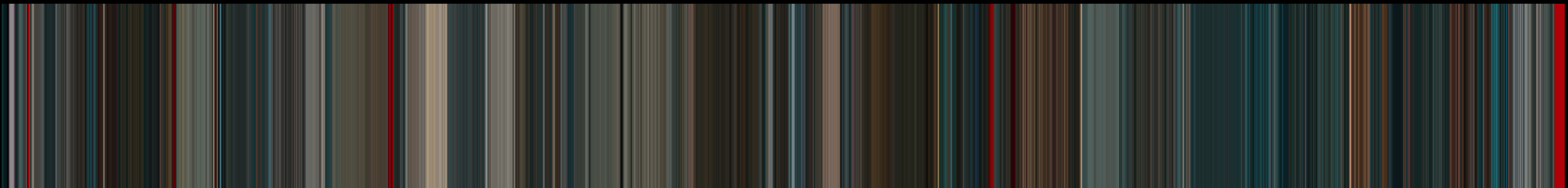


COLOR GRADING
APRIL X

A FILM BY
MICHEL K PARANDI

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY
NATHAN HAUGAARD

COLORIST
ENIKO EDELSBRUNNER



I N T R O D U C T I O N

Runtime: 96 minutes

Sci-fi, Drama

World Premiere: Rhode Island International Film Festival 2025 (Aug 7, 2025)

Budget: 2M\$

Logline

In a crumbling city of concrete and smoke, twins Bax and April drift at the edges of survival. Bax scrapes by in the trade of synthetic hearts, drawn into a silent machinery of death and debt. Then April slips away, without explanation, without noise. The world does not stop, but Bax begins to unravel. Time folds in on itself. The city becomes a maze of shadows and reflections. Faces blur. Language fractures. And somewhere in the static of memory and dream, he searches, for her, or for what he was before he lost her.

April X has been the biggest and most complex project of my career so far. Getting to work on it was the result of a persistent DoP, some luck, and a bit of fate.

Nathan, our cinematographer, someone I've been fortunate to work with for years, was determined to bring me on board. As it happened, I was living in Kyoto when the director, Michel, visited the city after wrapping the shoot in Romania. We met, connected, and I ended up joining the team.

It was an ambitious film, made on a tight budget by a small crew and I'm proud to present the result.



V I S U A L I D E N T I T Y

Set in the near future in Eastern Europe, amidst tangled wires, concrete structures, and the weight of the past that never fully vanishes, the story dwells on advances in biotechnology, questions of identity, and the entanglement of memory and data. It explores the intertwined nature of our inner and digital worlds, spiraling around the question of what is reality and uncovering its emotional core through the experience of personal loss. While these themes are deeply philosophical and emotional, the film itself is not a static piece. It balances its introspective depth with high energy: it is filled with movement, bursts of intense action, and a wide range of striking locations, creating a fragmented and electrifying atmosphere.

With this director every frame, prop, color, and composition have to fit a pre-determined narrative and symbolic system. Colors are central in his system.



P A L E T T E

The film's palette revolves around red and blue tones, leaning toward cyan in our case, which are signature colors in the director's work. The Eastern European setting naturally brought in gray, desaturated tones, while the sci-fi action, and thriller elements introduced greens and metallic hues into the mix.

C O N T R A S T

We aimed for a healthy level of contrast, but I created softer and more compressed blacks to complement the lens choice, which intentionally produced softer images to begin with. This was technically challenging at first, as the default out-of-the-box ACES contrast is quite punchy in the shadows.

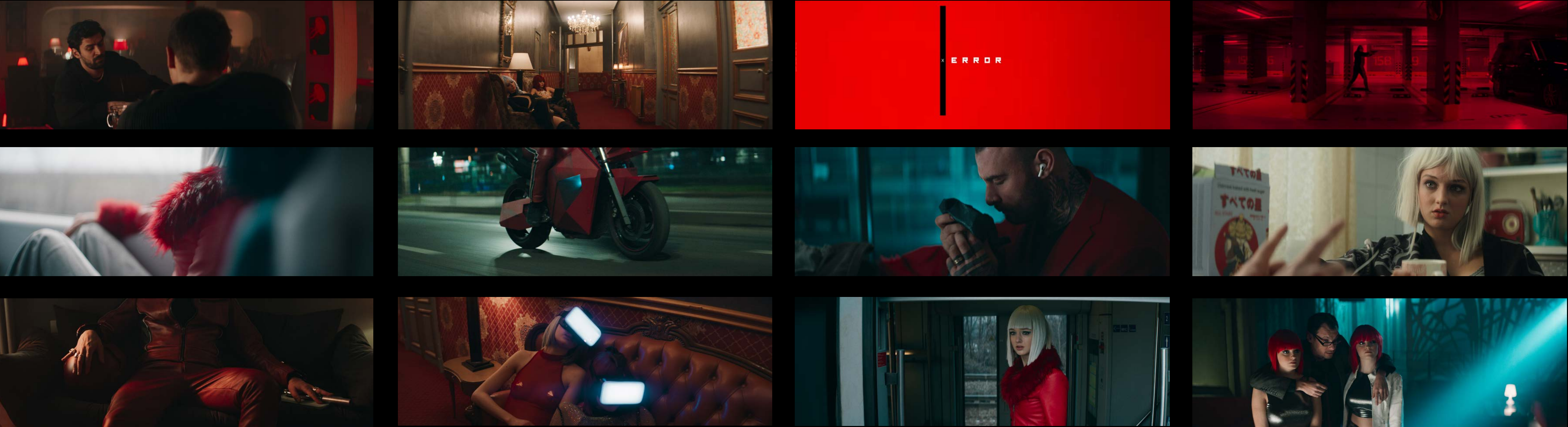
T E X T U R E

The overall texture was largely defined by the choice of Xelmus Apollo Prime anamorphic lenses, which introduced significant blooming and a naturally soft image, eliminating the need for additional softening. We used the Alexa 35's built-in grain at its highest setting and added a subtle layer of 35mm-style grain in post to enhance the gritty feel. Highlight compression was also applied later to achieve a more filmic look. For certain scenes featuring the main actress, we added in post a very gentle Hollywood Blackmagic filter, a technique often seen in older films, though applied much more subtly in our case.



U S I N G R E D

In April X, red is used to represent what the director calls “fragments of consciousness”. It can be seen in key props and costumes, such as the red jacket, red helmet, red wigs, and in set design, such as the red corridors, and the elevator. Some scenes are entirely monochrome red, this was achieved on set, but red is also the color used for all outputs from the dream machine, which was achieved in post production. Red is a color which required extra attention.



W O R K F L O W A N D I T S C H A L L A N G E S

The team decided to shoot the film on ARRI Alexa 35 in ARRIRAW using the Xelmus Apollo Prime Anamorphic lens series. One of the reasons for choosing these anamorphic lenses was their distinctive lens flares. Beyond the stylistic appeal, these flares played a functional role in helping to obscure background details. This was particularly useful in the car chase, where streetlights triggered aggressive flares that abstracted the cityscape, making the location timeless. It was a creative decision that not only enhanced the visual language of the film but also helped navigate the limitations of a lower budget. On set, an internal Arri LUT was used for monitoring, but since we decided to do the post production pipeline entirely in ACES, one of my first tasks was recreating this initial look to serve as a starting point for grading. I used Lattice and some trial and error to reverse engineer the core of the LUT, which mainly meant greenish, teal shadows, magenta-leaning skin tones. This gave us continuity from the images they looked at while editing and allowed us to explore and fine tune the look for each scene. All grading was done in DaVinci Resolve.

Later on, I went down the rabbit hole of device testing as the team wanted to see how the look translated across different screens and how it held up in less than ideal viewing environments. While I've done cross-screen checks before, this was by far the most extensive. In addition to working on a calibrated screen in a dark environment, I tested the film on OLED TVs, phones, and various uncalibrated displays. I even created a DCP and watched it in a cinema to ensure that nothing stood out as a problem and the overall look remained consistent. Of course, one cannot avoid the inherent inconsistencies across these displays, and within those limits everything looked fine, but for a colorist's eye, it was still an exhilaratingly painful experience.

V F X

This movie has around 200 shots that have some sort of VFX on them (created in After Effects and/or Fusion), which was a new type of challenge for me, both technically and artistically. As the budget didn't allow for keeping a designated post supervisor for the entire process, I helped out in setting up VFX pipelines and fixing problems. Prior to grading, I took on an ACES training course, which helped me understand current workflows and anticipate problems. Using ACES was new to many on the team, which led to a number of challenges to solve, ranging from incorrect color spaces to minor color and/or gamma shifts, and clamped highlights. To help identify and isolate these issues, I wrote Python scripts that scanned EXR files for inconsistencies and flagged problematic material. I also tested workflows and color management in round-tripping between Photoshop and After Effects, finding various incompatibilities, such as common plugins that didn't work properly within ACES.



COLLABORATIONS

D O P

My work with Nathan on this project began well before I received any footage. We had extensive, both creative and technical, conversations about the story, the mood, and the overall visual direction. He shared dailies and behind-the-scenes photos to give me a clearer understanding of what they were aiming to capture on set. We also reviewed references for the film. We discussed how they inspired lighting on set and how it should affect color choices in grading. In the lead up to grading, we discussed potential issues, namely problematic locations or continuity issues caused by weather changes between takes. Later we also held several online grading sessions to refine the looks together.

D I R E C T O R

I also spent a week in person with Michel during grading, which proved to be essential. Although he had a clear and strong vision for the film, he gave me the freedom to experiment and contribute my own perspective. Many of the final looks emerged from this collaborative exchange. Together, we fine-tuned scenes and made precise, surgical adjustments to build balanced and intentional palettes. I learned a great deal from him, not only about grading, but about filmmaking as a whole. His attention to detail taught me how much can be achieved with subtle, targeted changes. I came to appreciate more the creative potential of masks not just as corrective tools, but as a way to think like a DP rather than a colorist: where would we put an actual light on set in order to create depth, shape the space, and guide the viewer's eye.

V F X T E A M

Working with the VFX team involved more than just technical troubleshooting and debugging. A major part of the process was ensuring that the VFX elements integrated seamlessly into the graded image. This required learning their language and understanding how certain terms could mean very different things: for example, 'shadow' might refer to a literal cast shadow for them, while for me it meant the darker pixel values in an image. It wasn't always easy to explain why something felt off, especially when the issue was more perceptual than technical, but I had to find ways to express it clearly.

E D I T O R

I also spent a considerable amount of time working with Hugo, the team's chief editor. As the cut matured over time, we had to go through multiple conforming sessions. He was generous with his time and shared valuable insights.



SCENES TO MENTION

SOME CREATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS

One of my strongest personal creative contributions was the scene in the Oxya club, which ended up looking quite different from what was originally intended. It was meant to have a monochromatic grade with salmon and gold tones, but the lighting on set introduced far more colors. I decided to lean into those tones and, without forcing it, developed a look inspired by stills from Wong Kar-wai. The director loved it but decided to set it aside temporarily so we could reflect on whether it truly fit the world of the film.

The scene is emotionally charged, the main character meets his long lost sister for the first time, but it's not a happy reunion. His mind is collapsing, and he's falling into insanity as his world crumbles around him. This heightened sense of loss and disorientation could justify a more vivid and stylized treatment but we had to be careful not to break the overall sci-fi tone. It also happens right around the midpoint of the film, which gives it structural significance. As the character gets kicked out of the club, we snap back to reality in the next scene, which is intentionally graded to feel unpleasant. It features harsh, cold overhead neon lighting, and we enhanced that discomfort by pushing greens and cyans in the image. This gave us an opportunity to create a world within a world.

Later, we revisited the scene and fine tuned the look into a version that better fit the film's world. We toned down the warmth and shifted the stronger greens toward a more metallic blue. The final result preserved the emotional tone while integrating seamlessly into the overall aesthetic, and it made it into the film.



The opening and ending are variations of the same scene, which also appears in flashbacks throughout the film. I suggested grading them differently to evoke distinct emotional tones as the story unfolds: using cooler blue tones at the beginning to set an unsettling, distant mood, and shifting to warmer, greener tones at the end to suggest a sense of resolution.



The train station and police precinct scenes took longer to find their visual identities. Both had some production-related challenges, and the initial grades weren't working well and the director wasn't satisfied with how they felt in context. We had to experiment, adapt, and rework the scenes multiple times to find something that supported the tone and rhythm of that section of the film. Eventually, I created a look that addressed those concerns and helped anchor the scenes emotionally and visually. With some small adjustments, that treatment was then applied more broadly across the second half of the film to bring a sense of cohesion and continuity to a range of scenes.



The car scene with Klein and Bax was another that received a more intense grade. We pushed the contrast and let the highlights clip slightly more than usual to reflect the tension and fear within the scene. The result was a radical, more aggressive look that emphasises the emotional pressure on the characters.



REFLECTION

Working on April X was an intense and deeply rewarding experience. It pushed me technically, creatively, and personally. I had the chance to really contribute to shaping the film’s visual world, and take responsibility beyond grading, stepping into technical troubleshooting, VFX integration, and collaborative decision-making. It was a project full of challenges: shifting conditions, evolving looks, and unexpected problems, but each of these also opened up space for growth. I learned a lot.

The project is still very fresh, and as I look back on it, I already see many things I could have done differently or better. One always strives to improve, and that happens through the work itself. Despite all the doubts that inevitably come after a challenging project, I am proud of what I contributed, both the visible results and the less visible parts.

I’m deeply grateful to Michel for his trust, clarity, and openness. He is a true visionary, precise in what he wants while generous in giving space to others to bring their voice to the work. A combination one does not often encounter. His way of working made the grading process both collaborative and creatively rich.

And of course, working with Nathan is always a joy, his stunning images are an immense pleasure to grade and a strong foundation to build on.



Michel K Parandi



Nathan Haugaard



Eniko Edelsbrunner