as a reference. I find it especially valuable today with the DI process, which you can compare to the process of painting." ■



PHOTO: MIKE BRODERSON

Left: (L to R): DP Vanja Cernjul, Director Goran Dukic, and first AC Emily Mackley preparing to shoot a scene for *Wristcutters*.

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"Because we knew we were going to do a DI, we wanted as much latitude as possible to keep our options open," Cernjul says. "We knew that in a harshly lit desert exterior, we could record subtle details in both the highlights and shadows with the VISION2 films."

He says that some of the more visually interesting scenes feature an urban afterlife environment, shot in an industrial area of downtown Los Angeles.