

turn-of-the-century architecture in the Santa María neighborhood.

An investigation into the past and childhood, the novel is full of leaps in time. In this sense it is not a linear narration, but a discontinuous one which allows the author to insert fragments of life, deviations, and essay-like asides. Unlike *Foucault's Pendulum* by Eco, (an obligatory reference) González Rodríguez' novel does not attempt to exhaust the highways and byways of occultism,

and it does not confront us with jumbled discussions or interminable historical investigations.

In *Foucault's Pendulum*, what Eco intends to be a mockery, an ironical representation of occultism and esotericism, ends up as a consecration of it in five hundred pages. *The Hidden Night* is not a criticism of esotericism or occultism: it uses them as means. At the same time it shows us that there are revelations as atrocious or

marvelous (if not much more so) than those hidden in a ouija board, tarot cards or horoscopes. A firefly can eradicate the fear of night creatures; an old photograph of a nude woman can contain more meanings than the signs of the zodiac; and in anyone's past there may exist secrets that are simply best not revealed. ■

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Interview: Toni Kuhn, cameraman for the film *La Tarea*

La Tarea is undoubtedly a Jaime Humberto Hermosillo's movie that shows that Mexican film-making in the nineties does offer alternatives. *La Tarea* is an original story of two characters who get the audience to participate as accomplices in their clever *tarea* (homework). Love, passion, eroticism, and a home video camera reveal the private life of a couple seeking entertainment which enables them to forget for a while the agitation of the biggest city in the world.

Meeting, separation, and complicity. To complete *La Tarea* a husband and wife fictionalize their intimate games and daily existence and twist their creation until it is indistinguishable from their own reality. The direction is remarkable, and the protagonists are played by two excellent actors, María Rojo and José Alonso, who "act and over-act while acting." They demonstrate that, contrary to what we might expect, nude scenes can still be striking when "egos" take off their clothes. One can

imagine that many people will leave the theatre with their own fantasy of recreating a *tarea* with a home video camera, exchanging their fantasies for delight via the world of eroticism.

La Tarea is filmed with a single 35 mm immobile camera. This has led many people to assume that there was no real work for a cameraman. The truth is just the opposite. *La Tarea* required meticulous planning before the filming and during it. Toni Kuhn's work shows that technical skill is an inherent part of any sensitive, aesthetic, and original conception that tries to eternalize a moment on film. As I was on my way to Toni Kuhn's house I thought about what I had heard about *La Tarea*, made with only one set, two actors, a fixed camera and two locations. Some thought it would be easy to emulate *La Tarea*; it seems as easy as placing oneself strategically behind a video camera and turning it on. I asked Toni Kuhn what he thought about this?

Toni Kuhn: I think it's fine that people say that, that our work is not visible. That shows it's well done.

Dinorah Isaak: Is that what you wanted to achieve in *La Tarea*?

TK: From the beginning of the movie, when María Rojo sets up the video camera, she knows approximately the angle it's focusing on, but she only manages a frame that conforms to the architecture of the apartment. Carried away by the plot, the audience forgets the hidden camera a bit. But she doesn't, and there are moments when she has to drag José Alonso into the frame. We figured that some people wouldn't be aware that the frame was deliberately prepared for putting people in it. But at the same time we wanted to avoid having to make the point with extended full-length shots of bodies with their heads cut off. Jaime Humberto Hermosillo and I decided that this kind of shot shouldn't last longer than 20 seconds, and when the two characters sit on the table and we see only their shoes this produces precisely the effect we were looking for. The room is out of focus and we see only two pairs of shoes. The shot has only the dialogue between the characters plus the funny

effect of the movements of their feet, which lets us imagine their frustration and gives a free rein to the audience's imagination.

DI: *How do you manage the movement of your camera when José Alonso discovers the video camera and kicks it around?*

TK: The camera wasn't really moved. We had it mounted on a tripod and we simulated the fall using the natural movement of the tripod. That made it possible not to lose the location of the frame.

DI: *How did you get the frame again when María Rojo moves the video camera to another part of the room and places it on the television set?*

TK: We had two tripods with two heads and at the same time that María took the video camera over to the television, my two assistants did the same with the film camera. This made for a natural movement and overcame the problem of breaking concentration. All that time we were checking the video pick-up.

DI: *How did you place the movie camera to produce the effect of natural height?*

TK: The upstage was raised 60 cms so we could sink the camera into a hole in the floor and get the precise angle a video camera on the floor would give. We had to do this because the lense of the movie camera is at a different height than that of a small video camera. We used a medium-angle lens to get the depth of field the film required.

DI: *What can you tell us about the lighting?*

TK: The lighting for this film has to do with certain memories of my childhood which Jaime Humberto Hermosillo was good enough to use. The idea was to create the effect that the apartment was close to

some big road. I tried to imagine the space that the audience wouldn't see and how this space influenced the inside of the apartment. How to give something as static as the set a certain life, and not just by turning lights on and off. Besides, that's what the actors do anyway. Above all, we wanted to make the audience imagine that the plot is really working itself out in an apartment in a city. The childhood memory is that when I used to be sent to bed at eight o'clock and I wasn't sleepy, I used to watch the ceiling and the walls of my room and see the cars passing by in the street by the shadows made by their lights. It gave me the feeling that the windows were moving around the walls and the ceiling. Without wanting to stress this idea of a daydream, because *La Tarea* is a comedy, I planned a flatly lit space that would let you feel the outside world through lights moved as if

they were the lights of moving cars. Traffic was handled by two technicians pushing lights very carefully on dollies. Of course, everything was tried out beforehand, but the technicians had to be exact because if they made some mistake a whole roll of film was lost, that is to say a thousand feet of film, so their precision was critical, and very difficult to get right.

DI: *I imagine that you also had something to do with the set design and props. Is this so?*

TK: Jaime Humberto Hermosillo was always sure about how he wanted the house, so the art director and I got together on the colors of both the walls and the furniture, and María's magenta-colored dress. On the other hand, Barbachano said the house had to look very Mexican. You have to remember that he is a film producer who is very interested in his films



Tony Kuhn.

being shown abroad, and he likes them to have a Mexican touch, like *María de mi corazón* and *Frida*, for example.

DI Toni, a lot of people are saying that *La tarea* shows one can make good films without much money. Is that true?

TK I think that the total cost of the film was somewhere between 330 and 360 million pesos (approximately U.S. \$120 thousand). We spent half as much on rolls of film that the showing time would indicate, that is to say, only 18 thousand feet of material. Another important savings was the amount of time spent filming, about six times less than usual, and with at least eight times fewer people too.

DI Are there any anecdotes you could tell us about Jaime Humberto Hermosillo's script?

TK Yes, something sensational that Jaime Humberto did after he showed us the video he had made prior to the movie and asked our opinion of it. He reversed what were the original gender roles, making it the female character's mission to invite the man and induce him to take part in *La Tarea*.

DI Tell us something about María Rojo's and José Alonso's acting. What do you think now that the film is finished?

TK Don't forget what might be considered overacting on the part of José Alonso and María Rojo was necessary and planned that way, because in the plot the two are acting for a video camera and supposedly neither of them are professional actors. Something, that María Rojo acts brilliantly is her monologue when she feels she has failed because she hasn't fulfilled *La Tarea* and speaks directly into the camera to her teachers. Here María Rojo is what she



Actors María Rojo and José Alonso.

is in real life and at the same time the character that she is playing. Both María Rojos are really suffering. This must be very striking for the audience. The text of this monologue was written by Jaime Humberto and María herself. He is a very open-minded director and adapts himself a good deal to what each actor brings to the script. However, he is very firm about what he is looking for and wants to achieve. But he let María have a hand in it and explain what happened to her, both on the level of the actress in *La Tarea* and on that of the woman who takes her clothes off.

DI What was the biggest personal challenge in your work as cameraman for *La Tarea*?

TK That of not being able to move the camera. The frustration of looking through a camera that you know you placed, and seeing the shots as it is filming, but not operating it.

DI Tell us more about this experience.

TK A cameraman's eye seeks to constantly compose the things that he is filming. It's like the painter's placing a subject in a particular place in his frame. The cameraman does this too, and he also plays with light and colors, creating balance. Just imagine,

I was looking through the camera, and nothing more. And it was like setting out to find myself. The challenge for me in *La Tarea* was to put up with myself, to accept that lack of active composition with a camera without a cameraman to direct it. Besides, I had to accept these shots because they were planned that way.

DI How did you feel the first day of filming when you really saw what this lack of composition meant?

TK Obviously, all the prep-work had prepared us for what would happen, but I could compare this experience with John Keitch's music, going against the rules, against harmony, against premeditated sounds. I learned that chance teaches you things.

DI How would you evaluate *La Tarea* as a photographic experience?

TK I think it was a good one, and I am pleased to have had the chance of doing a piece of work like this one which, apart from its commercial touch, also has an experimental angle. It's strange that we were able to combine these two styles of working.

DI How did Jaime Humberto Hermosillo manage the directing?

TK First we made the whole movie on video, so he knew perfectly well what was going to happen from the beginning to the end. We did the video as soon as the set was ready. We worked for two weeks on the set, week one on the video and the second week on the real filming, which took only four days.

DI How did you manage to change the rolls of film without moving the camera?

TK *La Tarea* lasts an hour and a half, meaning 9 roll changes, but Jaime Humberto had it all perfectly planned, the actors had to be off camera or, José Alonso hangs his jacket on the chair and shuts off the light. The sound track goes on, keeping the continuity.

DI Toni, they say that *La Tarea* is the film that represents a "coming-out" in Mexican film-making. What do you think?

TK I think the "coming-out" of Mexican film-making took place in 1970 with Paul Leduc's *Reed, México Insurgente*. That was the moment for Mexican film-making to be reborn, and although I'm speaking 20 years later, it was then that the schools of

film-making in which many of our present film directors learned their trade began to be important.

DI Do you really believe that today's Mexican film-making is not in an important stage?

TK One would have to wait another five years to be sure of it.

DI What do you think of Mexico as a country for film-makers?

TK Mexico is marvelous. It is the country for film-making, because it's completely surrealistic. It has an ideal climate, the light from directly overhead, its contrasts. One draws sustenance from the Mexicans' attitude toward life, which I compare with that of the people who make movies; sometimes we don't know what we prefer, movies or our own lives. When filming in Mexico, unforeseen things happen that make you more creative.

DI How would you define this surrealist Mexico that we who live here experience every day?

TK I think there's more chance of remaining child-like, it's like

attaching more importance to life without being so strict. Improvising more.

DI Being more natural?

TK Being more open to the things one is experiencing and those around you. In my work I have travelled all over the country, and every time I discover new things that make me question my own behavior and way of living more and more.

DI How did you get involved in the world of pictures?

TK Ever since my childhood I have been more interested in what was seen than what was said because I grew up bilingual, speaking German and French with Swiss parents. When I arrived in Mexico and had to take on another culture I got further and further away from trying to explain things in words. So I went into the visual side of things. That's one explanation, but I don't know if that's the right one.

DI How does your inner eye feel and capture the reality of living and being part of the biggest city in the world?

TK ???

I take the liberty of guessing what this answer might mean. Toni Kuhn, in addition to being a cameraman, devotes part of his creative work to conventional photography. There he captures the unplanned reality of everyday Mexican life, the true, surrealistic Mexico, the Mexico that Toni Kuhn manages to transmit by means of the car lights "that night" in which we expiate the intimate relationship of a Mexican couple doing their *tarea* **M**



Jaime Humberto Hermosillo and his actors.

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