

**THE FABER BOOK OF
MEXICAN
CINEMA**
JASON WOOD

films. It had a massive impact on the industry. Prior to NAFTA it was largely state production – something with which I have never been involved – but after NAFTA it was completely the opposite, a totally open market, with nothing in between and no period of transition. Now we have different rules to the game.

GUILLERMO DEL TORO: I remember at the time that I felt that NAFTA was so ill-planned, because it was passed without getting any consensus from the world of culture as to how best to protect the industry and the local culture. We were raided and invaded by media companies and there was nothing there to protect us.

ALFREDO JOSKOWICZ: Prior to joining NAFTA there was a very important law – albeit one seldom respected – dictating that Mexican cinemas had to show a certain minimum percentage of locally produced films. In the first three years of joining NAFTA, this percentage was reduced to 30 per cent, then to 20 per cent, and then to just 10 per cent. However, NAFTA did have an important effect on exhibition in Mexico, because it allowed exhibitors to increase ticket prices. With this came the proliferation of the American-style – and frequently American-owned – multiplex screens that did bring much improved screening facilities and improved technical specifications.

You also have to take into account the new freedom of choice Mexican audiences faced. Previously the cinema would have two, maybe three screens. Now they had eight. Of course, if you wanted to see spectacular special effects and big stars then you would invariably pay to see an American film. But if you wanted to view a representation of your identity then you would choose to see the Mexican film. That is, if the film was good. If it wasn't, why would you pay to see it?

This is perhaps the beginning of a new story: because, from an industry on the point of collapse, there finally came signs of regeneration.

Adventures in Hollywood, and More Generational Stirrings

In 1994 Alfonso Cuarón took up his first Hollywood engagement, directing an adaptation (scripted by Richard LaGravenese) of Frances Hodgson Burnett's A Little Princess for Warner Bros. Updating its action to the First World War, the film tells the tale of ten-year-old Sara Crewe (Liesel Matthews), raised by her father in India until he heeds the call to war, and so places Sara in a magnificent New York private school run by the stern Miss Minchin (Eleanor Bron), where Sara introduces the other girls to the joys of make-believe and makes a spirited adjustment when her circumstances suddenly and tragically become straitened. Enthusiastically greeted on release, the film was praised as a formally audacious, sensitive and humanist rites-of-passage story. It won Cuarón a New Generation Award at the 1995 Los Angeles Film Critics Awards and also saw Emmanuel Lubezki nominated for an Academy Award for his cinematography.

JOSÉ LUIS GARCÍA AGRAZ director: Alfonso Cuarón and Guillermo del Toro understood that if they wanted to find fulfilment in their chosen profession, they'd need adequate resources in order to have continuity and development, which is why they emigrated to Hollywood. I suppose many other film-makers have had the same idea – although not everyone possesses the 99 per cent of artistic rigour and 1 per cent of holiness that these two have.

ALFONSO CUARÓN director: I ended up in Hollywood not because I wanted to; I ended up in Hollywood because I didn't have any choice. When I did my first film I burned my bridges with the government, and I knew that if I were going to go back, the way of doing films in Mexico or the ways I knew of doing films in Mexico would have to change. Most films had a big percentage in terms of input from the government; my first film had 40 per cent. To survive as a film-maker in Mexico you had to sustain yourself by doing lots of work that had nothing to do with cinema – stuff like commercials. I didn't want to go from being an assistant director with Luis Mandoki to making commercials. *Sólo con tu pareja* premiered at the Toronto Film Festival and I

knew I had a choice: I was completely in debt but immediately started getting offers of work from Hollywood. There was an open door and I went to pursue that open door and I'm very thankful.

I don't see Hollywood as the 'dark side'. Again, it's all about film, and in this regard the idea of working in Hollywood is irrelevant. Paul Thomas Anderson works for studios but so what? For me, independence has nothing to do with budget – and this is where many mediocre film-makers shelter themselves. There are people who do amazing masterpieces for nothing and at the same time there are people who make crappy films for nothing. My point is that Hollywood is what it is: it's an industry, and I don't feel that the mission of Hollywood is to corrupt film-makers. There are talented people working in that industry and mostly, yes, there are mediocre people who don't care about cinema but do care about power and money. But I can't classify things as simply as: 'This is a Hollywood film: it's bad. This is a Mexican film: it's good. And this is an Iranian film: so it's good. And this is a big-budget French movie: it *must* be bad . . .'

Guillermo del Toro had been having a tough time finding the means to follow up Cronos – at least, until a Hollywood studio came calling.

GUILLERMO DEL TORO *director*: Four years passed between *Cronos* and *Mimic*, and they passed because I didn't know then what I know now. At the end of *Cronos* I was in incredible personal debt, to the tune of a quarter of a million dollars; I may have made a career on the film, but I certainly didn't make any money. And I was desperate, because I was in no position to have that kind of debt. My father helped, he told me he would assume the debt, but that he wanted to be paid back in dollars. Then I watched in horror as the value of the dollar rose . . .

Then, out of the blue, came an offer to meet with Universal Studios to discuss the possibility of a project. They explained that they would pay me \$125,000 for writing a screenplay. I was immediately interested, but I told them I would do it only if the screenplay were something I really wanted to do. And so I wrote *Spanky*, based on the novel by Christopher Fowler. I really think it's one of the best things I've ever written. Perhaps because of that, it was rejected by the studios, who said it was too dark, and unlike any other movie in that it sounded like a comedy but ended up as a tough horror film. I said, 'Exactly! That's the whole spirit.' I lost about a year on that one . . .

Then I started developing a period project, and Universal told me they didn't do period movies. Lo and behold, a few years later – *The Mummy*.

But after two years came the chance of doing *Mimic* as a short film – part of an anthology movie. At the same time I was also developing *The Devil's Backbone* but we were finding very little support in Mexico. So I was trying to do a Mexican film and I couldn't; I was trying to do an American film and I couldn't. When I pitched the *Mimic* short to Bob Weinstein at Miramax's Dimension outfit, he loved the story and said, 'Why not make it into a feature?' I must say, my first response was, 'It's a perfect short but is there enough here for a feature?' But it had been three years since I'd made a film, so I said yes to it. I learned a lot after that . . .

Mimic proposes a classic horror plot. After a disease carried by the common cockroach has reached epidemic proportions in Manhattan, entomologist Dr Susan Tyler (Mira Sorvino) genetically engineers a mutant species of insect that can exterminate the roaches before dying out itself. The venture is a seeming success but a handful of years later Susan learns that people are disappearing and corpses turning up in and around the Manhattan subway. The mutant species has proved more durable and adaptable than she intended and so alongside her colleague and partner Peter Mann (Jeremy Northam) and reluctant New York subway cop Leonard (Charles S. Dutton) Susan sets out to destroy the mutant race she has unwittingly unleashed. Ostensibly a subterranean sci-fi thriller, Mimic is also a convincing allegory about genetic manipulation and, a recurring del Toro preoccupation, how the ghosts from the past come back to haunt us.

GUILLERMO DEL TORO: *Mimic* remains the hardest shooting experience of my life – it's still right up there, pricking at my pain threshold. There were many reasons. Back then, it was the most expensive movie Dimension had made and also by far the most expensive movie I'd ever done. I experienced many hardships with it. I sustain the belief that you learn through pain, and I certainly learned a hell of a lot. One of the main things I learned, and which I cherish to this day, is that you are *always* making two movies. You are making the movie that the screenplay is telling, and you are making a movie that is pure image, pure cinema. Cinema has a kinship to theatre and other forms of drama in that it needs a narrative, characters and an arc, but in fact a film may also remain full of memorable images in spite of the screenplay not being completely there, or screwed with by the powers-that-be. And that is the most intimate part of the movie and the part that nobody should be able to take away from you. That was a revelation, almost like an out-of-body experience. To this day I can see this being the case with film-makers such as Dario Argento and Lucio Fulci. Sometimes their films can be

completely incoherent but out of this mass of incoherence a beautiful and absolutely powerful image arises.

As well as being hard for me, it was also a hard movie for Miramax to make and I didn't make it any easier on them. At the end of the day, with a cold head and a cool heart, I see that they wanted to do *Alien* and I wanted to do *Mimic*, and so we ended up with *Alien 3-and-a-half* . . .

American films seldom show child characters coming to harm, but Mimic surprises us in a scene where a child who breaks into a basement is first terrorized and then mercilessly killed.

GUILLERMO DEL TORO: Horror is an extension of the fairy tale and in fairy tales ogres and wolves eat children and I think that it goes to the roots of story-telling to have children as vulnerable. It's something I really take very seriously when I make movies. To me it's more dangerous to show kids in a movie about giant dinosaurs, and pretend like the dinosaurs won't eat them. In reality, they would. I think it's best to show that, should a child ever encounter danger, then he or she should act cautiously. Children don't necessarily need to fear what they know – such as the granddaughter in *Cronos*. But they do need to show caution towards that which they don't know. If they don't, just like adults, they are apt to pay the consequences.

I shot that basement scene very slowly over a single day, paying very careful attention to pull back and show the final moments from a wide angle. That was for fear of censorship. With every frame I shot, I feared that it would never be included in the final movie. Thankfully it is, and it remains not only my favourite scene from the film but I think among the very best things I have done. I don't like *Mimic* as a whole, but that scene, and the scene of Mira Sorvino being abducted on a subway platform, are two of the best scenes I have ever shot.

There was some stuff shot by the second unit that I detest. I refuse to shoot fake scares, and *Mimic* has a couple of them. One is the girl leaving the building with her bicycle; that sequence is absolutely ridiculous. The other is of the boys finding a derelict under a plastic bag. I really hate 'jump' scares. I can safely say to this day that I have never shot one of those. There are also things on the first unit that weren't done by me, and I really find them very defective. They lessen the movie. I still love the moments I mentioned, and I still love the stuff in the abandoned subway. Actually, the scene where Charles S. Dutton's character meets his death was a sequence that they wanted to give to the second unit and Charles and I stood united and said,

'Screw that.' I love that death. It's an unexceptionally beautiful death that we took a great pride in shooting.

One of the ways in which del Toro responded to his troubles on Mimic was in the formation of the production company Tequila Gang, in which he was joined by Laura Esquivel, Bertha Navarro, Rosa Bosch and Alejandra Moreno Toscano.

BERTHA NAVARRO *producer*: All Guillermo's Spanish-language films and projects are done through Tequila Gang. Guillermo also wants to help other people so that they can have the same break that he did, and this is another function of Tequila Gang.

Spanish-born Rosa Bosch moved to Los Angeles and began working at Filmex, the American Film Institute Film Festival in LA. In the early 1980s she attended the Havana Film Festival, a force that brought all of Latin America together in large numbers.

ROSA BOSCH *producer*: When I went to Havana I discovered that there was an incredible heritage of Latin American film-making that I knew very little about. It gripped me in a very passionate way, a little like falling in love. In Havana I not only met some great people but was privileged enough to watch a lot of films that are very difficult to access, particularly films of the third cinema, the ground-breaking political cinema from the 1960s which was a major force at the Festival and in the international arena. Then I began to go back even further, exploring the Brazilian cinema of the 1940s, the silent cinema of Mexico and Argentina, the Mexican cinema of the 1940s, the so-called 'Golden Era'.

The whole boom has always been celebrated as a Spanish-Latin American thing but the attitude of the Spaniards until recently was always very condescending. At that time in Havana there were actually very few Spaniards running around. Then came the celebration of five hundred years since the discovery of Latin America, and out of that came quite a change in attitude.

I was then appointed Deputy Director of the National Film Theatre in London and of the London Film Festival. Sheila Whitaker, the Director at the time, was extremely interested in Latin American cinema. I was given a fantastic opportunity to do a huge number of seasons focusing on national cinemas from Brazil, Mexico, Argentina and Central America. At the end of my time in London I took something of a semi-sabbatical but remained on the Committee of the San Sebastián Film Festival. It was around this time,

while on a trip to Mexico, that Bertha Navarro mentioned to me that she and Guillermo del Toro were thinking of setting up a production company. This was Tequila Gang. Bertha was the driving force and we went into it full force and full of enthusiasm, even though we had no backing for the venture. It was a very good mix of personalities. Bertha and Guillermo were already very close. Bertha, of course, is historically a very important figure in Mexican cinema. Having me on board to look after some of the business aspects of the company and the launching of the projects just seemed to make perfect sense.

Because we all have to eat, we also started handling films from other people and other production companies. This increased on a greater scale after I worked with Wim Wenders on *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999), which provided a key link into Cuban cinema and Cuban culture.

From the beginning we presented ourselves as people who understood the business, and wanted to *do* business. We also helped unite film-makers in a desire to be seen, and to be commercial. Unlike the film-makers of the 1960s, most of whom were driven by a purely artistic or political force but despised the business side of the industry, Guillermo del Toro, Alfonso Cuarón and Alejandro González Iñárritu, the guys we have emerged alongside, all understand the business side of film-making. Instead of sitting around and bitching – ‘We’re on the other side of the world and nobody’s interested in the films we’re making’ – they have really gone out and shaken up film-making and grabbed the interest of the world. It’s similar to what later happened with the Argentinian group. They want to be in the world and for their films and culture to be visible. What brought about the change, I think, was primarily their analyses of and frustrations at what had come before. All of these film-makers are very ciné-literate, highly educated and very savvy both technically and artistically. In a business sense they are all very confident and competent.

This is the driving force; the desire to have a place in the market. They are also aware that as a film-maker you really have artistic freedom and space only if you also have box-office success. One often generates the other. Freedom is not given to you; it has to be earned. They have also watched the previous generation of film-makers grow quite bitter and angry and have made a resolution that this is not going to happen to them.

The film-makers were of a new generation, with an age range of late twenties to early forties. Of this generation I think that Cuarón is the oldest but he is still relatively young. *Como agua para chocolate* was directed by an older director; Alfonso Arau is now in his mid-sixties. There is a big difference. Arau also came out of a very different milieu. The newer generation of

directors we are talking about are well travelled, very cosmopolitan and emerged in a very different cultural moment in time.

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After completing the short films Un muy cortometraje (1988), Malayerba nunca muere (1988) and Amada (1990) Carlos Carrera – who began making short animations aged only twelve – attended the Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica (CCC), studying under important theatre director Ludwik Margules. Carrera’s first feature, the multi-Ariel-nominated La mujer de Benjamín (Benjamin’s Woman) (1991) was followed by the comedy-crime hybrid La Vida conyugal (1993). This was a project beset by financial difficulties and Carrera put the experience behind him with his third feature, Un Embrujo (1997). The film is set on the Yucatán peninsula in 1928. Eliseo (Daniel Acuña) is the son of a violent stevedore, and faring poorly at school. But his teacher Felipa (Blanca Guerra) takes an interest in him and, though she is in love with a sailor, winds up having a sexual encounter with the boy, which inevitably stirs up gossip and trouble, not to say local superstition.

BERTHA NAVARRO: Carrera had done those two films prior to *Un Embrujo* and, quite simply, I liked him very much. I was also impressed by his animation work. What’s very clear is that the film I made with Carlos was his most personal. He has covered other subjects and worked from other scripts that were given to him, but I think that even above his first film, *Un Embrujo* is the one that meant the most to him. I liked the fact that Carlos had a passion for the project, felt that it was a story that had to be told. As a producer I need that passion from the director – I don’t believe in compromises. In Mexico we have so few film-making opportunities that when we do make them we should always try to make jewels. There’s no room for mediocrity.

CARLOS CARRERA director: It took us about ten years to make *Un Embrujo* and it was originally supposed to be my second film. It is based on a book by a good friend, Marcel Sisniega, who had written down the stories as told to him by a very old man. I found the material fascinating and very original. It was also very Mexican. It happened in a region that has very seldom been portrayed on film. We also placed the story in a period that had not been shown on film before, a very interesting time in Mexico’s history. When I started working with Bertha Navarro I also met Martín Salinas.

MARTÍN SALINAS screenwriter: After several years of mostly ‘development hell’ and writing in English, with no directors attached to the projects in

most cases, or not meeting with them at all along the whole development process, teaming up with Carlos Carrera and Bertha Navarro for *Un Embrujo* was a blessing. Not only did I have a director to talk to, but one whose favourite drama teacher at CCC was the same as mine. What he had on paper were a series of wonderful, powerful moments in the life of a man who Marcel Sisniega had interviewed over several months, written as a series of vignettes. The story started in Yucatán around 1923, and spanned several years, with no dramatic structure at all. He had been trying to turn these pearls into a screenplay and needed someone to build a story with what he had. He told me he didn't want the story to concentrate on just a childhood story, but to try to give the feeling of a life going by, to span several years of Eliseo's life – from childhood to adulthood but with a clear dramatic unity. I agreed because that was the kind of thing you felt when you read all of those fragments. The other thing that we wanted to keep and strengthen was this amazing cultural mix of conservative Catholicism, Marxism and Mayan pre-Columbian cultural background that prevailed in Yucatán in those days – sometimes even within the same character.

We first talked for days about the characters and what the father-son aspects in those fragments suggested to us. Then we worked together on a first tentative structure. I then flew back to Argentina – where I had returned to live – and worked on my own until I was able to send Carlos a first storyline and outline. He liked it and we continued working until we got to what we felt was the main storyline: the story of the son of this idealist union fighter at the docks who deals with frustration by drinking too much, a mischievous kid who has this dream of living a very different life to the one his father lived, and doesn't want to follow in his steps. The romance with his teacher is a possible way for him to find this way out of that world. But it is obviously an impossible dream and as he grows up he can't help finding himself in his father's place and has to cope with this until he is pushed by circumstances to take some decisions as an adult. We all have been involved in a father-son story in our lives. I felt I knew what I was writing about and that we had a very clear common denominator with Carlos on that, without needing to say a word about own father-son personal stories. Once we had this storyline clear, we travelled to Yucatán on a research trip and found lots of very original stuff and events in the newspapers of those days and stories told by the older people in Puerto Progreso, to build the plot.

RODRIGO PRIETO *cinematographer*: Originally *La mujer de Benjamín* was going to be Carlos's thesis project at CCC and I was going to work on it, but Carlos had the opportunity to turn it into a feature and I couldn't work on it

because I had not yet finished my studies. You wouldn't believe how disappointed I was. That said, Xavier Pérez Grobet did a truly wonderful job on it. I had always wanted to work with Carlos and so we began to discuss another movie that also sadly never happened. Then, at last *Un Embrujo*. The film was very different from anything I had done before, and Carlos was worried that I was into only very stylized and sleek movies when in fact I just thought that this style was what was best suited to some of these movies. Carlos wanted something much more subdued and realistic and I was also very eager to also explore this avenue. *Un Embrujo* was the perfect opportunity to do it. The style of the film is very simple and I really enjoyed working with a naturalistic type of lighting. Carlos is also very visual: he draws incredible storyboards but he is not stuck on the visual side as his emphasis is on the drama, the narrative and the characters. He was very good to work with. He let me do my thing while also encouraging me to try doing less.

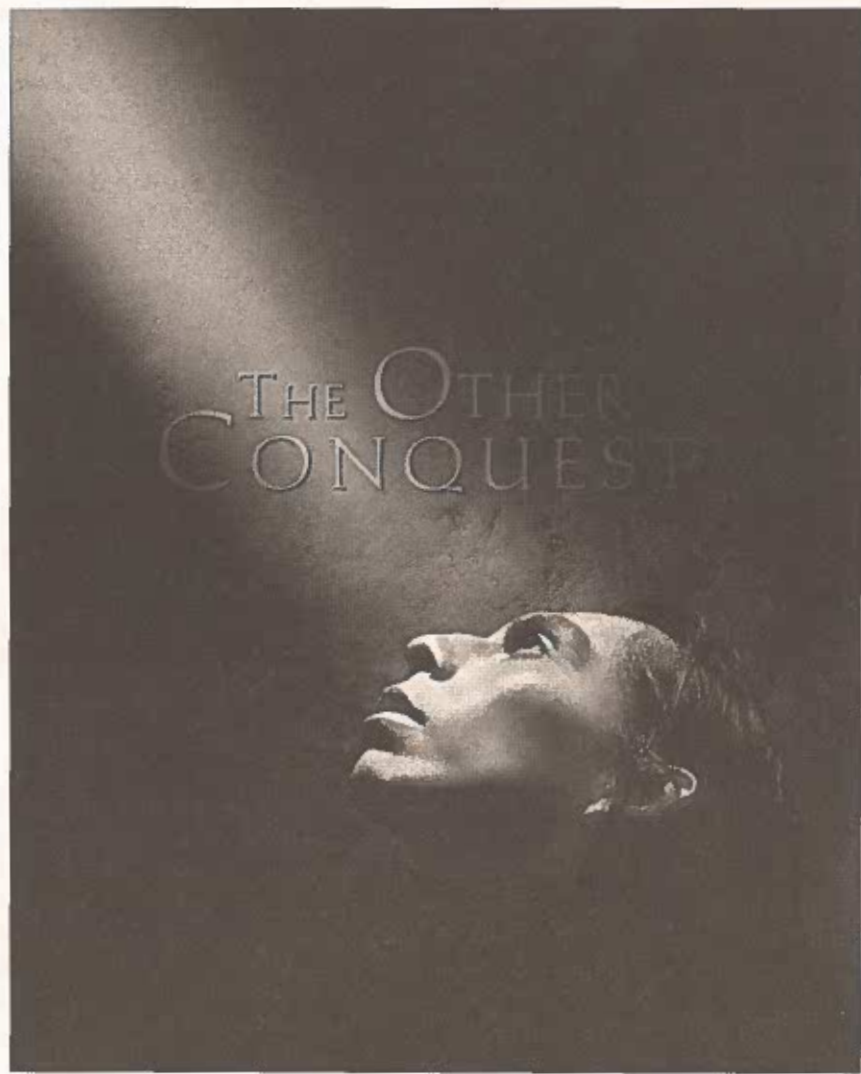
On the evidence of Un Embrujo it was obviously very important to Carrera that he relate stories and places that connect specifically to Mexico and Mexican history. From an early stage he was viewed as one of the leading voices in contemporary Mexican cinema.

CARLOS CARRERA: I didn't, and still don't, pay much attention to that. I want only to make the films and to tell the stories I like – that is, stories about common people in common situations. I really don't care too much about such things; I also don't pay any attention to box-office results. It's the stories I believe in. I feel comfortable with the stories I know. I am not a nationalist but I like the stories that I know better.

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FRANCISCO GONZÁLEZ COMPEÁN *producer*: You know, everyone talks about 'New Mexican Cinema' and many see *Amores Perros* at the forefront of this boom, but for me it all started with an earlier film that was not as successful as *Amores Perros* – Salvador Carrasco's *La Otra conquista* (*The Other Conquest*). It was very well marketed by Twentieth Century-Fox and it opened well on what was for Mexico a large number of screens.

Carrasco's film takes place one year after Hernán Cortés's arrival in Mexico, and opens with the infamous massacre of the Aztecs at the Great Temple. The lone Aztec survivor of the massacre is a young Indian scribe, Topiltzin (Damián Delgado), illegitimate son of Montezuma. Spanish friar Diego



© Andrea Sanderson

The American poster for *The Other Conquest*

(José Carlos Rodríguez) has been charged with converting the native 'savages' into civilized Christians, but naturally finds Topiltzin to be a tough assignment.

SALVADOR CARRASCO director: My sisters had a lot to do with my passion for cinema. As a teenager they would take me to art houses in Mexico to see

films that marked me for ever. Then it became a ritual for me to go on my own. My approach to some of these films was almost religious, treating them as cultural icons that transcended everyday existence and made me feel, think and learn things I hadn't experienced before. Intimate films with universal dimensions. Some personal favourites that always come to mind are Lelouch's *Les Misérables* (1995), Saura's *Cría cuervos* (1976), Wenders's *Wings of Desire* (1987), Teshigahara's *Woman of the Dunes* (1964), Scola's *Le Bal* (1982), Kieslowski's *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991), Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia* (1983), Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985), Claire Denis's *Chocolat* (1988) and Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (1950).

My producer Alvaro Domingo and I met in the first week of college and immediately we hit it off. Although we come from different worlds, we share many artistic objectives, and thus complement each other very well. *The Other Conquest* is a quintessentially independent film in that, in order to do it our way, we took seven years to make it, from 1992 to 1999. As an exemplary producer, Alvaro carried it through from beginning to end. His faith in the project was unflinching, and there is no question that this film would never have happened without his commitment, perseverance, loyalty, hard work and, ultimately, an unconditional respect for the integrity of my vision as the writer-director of this film.

The first seed, so to speak, came to life on 13 August 1991. I remember the date so distinctly because it was the four hundred and seventieth anniversary of the fall of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, I was in New York, thinking about my country's origins – the sort of thing one does more often when abroad. And I felt like reading something about that historic day, which is how I came upon Vasconcelos's *Brief History of Mexico*.

One of Mexico's leading philanthropists and businessmen, Manuel Arango, had generously granted me a scholarship to attend college, and after my graduation from New York University, we discussed the possibility of making a short film about the Conquest for the Expo '92 in Seville. In October 1991, I presented him a treatment of the film, which was then called *The Absolved Vision*. Fortunately he liked it very much, and that is how the seed money came about. Then over some *tacos de cochinita pibil* in a restaurant in Coyoacán, I suggested to Alvaro, with whom I had made a couple of short films at NYU, that we join forces, he as producer and I as writer-director, to make this short film together. He read the treatment, fell in love with it, and we resolved to create our own company, Carrasco & Domingo Films, as a framework to take the big plunge together.

It wasn't long before Alvaro and I saw in the story the potential to turn it into a feature film. Neither he nor I then knew exactly what we were

getting into, so our primary motivational drive has always remained to tell Topiltzin's story as best as we could. We both believed there's something in this story about resistance and preserving one's identity and beliefs that would be appealing to different kinds of people, just as he and I were originally drawn to it for different reasons.

So I worked on the feature screenplay. Alvaro showed it to his father, Plácido Domingo, who was able to read it on a plane from Europe to New York, and was very moved by it. Needless to say, Mr Domingo himself embodies the best possible form of syncretism between Spain and Mexico. Once he agreed to participate as a co-producer, the fundraising odyssey had officially begun. Mr Domingo also sings the aria 'Mater aeterna', composed by Samuel Zyman originally for the film, in the end credits. Another significant co-producer who later came into the project was Enrique González Torres SJ, who is currently the Dean of the Iberoamerican University in Mexico. Mr González's faith in the film has been a continuous source of inspiration for us. He believes that, bottom line, *The Other Conquest* helps remind everyone that Indians are an intrinsic part of Mexican history and contemporary society. At the time of the film's narrative, the 1520s, there was an ongoing debate in the courts of Europe about whether Indians had a soul or not.

In August 1992 we decided to shoot some sequences in order to generate credibility and dispel a certain notion that this film couldn't be made. We obviously didn't have enough money to shoot the whole feature yet, so we shot as much as we could, until the money ran out, and we were not able to resume until June 1995.

I should also point out that at Bard College I took a wonderful literature course with Mary McCarthy, with whom I developed a friendly relationship. Among other things, she was kind enough to bring a collection of poems of mine to the attention of Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes. One day she urged me to read a short story she believed would affect me profoundly: Vsevolod Garshin's *The Scarlet Flower*, about a man who in the most adverse of circumstances – such as being confined in a mental asylum – becomes obsessed with the idea of stealing a flower that embodies all evil; thus he would redeem mankind. The premise resonated deeply within me, perhaps because of its Don Quixote-like connotations, but also because it embodies a simple truth: life makes more sense if you have something to fight for.

In fact, that story couldn't be further away from the subject-matter of *The Other Conquest*, but an interesting turn of fate happened. A few months later, I was reading a book my father gave me, the aforementioned *Brief History of Mexico*, and it occurred to me that at the time of the Spanish

Conquest of Mexico, an Indian who had been deprived of everything might have tried to conquer, so as to possess and absorb, the powers of a statue of the Virgin Mary – in whose name questionable things were being done – in order to redeem himself and his people. The twist was that 'to conquer' would not imply destruction, but to regain his own Aztec Mother Goddess through the Virgin Mary, the utmost symbol of the invaders. In Topiltzin's and in Friar Diego's minds, the Virgin Mary and the Mother Goddess become one and the same. Ultimately, I think the film is a parable about cultural tolerance.

The main thing was to tell that particular story in a context that had always fascinated me for its complexities and ambiguities, its poetry and its harsh brutality. Just to imagine those encounters, the misperceptions – Moctezuma believing Cortés was the God Quetzalcoatl; the friars believing conversion could happen overnight; the mere idea of 'conquering', the will to resist expressed in mysterious ways, the religious fervour, the otherworldly sounds . . . anywhere you turn you find movie material. I'm just surprised there aren't many more films out there about the Conquest. One of the most significant contributions of our film has been to heighten interest in a topic so vast and complex that it deserves to be treated with a multiplicity of voices, stories, and points of view.

We raised the money mostly through private investors and rather symbolic contributions from Mexican institutions that support the arts and culture. There were hundreds of phone calls, letters, and appointments throughout the years. It was a painstaking process, with many ups and downs, countless disappointments and a few occasional breakthroughs that made it possible in the end. I am in complete awe of Alvaro as a producer for pulling this through, for not only was the subject-matter and scope of the project regarded with scepticism by many people, but he was also trusting a first-time, ambitious, completely unknown twenty-four-year-old writer-director.

Damián Delgado was undoubtedly the best casting for Topiltzin. At the time he was dancing in a brilliant company called Ballet Teatro del Espacio. He was a first-time actor. Subsequently, he was one of the leads in John Sayles's *Men with Guns*, among others. I was looking through the video camera during Damián's casting session, and when he said the line 'Hicieron cenizas de mi pueblo; ahí quedó hecha humo nuestra verdad de las cosas . . .' ('You turned my people into ashes; our truth went up in smoke . . .'), it became very clear to me that he was not acting, as he knew what those words meant. He was Topiltzin. Incidentally, during the shoot people never called him by his real name.

We had a first-time writer-director and editor, first-time producer, first-time lead actor, first-time production designer, first-time composer. But our art director was Brigitte Broch, who went on to win an Oscar for her superb work in Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge*.

BRIGITTE BROCH *production designer*: I read of the period through books and novels set during this era to help me get the feel of mood and time. I tried to use colour not only from an aesthetic point of view but also in connection with its symbolism and relation to the state of mind of the characters and their spiritual voyage. I prepared a Zapata project for Alfonso Arau – a film that fell through then – but had the great fortune to work briefly on two occasions with Vittorio Storaro. His colour theories have embedded themselves in me and I try to be aware, to use colours with utmost care as to their significance. So, *The Other Conquest* was really no more difficult than any of the other movies I have worked on. It involved research, locations that don't betray the period and detail to the spaces in order to make them believable.

SALVADOR CARRASCO: I went to every possible archaeological site within a three-hundred-kilometre radius surrounding Mexico City, where the production was based. I was looking for an intimate setting far away from the metropolis, where clandestine rituals would still be taking place without the Spaniards immediately realizing ... though of course, eventually they would, like in the film. What we see in the film is not, and did not ever attempt to be, the great Mexico-Tenochtitlan that Bernal Díaz del Castillo described. It is a post-Conquest look, since the present time of the film begins in 1526, five years after the fall of Mexico-Tenochtitlan.

Other sets include sixteenth-century monasteries, underground caves, colonial plazas, etc., which one still finds in Mexico. Of course we had to make up and retouch them for authenticity. Slight architectural licence was taken for the sake of spectacle, but we always remained true to an internal aesthetic coherence.

In terms of location permits, the real breakthrough took place when Alvaro pitched the film to the Director of the National Anthropology and History Institute, who told Alvaro that she had always envisioned a serious, committed, Kurosawa-like approach to this subject, and that here was the opportunity to fulfil that.

The logistical challenges could be summed up in an unforgettable phrase that my first assistant director once told me: 'The problem with you, Salvador, is that you're trying to make a first-world film with third-world resources.' I am convinced that the biggest asset of this film was that most of

the people who worked in it genuinely believed they were doing something worthwhile, something about a subject we all carried in our veins and yet were regrettably ignorant about, since many of the issues raised by the film are still taboo in Mexico. And yet, the film had an incredibly positive response in Mexico, becoming the highest-grossing Mexican film ever when it opened in 1999.

The opening sequence at the aftermath of the Great Temple Massacre was filmed in the archaeological site of Tenayuca, which is situated in the heart of Mexico City. The camera placements had to be carefully chosen, for moving the camera an inch in any direction would have revealed the local market, buses, phone cables, etc. The rain hoses weren't powerful enough, so we had to spend many hours fixing them versus a few hours shooting one of the main events in Mexican history! That was my first day of professional 35 mm shooting ever. But I was hooked.

The shot of the Spaniards discovering the clandestine ritual was filmed in 1992. The reversal of the Indians reacting to their arrival was shot three years later. Thanks to our ingenious production designer, you don't notice the difference. In the process, actors aged, even disappeared, and the sacrificed princess was now dripping milk from breast feeding, which was a beautiful metaphor for the idea of rebirth through sacrifice.

The title has three levels. First it refers to the religious or spiritual conquest that followed the military conquest of Mexico; second, to the Conquest of Mexico focused on an 'other', an indigenous protagonist – the Aztec scribe Topiltzin, illegitimate son of the Emperor Moctezuma; and third to the 'conquest' carried out by the indigenous peoples themselves, who appropriated European religious forms, and made them their own. The Virgin of Guadalupe, which combines the Aztec cult of the Mother Goddess with the Catholic veneration of the Virgin Mary, is perhaps the best example of this 'reverse conquest'.

My goal was to narrate a passionate story, one based on a careful imaginary reconstruction of what things might have been like during the decade between the fall of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, capital of the Aztec Empire, in 1521, and the alleged apparitions of the Virgin of Guadalupe to the Indian Juan Diego in 1531. This decade constitutes what we might call the gestation period of the contemporary Mexican nation; it is a period fraught with complexities and ambiguities which are still relevant today, five hundred years later.

Frequently, when the indigenous peoples of the time of the Conquest are portrayed, they come across as entirely passive, as if they had just simply and unquestioningly accepted the things imposed on them by the Spaniards. *The*

Other Conquest depicts a creative and critical indigenous culture which, despite all sorts of losses and setbacks, makes an effort to assume an active role in the shaping of its own destiny. The characters in the film show us that, even under the most adverse circumstances, people will strive to carry out their own 'conquests'.

In other parts of the world, the 'encounter' between European and 'native' peoples was resolved by the outright annihilation of the indigenous groups. The social consequences of the Conquest of Mexico are especially profound, in that in Mexico the indigenous peoples, through their violent and partial incorporation into the official and religious life of New Spain, managed to survive.

The new, hybrid, *mestizo* race which is Mexico was certainly not the result of a tidy and idyllic process of harmonious interaction. Still, I don't think that it's a good idea to adopt a facile Manichaeian point of view, that sees history as a black-and-white story with good guys and bad guys. *The Other Conquest* explores different levels of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico, a remarkable historical process whose relevance has in no way been diminished by the passing of five centuries.

This picture is not just about Aztecs and Spaniards; the topics it explores are relevant to all ethnic or national identities that were formed in the crucible of colonization, conversion, and syncretism. *The Other Conquest* is an invitation to dialogue, an opportunity to reflect on our origins and respect our differences.

La Otra conquista opened in Mexico on 4 April 1999. Released on twenty-seven screens, by the end of the film's first week the film had grossed \$216,038 with a high screen average of \$8,001. Expanding over the subsequent three weeks to a maximum of seventy-two screens, the film grossed an impressive \$1,507,306. Opening in seventy-four screens in Los Angeles on 19 April, the film dominated industry headlines, grossing \$400,000 on its opening weekend alone. It went on to finish among the highest-grossing foreign-language films of the year in America.

* * *

Juan Rulfo is widely regarded as one of the greatest writers in the history of Mexican literature. An exponent of magic realism, perhaps his best known work is *Pedro Páramo*, in which the book's narrator, at the behest of his dying mother, visits the deserted village haunted by the memory of his patriarchal father.

After working on both *La mujer de Benjamín* and then *Sólo con tu pareja*,

Rulfo's son, Juan Carlos Rulfo, emerged as a singular film-making talent in his own right during the mid-1990s: first with *El Abuelo Cheno y otras historias* (Grandfather Cheno and Other Stories), then with *Del olvido al no me acuerdo* (I Forgot, I Don't Remember).

JUAN CARLOS RULFO *director*: *El Abuelo Cheno* came about as a result of ignorance and ingenuousness. I had wanted to tell a story that moved me deeply, but I was worried that a story personal to me would not be interesting for the spectator. Yet, at the same time, I was sure there was something in it that could justify making a film. Curiously enough, the only thing I'd done before then was a 'Making of' documentary of Carlos Carrera's first full-length film, as well as a lot of interviews with a bunch of old men. I wasn't concerned – I'm still not – by the formal and/or conceptual distinctions between fiction and documentary. *El Abuelo Cheno* represented the discovery that the personal can have value as narrative, and that you can learn from that. You could say that what I achieved in the film was achieved unwittingly, although I was learning along the way.

My father did have an influence, of course. But it was to do with discovering the process of introspection that an author has to go through in his work. Rather than being close to my father in the sense of reinterpreting his work, I think it's something more intimate and personal: a son learning from the steps and the paths taken by the father – which, in a mysterious way, have an existence very close to mine. The part of his work that I feel closest to is his photography. It's there that you see his attitude to things. The way he framed a photograph, the atmosphere, the feeling it imparts – all comes together perfectly, allowing an apprentice like me to fathom from it an approach to life that, doubtless, will be with me for ever.

When talking about *Del olvido*, it's important to bear in mind *El Abuelo Cheno*, which tells the story of the tales surrounding the death of a character called Cheno – my grandfather. Originally, however, I'd been trying to find people who had known my father, who had lived in the same region. I didn't find anything out about my father, but, on the other hand, I did discover all these real characters who led me into a fascinating world full of stories and sensations I just couldn't ignore. That's why I came up with the structure of the death of the grandfather – to provide myself with a pretext for telling all the other stories. *El Abuelo* is basically a short told in a circular structure, without taking too many risks. It was my answer to what had seemed the failure of not finding what I had been looking for: my father.

Later on I decided to keep on looking, but making use of the seeming failure of the non-meeting, basing myself on the things people had forgotten,

in order to continue telling their stories. Let me add that it's these stories that attract me the most, much more so than the direct testimonies concerning my father, which, although I did get them, didn't offer as much, in filmic terms, as the other characters. *Del olvido* is a work full of loose ends, in which the themes of memory and the transitory nature of life allow me to play with very evocative atmospheres and film time. Memory and the fleeting nature of things are both very cinematographic.

It's perfectly normal for people to feel uncomfortable in front of a camera. We can take that as a given. It's really a question of not treating people as though they were material for a news report. You need a great deal of time, and they do too. If you expect to get everything on a first take, then think again. In this particular case, the working plan stated that the most important thing was to get right up close to daily life, to the pace of life there, and to listen. All the crew, cameraman and sound recordist, knew exactly when to turn on their equipment; they'd learned to sense when the words we needed were approaching.

The film was well received, although I think the results could have been much better. Critics and producers, who reckon they know about these things, want me to accept the numbers. They argue that it was enough that a documentary of such a personal nature was even able to enter the big-screen battle of midsummer 2000. Ten prints went out, compared to 250 for *The Perfect Storm*, 250 for the *Flintstones in Viva Rock Vegas*, and 250 for *Amores Perros*. It remained in cinemas for over eight weeks and for a similar length of time on video and in video shops and clubs.

All this, it should be said, was achieved despite the total scepticism of the distributor, who invested very little in promoting the film – still the case today now that a DVD version has been edited and has yet to be released. *Del olvido al no me acuerdo* remains in circulation thanks to word of mouth, which has gradually become the film's real promoter. In this sense I'd go as far as to say that it's a film that, over time, has become more powerful.

The Making of *Amores Perros*

In turning to the impact of what became the signature film of the New Mexican Wave, it is necessary first to consider certain trends in Mexican film exhibition during the 1990s, together with the domestic success of a 1999 picture entitled Sexo, pudor y lágrimas (Sex, Shame and Tears).

ALFONSO CUARÓN *director*: What happened is that, for many years, the Mexican people stopped going to the movie theatres, because the theatres were so lousy. First they stopped going to Mexican films, then they stopped going to films in general. Most of these films were financed and released by the government. IMCINE couldn't really have cared less; its function was political, in that they had to state that they made twenty films per year. These were films that nobody saw. Though, I must add, there are now some good people at IMCINE . . .

FRANCISCO GONZÁLEZ COMPEÁN *producer*: The cinema ticket price was controlled by the government, so there wasn't much money coming back to the producers, and the quality of the films declined to that point that people finally stopped going to see them. Then in 1995 the price controls were terminated, and bigger exhibition chains started to flourish. We not only got a lot of screens, but better quality too. These new theatres also cultivated a new audience, the more affluent classes who had previously avoided the cinema because it was such a low-grade, shabby experience.

ALFONSO CUARÓN: In the mid-1990s, there were new chains of cinemas, multiplexes. When you walked into one of these, it was no different from being in a cinema in the US, right down to the concessions stand. My memory of cinema from childhood is related to Mexican candies, now it was all Hersheys . . .

FRANCISCO GONZÁLEZ COMPEÁN: So, now we had all these lovely cinemas – but they were completely filled with American films because Mexico was not producing any films of its own.



The turn of the twenty-first century ushered in a thrilling new wave (or *buena onda*) of Mexican moviemaking. It was not the first such wave, but it broke upon the global cinema scene with an unprecedented energy.

The international successes of *Amores Perros* and *Y tu mamá también* alerted the eyes of the world to the embarrassment of new talent in Mexican cinema, from directors Alejandro González Iñárritu and Alfonso Cuarón to the poster-boy looks and electrifying screen presence of Gael García Bernal. Their rise to prominence – abetted by a new entrepreneurial spirit amongst Mexican financiers and producers – coincided with an emerging generation of Mexican cinemagoers thirsting for intelligent, identity-affirming, locally made product. Having endured a period of relative famine throughout the eighties and nineties, Mexican audiences once more had a national cinema to shout about, and the global audience and Hollywood too had to sit up and take notice.



In this roving investigative study Jason Wood offers extensive interviews with all of the key figures of the *buena onda*, coupled to a hugely insightful examination of Mexico's colourful film culture, past and present. He puts recent successes into historical context, while also illuminating the social and political circumstances that lie in the deep background of this new wave.



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