

Cinema

Film: The Three of Hearts

New film by Mexican director Felipe Cazals

Film-maker Felipe Cazals possesses his own distinctive cinematographic style. This style was still developing in his 1982 *Bajo la metralla* (Under the Shrapnel); in the controversial *Los motivos de Luz* (The Motives of Luz), 1985, however, it was already fully established.

Both of these movies, whatever their faults, were very ambitious works. But Cazal's most recent offering, *El tres de copas* (*The Three of Hearts*), was conceived with the deliberate intention of being no more than a minor piece—a pot-boiler,—albeit an honest and decently-made one. It was shot in three weeks at Mexico City's Churubusco Studios and on a few locations close to the city. A film-maker's lot in Mexico at the moment is difficult, unstable and

haphazard, even for a director of such well-established credentials as Cazals. *El tres de copas* was undertaken to provide support for future projects of a more significant nature.

For his purpose, Cazals took up a script written some years ago by Xavier Robles, freely inspired by a Jorge Luis Borges short story, *La trusa* (*The Drawers*). Borges' fans will, however, recognize the original work only at the film's beginning. In its development, *El tres de copas* differs substantially from *La trusa*. Cazals, in his many substantial modifications of the script, has done away with several characters and situations, and has even introduced a new character of great importance to the plot.

El tres de copas tells the story of two brothers, Damián (Humberto Zurita) and Pedro (Alejandro Camacho). Damián and Pedro are comrades-in-arms and foster-brothers—first departure from Borges' tale, in which they are blood brothers—whose father (or fathers?) belonged to the St. Patrick Battalion, a group of U.S. Army Irishmen who fought on the Mexican side in the U.S.-Mexican War of 1847.

The movie starts as Pedro and Damián are drinking, gambling and wenching their way home to Nochistlán, Zacatecas, after the war against the 1862-64 French intervention. In one of their stops, Pedro takes up with Casilda (Gabriela Roel), and she comes on to Nochistlán as well, where the brothers intend setting up a business. Pedro loves Casilda; Damián gambles, drinks, dreams of Casilda and listens to her making love in the next room. The triangle, or the trio, has been established; and from that point



Gabriela Roel and Humberto Zurita.

Photo by Imcine.

Mexico a través de los libros (Mexico Through Books), Bilingual Spanish-English edition. UNAM, Mexico, 1987.

For centuries Mexico's great natural and cultural wealth has attracted the interest of specialists from around the world who have attempted to understand and explain the country's cultural expressions.

odds and ends

on, the cards will be changed or mixed up in a variety of ways. Using card-game terms, Cazals gives us the following explanation of his film: "It opens with a pair of twos. Three is the discard. But in matters of the heart, there's always some card left over."

El tres de copas is concerned with Fate, both in its "objective" sense and as chance; and with the myth of the *femme fatale*, time-honored favorite in Mexican film, song, and other cultural expressions. The main theme, though, is the triangle. Even such apparently unrelated interludes as the episode of Cipriano Melquisador (a splendidly truculent Pedro Armendáriz) are introduced with the purpose of reinforcing it. The triangle motif is sustained right to the movie's end—an ending which, incidentally, is both tongue-in-cheek and deliberately misogynist.

El tres de copas has been accused of being phallogocentric by certain diehard feminists, who have yet to forgive Cazals for *Los motivos de Luz*. In a certain sense this is true, though the intention is ironic. But if these critics were capable of really seeing the movie, they would understand that the driving force behind the action is not the phallus. Cazals is too good a film-maker to reveal his film's driving force through dialog, statements or abuse of general ideas. He uses other, less concrete means.

When Pedro first takes Casilda to live with him, the camera dwells upon her rear. At first, this is an objective point of view: the shot states and highlights forthcoming action. Shortly afterwards, however, it becomes subjective; it is Damián's viewpoint, and thus the film's driving force is fueled by the obsession of one of its characters. The same shot of Casilda's rear—this time naked—will occur again later, at the moment when Damián final-

ly manages to crystallize his obsession. Logically, here the point of view is simultaneously both subjective and objective.

In formal terms, stylization is the principle at play in *El tres de copas*. Cazal's Nochistlán is reduced to a few archetypal elements: a street, housefronts, typical village gossips, the usual figures to be found in taverns and other such meeting places. Camera work consistently employs long focus and short timing,

brilliant work on Arturo Ripstein's *El imperio de la fortuna* (*Fortune's Dominion*), reviewed in last issue of *Voices*.

On another level, *El tres de copas* can be seen as Cazal's reflection upon his profession as story-teller. The film has a narrator (José Carlos Ruiz) whose commentary runs alongside the action during its first third, confirming, contradicting, announcing, ironizing, highlighting, or establishing a counterpoint to the tale told in images. In the end, it is the narrator's tale which dominates.

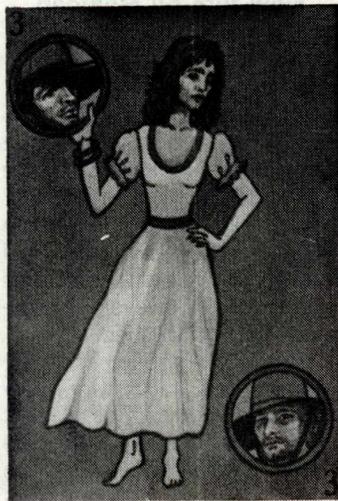
Along with the formal principle of stylization, it is the narrator who establishes *El tres* calculated tone of unreality. One aspect of this is the characters' longevity. Strongman Ponciano (Enrique Lucero), for example, is hanged by revolutionaries in 1910; if at his first appearance (around 1870) he is about sixty, he must be a hundred by the time he dies. The narrator tells us that Casilda—by that stage Doña Casilda—dies in 1926, at a very ripe old age indeed. The narrator himself shares this characteristic. He speaks from a contemporary viewpoint, making reference to plane travel, for example; yet he claims to have known characters in the story personally. From a strictly realist angle, he transcends the limits of what is humanly possible.

The narrator intervenes constantly (if passively) in his fiction. He is omnipotent and omnipresent. His manipulation of the protagonists is such that it amounts to a refusal to let them live. His is something more than the recreation or retelling of an experience. It is the imposition carried out by all creators of fiction. By its very form, the film refuses to let us approach it as an experience retold.

In the narrator, Cazals presents himself—a little derisive god manipulating the characters he has created, an arbitrary maker of shams and artifices, taking materials from reality and converting them into pure fiction ruled by codes of its own. In *El tres de copas*, there is no confrontation between reality and fiction: right from the first shot, it is clear that reality has been sacrificed to fiction. Thus we are treated to a Pirandello-like speculation on the subject of characters as their author's doubles.

In this vision of the film-maker as creator of fictions, as falsifier, we see a Cazals stripped of all solemnity and capable of self-derision.★

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not only with interior and false exterior sets, but also on outdoor locations, very beautiful footage, incidentally, filmed on Mount Ajusco, just south of Mexico City. Through systematic use of this lens, indoor backgrounds are reduced to blurry masses of grays and blacks. This effect is an application of the stylization principle; at the same time, it is an intelligent solution to the problem of how to deal with the shabbiness and inauthenticity of the Churubusco sets. *El tres de copas* is the second triumph in the space of a few months for cameraman Angel Goded, who also did

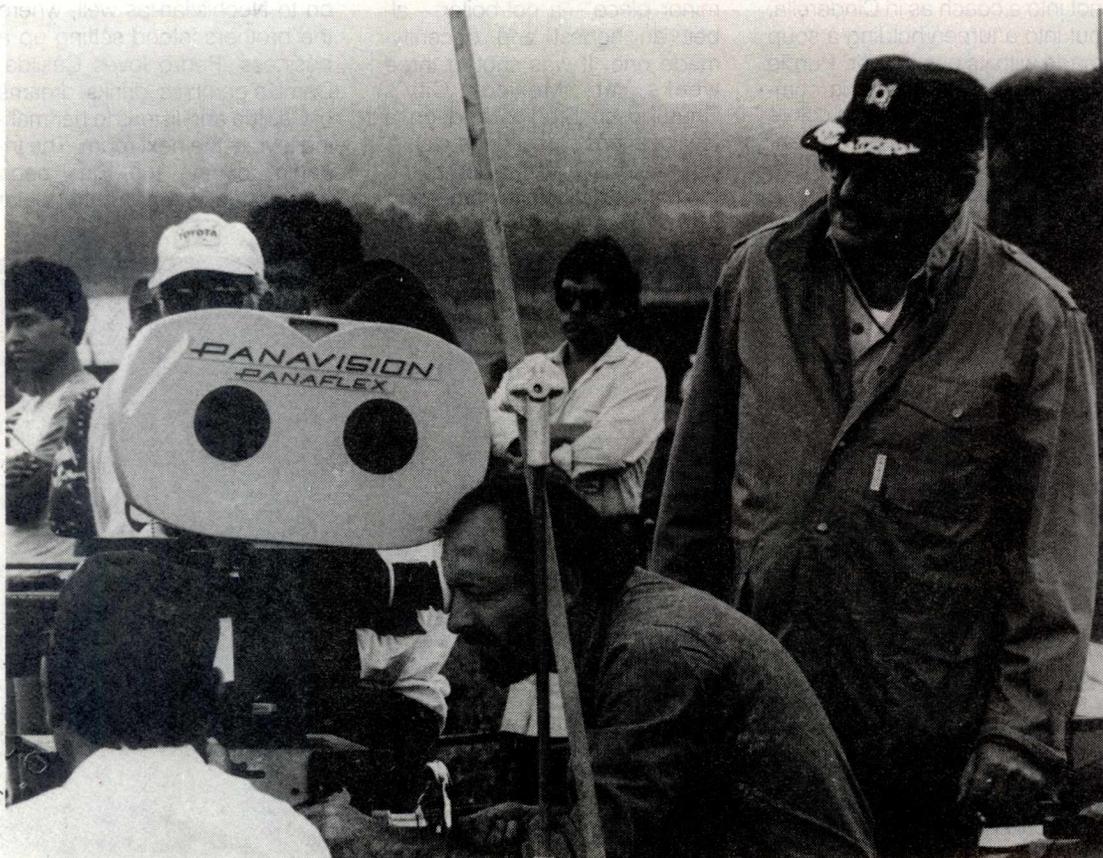


Photo by Imcine.

Felipe Cazals, *Tres de Copas* director.

Tomás Pérez Turrent