

PARANOID PARK: THE HOME FRONT

MEGAN RATNER REFLECTS ON THE TORPID ENVIRONMENT DEPICTED IN GUS VAN SANT'S LATEST DRAMA OF ADOLESCENT LIFE

Paranoid Park extends Gus Van Sant's ruminations on how American life affects the young. In tandem with his last two films, *Elephant* (2003) and *Last Days* (2005), *Paranoid Park* deals with life on the home front in a time of war. Whereas recent ordinary-youth-in-trouble films such as *Juno* and *Knocked Up* (both 2007) find soothing, audience-flattering answers that have a great deal in common with *Big* (1988)—adulthood gets tried on for inconsequent size, the effects all win-win—Van Sant focuses instead on violent undercurrents in everyday life; on what success means; on what defines a man, or at least a grown-up. A craving for deviant experiences is highlighted. It drives the two teens in *Elephant* to carry out a high-school shooting; in *Last Days*, it sends Blake (Michael Pitt) on a drug-induced trip to nowhere around his property (he makes vain attempts all through the film to connect with nature, to find some solace, but only the shotgun seems to give any comfort). Both the earlier films show young men living synthetic, disconnected lives of which the strangest aspect may well be the so-called normality that surrounds them. In *Paranoid Park*, this anodyne but suffocating environment serves as camouflage, even for manslaughter.

Quite faithfully though not chronologically adapted from Blake Nelson's 2006 novel of the same name, *Paranoid Park* revolves around the Never-Never Land skateboard community. Alex (Gabe Nevins), a Portland, Oregon skateboarder, inadvertently kills a railway security guard. The proximity of the killing to *Paranoid Park*, a rough pocket park beneath the Burnside Bridge, casts all the skaters at Alex's school as potential suspects. Alex admits to nothing. Struggling under the weight of knowledge for which teendom has no categories, Alex tries to square the ethics of his situation with what he assumes will be his fate if he confesses. His one real friend and the only person who picks up on a change in him is Macy (Lauren McKinney). Unwilling to make any demands



Gus Van Sant, Gabe Nevins, Lauren McKinney

Paranoid Park Courtesy MK2. Photo: Scott Green.

on him, she urges him to get his problems on paper. The film opens as he begins to write.

Van Sant jumbles the narrative to reflect the restive bursts in which Alex remembers and writes: "Paranoid Park was great. I could have sat there all night long watching the skaters and the girls and all the stuff goin' on. The only bad thing was I started thinking about other things. Like my parents." Alex narrates much of the film in speech so affectless that, even at times of emotion, his voice has the intonation and rhythm of small talk. Jump-cuts reinforce a generally hallucinatory atmosphere to the memories; they feel less like traditional movie hindsight and more like drug-induced flashbacks. Though Alex is probably drug-experienced, drugs are not part of the story. Yet as Alex glides through the chute-like hallways of his high school, the very walls seemingly about to fold in on him, or watches the gravity-resistant skaters rise and dip at *Paranoid Park*, the film reflects his own sense of watching what happened to him happen as if to someone else. In a world where almost everything has been photographed or videoed, it's difficult not to imagine life as one long movie. Van Sant adeptly conveys the provisional aspect of much of contemporary teenage life. The repetition



Remote adolescence

Paranoid Park. © 2007 MK2 Productions. DVD: Tartan Video (U.K.).

of certain scenes suggests that life for these young people is often little more than a series of good and less-good takes.

The skating sequences at *Paranoid* and beyond are often balletically slowed-down, soundtracked by French vocals, industrial sounds and birdcalls, among other acoustics. Juxtaposition of the skaters and the experimental music seems a little arty at first but references the interconnected, spongy world of the Web, where chronology and context matter less than coolness. In what is primarily a 35mm film, Van Sant and cinematographers Christopher Doyle and Rain Kathy Li mix in Super 8. The cuts from one stock to the other also call to mind the Internet hodge-podge and heighten the oneiric qualities without caving in to whimsy.

Skateboarding grew out of 1950s surfing. In many ways, mainstream culture portrays surfers and skaters as equally, even a bit dangerously, insubordinate. Skaters began on California sidewalks, but now subvert built environments anywhere, often appropriating marginalized, unused spaces. It is as much about doing as about watching; even a cell phone can capture the latest feat, the documentation part of the culture. Its denizens have a highly developed skill that means nothing in the adult world, their quest for perpetual motion a corollary to the Lost Boys feeling of *Paranoid Park*. These cast-offs, whose harrowing kin make Alex's divorcing-but-still-functioning parents seem almost consoling, are part of the generation of ahistorical youth, neither burdened by the past nor galvanized by the future.

An inexperienced skater, Alex tells his friend Jared (Jake Miller) he's not ready for the park. "Nobody's ever ready for *Paranoid Park*," he announces, the scene repeated twice in the film. In keeping with his general passivity, Alex perches on the sidelines, yet he's drawn to it even when Jared cancels plans for a second visit. Driving in his mother's car, he cycles through various music states, from hip-hop to classical, pausing for a fast-food fuel-up before he parks the car safely away from the action. It's only one of two scenes in the film when

Alex smiles, his face suddenly all boy, with no trace of the man-to-be.

He agrees to accompany an older fellow on a beer run, his interest less for the drink than in hopping a freight to get to the store. In Doyle's lush shots, the rail yard looks submerged, as if seen through inky water. Guided by his new buddy and clutching his skateboard, Alex has a few minutes of freight-train thrills before a security guard hustles up alongside and begins striking out with his nightstick. Fighting back, Alex whacks him off balance, right onto the tracks of an oncoming train. As his buddy disappears in the night, Alex looks shell-shocked. The camera lingers for a moment on what he sees: the grotesquely severed body of the security guard, its legless torso, arms and head crawling towards Alex. Though death is immediate in the novel, in the film, Alex has time simultaneously to recognize his own vulnerability and unexpected power.

War is mentioned only in passing dialogue, yet Van Sant's adaptation conveys the novel's more explicit references, from the first page when Alex notes that nearby surf sounds like "little bombs going off," to just after the killing: "I thought about soldiers in Iraq, in Vietnam, in every other war. They *had* [*sic*] to kill people. And they had to live with it." In a subtle parallel with widespread domestic unease about the remote exercise of American military power, Alex embodies the contradictions of self-preservation at the cost of moral ambivalence at best. The gore, unusual for Van Sant, tallies with the mangled bodies served up by round-the-clock news. Though not overtly about the war, *Paranoid Park* suggests how the conflict plays out in the national imagination.

On college campuses, in high schools, in drive-bys, and in malls, killing is everywhere. Television combat scenes, real or acted, are so familiar they have little more effect than a test pattern. Picking off characters drives the most popular video-games and movies outdo each other in graphic bloodshed. At the same time, America is engaged in a nearly abstract war,

OTHER LEVELS OF THINGS



Paranoid Park. © 2007 MK2 Productions. DVD: Tartan Video (U.K.).

fought not only by someone else, but quite likely a mercenary independent contractor. In one generation, war has become the problem of the unlucky few rather than a hazard for the majority. It is against this backdrop of the home front, with its singular combination of mayhem and preternatural placidity, that Van Sant has set his last three films. Underlying each of them is the notion that the America people live in is far more a figment of their imagination than they realize, brought on by a terrible confusion of communal insularity with maverick individuality.

By the time of the death scene, Alex has already recalled his meeting with Detective Richard Lu (Dan Liu). Lu is a solid, if unaware, presence. He and Alex talk across an oversized classroom table, near a banner rooting students on to "ASPIRE." Using noir conventions to spotlight the detective's eyes, Van Sant conveys not only Alex's narrowed focus but also how he might very well see this authority figure in movie-lit terms. What's striking in these scenes is Alex's ability, despite an affable, possibly even naive view of the world, to dissemble. Except for a momentary "oh shit" when he discovers from local news that the guard died, he disconnects. Even at the rail yard, he stays clearheaded, his considerations shaped by what he understands of society's system, right down to wondering about a lawyer ("what sports figures do").

Alex remains absently present, passivity his greatest defense. He is most compliant with his me-tooer girlfriend Jennifer (Taylor Momsen), whose over-made-up eyes and zeal for peer approval suggest the frenzy of the consumer-besotted young women in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). Impatient to get her virginity out of the way, she coaxes the hyperdocile Alex relentlessly. (This is in startling contrast to the female-initiated sex montage in *Juno*, with its winsome shot of panties around Juno's ankles and the teddy-bear coziness of her lips whispering into her boyfriend's ear.) The conquest made, Jennifer takes time only to discuss condoms and how soon they can do it again, before leaving to call her girlfriends. The scene plays from Alex's murky perspective, Jennifer's every gesture mimicked from television and movies, his part merely deflowering stand-in. The sex happens to Alex in a life he's already left behind

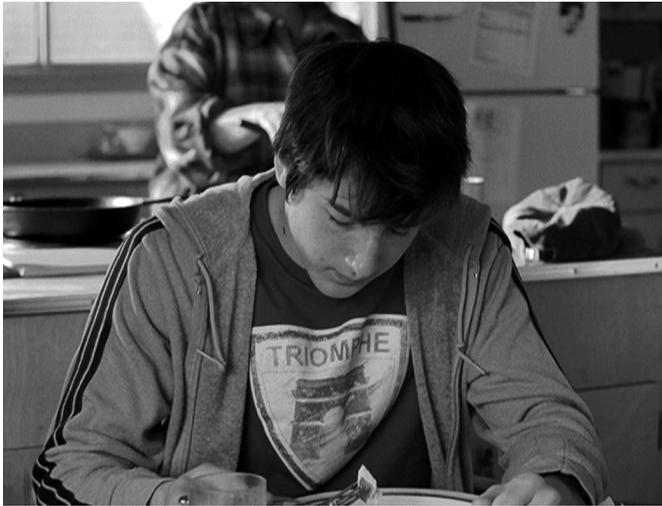
When he subsequently breaks up with Jennifer, their predictable lines are submerged under Nino Rota's main theme from *Amarcord* (1973). Importing music written for one movie into another has become something of a trend lately, as in *I'm Not There* and *The Darjeeling Limited* (both 2007), but few use it to such good effect as Van Sant does here, the reality of life and death in the train yard constantly bumping up against the death-in-life of high school and suburbia. He also uses excerpts from *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965),

indicative of Alex's muddle of fantasy and reality. The overlapping of one with the other runs through Federico Fellini's work, generally coupled, as it is here, with male passivity and helplessness. Although Alex burns his confession, the knowledge he has cannot be unlearned. "I just feel like there are other things that happen," he tells Macy, "Outside normal life. Outside parents and girlfriends and breakups. Like right out there. There are other levels of things."

In his recent work, Van Sant has noticeably refused an easy-access visual approach to character psychology: the frustrating distance at which Blake is kept for most of *Last Days*, demanding that viewers wonder about his state of mind rather than consume it from a close-up, is a case in point. In *Paranoid Park*, Doyle and sound designer Leslie Schatz maintain a tension between what Alex does (very little, actually, though he's often on the move) and his mental state as reflected in the soundscape and the camera's subtle off-angles such as the post-killing car scene with Jared, whose head, as he questions Alex about his new skateboard, appears huge. But the best example is the shower scene, which Van Sant doubles back on later in the film and is acoustically cribbed from the shower scene in *Elephant* (both are soundtracked by "Walk Through Resonant Landscape" by Francis White). Here, the camera follows Alex into the shower, a slowed-down image of drops running off his boyishly shaggy hair. Alex seems to actually be submerged, as if he were drowning by drips.

Van Sant uses his setting to play up Alex's alienation. As in his two last films, Van Sant's Portland occupies the place found on real-world maps yet is distinctively not that place. Unlike David Lynch's down-the-rabbit-hole oddities, Van Sant shows what is commonly acknowledged as normal American life for the collection of absurdities it so often is. Collecting himself at Jared's vacated house (the single mother gone for the weekend, Jared scoring with willing co-eds at Oregon State), Alex showers off the evidence of the killing, helping himself to Jared's T-shirt and jeans. Standing on the plush wall-to-wall, amid Jared's mother's fanatically matched furniture, he puts through a call to his uncle, only to be told by the automated operator to "have a nice Citizenship Day." The funereal sterility and enforced cheerfulness of this ordinary scene are chilling and spooky.

Van Sant's Portland has strong affinities with Jeff Wall's Vancouver. Like Van Sant, Wall presents a Vancouver that shares physical attributes with the city yet is not documentary. Though Wall's stills express the idea more formally, Van Sant is also drawn to the tableau as a way of opening out a moment into a scene, rather than hewing to a standard plot. Alex's recollections are achronological, based not in time but association. The freeze-frame violence of Wall's *Milk* (1984)



Downcast eyes

Top left: *Elephant*. © 2003 Home Box Office. DVD: Optimum Home Entertainment (U.K.). Top right: *Last Days*. © 2004 Home Box Office. DVD: Optimum Home Entertainment (U.K.). Bottom: *Paranoid Park*. © 2007 MK2 Productions. DVD: Tartan Video (U.K.).

comes to mind, especially with its milk-spilling manchild, his back literally against the wall. Wall also has a similar awareness of the built environment as both formative and deformative; his *Eviction* (1988/2004), in which the home-loss drama occurs against the backdrop of freeway overpass and the massive expanse of the Pacific Northwest sky, looks like a possible Van Sant outtake. The same could be said of several of Wall's less-known black-and-whites, such as *Passerby* (1996), an ambiguous nighttime shot of a young man looking back at a passing figure, and, in particular, of *Night* (2001), in which only prolonged viewing reveals details of a waterside encampment beneath an overpass. Like Wall, Van Sant shows a parallel, looking-glass world.

For Alex, *Paranoid Park* is the dark side, the place where he can break out of the staid, innocuous routines of home and school. The park is a cure for his experiential deprivation. Along with this eagerness for perverse novelty, *Elephant*, *Last Days*, and *Paranoid Park* share the exile of the housed but homeless. Home is the first real word of *Last Days*, Blake's aching howl into the night, which becomes his wrung-out version of "Home on the Range," his castle-home anything but comforting. The only home life in *Elephant* is Alex's

(Alex Frost) cluttered basement bedroom and his mother's resentful pancake breakfast on the day of the shooting. In *Paranoid Park*, Alex spends time everywhere but home. In each instance, Van Sant poses questions about the place of home in America, the reality at a total remove from the snug promises on television and in advertisements. For all of these young men, the only comfort is being on the move, including, in many ways, leaving home.

In a sense, Van Sant himself had to leave home to get this movie made. The "Indie" designation long ago slid from definition to type; except that its subject is inarguably American, *Paranoid Park's* look, sound, structure, and moral ambiguity are strikingly non-American. Like David Lynch, whose *Inland Empire* was partially financed by French Studio Canal, Van Sant relied on French MK2 Productions. "We do have independent financing in America," he told the London *Evening Standard*, "but a lot of it is tied to studios, so if you make a small-budget movie you run the risk of going through their accounting system, which is not built for low budgets." In the *Daily Telegraph*, Van Sant noted that "freedom comes from the financial set-up. All my last four films were made for \$3 million. If you're willing to work at a



Jeff Wall, *Milk* (1984)

187 x 228.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

certain budget and the distributor or financier on a film gets a good deal, they'll be more willing to lighten up on control. But if the budget goes to, say, \$10 million, that's when interference creeps in." In the case of *Paranoid Park*, the modest budget worked to the film's advantage, with the mix of amateurish and professional skating sequences setting off the enigmatic narrative.

"It wasn't like killing people was some bizarre event that never happened. Someone got killed on TV every two point five minutes. All you did in video games was kill people." Though Van Sant cut this line from the novel in his script, the idea permeates his film. What is the meaning of one death among so many? And is an unwitnessed incident the same as one you're caught at? *Paranoid Park* is a strikingly beautiful film, but its beauty is all about numbing, about shutting out what doesn't jibe with the smooth ride (or skate) American life is meant to be. In terms as oblique as those of

his teenage protagonist, Van Sant outlines a society eager for sensation but unwilling to accept responsibility; a society in profound denial about the warfare on which, to a great extent, it depends; a society unwilling to see that, for the young, a great deal of the home front is little more than a mawkish Potemkin village.

MEGAN RATNER is at work on *The Little Book of Big Ideas: Film*.

ABSTRACT This review essay of Gus Van Sant's 2007 adaptation of Blake Nelson's novel about a teenage life in Portland, Oregon considers the film in terms of its depiction of U.S. life in wartime; its mixed-media aesthetic; and its disturbing representation of numbed-out adolescence.

KEYWORDS Van Sant, Blake Nelson, cinematic teenagers, Portland, Jeff Wall

CREDITS *Paranoid Park*. Director, editor: Gus Van Sant. Producers: David Cress, Charles Glibert, Marin Karmitz, Nathanaël Karmitz, Neil Kopp. Screenplay: Gus Van Sant (from the novel by Blake Nelson). Cinematographers: Christopher Doyle, Rain Li. © 2007 MK2 Productions. U.S. distribution: IFC Films.