

Analysing *Lâ*

"We were amazed when Director/Producer Dirk Schäfer came up with the idea of shooting *Lâ* in black-and-white and tried to find a look that allowed us to concentrate intensely on the interaction between the characters and their environment," says Co-Director of Photography Knut Schmitz. "The richness and depth of the black-and-white images produced exactly the right atmosphere."

Lâ, Schäfer's 17-minute Kunsthochschule für Medien graduation project, is a portrait of an eccentric German widow (Grischa Huber) who works as a psychoanalyst in Istanbul. After a long separation, she meets her daughter who belongs to the Kurdish guerrilla movement in Turkey. During the evening, the girl reveals an amazing secret – but there's a further surprise in store. Schmitz describes the opening scene. "Pauly sits on a chair by the window with a client who's reclining on a sofa. It's very quiet, but there's tension in their concentrated focus. The lighting underlines the room's function as a shelter and daylight penetrates through half-closed blinds and curtains. The soft light reproduces every detail in their faces, but it doesn't give away all their secrets."

Schäfer and Schmitz have known each other for ten years and previously collaborated on *Ali's Welt*, a documentary about Turkish children living in Berlin. *Lâ* also reunited Schmitz and Co-DP Bernadette Paassen, who first met as students in the early 1990s at the Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg. "It's not easy for two cinematographers to work on the same film, but we were very interested in each other's approach," states Schmitz who shot the interiors in Berlin, while Paassen tackled the Istanbul exteriors. They lit for each other.

Schmitz and Paassen used a Super 16mm P+S Technik modified ARRI SR2 with Zeiss primes and shot handheld using subtle moves to convey, in Schmitz's words, "more feeling, breathing and shivering with the actors." However, they opted for Kodak Vision 200T 7274 and Kodak VISION2 500T 7218, rather than black-and-white film, and set out to achieve a modern look with fine grain, a wide contrast range and rich detail, even in very low light conditions.

"Shooting in Istanbul was a challenge," admits Paassen. "In the night shots of the little boat moving out across the Bosphorus with two actors on board, I only had a gas lantern next to them,

a 12v battery-generated china balloon and the practical lights of Istanbul's skyline. I was aware of the terrible under exposure, but I trusted Kodak and knew there would be sufficient information on the negative."

In one brief scene, tea in Turkish glasses starts to glow in the early sunlight on the Bosphorus and then returns to its original red-brown colour. "We used colour information from the original negative and separated it on Pogle, keeping the colour in only a part of the image, fading it in and out," says Schmitz.

Instead of a direct blow-up to 35mm, the Super 16mm negative was scanned on a Spirit Datacine in HD and recorded uncompressed onto hard drive. Pogle colour correction was used during the scan to create the desired black-and-white look and, after the insertion of titles and special effects, the film was recorded onto 35mm on an ARRILASER and printed on Kodak Vision Premier color print film.

David Pfluger, Transfer Technician of Swiss Effects, Zurich, recalls the task: "We had to produce a master negative capable of reproducing the rich neutral grey steps of a black-and-white film with fine grain. We picked Kodak's colour intermediate material for our ARRILaser system and used homemade Look-Up tables for a perfect conversion. Kodak's intermediate film stock and print material match perfectly and made it possible to produce a master negative with consistently neutral blacks that barely needed any further film grading."

"Working on a short film means a low budget, but it provides great freedom for creative decisions such as black-and-white photography. Although it's almost unheard of in commercial productions, it's a very powerful storytelling tool," muses Schmitz.

Lâ was screened at the 2005 Cannes Film Festival's "Next Generation" programme and is being entered in international film festivals. It had its American premiere at the 43rd New York Film Festival. ■



Above: HD film scan and colour correction on Spirit and Pogle at Egli-Swisseeffects Boost post-production studios, Zurich.