



# A Tapestry of Textures

Rodrigo Prieto, ASC, AMC combines 3 formats for Pedro Almodóvar's *Broken Embraces*, which recounts a filmmaker's doomed love affair with his star.

by Patricia Thomson

Unit photography by Emilio Pereda and Paola Ardizzoni

Combining noir, naturalism, melodrama and comedy, Pedro Almodóvar's *Broken Embraces* is the work of a true cinephile. "This is Pedro's ode to filmmaking and cinema," says director of photography Rodrigo Prieto, ASC, AMC. The production itself was a cinematic Chinese box, incorporating a present-day storyline, flashbacks, a film-within-the-film and video footage captured by an amateur spy. Prieto ultimately combined three formats — anamorphic 35mm, standard

35mm and Super 16mm — to render the complex narrative.

The story opens by introducing Harry Caine (Lluís Homar), formerly known as Mateo Blanco, a film director who was blinded 14 years earlier in a car crash that killed his lover and leading lady, Lena (Penélope Cruz). The two began their affair on the set of Caine's comedy *Girls and Suitcases* while Lena was living with wealthy industrialist Ernesto Martel (José Luis Gómez). In an effort to stay close to Lena, the jealous Martel offers to produce Caine's film.



Opposite: In video footage captured by an amateur filmmaker, Lena (Penélope Cruz) addresses the camera to tell Ernesto Martel (José Luis Gómez, foreground) that their relationship is over. This page: After leaving Martel, Lena and her lover, Mateo Blanco (Lluís Homar), escape to a seaside town.

Moreover, he orders his son, Ernesto Jr. (Rubén Ochandiano), to shoot a "making-of" video so he can spy on Lena and the director. After production wraps, Lena and the director flee to a seaside bungalow, and Martel attempts to flush them out by releasing a disastrous cut of *Girls and Suitcases*. The lovers' interlude ends with the fatal car crash, captured on tape by Ernesto Jr.

Caine recounts this story to his young assistant, Diego (Tamar Novas), who is also the son of Caine's production manager, Judit (Blanca Portillo), and the director eventually discovers there is more to the story than he knows.

Almodóvar says he invited Prieto to shoot *Broken Embraces* because when he watched the cinematographer's films, which include *Amores Perros* (AC April '01), *Frida* (AC Oct. '02), *Alexander* (AC Nov. '04) and *Babel* (AC Nov. '06), he noticed Prieto's fearlessness with color. "Rodrigo's understanding of

color is very cultural," notes the director. "I don't have to explain [Spain's colors] to him because he already carries it inside. If Spain is baroque in its colors, Mexico is even more so. Even though this film is quite somber in some ways, I still asked for colors that are much brighter than those I see in film in general. Having seen *Frida*, I knew he would understand." In addition, Almodóvar was impressed with Prieto's handling of darkness in *8 Mile*, "especially the establishing night scenes in Detroit, which were very original. And Alejandro [González] Iñárritu told me Rodrigo is very collaborative, with no ego at all."

Almodóvar and Prieto began their six weeks of prep by going through the script scene-by-scene in the director's apartment. "I had ideas about using lighting and film stocks to establish certain visual styles for each character, his or her environment and the different time

periods," Prieto recalls. "There are so many layers in this movie, and I found that interesting to play with. I presented Pedro with various ideas, mainly as a starting point of discussion so I could hear his vision."

It wasn't until Prieto shot tests that he could truly assess Almodóvar's reaction, however. "Pedro is not technically oriented — he responds viscerally to visual impulses — so our early conversations were always just conceptual. I found the best way to discuss my ideas was to actually film them for him."

One thing Almodóvar knew at the outset was that he wanted the film's central narrative to be shot in anamorphic 35mm, a constant format in his oeuvre since 1997's *Live Flesh*. "I'm very much interested in décor, and [anamorphic] allows you to see the whole set in all its magnitude," explains the director. "The format also permits having a two-shot and shooting it fairly close. My

Photos and frame grabs courtesy of El Deseo and Sony Pictures Classics.



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**Above:** After Lena is cast in Blanco's new film, the suspicious Martel (right) signs on as a producer and hires a lip-reader (Lola Dueñas) to translate MOS footage of the pair captured on the set. **Below:** At the hospital, Lena consults with her mother (Ángela Molina) about her father's condition.

films are quite theatrical, and scenes often take place between two or three characters."

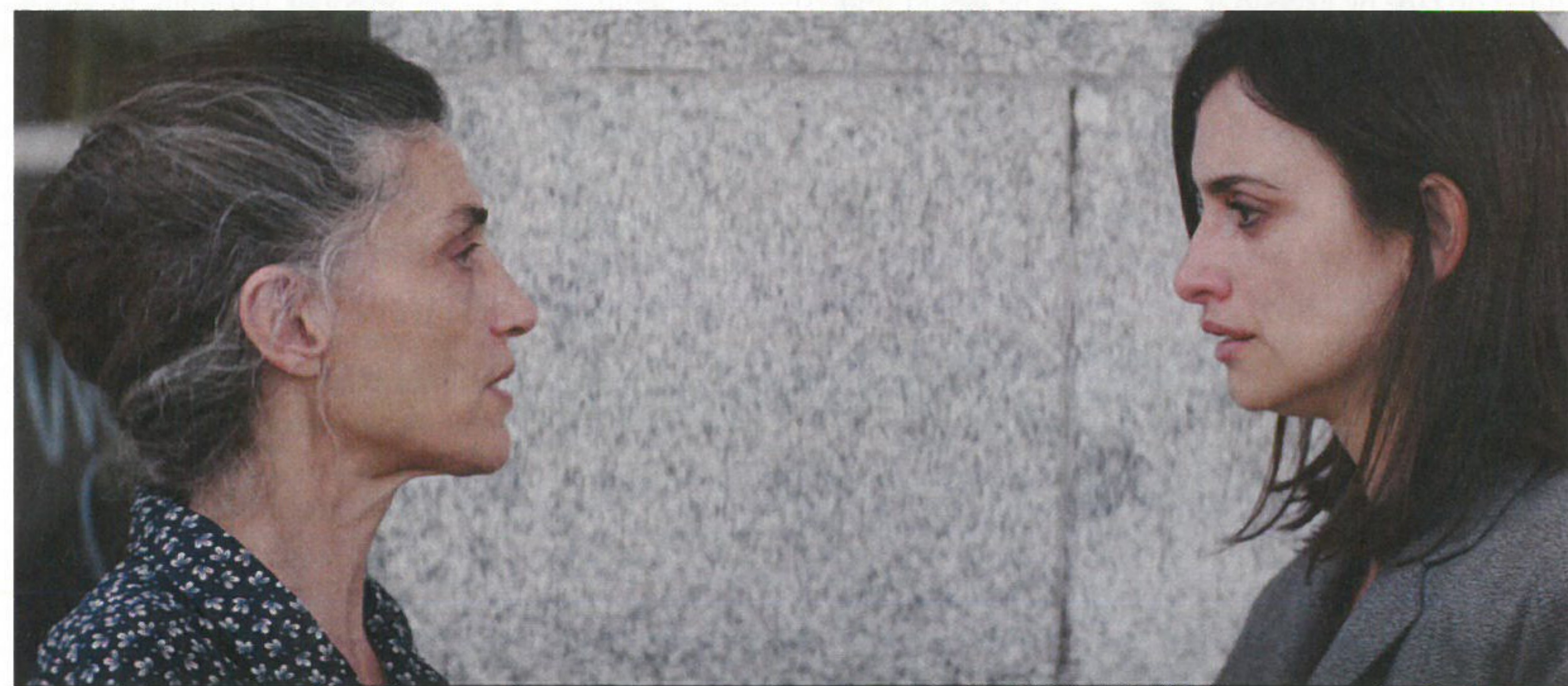
For the anamorphic work, Prieto obtained a Panaflex Millennium from Equipos Profesionales Cinematográficos in Madrid and brought a set of Panavision's G-Series primes directly from his prior shoot, *State of Play* (AC May '09). As always, Almodóvar eschewed zoom lenses, as well as a B camera. "Pedro rarely uses a second camera," Prieto says. "He's very much into composition and carefully designs each shot. Many scenes were blocked to fit specific frames or camera moves."

During the 72-day shoot,

Almodóvar would typically arrive on set with a small diagram or two. From this starting point, the team would rehearse and figure out coverage. "Pedro likes to take the viewfinder and position things in frame; he's very particular about the placement of characters, props and colors," says Prieto. Sometimes the director's plan was carried out exactly, as in the film's first sex scene: the camera tracks behind Caine's purple-velvet couch and reveals a woman's wriggling foot propped up on the back of the sofa. "That's very Pedro — he wanted to focus on the fabric of the couch!" says Prieto.

On other occasions, Almo-

dóvar would change course with response to inspiration on set, as in the scene that shows Lena and Martel having sex under the sheets. The director's starting point was a Magritte painting of a couple kissing through a sheet, but when he noticed one of the actors' hands hanging outside the sheet, he imagined a body under a shroud. That inspired him to rewrite the dialogue on the spot and introduce the idea of Martel faking his death to test Lena's response. Almodóvar then coached Cruz through her reaction shot as Lena sits on the bed, contemplating her options. "It was hilarious to hear," recalls Prieto. "He



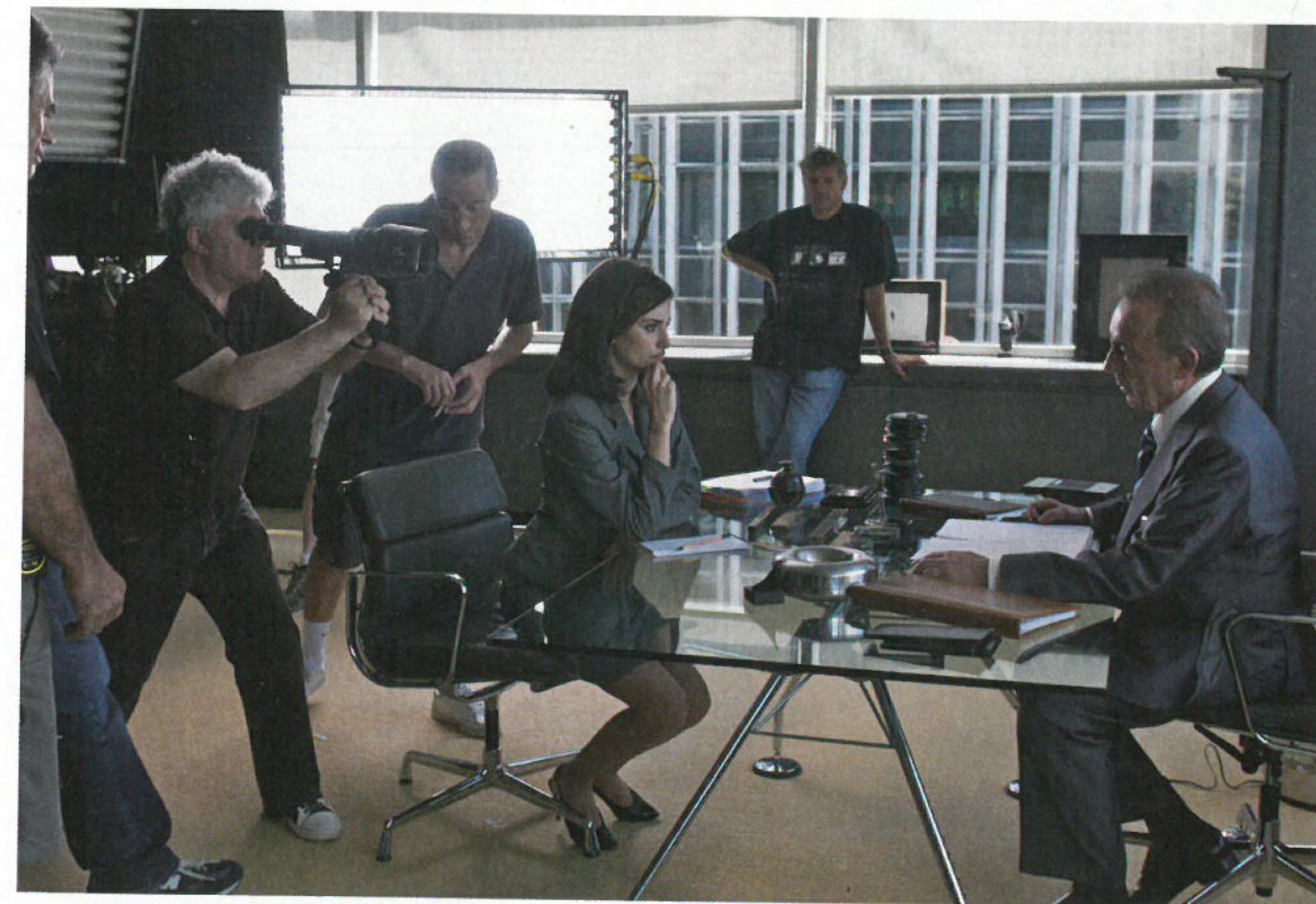
was talking to her while we were shooting as if he were her thoughts: 'Hmm, do you think he's dead? Maybe not ...,' and her acting matched what he was saying.

"Once the actors arrive on set and Pedro starts to shoot, he is very intent on directing them in a precise manner," he adds. "He talks to them a lot and is very exact about the intonation of the words."

Almodóvar would sometimes talk Prieto through his visual beats as well. In two dialogue scenes between Caine and Diego, who prove to have a more complicated relationship than either is aware of, Almodóvar didn't want a standard two-shot, but rather to have the camera to move back and forth between them. "He wanted the camera to dolly in very specific moments that did not necessarily coincide with the dialogue, and he'd cue me when he wanted the camera to move," says Prieto, who does his own operating. This pendulum-like action kept the characters connected but separate. "They're connecting, but their bond is still tentative," observes the cinematographer.

"I have very specific taste as to what goes in my frame, and often it doesn't coincide with the conventions a camera operator might have," says Almodóvar. "Rodrigo stayed close to me, so he understood perfectly what frame I wanted." He notes that *Broken Embraces* was his first experience with a director of photography who also operates the camera. "It's two jobs, but Rodrigo has very good taste for framing, and there were some scenes he resolved because he was on the camera."

A case in point is the passionate encounter between Lena and Caine in her dressing room. "Rodrigo saved it," says Almodóvar. The director wasn't sure how to approach the scene, so "I proposed hanging the camera on bungee cords and just floating it above the actors, twisting it around to see bits



**Director Pedro Almodóvar** checks a shot of Cruz and Gómez in Martel's office.

of their bodies," says Prieto. "We shot a take like that, and Pedro loved it."

"There's virtuosity in this kind of thing," Almodóvar attests. "We were going to do the scene in only one take, and there are things you don't want to show when actors are having sex which Rodrigo had to maneuver around. Yet he managed to do it in such a way that by the time the editor cut it, it looked like a much longer sequence than a single take. He's one of the best cameramen I know. In some ways, I wish I'd had more traveling shots so we could have used more of his expertise!"

Before any filming could occur, Almodóvar would always fine-tune the set. "He'd spend a fair amount of time in the morning rearranging the props — removing things, asking for different curtains and so on," says Prieto. "He couldn't do anything else until he was comfortable with that. I found that interesting because we were playing with diametrically opposed characters in different environments and social strata, yet every set and every costume reflects Pedro's seal, his personality. So in a way, every character is Pedro."

When Prieto proposed shoot-

ing scenes set in Martel's world on Fuji Eterna 400T for a more muted palette with lower contrast, Almodóvar nixed the idea. Prieto recalls, "When I showed him the tests, he immediately said, 'I just don't like it.' I tried to point out it wasn't a matter of liking it; it's what's appropriate for that character, but he *has* to like it. It has to be something he feels comfortable in, even if it's the house of the antagonist! I've found that movies are the most interesting when the director or writer is really talking about himself in every character."

Naturalism was the governing style for Caine's world, and Prieto shot these scenes mainly on Kodak Vision3 500T 5219. "I much prefer it to [Vision2 500T] 5218 because it has more guts, more contrast and bolder colors," notes Prieto.

In Caine's apartment, a set built at Estudios Barajas in Madrid, the trick was to create an ambience appropriate for a blind man. "Harry doesn't need to turn on the lights or have the curtains open, so my challenge was how to create sourceless lighting." Prieto devised a number of strategies, including using Caine's computer as a light source. He



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**Above:** Lena and Chon (Carmen Machi) enact a scene in *Girls and Suitcases*, the film Martel butchers after Lena leaves him for the director. **Below:** Years later, the director, now blind and using the alias Harry Caine, realizes he might be able to save the movie.

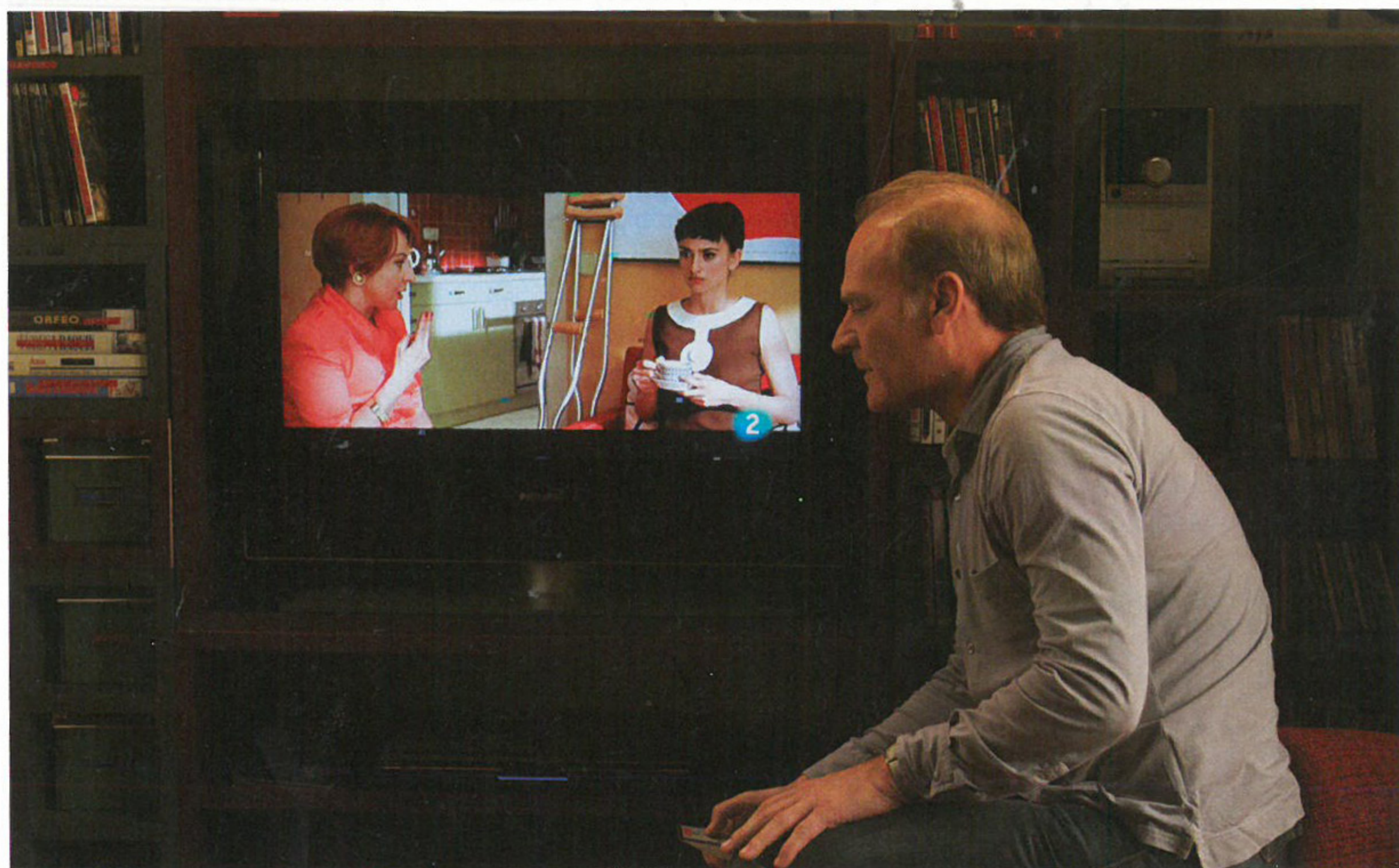
placed several Rosco LitePads gelled with various colors directly on the face of the monitor, and these could be turned on and off separately to suggest changing Web pages.

It was Prieto's use of sunlight that Almodóvar most appreciated, however. "Harry's apartment doesn't look like a set

because the sunlight was handled so well," says the director. Prieto created ambient daylight with 2K Blondes through 12'x12' frames of Full Grid Cloth plus eggcrates to prevent spill. But when the scene called for some tension, as when Ernesto Jr. visits Caine, Prieto used a 20K to send "a sliver of sunlight

through a crack in the curtains and light one of Harry's eyes. It enhances the uncomfortable feeling of the scene and creates a bit of contrast."

A much different look was needed for the sequences from *Girls and Suitcases*, which was closely modeled on Almodóvar's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988). "It had to feel very high-key and Doris Day-style," says Prieto. He employed several tactics to achieve this aesthetic. First, he switched to standard 1.85:1, using spherical Primo lenses on a Panaflex Platinum. Second, he used Fuji Eterna Vivid 160 to achieve more color saturation with the set's red, yellow and white palette. "Of course, that meant we had to use much more light," he notes, adding that the studio had no air-conditioning. Almodóvar, who was occasionally driven out onto the sidewalk with a chair and monitor because of the heat, recalls that Prieto "burned us to a crisp! Normally, we use one generator; this time, we needed 10!"





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Right: Almodóvar and director of photography Rodrigo Prieto, ASC, AMC fine-tune their approach to a shot for *Girls and Suitcases*, the film-within-the-film. Below: Ensconced in their hideaway, Lena and Blanco discuss their next move.



Nevertheless, the director liked the introduction of sunlight into his décor. "It was quite expensive, but Rodrigo did it very well," says Almodóvar.

Because Prieto hadn't filmed comedies before, *Girls and Suitcases* was a novel experience. "The whole point of those scenes was high-key lighting — keep it bright, with an enveloping soft light and sunny highlights," he says. The crew hung 60 space lights on the set's terrace to create ambient daylight and placed a moveable truss outside the façade with a 24K that projected direct

"sunlight" into the apartment. "We covered the top of the set with Full Grid and had several 5Ks above it for soft topline. On the floor, I'd bring in a [Kino Flo] Blanket-Lite and throw an 8-by-8 diffusion over it for close-ups. We usually flagged the 24K to keep the sunlight out of the women's faces; it just crossed their upper bodies."

By contrast, a noir look prevails in Martel's mansion, a set built in the Los Angeles de San Rafael studio in Segovia. This mood is most conspicuous in the sequence when Martel pushes Lena down the stairs

as she tries to leave him. Initially, Prieto hung six space lights over the foyer and staircase and skirted the units with black Duvatyn. "I wanted to create a soft but directional topline, but when we saw the effect, Pedro and I agreed it wasn't expressive enough. So instead, I used a 10K Fresnel with the lens removed and shone it through the banister on top of the stairs." That projected a sharp shadow of the banister onto the stairs and floor. When switching from wide Technocrane shots to close-ups, the crew removed a piece of the banister and placed it closer to the action in front of a 5K to retain the shadow patterns.

The high contrast of the noir sequences became a bit tricky when lighting Cruz. "It was a high priority for Pedro that Penélope always look beautiful," says Prieto. For most of the film, the cinematographer followed the makeup artist's advice and lit the actress frontally; depending on space, Cruz's beauty lights were 4' 4-bank Kino Flos or 2' Double Kino Flos above and below camera, with sidelight provided by either a 6'x6' Blanket-Lite through Full Grid diffusion or a 10K through an 8-by or 12-by frame of Full Grid. "But





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Right: At his father's request, amateur videographer Ernesto Martel Jr. (Rubén Ochandiano) keeps close tabs on Lena during filming of Blanco's movie. Below: Almodóvar checks a shot of Cruz at the mirror.



that just didn't match the look of film noir," says Prieto. "I tried moving the light to one side, and it looked bad, bad, bad, but suddenly, I hit a position *more* to the side that worked very well. So I went with that." Almodóvar got the effect he wanted: "Penélope looks beautiful but older — hardened."

Prieto also veered away from flattering light in the bathroom where Lena is physically sickened by sex with Martel. To mimic a skylight, Prieto spotted 2K Fresnels onto the

sink and toilet, and the light hit the top of Cruz's head and bounced off the sink. "The toplight was around 4 stops overexposed, and the bounce on her face from the sink was the proper exposure. It was not flattering at all, but it was good for that moment."

When Lena and the director flee to Lanzarote, off the coast of Africa, Prieto aimed for high-key naturalism. He used Fuji Vivid 160 to take advantage of the location's colors — black volcanic rock, white

architecture, emerald palms, pale-blue bungalow interiors — and to enhance the natural contrast. Though tragedy is pending, "these scenes are meant to be more upbeat," he says. "They're escaping the dark world of Martel and are really trying to be happy. We wanted to give it some sparkle." Interior night scenes also tended to be warmer, such as when Harry is examining a photo of two lovers on a beach. "That was lit with an amber sunset light coming through the windows," says Prieto. "We used 18Ks gelled with Full CTO, so it has a warm, bright feeling. Even at night, when they're watching television, the scene is lit brightly. I had two sources, practical lamps and a TV effect, so it's a combination of the cool TV images flickering on them and the warm lamp light. For the TV effect, I placed a bunch of 2-foot Kino Flos gelled with different shades of CTB on a 4-by-4 white card and switched them on and off independently and randomly. The practical lamp's light was enhanced with a 4-by-4 Kino Flo with 2900°K bulbs placed close to the wall and controlled with flags to only light the actors."

*Broken Embrace's* third for-





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Prieto and Almodóvar at work on location.



mat, Super 16mm, comes into play for Ernesto Jr.'s "making-of" video. Because he is filming in the early 1990s, the prop was an old Canon camcorder. However, Almodóvar refused to shoot video. "He simply

doesn't like the way video looks," says Prieto. Instead, the cinematographer shot on Super 16mm (framing at 16x9), using an Arri 416 with Zeiss Ultra 16 primes and Kodak Vision3 500T 7219, which he

pushed 1 stop. "The idea was to get a really high-contrast and grainy image, then enhance it further in the digital intermediate by adding more contrast and more color saturation," he says. "It looks more like Super 8 than video, but Pedro doesn't go for realism on things like that. It's just what he likes."

Looking for signs of Lena's betrayal, Martel watches his son's video footage in his private screening room, employing a lip-reader to decipher the lovers' dialogue when sound is unavailable. "In the telecine, we enhanced the contrast and the color saturation so that when the footage was projected on set, it would have a really intense look," says Prieto. He also added a pixellated texture in the DI to further enhance the video look. To maintain contrast and prevent a milky look, Prieto worked hard to keep spill off the screen, lighting

props very specifically and putting negative fill on the floor and walls.

One of the main challenges in the DI proved to be harmonizing the actors' varying skin tones. "They were so different we had to isolate some of the faces and tweak things a little bit," recalls Prieto. "For instance, Lluís Homar's skin tone is extremely magenta when compared to Blanca Portillo or Tamar Novas, who both tend to be olive. When they were together in a scene, it really looked strange, so we had to even that out." Prieto worked with colorist Miguel Perez, who handled both the film dailies and the DI at FotoFilm, a division of Deluxe Laboratories in Madrid. "Working on both dailies and the DI with Miguel was very helpful, because he knew the movie perfectly," says Prieto. FotoFilm handled the entire post workflow, including the 4K scan and 2K filmout.

At the end of *Broken Embraces*, Harry and Diego watch the footage of Lena and Harry's car accident, and this leads to one of Prieto's favorite moments in the film: just before the crash, Harry and Lena share a tender kiss in the car, and, as he plays the scene back, Harry reaches out to the TV screen and runs his hands over Lena's face. "The shot of the kiss in the car was filmed in Super 16, and we zoomed further into the kiss on a telecine, so the grain is huge," says Prieto. "It looks very pointillistic, like a Seurat painting. Pedro really liked that, and I think it's beautiful."

"I was very moved when we shot it," he continues. "It's the perfect connection of image and emotion, an expression of how we can transmit such a deep longing without words. It's beautiful, it's tactile and it's a riff about created images. The person doing the touching cannot

see the image, even though his life was directing images. For me, that's the most emotional moment in the film. I feel most fulfilled with my line of work when the visuals are on par with the emotions." ■

## TECHNICAL SPECS

2.40:1

35mm and 16mm

Panaflex Millennium, Platinum;  
Arri 416

Panavision G-Series, Primo;  
Zeiss Ultra 16 lenses

Kodak Vision3 500T 5219/7219,  
Vision2 250D 5205;  
Fuji Eterna Vivid 160

Digital Intermediate

Printed on  
Kodak Vision Premier 2393