American Cinematographer

**Fincher
and Savides
Play *The Game***

***Cop Land* Adapts
Western Aesthetic**

Plus: *The Peacemaker, Kiss the Girls*

San Francisco entrepreneur Nicholas Van Orton (Michael Douglas) examines a mysterious harlequin that marks his enrollment in a bizarre and manipulative game.

After scaring moviegoers out of their wits with the inventive and highly successful chiller *Seven* (see *AC* October '95), director David Fincher sought a follow-up project that would subvert the public's expectations. The resulting film, *The Game*, is another existential foray into the dark side of the human psyche, but Fincher's latest tale eschews serial killers for "suits."

The picture stars Michael Douglas as wealthy San Francisco entrepreneur Nicholas Van Orton, who is drawn into a bizarre string of events after receiving a unique present from his estranged brother Conrad (Sean Penn). Conrad's gift launches the elder Van Orton's unwitting enrollment in a mysteriously orchestrated "adventure game" ostensibly designed to instigate positive, life-changing realizations. The game's participants are thrust into a series of manufactured scenarios within their real lives, to the point where they can-

not be sure which events are authentic and which result from the strange machinations of CRS (Consumer Recreation Services), the adventure's sometimes sadistic organizers. As he is manipulated, tested, and deceived, Nicholas soon discovers that the real purpose of the game may not be personal enlightenment, but something far more sinister.

"*The Game* is not a big action movie," Fincher asserts. "It is much more of an intrigue movie. There are no big plane crashes in this film. If the movie is about anything, it's about loss of control. We wanted to create an experience for the audience that didn't *seem* contrived, even though it *is* quite contrived. What we've come up with is a very different take on the idea of 'old money' and wealth. It definitely ain't *Dynasty*!"

Fincher began working in the film industry in the early Eighties as a visual effects technician at

Industrial Light & Magic. He then went on to direct a slew of memorable and influential music videos for such artists as Madonna, Paula Abdul, Aerosmith, and the Rolling Stones. Fincher also gained valuable experience on commercial shoots, honing his eye while mastering a variety of cinematic tools and techniques. He made his first foray into the feature film arena with the visually accomplished *Alien3*, and then burst into prominence with *Seven*.

"I have a philosophy about the two extremes of filmmaking," says Fincher. "The first is the 'Kubrick way,' where you're at the end of an alley in which four guys are kicking the shit out of a wino. Hopefully, the audience members will know that such a scenario is morally wrong, even though it's not presented as if the viewer is the one being beaten up; it's more as if you're witnessing an event. Inversely, there's the

'Spielberg way,' where you're dropped into the middle of the action and you're going to live the experience vicariously — not only through what's happening, but through the emotional flow of what people are saying. It's a much more involved style. I find myself attracted to both styles at different times, but mostly I'm interested in just presenting something and letting people decide for themselves what they want to look at.

"I look for patterns in coverage, and for ways to place the

Playing for Keeps on *The Game*

Director David Fincher and cinematographer Harris Savides lend their talents to the chilling tale of a very sinister corporation.

by Christopher Probst

camera to see what you need to see, from as far away as possible," he continues. "I try to remain semi-detached; I want to present the material without becoming too involved. I'll say to myself, 'Am I getting too involved in the action? Am I presenting this to someone who's uninitiated to these people, and doesn't want to be in the middle of this argument? Maybe we should be doing over-the-shoulders, as if the spectator is experiencing the scene after returning from the water cooler.' My [visual] approach comes from a more voyeuristic place."

In selecting a cinematographer to help him achieve first-class visuals for *The Game*, Fincher chose New York-based director of photography Harris Savides. The duo had previously collaborated on several commercials, and also on the striking title sequence and second-unit work for *Seven* (which was photographed by Darius Khondji, AFC). "I knew I wasn't going to have a lot of time to get involved with the lighting on *The Game*; which is something I normally love to meddle in," says Fincher. "This was an all-encompassing movie for me. A lot of thought had to be given to a number of different elements, because every scene is filled with three or four different [narrative] lies. We had to constantly balance all of the different lies we were telling, which can become enormously confusing.

"Harris is one of a handful of people in the world to whom I could say, 'Well, you know what to do, so just do what *you'd* do...' I have that much faith in him. It's also a lot of fun to be around him and to watch him work; he's incredibly responsible. When he tells you how long it's going to take to light a shot, that's how long it's going to take. I needed someone that I could trust, so I could walk away [from a setup], come back later, and say, 'Wow, that's beautiful, let's shoot it.' *The Game* was a great opportunity to give Harris a big canvas to work with, and I think the richness of the movie is a tribute to his ability to make things look beautiful. I'd love for people to see this movie and appreciate how much work went into making it look as if *very little* work went into it."

For Savides, the project represented the chance to expand his feature film resume on a prestigious $50 million project — just a year after earning his first studio feature film credit on director Phil Joanou's *Heaven's Prisoners*. Prior to his big-screen debut, Savides had established himself as one of the most prolific and talented cinematographers working in the realm of commercials and music videos. The cameraman studied film at the School of Visual Arts in New York, but was enticed into the still photography world after taking several still courses as part of his film curriculum.

After graduating, Savides assisted several still photographers in New York before moving to Milan and Paris to put together a portfolio of his own photography.

Returning to the United States, Savides became involved in music video production, his cinematography catching the attention of several prominent music video directors. The cameraman soon found himself shooting for directors like Ridley Scott, Mark Romanek, Jeff Priess and Fincher.

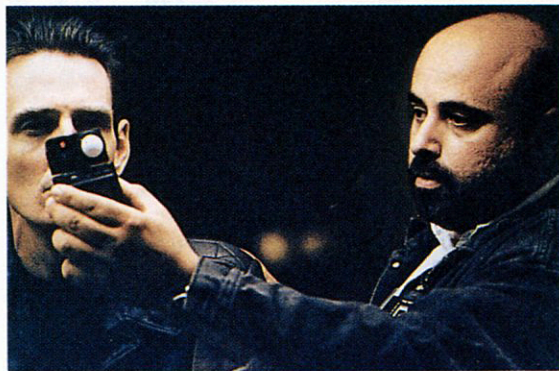Given *The Game*'s tension-packed narrative — and the mounting complexity and outra-

geousness of the events that occur in the story — Fincher and Savides decided early on to ground the film with a very realistic look. "We wanted Nicholas Van Orton's world to be very rich and supple," Fincher submits. "We talked about films like *Being There* and *The God-father*, both of which present these very beautiful worlds that have [a sinister side under the surface]. In our film, things start to get out of control when Van Orton leaves his pristine world. We would let fluorescents, neon signs and other lights in the background be *seven* stops overexposed. When we shot the night exteriors, we weren't so concerned about balancing those lights; we let things get a bit wilder out in the real world.

"We also talked about 'white' night as opposed to 'blue' night, and the idea of a night where things go into deep blacks and shadows. In some scenes, people run out of little pools of light and just disappear, because there's no edge light on them. We wanted to create the type of feeling you get when you park your car three blocks from your house at night and then have to walk down the street. In that situation, you invariably look over your shoulder, because it's dark. We wanted a night look that felt real, with uncorrected practical sources. We'd have sources like sodium-vapors, metal-

halides and mercury-vapors all mixed together to produce certain colors. But if we were going to pick up the exposure on somebody, even at three stops underexposed — we had keys at 2 ½ to three stops under for a good deal of the film — we used white night. We were trying to find a look that was neutral, without trying to make a statement about it — 'Okay, this is what night looks like.' In this picture, night is night, and practicals are practicals. Even if all of the tubes in a parking structure were green, we didn't change them; we just shot them the way they were. We even brought some metal-halides along on the truck, so we

could just tape them up whenever we wanted. There's nothing like the blue-green look that you get from them; you can gel lights all you want, but it just doesn't look the same. There's a certain hideousness to them, a frequency that just feels different."

Savides notes, "David wanted this film to look somewhat banal. We didn't want to use Xenons to go for a very modern, slick look; we tried to be a bit subtler. We wanted the film to look very natural and real, and I feel that the nights in the picture do look like nights.

"In essence, we wanted to maintain a sense of reality in the look of the film so that audiences would believe what was happening in the story. This was a big-budget movie, but we made a conscious decision to keep things simple, with no tricky stuff. Of course, we were both terrified that this approach might be boring! David and I both have a full bag of tricks, and sometimes we'd begin asking ourselves, 'What did we do? Did we make a boring-looking movie?' I hope our decision to hold back a bit lends the film a certain dignity. I wanted to tell the story without drawing undue attention to the lighting."

The filmmakers shot *The Game* in Super 35, with a special-centered Super 35 ground-glass — as opposed the standard common-topline configuration. Savides worked with Panavision cameras and Primo lenses, while his stocks of choice were Eastman Kodak Vision 320T (5277) for daytime interior and exteriors, and Vision 500T (5279) for nighttime scenes.

After conducting extensive tests in prep, the duo also decided to make Technicolor's ENR printing process an integral part of the film's look. Both Fincher and Savides had done some work with similar silver retention/silver additive processes, such as Deluxe's bleach-bypass CCE process, which was used on some select prints of *Seven*. "The ENR gives you a look that's a bit more supple," Fincher explains. "It tends to lend a smoother look to things that have blown out at the highlight end — where you'd pick up grain and get

Van Orton lunches with brother Conrad (Sean Penn), and receives the gift that will forever change his life. Says Fincher, "We shot that scene with as much available light as possible. The actors were keyed with just a 2.5K Par through a 4' x 4' frame of diffusion." Planning for the eventual loss of ambient daylight, the filmmakers photographed wide shots and all of the angles facing the windows first, then were able to continue filming into the evening by matching the lighting for the reverses and close-ups.

this sort of 'emulsion tearing.' You get a much smoother look at both the high and low ends. There are a lot of night sequences in *The Game*, and I didn't want them to be milky. One of the byproducts of massive underexposure is that a print starts to get milky in the blacks, but the ENR will hold the blacks for you; you're not as radically aware of the underexposure. We often shot night scenes with a key light that was 2 ½ stops underexposed, but we would still be printing in the high 30s."

To extend the range of the film's latitude for night scenes, Savides chose to flash the Vision 500 stock by five percent, either in-camera with a Panaflasher or at Technicolor. He rated his metering at ASA 500. Extensive testing was also performed to lock in a series of printer-light numbers for the various day or night scenes so that the filmmakers could readily see any variances in their efforts. Additionally, the filmmakers screened printed dailies which incorporated 60 percent ENR as a baseline. "Locking in our printer numbers told us that any exposure mistakes were strictly on my end. If the lab is over there correcting for the variances, you don't know what's going on; you cancel each other out. If our dailies came back too blue or too dark, we could ask, 'What happened here? Did we screw up and

underexpose?' Of course, the numbers change when you time the film, but at least we were able to sleep at night. It was certainly better than the alternative: one day you get dailies and they look fine, but the next day, they don't look good, so you panic, call the lab and tell them to make it brighter. Then

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>
> —Harris Savides

they come back too bright, and you don't know what's going on."

Fincher adds, "I find it distressing that you have to convince a studio to give you the extra money to get prints to look the way they should look. Paying more to get a print that has good blacks

is kind of criminal; we should be getting that anyway. When you're looking at a black area on your print, it should be black, not dark gray. If I were a lab man and it was my job to make a release print look as good as it could, I don't think I would say, 'Well, here's the normal printing technique, and here's the really good stuff.' Why should you pay extra for the good stuff if you're processing at Technicolor? They're supposed to be the best! Why are we paying more for ENR when it just makes Technicolor look better? After all, that's the purpose of this technology. Our experiences with Technicolor on this film were really good — probably the best I've had with any lab — but I'd like to see everyone become more involved with the quality of the images.

"I've shot Panavision exclusively for about 10 years now," the director continues. "And when we went to them, we told them that we didn't want to have to black the camera out every time we shot through a window. As a result, they gave us a black Platinum and a black GII, which is something they normally never do. That's what this industry should be about."

The Game was shot on a 92-day schedule, with extensive location work done in San Francisco. The picture incorporates such landmarks as the famous Filoli estate in Woodside, the Sheraton Palace hotel, the Presidio, and the city's bustling financial district. The production also shot in Mexicali, Mexico, and on several soundstages in Los Angeles. Fincher comments, "A lot of people choose not to shoot in San Francisco's financial district because it's difficult. Thousands of people move in and out of the area every day, so you can't shut down the streets, and it's very hard to maneuver around. But I love the district's old-money, Wall Street vibe, so we shot there on weekends. And since we were in San Francisco, we had those great hills and cable-car tracks. The setting combines beautiful old stone buildings, small streets, and the hills; the class system is represented pictorially. To capture even more of that old-money

world, we set a lot of scenes in restaurants with hardwood paneling and lots of red leather. Michael Douglas' character lives in a mansion on top of a hill, so he has to go *down* into the city; in many ways, the movie is about descent."

Savides adds, "We kept Michael Douglas' character darker in the beginning of the film, shooting him in top-light to hide his eyes. Van Orton undergoes a metamorphosis during the course of the film, so we kept him a bit hidden while showing everyone else. We gave him more light later in the story, as he became a new person."

After establishing the tone and look of the film, the filmmakers began defining their style of coverage, as well as the positioning and movement of the camera. "David is very clear about what he wants, and he has a great eye," Savides attests. "I've learned a lot from him. He's not like a lot of other directors, who sometimes let their cinematographers run away with things. He has very definite ideas about the camerawork."

To maintain their restrained visual design for the film, the filmmakers decided to shoot as quickly and efficiently as possible. "The location shooting had an almost documentary edge to it," says Fincher. "We often went with small equipment, because a lot of the location work in San Francisco involved going up flights of stairs. In many situations, we used smaller dollies, such as the Fisher 11, and smaller lighting units, like Kino Flos. We didn't want to spend all day loading equipment into a location. Also, we basically used just three different lenses — the 27mm, 40mm and 75mm — for the entire movie. The 27mm was really the *lens du jour*; I fell in love with it on *Seven*, because of its neutrality. It has a wide-angle feel, but it doesn't stretch faces. The 24mm is just a bit too wide, and it's not a Primo."

Elaborating on this point, Savides says, "The limited lens palette was a discipline that David imposed on the project, but it really gave the film a consistency. We did use other lenses when we needed to, but very rarely; we didn't even have a 50mm on the show! I feel that the lenses you select creates a kind of language for a film. The choices we made just felt good. The 75mm, for example, is a classic close-up lens. [Using just a few lenses] is also a nice way to shoot because you don't have to deal with a mix of lenses — super-wide-

Van Orton's childhood at his wealthy father's mansion. Fincher and Savides wanted the sequence to look distinctly different than the rest of the film, so they shot Van Orton's "memories" on 16mm VNF 7240 color reversal film, a 125 ASA tungsten stock. Fincher explains, "We wanted a sort of over-exposed look that was a bit uncontrolled in terms of contrast. We took the 16mm flashback footage, which was shot in a 'run-and-gun' style with a couple of Bolexes, and blew it up to 35mm [although scenes in which framing was critical were executed with a 16mm Panaflex fitted with a custom ground-glass]. We then struck multiple prints which we bleached, left out in the sun and/or scratched in different combinations. To make the flashbacks look almost like archival footage, we then assembled different cuts."

Above: *Van Orton discovers that his home has been vandalized by graffiti artists. The Filoli mansion's interiors were doused in UV paint by the production and graffiti artist Vince Moisden. The paint was then illuminated with several Black Moon UV fixtures and multiple on-screen Wall-O-Light banks equipped with Super Blue Kino Flo bluesceen bulbs.* **Right:** *Van Orton finds peaceful sanctuary in his library, prior to the room's Day-Glo transformation.*

angles and so on. We didn't have to constantly figure out which lens we needed; the 27mm went on the camera, and we started working with it. If it didn't work, we put something wider on, but that happened very rarely."

This less-is-more aesthetic extended to other elements of the production as well. "I prefer shooting with a single camera," Fincher notes. "Naturally, we brought out more cameras for the few scenes involving stunts, but when you use multiple cameras [all the time], everybody becomes focused on coordinating things rather than achieving a [clear] point of view. Coordination is the most difficult and time-consuming aspect of filmmaking.

"We tried to stage scenes as simply as possibly," he continues. "If we shot a conversation at a table, we wanted the scene to be about what the characters were saying, not about the camera. When you shoot a scene like that with multiple cameras, you run the risk of boring people with coverage. When an audience sees a new shot every three or four seconds, they get used to the specific cutting patterns. If you give viewers one angle, it forces them to pay attention, and it can create an interesting tension. By not cutting away, you


can make them feel a certain type of anxiety. In a movie where you're trying to subvert people's expectations, ideas like that are key."

Savides agrees that simpler methods can produce interesting effects. "I'm always trying to get away with one light source," he says. "I always get frustrated when you can't do that because of the camera or the actors' movement. I've never approached photography from a technical point of view, but instead from a visceral place."

The Game opens with flashback footage from Nicholas

A match dissolve was used to create a transition from the face of the adolescent Van Orton to that of Michael Douglas. The filmmakers used the interior of his house, shot within the Filoli mansion, to visually establish Van Orton's elegant lifestyle. Detailing his lighting approach, Savides submits, "We tried to make Filoli seem very natural. A case in point is a scene in which Van Orton wakes up in his bedroom and answers the phone. We lit that shot from outside the windows with 12Ks through 1000H paper, adding a
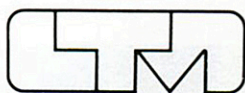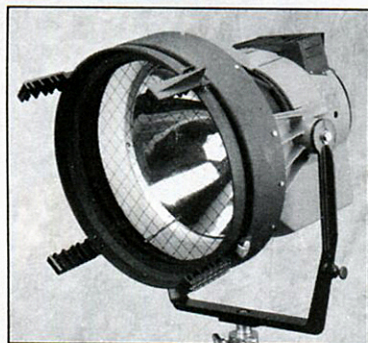
After finding himself dumped in Mexico, Van Orton treks home in a dilapidated transit vehicle. Savides had gaffer Claudio Miranda and key grip Michael Coo rig multiple Maxi-Brutes on top of the bus. The duo also hung sheets of Luann along each side of the the bus to provide bounce.

couple of Kino Flos [inside] for fill."

Savides' gaffer, Claudio Miranda, further details the cinematographer's overall approach. "We used a lot of 6' x 6' or 12' x 12' double bounces to get a soft key," Miranda reveals. "We'd aim nine-lights into muslin, and then bounce the light back through a light grid or another piece of muslin. Harris actually preferred muslin bounced through muslin, which we used in the bedroom scene at the beginning of the film. We'd just box the frames in [to control spill from the large bounce source] and then add a Kino Flo for fill. We basically tried to motivate the lighting as often as we could from practical sources like windows or lamps, and we kept things pretty monochromatic for both day and night scenes. We didn't want colors to pop out."

The plot of *The Game* begins to unfurl when Van Orton meets his younger brother for lunch at an elegant restaurant and receives a certificate for the CRS game. The scene was shot on location in San Francisco in an empty space that was transformed by production designer Jeffrey Beecroft (*Stop Making Sense, Dances With Wolves, 12 Monkeys*). While planning a wide-angle shot of the

restaurant interior during a location scout, Fincher discovered that the use of his favored 27mm lens would require some adjustments. "The shot shows Michael Douglas and Sean Penn at their table," he relates. "The 27mm made them seem far away from each other, which is what we intended, but the distance appeared to be so great that we needed a smaller table. During the scout, I brought a camera with me so I could kind of set up the action with the location scout, Rick Schuller. When we set up that particular shot, we realized that we needed a 29-inch table as opposed the 54-inch table. We also did a lot of light studies at the locations. When we found a location that we liked, Rick would take photos of all four walls every 15 minutes throughout the day, so we'd have an idea of what we would be seeing."

During the lunch scene, Van Orton's brother manages to convince him to visit the offices of the seemingly elite CRS corporation. In designing the company's interiors, the filmmakers chose to depart from the sumptuous woodgrain look of 'old money' San Francisco, instead creating a more modern, antiseptic look. "We definitely wanted that part of the film to be more slick," says Fincher.

Savides decided to use extensive top-lighting to lend CRS an appropriately institutional vibe. The company's glass and black marble foyer was lit in a sleek style reminiscent of a high-end car com-

For a stunt involving a taxi that plummets into San Francisco Bay, Savides used a custom 40' x 40' moon-box "because of the nature of the stunt, and because we were filming with multiple cameras. My key grip, Michael Coo, rigged lights in the strangest places and made them work." Adds Miranda, "The moon-box had about 25 space lights in it and was suspended off a 100' construction crane. Harris didn't want to make a source out of it, he just wanted to build up the ambience."
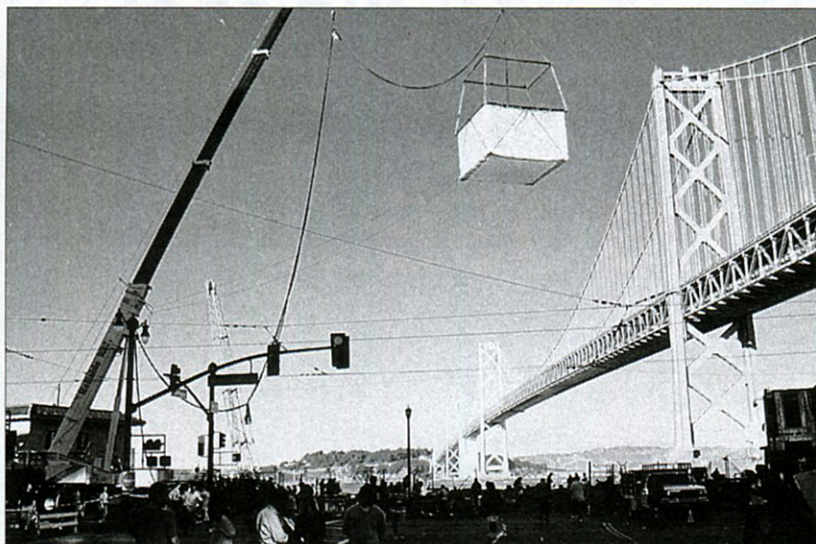
mercial. Gaffer Miranda says that the filmmakers used "12 space lights [in three-by-four rows] over the main entryway, aimed through muslin, to create the look of overhead fluorescent panels. In the hallways, we used double Kino Flo banks behind the panelings.

"For the CRS office interiors, we used 18 Maxi-brutes shining into a 10' x 50' muslin, which provided a 45-degree top light bouncing down into the set through a window. The bounce was hung above a TransLight, and the Maxi-Brutes were on top of the set walls — just above the windows, aimed toward the muslin. The bounce served as a source through the windows, and also provided a nice sheen on the polished floors."

Van Orton meets with a CRS representative, but later begins to detect the subversive intentions that lurk beneath the firm's polished presentation. After discovering that his telephones are tapped and that his every move is under surveillance, Van Orton realizes that CRS has engineered an intricately orchestrated conspiracy to undermine his very existence. Nothing that happens to him can be taken as coincidence, driving him to the brink of a mental collapse.

Van Orton's troubled psyche nearly reaches the breaking point when he returns to his home and finds the expansive interior strewn with glow-in-the-dark graffiti. Surprisingly, this scene was also filmed at the Filoli mansion. The filmmakers hired graffiti artist Vince Moisden to spray the walls with Wildfire UV paint, and used several Black Moon UV lights to illuminate the Day-Glo colors. (The production later paid to have the mansion's interior repainted to its original, pristine condition.) "We used the Black Moon lights in combination with Super-Blue Kino Flo bulbs," Savides explains. "We wanted the black light to come up
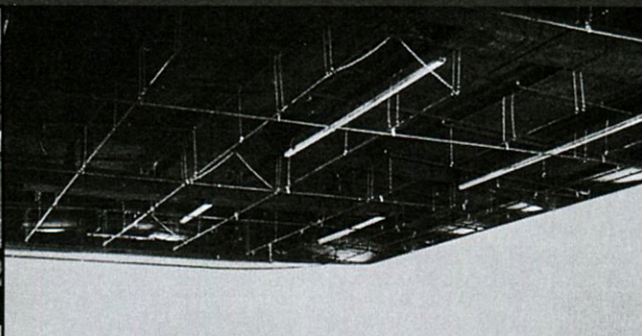
almost instantly as Michael Douglas walks into the room. In order to create the full effect, Claudio [Miranda] had to have special scrollers made for the UV lights."

Miranda says, "We used scrollers because David wanted the lights to come on quickly. You can't do that with UV lights, because they use a special halide lamp which takes a long time to warm up. We had a special green gel that basically blocked out the ultraviolet light transmission from the lamps. I made scroll patterns that had 'stutters' in them, so they would look as if they were coming on [in stages]. To get the actual coloring of the room, we used Kino Flo bluescreen tubes. We tried to use colored gels on tungstens, but the Kino Flos seemed to work best."

One noteworthy technique which will probably go unnoticed was the filmmakers' use of rear-screen projection for key driving scenes. Determined to avoid producing footage that screamed "process," Fincher broke with a few conventions in his approach to filming both the background plates
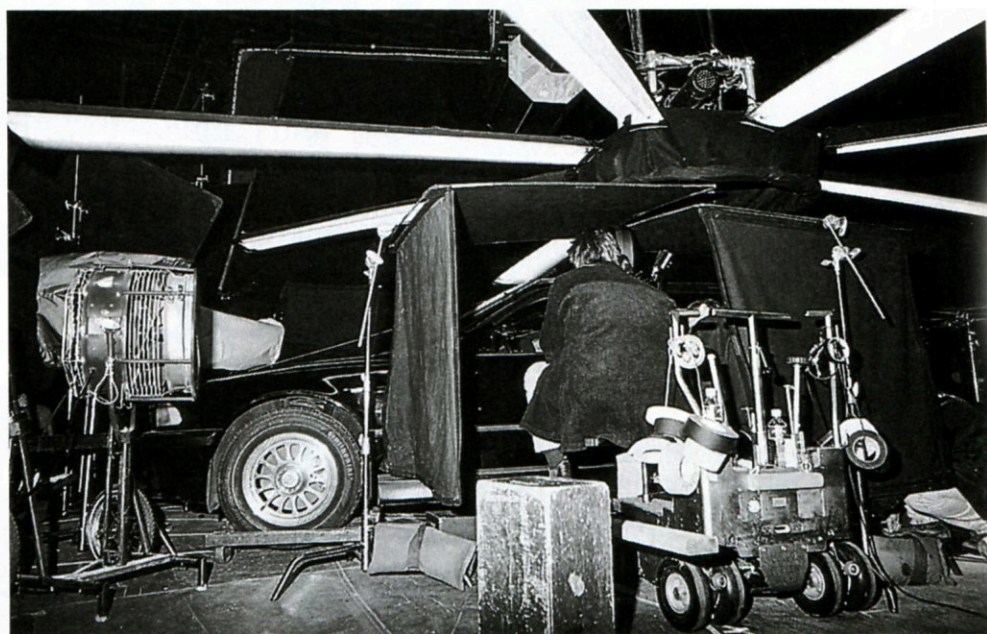
and the screen itself. "We shot VistaVision plates with Gyrosphere stabilization at about 28 miles an hour and 12 fps," says the director. "We didn't necessarily use the same focal-length lenses to shoot both the plates and the actors in the car, but we tried to match the focus. If Michael was going to be

54" away, we shot the plates at 54"; that way, the background was presoftened. In doing it that way instead of just defocusing at the rear screen projector, the physics worked much better. The size of the circles of confusion in the background just snapped in perfectly. You can throw a rear screen out of

Miranda's intricate rear-projection rig enabled the filmmakers to produce some exceptional process footage.

focus, but you don't get the same dots of lights expanding the way you do when you shoot the plate out of focus. To light the actors, Claudio built this bizarre rig that had all of these Vari-Lites shooting into mirrors and stuff."

"That was probably the most complicate and expensive rig I've ever built," Miranda recalls with a laugh. "We basically built a helicopter-like contraption on top of the car. The 'rotor blades' were 8'-long Kino Flo tubes extending from either side of a 2' center; we used a brushless motor system to spin the Kino Flos and get the effect of fluorescent lights passing overhead. We originally rigged eight spokes, but ended up using just four of them to create a better light/dark effect as the blades were spinning overhead. Additionally, we had three 6'-long motorized drums, each of which had six 1' x 6' mirrored panels on them. We could angle and position those above the car with chain motors. On top of all that, we had two Vari-Lites four feet off the ground, three-quarters back from the rear projection side. Those were computer-controlled and timed to [coincide with the sources seen in] the background plate."
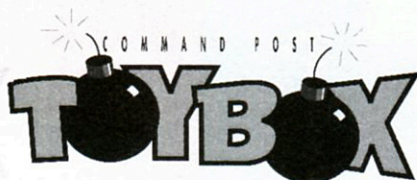
With a substantial portion of the film completed on the San Franciscan locations, the filmmakers then continued shooting on stages in Los Angeles — with sets constructed for the CRS corporation and Van Orton's office — before moving south of the border to Mexicali, Mexico to shoot pivotal scenes in which Van Orton is drugged and left for dead.

Fincher feels satisfied that he has produced a film laden with enough plot twists and ruses to keep audiences guessing, and hopes that by detailing the meticulous care that his crew brought to *The Game,* he can encourage other filmmakers to follow suit. "I think *American Cinematographer* is a forum where filmmakers can express and exchange ideas," he opines. "I'd like to use this article to urge people to do the best work they can." ◆