

Aesthetics and **Agora**

Agora, Oscar-winning director Alejandro Amenábar's second English language feature after *The Others*, is set in ancient Egypt and marks his fourth collaboration with Mateo Gil, the highly-acclaimed scriptwriter. The high-budget European epic stars Oscar winner Rachel Weisz as Hypatia of Alexandria, the western world's first female philosopher and astronomer, and her slave Davus, played by Max Minghella, who is torn between his love for her and his desire for freedom.

Renowned director of photography Xavi Giménez had long harboured an interest in the human aspect of Amenábar's movies. "Alejandro uses photography as a tool to express the emotion intrinsic to a story and I wanted to secure the experience of working with him. In our early conversations we talked about avoiding a fantastic aesthetic interpretation, but after a great deal of research we understood that we couldn't escape the striking nature of 4th century Alexandria with its social contrasts. We had to evoke

the same sensation as if it was a big modern city and that's why we placed the camera in the middle of its social collapse, shooting like a tourist or ENG camera operator sent to capture some big city argument. The audience needs to be aware of a current reality; to feel involved in what's happened and what's happening. So we pushed further to tell them: 'this is your camera' and 'this is what you shot on your recent vacation'. But we couldn't avoid an emotional interpretation of social and sentimental events which allowed us to enter into a more suggestive narrative language with pictorial images."

Natural ambience

Mod Producciones recreated Alexandria in all its glory in Delimara, Malta; an island exposed to strong winds that deposit fine layers of sand onto every surface. "We decided to keep away from lighting effects caused by the sand," notes Giménez who fought to retain a natural photographic

ambience. The DP chose KODAK VISION2 250D 5205 for daylight exteriors and interiors and, after stock tests for night shoots, he and FX supervisor Felix Bergés settled on KODAK VISION3 500T 5219. Giménez used two ARRICAM STs and, for versatility, an ARRICAM LT and ARRIFLEX 235 for Steadicam and handheld work. He selected his favourite ARRI/Zeiss Master Prime lenses and shot without filtration.

"I chose 35mm so I could easily play with the film's dual aesthetic language: the realistic direction that combines handheld camera with Steadicam shots and the parallel aesthetic direction with its very complex camera movements"

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says Giménez, adding that 5205 contributed to production values. "Alejandro didn't stop introducing challenges, particularly in terms of camera movements, but thanks to key grip Javi Gonzalez who designed and redesigned equipment we were able to capture very complicated shots."

"Space and production issues dictated that the central block of 25 scenes which depicted one location, involved the most complex lighting situations and demanded absolute continuity, had to be shot in different locations and orientations during widely-separate days in the middle of spring - a time of great

atmospheric instability in Malta. But our intense preparatory work and scheduling allowed us to shoot quickly and efficiently, despite a real fight against clouds and wind" states Giménez. "I was lucky to count on the help of 1st AD Javier Chinchilla who remained by my side and gaffer José Luis Rodríguez, without whom it would have been impossible to complete the film on time. I'd also like to thank Deluxe Laboratories in London, in particular colourist Wade Odium."

"In my past movies I concentrated on maintaining a constant optical language, but Alejandro utilises lenses and storytelling with a great deal of

creative freedom and always seeks the most effective way to capture emotions. He possesses amazing emotional intelligence and visual capacity, and I quickly realised that he is able to maintain aesthetic continuity in a completely intuitive way, never leaving anything to chance."

"*Agora's* content, reality and social environment have made it a very exciting and humanistic experience and working with Alejandro has been an absolute pleasure." And the DP's concluding comment? 'Alea jacta est' ('the die is cast')!"



1 Director of photography Xavi Giménez filming *Agora*. Photo Teresa Isasi