

# former still photographer adds motion to her art

*Colour,  
light  
and  
lenses  
combine  
to  
achieve  
a  
special  
look*

**F**RIENDS TOLD GISELLE CHAMMA that she was crazy to leave Brazil; after all she had a house, a fiancé, and a position as one of her country's most successful photographers.

"But I said to them, 'It's not enough,'" she remembers. "I want to be a cinematographer."

Now, a decade later and living in New York City, Cinematographer Chamma has made over 20 short films, and has received a Warner Brothers Internship for Cinematography and an Eastman Scholarship Award. She is currently sharing kudos and awards with Director Myra Paci for their graduate thesis film, *XXXtasy: Two Days in the Life of a Saint*.

The 29-minute film, made while Chamma and Paci were completing their master's degrees in film production at Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, has earned them the 1994 Nestor Almendros Cinematography Award and the Jurors' Choice Award for the 1994 Charlotte Film Festival. The film was a Director's Choice at the 1994 Atlanta Film and Video Festival, and has been featured at many film festivals around the world. *XXXtasy* is distributed in Europe by the Paris-based company, LAPSUS Distribution.

The filmmakers describe the film as "A New York story about a Polish immigrant go-go dancer who dreams of Hollywood, and a man living in his car who dreams of redemption. They meet. A comical, at times brutal, look at the American dream."

Many scenes, such as the go-go club sequence, shot on a sound stage, are stylized and theatrical. A quality of unreality pervades, created by the script, the garish and outlandish costumes, and Chamma's choices, in consultation with Paci, of saturated colors and contrasty lighting with no diffusion. For other scenes, such as the opening shot of the protagonist sitting in her apartment watching television, Chamma uses diffused light to suggest a morning sun streaming in through a window.

"Even though some scenes look very real, they still have a sense of unreality because of what the characters are wearing and how they behave," she says.

Chamma uses different lenses to achieve a sense of what she calls "hyper-reality". "Lenses," she says, "can change the viewer's feelings toward an image and determine what elements he or she should be following in the story. What your eyes normally see as a total picture, the cinematographer can fragment into separate points of attention for the audience."



*Director of Photography Gisel Chamma (left) and Director Myra Paci (right) on the set of XXXtasy*

Communication between director and cinematographer is a crucial element of the art of filmmaking, Chamma emphasizes.

*"The director gives me a mood to interpret. Then I write that mood with light"*

"The more I know from the director, the better it is," she says. "I want to find out how he or she feels about the script, what movies they like, everything. The director gives me a mood to interpret. Then I write that mood with light in the same way a writer uses words. What I give to them depends on what they give to me."

Chamma met Myra Paci when she shot Paci's film *Transeltown*. They have developed a strong trust, friendship, and sense of collaboration.

"I totally understand what she wants to say," says Chamma. "With that understanding as a basis, I use intuition, combined with what I actually see in front of me, to give my own interpretation of reality. It's hard to explain. It comes from deep inside me."

Chamma was initially drawn to the movement inherent in the medium of cinematography.

"Life is about motion," she says. "With still photography I can tell a story in 24 photographs where each picture is one emotion. With motion picture film, I shoot 24 frames a second and can capture the entire range of human emotion."

Chamma's next projects are a feature film with Australian Director Susi Graf, a series of 30-minute interviews with media figures such as John Waters, Nancy Savoca and Marianne Faithfull for German and Austrian television, and a music video with Weiss, Whitten, Stagliano Film and Videoworks. ●