

Questions for Alfonso Parra on "Women in the Park" (Spanish title: "Mujeres en el Parque")

- **"Women in the Park" has a naturalist photography; it's full of soft colors, soft blacks and soft contrasts. What emulsion did you use and why? Did you do some kind of contrast reduction process like flashing the negative or some *intermediate*, or did you underexpose the negative; or is it the emulsion's own qualities that you used in normal exposure and development conditions?**

I used Fuji's 8583 Eterna emulsion that really gives soft colors and moderate contrast without any special lab process. The emulsion behaves pretty much like its predecessor, the 400T, although it's less grainy, and with which I had already worked with before. I just used this emulsion in the entire film. Normally, I prefer to work with only one negative and adapt it to different situations, It gives me the impression that that way I get greater visual coherence as far as colors, sharpness and texture are concerned.

- How did you expose the negative and what printing lights did you use?

After doing the necessary tests, I decided to expose the negative under the normal sensitivity recommended by the manufacturer, that is, between 250 Asa and 320. A while back, we published the results of those tests in *Cameraman*; the most interesting thing was the big difference in density obtained in the layer sensitive to blues with respect to reds and greens, so that if I had used the 400 Asa emulsion—the sensitivity recommended by Fuji- I would have had to have printed with a light for blues around 12 points. Just so you get an idea, in order to get a balanced positive grading wedge spectogram, the lights had to be at 26, 25 and 10. The result was that the image with those lights was a bit soft and grayish and grainy in the mid tones. So when I overexposed them, I ended up using lights over 30 for the reds and greens and between 20 and 25 for the blues. That way, I got a negative with the adequate density, soft colors and low contrast.

It's not a sharp image; it's softer without looking blurred. What lenses and filters did you use and what diaphragm did you shoot with, in general?

I used the Zeiss Ultra Prime lenses and normally shot at around T 2 for interiors and between 2.8 and 4 for exteriors. As for filters, I used the usual ones for color correction, the series 85, 81 etc. and Schneider's Classic Soft, which I like a lot for faces because, as you pointed out, they soften without blurring.

I thought the movie had a homogenous optical treatment; what lenses did you use and why?

Something that both Felipe and me like is to use one lens throughout the entire shoot, normally one in the 35mm to 50mm range. When we pick the locations I already have in mind the type of lens for the movie and then I see if the place is good or not. I also keep in mind the distance from the camera to the actors so I use lenses to try to preserve the same visual sensation during the sequences, I mean, the characters' relation to the space, how the lines in those spaces vanish and the spatial relation between the actors. In this case, we used the 32mm and the 40mm a lot. The 32mm allowed me to put in more space around the characters, especially in exteriors like the Retiro Park or the inside of a bus. Felipe wanted Madrid to be always present somehow and I thought that working with the 32mm lens was a good option. A lot of the interiors were shot with the 40mm lens, which I quite like. With the 40mm, space isn't lost around the actors' faces to become another mere background; it serves as a frame and delimits the action. I think you can see this well in Daniel's house at night.

How did you define the chromatic palette with the art director and the director? What conclusions did you reach?

We started with the idea of having soft colors with a limited array of beiges, browns and a full gamut of grays so that any touch of color we used would stand out, such as the red Ana wears in several sequences. We wanted an urban movie pleasant to watch, visually far from the stereotypes employed when photographing cities, which, since they are aggressive, are photographed with high contrast, loud colors, very grainy or with the camera in hand in search of that lost shot.

Did you have any film references or any other type when it came to establishing the film's aesthetic?

At Felipe's urging, we watched *A Nos amours*, photographed by Jacques Loiseleux. It was an important reference especially for the night scenes and the color tones.

You use the camera on a tripod, traveling shots and hand-held cameras; what is the rationale behind each of these resources throughout the film? Did you participate in decisions concerning film frames and camera movements? Or did it depend solely on Felipe Vega's judgment?

In general, we used hand-held cameras in exteriors except for the last sequence in the Retiro Park where father and daughter are talking. In the city, there are always eyes that look and in turn are looked at; there's a permanent exchange with many others, each with his or her actions; in fact, the movie begins with Daniel's gaze on the quarreling couple and then continue through the Retiro Park. The instability created by filming the scene with the camera on my shoulder makes them present and, thus, the other that looks on who is outside the shot. In essence, we imitate Daniel when he follows the couple. The choice of using a traveling shot or a crane was always determined by the narrative and we normally used it to focus attention on a specific moment in the shot, approaching the actors or as in the case of the concert in the auditorium, to evoke Daniel's condition as a musician and artist. In any case, we didn't use these tools a lot.

To answer the second part of your question, Felipe and I planned everything together; first visualizing the sequence on location and then deciding what shots to take, where to place the camera, etc.

Do you carry the camera personally? Why have, or not have, an operator?

Yes, I like carrying the camera myself and in movies like Felipe's even more. In any case, there are movies that, because of the excessive workload that the lighting entails, it is better to have an operator who can plan and solve framing and composition problems. I think you should always have a second operator but perhaps not for all movies.

I thought the photographic treatment of the night scenes was especially adequate. In the interiors, you avoided sensational chiaroscuros, backlighting, bluish moonlight entering through the window and all that conventional stuff we are sadly too used to. You don't light by layers or sections; you create a light that already exists in a space, a light that simply is. How did you come up with the interior night lighting in general and specifically in Daniel's apartment?

Women in the park is a melancholic movie, profoundly sad; a movie that expresses great loneliness. When I say profoundly sad, I'm not referring to that sadness that pours forth from emotions fulfilled or not, I mean the sadness that remains when one knows what essential sadness is, that which makes us human and which we cannot avoid. All of this led me to cover the spaces with diffused light, distributed naturally, enveloping the characters and thus establishing the setting for their loneliness. There are no hard edges to grab on in the light, neither for the characters nor the audience. This sensation materializes using large, white surfaces from which to reflect light or pass the light; we also used silk stretchers and another, more specific device to reinforce the lights in the shots.

I'd like all those people that think that only digital video can capture night exteriors in a city without using "cinema lighting" to see this movie. To a large extent, you use the real, available light and you get photography with a total sensation of verism. Did you reinforce the existing light and what devices did you use?

(Laughs) I like what you say about video because, contrary to what is thought, to get good results you have to light both day and night.

As far as the night scenes in Women in the Park, they were shot without any devices, we only used the light from the lampposts and sometimes we removed their diffusers or Mr. Torrecilla, my gaffer, would place a mirrored board or any other thing he invented behind the lamps, to the great joy of everyone, especially my photometer.

I have to say, you can only film that way with the director's collaboration. When we were picking night locations, Felipe would propose a location and I would see how the lamps were arranged and decide if it was possible to shoot there or not; if it was possible, great, if not, I'd propose another place and Felipe would adapt the sequence to the new place. I also did tests with the emulsion, as many as necessary, until I was sure we could film that way with good results. In the end, I filmed using the 320 Asa emulsion without any lab process and using reference printing lights of 32, 30, 20, not to mention Antonio Herreros' excellent work, my grader at Fotofilm Deluxe.

The sequence where Monica approaches David in the doorway to his house, in that sequence, there wasn't a defined source of light and you created a convincing penumbra. How did you plan the lighting? How did you expose the negative and how did you grade it?

I underexposed the negative by two diaphragms, thus gaining one more in the printing. To tell you the truth, I know the technical conditions I used but I wouldn't know how to explain how I planned it. I thought about using what I mentioned before, lighting without hard edges, I mean, just like I used diffused light to see, I also used it not to see, and, on top of that sensation, I worked with a bounced light filtered through cloths till I had an adequate level of darkness, in spite of the photometer grinning its teeth. The final touch was given by Antonio again, my grader, since he went further in the printing than I would have dared.

You had extreme contrast conditions as far as lighting levels and such complicated logistics like the interior day in the bus; how did you light the scene to get such a natural reproduction of the characters in the interior and keep the details we see through the windows in the exterior? What latitude did the emulsion you used have?

The emulsion had high latitude, twelve stops with a contrast ratio of more than 1000:1; this is enough if you compare it with any other format. It was simple, I used roscoscrim in the windows and I lit the actors with fluorescent screens connected to the bus.

What was your idea for lighting the daytime interiors, like the music academy where Daniel works? What devices did you use?

It was the same as in the rest of the movie, moderate contrast and exterior light coming through the windows that reaches the spaces sufficiently blended so that it could expand to fill each corner of the set, to a greater or lesser degree, without losing its character. So I used HMI reflected off of surfaces or directly through silk stretchers and corrected by means of an LTC or CTO to lower the coldness and metallic tone that the lamps give off. In the interiors, I tried to gather the light that entered from these devices using white cloths and directed it to the visible areas in the shot. I even used white cloths on the floors. I also came to an agreement with the artistic director, Sandra Franz, on the thickness and texture of the curtains and shades so that they could filter the light in a certain way.

The job of the director of photography always oscillates between what you want and what is possible. Although the majority of the movie falls on the side of what is wanted, there is one sequence where, I think, that's not the case: a daytime exterior shot in the sun with Monica and David sitting on a swing in the park and talking. It has a contrast level and harshness unseen in the rest of the movie. Why did you decide to photograph it that way?

You're right. I don't like the way that sequence came out. As you said, it is a sequence of what is possible, undoubtedly; the time we chose to shoot was not the best and I couldn't control the contrast as much as I would have liked. It's not that I decided to shoot it like that but more like I had to shoot it like that. The fillings with the HMI weren't enough to lower the contrast.

Do you think it's better "to use observation as a starting point instead of the imagination", as Néstor Almendros has said, to conceive the photography of a movie?

I wouldn't speak in those terms. I don't know what is more adequate to conceive the photography of a movie. What I do know is that for a certain style of photography, like naturalist photography, observing the space is determining. For example, Felipe gives great importance to the locations because he wants the places he chooses to appear on screen as he sees them, so I always try to respect that first impression I get when I visit them. I start building from there. So, for example, I light a library imitating its natural light; the same goes for the auditorium hall or the restaurants. Of course, later on I try to adapt it to the story.

-Do you reject expressionism in favor of naturalism in photography, be it in cinema in general or in this movie in particular?

I don't like rejecting anything when it comes to photographic styles. Art manifests itself through style and if there is a world of truth in the work of art, the style doesn't matter. Now, in the world we live in today, where there is so much falseness, it's far easier to hide artistic truth behind effects than in naturalism.

In a quotation from Corot that you use in your article "Photographic realism, natural photography", that says: "Reality is one part of art; feeling completes it. If you have truly been moved, you will convey to others the sincerity of your emotions. I interpret with my heart as much as with my eyes" Where do you think is the borderline between Corot and Monet, between Nykvist and Storaro? At what point do you think photography ceases to be naturalist to become impressionist? Or even expressionist?

Somehow there are creators who shape matter with their will to create the work of art and, on the opposite end, those whose will is shaped by the spaces and places they observe; I think Storaro belongs to the first and Nykvist to the second. The artist's affirmation, as an individual who belongs to his subjectivity, in other words, his way of sensing the world, has led us to the idea of authorship and everyone who invents something as an author/artist. Behind this concept, which clearly benefits the market, hides, most of the times, the absence of art. The difference between a naturalist photo and an impressionist or expressionist one is that the former exists because of what is out there and the latter depends on the author's/artist's vision over the space where he works. In naturalist photography, it is the space that acts on the photographer to the point where there is certain honesty, hesitancy or care about intervening in these spaces. In this sense, Storaro would be more of an author than Nykvist, but not more of an artist; on the contrary, I think that Nykvist's naturalist photography, freed from the condition of authorship, goes farther; it's more transcendental, if you will.

This is from the same article: "...the less intervention, the less natural will reality photographed appear to the spectator's eyes...naturalist photography needs more means, more time and more knowledge to be made and it has little to do with the immediate and cheaper representation of realist photography." What means, human or material, have you used in shooting this movie? Specifically, in cameras and lighting. How much time did you have to prepare and shoot the movie?

Means...? Enough; the team...? The best. People I've worked with for years, we know and respect each other. As far as preparation time, well, we had the necessary time for a six-week movie. We shot without any pressure, with the adequate time and conditions. Before preparing the movie, Felipe Vega called me and told me what type of movie he wanted and the means available; he asked me: can we make it like this? I answered, yes, without hesitating.