



Article professionnel

Article

2010

Published version

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[Film review of:] Agora / Alejandro Amenábar. 2009

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How to cite

MARTIN MORUNO, Dolorès. Looking to the Heavens: Aménabar's Hypatia and the Fall of Alexandria.
[Film review of:] Agora / Alejandro Amenábar. 2009. In: Journal of Jura Gentium Cinema, 2010, vol. 15.

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:36452>

Reviews » Agora

Looking to the Heavens

Amenabar's Hypatia and the Fall of Alexandria

by Dolores Martín Moruno

In his latest movie, Alejandro Amenábar recreates the legend of Hypatia, the first woman philosopher, who has also been considered one of the first victims in the clash of science and the intolerance of religion. *Agora* is not only a cinematic journey to the past, contextualised during the fall of Alexandria but, furthermore, a colourful lesson of astronomy that shows the importance of common dialogue for safeguarding pluralism in contemporary politics.



"Heavens should be simple, but they are not", is the legend Alejandro Amenábar uses in his latest film *Agora* to introduce Hypatia, one of the first woman philosophers and astronomers in Western history, who was inhumanely "butchered by a troop of Christian fanatics led by Peter the Reader in Alexandria" [1] at the end of the 4th century. The film premiered at the Cannes Film Festival last year with high expectations, not only due to the big budget of studio production, but also because the story of Hypatia, an icon of modernity and feminism against the corrupt powers of religion, had never been adapted in cinema.

Amenábar approaches this legendary episode in the introductory scene by showing the Earth from the point of view of the Universe, i.e. the Archimedean point from which an observer can objectively perceive the subject of inquiry. Using the camera like a telescope, he changes the perspective to suggest an analogy between the story of Hypatia and that of a city, Alexandria. Thus, Amenábar's gaze connects the infinitely small picture of the insignificant human affairs and that of the Universe designed through the perfect circular movements of the planets according to the Ptolemaic system. The result of this combination of shots is, thereby, a visual spectacle conceived by the director as a cinematic journey, which invites the spectator to come back to ancient Egypt in 391 A. C.

The collective project led by Amenábar with Mateo Gil (screenwriter), Fernando Bovaira and Álvaro Agustín (producers), has surprised the public with an unusual topic. In contrast to movies, such as *Thesis* (1996), *The Others* (2001) and *The Sea Inside* (2004), *Agora* is almost a kind of historical documentary or most likely a peplum, a genre which offers recent contributions such as Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) and Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004). However, Amenábar adds a touch of excellence to this type of movie contextualised in the fall of the Roman Empire through the protagonist, Hypatia, who is an intellectual woman devoted to uncover the eternal truth of the heavens, while the outside world is falling to pieces.

The role of Hypatia, which is performed by Rachel Weisz, portrays a young woman who embodies reason and science by means of Neoplatonic moral virtues such as wisdom, courage, and moderation. Hypatia's representation in *Agora* illuminates the life of a woman of science, completely dedicated to research and who even rejected her condition as a woman when she decided to have no sexual relation, in order to ensure her liberty as a man. However, Hypatia has not always been imagined as a virgin for emphasising her *sophrosyne*, but rather as an icon of sexual freedom [2]. In this respect, Amenábar has preferred to recreate Hypatia's chastity by introducing the famous anecdote attributed to her, which states that she rebuffed a suitor showing him a bloodstained towel with her menstrual cycle, through the scene played with Oerstes (Oscar Isaac), her young noble pupil, who would become the prefect of Alexandria and is in love with her.

Amenábar's Hypatia is clearly inspired by the literary legend constructed for centuries around her as an eternally beautiful woman, who was the daughter of Theon (Michael Lonsdale), the last known director of the Museion of Alexandria. Hypatia was supposed to have written on Apollonius, Ptolemy and Diophantus' works. We know about Hypatia's life only by the indirect references of Socrates Scholasticus, Dasmacius and Sinesius of Cirene, who was another of Hypatia's disciples and was later, elected the Bishop of Ptolomeics, a role that is played in the film by Rupert Evans.

As Charlotte Higgins has observed in a review of *Agora* published in *The Guardian*, Hypatia is drawn as an "anti-clerical heroine" and an "enlightenment martyr" in the style of Voltaire and Gibbon, who died for defending tolerance in the public sphere [3]. However, in contrast to the image of the unselfish sage, Hypatia's science is recreated emotionally as a metaphor for mirroring the political scenario of Alexandria. An example of this science with moral aims is the scene recreating one of Hypatia's lessons on Euclid -"things which equal the same thing also equal one another"[4]- in order to demonstrate by analogy that even if her disciples professed different religious faiths, they should understand their equality as brothers. This is where the relevance of the title, *Agora*, as the political space where the citizens gathered in the Greek city-states to express their opinions in common, becomes clear. Amenábar interprets it as the planet where we must live together.

Although *Agora* is an historical film, it is not only orientated on looking at the past, but also set to reveal the resemblances between the political arena of Alexandria and the contemporary world, in which religions continue to polarise modern societies by persecuting certain social opinions. As Amenábar has commented, *Agora* "is a mirror for people to gaze into and observe from the distance of time and space and see how little the world has changed"[5]. From this Archimedean point of view, we can see how *Agora*'s real focus is on the rise of Christianity and the fall of Paganism, which culminated in the destruction of the famous Library of Alexandria, where the largest part of the ancient Greek knowledge in mathematics, astronomy, philosophy and literature was preserved. Seen in this light, Alexandria, a city founded as a meeting space between communities of diverse origins, was in its death throes at the end of the 4th century, when Christianity was not only recognised as an official religion of the Empire, but as the only one accepted by the political power.

Film



Agora, Alejandro Amenábar, 2009

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Following a detailed historical research, Amenábar captures the last stage of the Ancient World through the image of a suffering civilisation, in which cultural pluralism is finally destroyed at the hands of the different religious factions existing during the violent upheavals spilled over the streets of Alexandria. As it has been observed by Thomas Sotinel in *Le Monde* [6], this is the fresh element in Amenábar's *peplum*: that the Christians are the gang of bad boys, who persecuted the heroine of the story, Hypatia, an atheist who only believes in philosophy. Thus, Amenábar shows the destruction of the Alexandrian culture through the scenes mirroring the crowd of dark and hateful men resembling cockroaches, who run to destroy the *Serapeum* following the order of the Pope Teophilus. The costumes designed by Gabriella Pescucci visually emphasise the uprising of Christians in Alexandria as the beginning of the obscure Middle Ages. The contraposition between the luminous white clothes worn by the Pagans and the blackness characterising the *Parabalani*, the Christian brotherhood composed in the early church, is not an unintended choice.

Precisely, the character of Davus, Hypatia's slave (Max Minghella), who is also in love with her, plays a central role in the fatal ending of the story, showing how Christianity obtained a social base amongst the oppressed, i.e. those who felt out of place. In this respect, Amenábar seems to make a kind of Nietzschean diagnosis when he explores the moral values belonging to the Antiquity in opposition to the Christians as the inversion of the original order of things, by favouring the weak and promoting their interests at the expense of the strong and noble. Therefore, the resentment of the weakest sectors of the population in Alexandria gave the power to a religion which was apparently based on compassion and charity, but which would ultimately justify violence to seize the terrestrial power by imagining a God who governs in Heaven. This process of social *purification* led by the *Parabalani* in the city is carried into execution in the dramatic ending of the film, which recreates Hypatia's death, when Cyril becomes Bishop of Alexandria (Sammy Samir).

In contrast to the myth elaborated around Hypatia's death, Amenábar imagines this scene in a light tone. According to Socrates Scholasticus, Hypatia was dragged from her carriage, and carted to the *Caesarum*, where the fanatics "stripped her and murdered her by scraping her skin off with tiles and bits of shell. After tearing her body in pieces, they took her mangled limbs to a place called *Cinaron*, and there, burnt them" [7]. However, Amenábar has chosen another ending for his film, by means of the frustrated love triangle established between Hypatia, Orestes and Davus. When Orestes finally accepts that Hypatia must embrace the Christian faith and the *Parabalani* prepare her murder, Davus, her ancient slave, who takes an active part in this social movement, kills her before the fanatics begin to stone her.

Amenábar's representation of Hypatia has been criticised for its unreliability. For example, in the film she considers Aristarco's heliocentric system, which would be introduced by Copernicus in the 16th century. Also, when she dies she does not seem to be a mature woman of around sixty years old. In reply to this, we should understand that Hypatia is not strictly an historical personality and that, in a broader sense, she represents a myth that each generation is expected to reproduce through its particular lens. Aside from these commentaries on the historical and scientific background of the film, **Agora** has been received in a controversial way in Spain because of its political message. The most conservative opinions coming from the Catholic sector have seen **Agora** as an attack on the church. Other, more progressive magazines such as *Público*, did not hold the film in high regard either, and have evaluated Amenábar's result as failed, because "the movie is a long lesson of history and astronomy, without passion, too much music and a poor chemistry between the characters"[8]. In a similar way, *El País* has considered *Agora* a good, but not as excellent a film as **Thesis** or **The Others**.

Finally, all the critics have coincided in marking **Agora** as too ambitious a project for being an intellectual film, which mirrors Amenábar's own intellectual concerns about the mysteries of the universe. Thereby, the subject is far from being interesting for a mass audience. In spite of this, **Agora** was one of the most viewed films in Spain, a country where the spectator generally goes to the cinema only for entertainment. Criticising that *Agora* has not achieved the perfection of Amenábar's previous films is absolutely valid, yet it is also pertinent to keep in mind the central message that the film has suggested: that there is no perfection on Earth, only in the Heavens and if we cannot perceive this perfection and simplicity it is only because we are not gods.

Since time immemorial, human beings have tried to understand their destinies through their limited eyes gazing at the stars and the planets, which, like us, seem to wander in the Universe. We should not forget that we are not placed in the centre of the Universe and, therefore, that we can only see from our relative perception. From this partial point of view, it seems clear to me that there should be neither a political truth without considering the different perspectives of the public sphere, nor politics based on exerting the violence in the world of common affairs against those who think differently.

[1] Gibbon, Edward (1831). *The history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire*, J. & J. Harper, Vol. 3, p. 250

[2] Dzielska, María (1996). *Hypatia of Alexandria*. Harvard University Press, p. 102.

[3] Higgins, Charlotte "Alejandro Amenábar's *Agora*: A gift for classicists", *The Guardian*, 18th May (2009). It can also be consulted in <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/>

[4] Euclid (1956). *The thirteen books of Euclid's Elements*. Thomas Little Head Edition. Dover Publications, Vol. 1, p. 222.

[5] It can also be consulted in <http://www.agorathemovie.com/>

[6] Sotinel, Thomas "Agora: un peplum intellectuel pour célébrer Hypatie, mathématicienne et païenne", *Le Monde*, 5 Janvier (2010).

[7] Scholasticus, Socrates (2004). *The Ecclesiastical History*, Kessinger Publishing, p. 281.

[8] Brito, Sara. "Un profesor de historia llamado Amenábar", *Público*, 17th May (2009).

