

# The multi-layered world of Los abrazos rotos

Oscar®-nominated director of photography Rodrigo Prieto, ASC, AMC had long admired Pedro Almodóvar's work and was delighted when the renowned Spanish director offered him the opportunity to lens *Los abrazos rotos* (*Broken Embraces*). Immediately attracted by Almodóvar's multi-layered script with its numerous time frames, textures and visual opportunities, Prieto sought a distinctive look for each segment that wouldn't overpower the story or the characters' experiences.



## Film noir

"When we first met, Pedro said he liked some films I'd made that had deep shadows or dark areas in which there was detail in the darkness," recalls Prieto. "It was particularly interesting that he cited *8 Mile* with its cyan, green and blue colours, naturalistic lighting and murky darkness because it is very different to Pedro's world. But he didn't intend creating an overall film noir movie; he wanted to explore darkness in certain scenes."

Set in Madrid in 2008, and Madrid and Lanzarote in the 1990s, *Los abrazos rotos* took three months to shoot. Its complex plot centres on a blind scriptwriter (played by Lluís Homar) with a mysterious past. In the present, he's hiding from the world as Harry Caine. In the past, as film director Matteo Blanco, he met Lena (Penélope Cruz), secretary to a millionaire interpreter and subsequently the man's lover. Then she falls for Blanco, becomes an actress and takes the lead in *Chicas y maletas*: a movie within the movie that emulates Almodóvar's *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*. Also in the past, the millionaire's son shoots a video of the making

of the movie to find out what's really happening on set. And in the present, Harry Caine falls in love with Lena, now a reformed brunette.

"Pedro let me propose many ideas about lighting and moods" says Prieto, for whom technical scouts and pre-lighting are all-important. "He was very specific in terms of framing and camera moves, but was also open to ideas I showed him on a viewfinder with a video tap. Pedro has a very particular sense of composition, of colour within a composition, and is meticulous about camera movement, sets and costumes. At the beginning of each day he changed lamps, flowers, or anything with which he was uncomfortable. Pedro wanted to shoot the whole movie on film - even the 'videoed' segment. He has an intense dislike of video."

## Powerful combination

The DP shot the film's past and present reality on a Panavision Panaflex Millennium camera with new G-Series anamorphic lenses and a Panavision Platinum camera

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for back-up. "Pedro responded well to KODAK VISION3 500T 5219, which was my main stock," continues Prieto. "It's gutsy, fibrous, has very nice contrast and the colour saturation is a little higher than KODAK VISION2 500T 5218. We printed it on KODAK Vision Premier print film: a very powerful combination. I chose KODAK VISION2 250D 5205 for the past reality exteriors of Lena and the millionaire as they needed to have a subtle texture, be a little more subdued, yet retain the same strong contrast as 5219. In the millionaire's house the shadows are deeper and the lighting more contrasty. For this section of the movie, I consciously emulated film noir lighting techniques, as Lena finds herself trapped in her lover's world. I allowed myself greater freedom in

making the light a little more filmic when Lena falls down a staircase. I lit through the banisters and their funky design cast deep shadows which are projected onto the floor."

## Painting

An important monologue with a cathartic theme, in which the woman who takes care of Harry Caine reveals her past secrets, took place at night in a bar on Madrid's la Gran Vía. The pair are seated at a table in front of a large window, with passing cars visible behind the woman. "Pedro wanted it to feel like an Edward Hopper painting," states Prieto. "I lit the scene with a soft top light, hiding small Dedo Lights wherever I could for the background and placing Kino Flos with different



coloured gels behind the bar. I played with colour contrast, turned off the street lights and lit la Gran Vía with ARRI 12 key lights with a cool greenish cyan gelled fill. Inside I bounced a hard 650w Dedo off the wooden table, filling the characters' faces from below with a warmer tone, and allowed the background to fall into darkness. It was a pretty moody scene, with the camera constantly dolly and craning from one character to the other. The reflections on the big glass window behind them proved challenging and we had to be careful to keep the lights off the crew and the camera."

"Pedro remarked that a blind person doesn't need to open curtains, so in a key scene in Harry Caine's apartment they were almost totally drawn and we only allowed a sliver of sunlight to enter the darkened room. We needed a balance between darkness and being able to see what was happening, so we had an 80 foot by 40 foot translucent taken of the street where the apartment was located,"

explains the DP. "It was placed outside the window and lit with numerous groups of nine lights. For ambient light, two rows of Space Lights were placed close to the translucent. Then I had a long truss with three separately placed 20Ks lighting different windows. Around the set I hung Image 80s with boxed-in 2900 Kelvin Kino Flo bulbs which we made fairly directional."

### Imperceptible

"In the scene a sliver of sunlight cuts through Harry Caine's body and part of one eye is lit while the rest of his face and the background fall into the darker sensation of an unlit room. The high contrast situation meant that the highlights were two-and-a-half stops overexposed while the rest of the room was around one-and-a-half stops under key. Finding a balance between a sense of darkness and lighting the images was tricky, but 5219 gave me the confidence I needed."

Prieto created a higher colour saturation and brighter lighting for *Chicas y maletas*, which he shot on 1:85 format with Primo spherical lenses. "For the making of video within the film, Pedro wanted the parallel 'videod' sequence to look grainy, contrasty and very different to the rest of the film, so I used an ARRIFLEX 416 camera and shot on 16mm KODAK VISION2 500T 7218 which I pushed one full stop to maximise the grain."

On set, Prieto frequently utilised a simple time-saving gadget comprising ten Kino Flos attached to a four-foot by four-foot white show card. "I added diffusion for a nice soft source and taped the card to walls and ceilings. It's really quick to use and doesn't take up any space," he assures.

"It was interesting playing around with so many different styles of lighting in one film and sometimes I had to fight my instincts," says Prieto. "I usually try to make lighting imperceptible, but *Los abrazos rotos* covered the gamut from very bright high key

lighting on the film within the film to a dark and contrasty film noir look, and from a naturalistic feel to expressionistic lighting."

Post-production was undertaken at Fotofilm Deluxe Madrid. "Colour timer Miguel Perez was fantastic. He timed the dailies and did the D.I. with really good results," states Prieto who is truly appreciative of his "great crew."

In conclusion, we asked the DP for his thoughts on film. "From my perspective, what I find on the negative I cannot find on digital - and I've tested many digital cameras. Film has a much richer depth of colour and great organicity in its grain structure. In post-production you can tear the image apart, explore it and see the details in each colour and under- or over-exposure. The subtleties of skin colour and tone that film captures simply don't exist in the digitally-captured image."

*Los abrazos rotos* is produced by El Deseo Production Company.