



Juan (Adolfo Jiménez Castro) takes a seat in a bathhouse in *Post Tenebras Lux*.

A Singular Vision

By John Calhoun

A little girl wanders alone on a field at dusk, surrounded by dogs, cows and horses. The camera observes her closely at eye level, and we soon notice that outside a sharply focused circle of view in the center of the square frame, the image is blurred, sometimes doubled. The scene shifts to what looks like early morning, inside a darkened house, where a red-silhouetted demon wanders, carrying a toolbox. The home belongs to Juan (Adolfo Jiménez Castro), an urban exile to the countryside, whose stream of consciousness seems to be structuring the narrative. Acts of senseless brutality burst from nowhere and recede, and the protagonist's small children abruptly grow several years older before returning to preschool age in the next scene. Without context, scenes of a bathhouse orgy and an English-schoolboy rugby match pop up at random.

This is the strange world of Mexican filmmaker Carlos Reygadas' *Post Tenebras Lux*, which won the Best Director prize at the 2012 Cannes Film Festival. To call the story non-linear does not quite to do it justice, and the visual strategy Reygadas devised

with director of photography Alexis Zabe was equally unorthodox. To describe the style as "first-person POV" is not precise, Zabe explains. "We wanted the camera inside the mind of the character, not looking at the world through his eyes, but looking at the world through his mind. A friend of mine recently wrote that he appreciated the film's 'mental point of view,' which I think is a nice way of describing it."

All of the key photographic choices the filmmakers made were designed to achieve this subjective state. We are in Juan's mind, and what we see is framed in the classical 1.33:1 Academy ratio. That decision was made early on, even while the filmmakers grappled with matters of format and lens choice. "It took us a while to figure it out," says Zabe, who briefly considered shooting digitally until practical considerations arose. The picture was primarily shot around Tepotztlán, in the mountains outside Mexico City, during the rainy summer season in 2011. "We had a reduced crew, and to set up a DIT tent on top of a mountain seemed a bit difficult," the cinematographer says. The production company owned a 20-plus-year-old Moviemac Compact that Reygadas and Zabe had used on their last feature, *Silent Light*. "I knew

the camera well, and it just made sense to use 35mm again," says Zabe.

More experimentation went into finding a lens that would represent the hazy-around-the-edges focus of Juan's mind. "We tested Baltar and Kowa lenses early in prep, but they were not strong enough for the mental point-of-view we sought," Zabe recalls. "We even tried putting Vaseline on filters, but that was way too messy." He eventually settled on using Vantage Film's Squeeze Diopters to achieve the desired look. The diopters, which feature a polished 25mm-75mm neutral zone in the center, are ordinarily used for a subtle out-of-focus effect, but the result in many sequences in *Post Tenebras Lux* is much more pronounced. "It took so long to ship them from Germany to Mexico that we ended up getting them one day before the shoot," says Zabe. "We put them on and figured them out on the first morning. We tried to see through the viewfinder what they were doing, but couldn't get a very clear idea. We got some dailies a couple of days later, and the effect was a bit more intense than anybody anticipated. But Carlos is pretty brave as directors go, and he said, 'I think it looks beautiful.'"

The effect is extreme because of how the diopters were used, he explains. "They're designed to be used with long lenses, but Carlos and I like to shoot with wide lenses, and wide-angle lenses accentuate the effect more." He used the Squeeze Diopters with Arri Master Primes, usually an 18mm or 25mm, open to f2 or f2.8. "Once you put the diopters on 1.33, it kind of creates a perfect sphere, with a very clear vision inside the circle. It seemed like shooting a little planet or little world, which is kind of what the mind is: its own little planet." The diopters were used on more than 80 percent of the movie, and their effect is most pronounced in exterior scenes.

The decision to use 1.33:1 also related to the locations, which included Reygadas' house. "Because of the tall mountains, it seemed a logical decision, and Carlos' house is also very vertical," says the cinematographer. "It wasn't even Super 35 1.33; it was standard 35 1.33. The Moviemac Compact is a beautifully built, solid little tank. It'll just take anything and

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Top: Against the fading light of dusk, the camera follows Juan's daughter around a field in the film's opening sequence. Middle: A demon enters Juan's home in one of the film's few shots with a visual-effects component. Bottom: Cinematographer Alexis Zabe frames a shot on location.



everything. We shot anamorphic with it on *Silent Light* in very extreme conditions, and we dealt with very extreme conditions on this film as well."

The entire crew numbered 13, with four devoted to camera: Zabe, 1st AC Jonathan Leys, grip assistant Eduardo Urbina and 2nd AC/grip assistant Joakim Chardonnens. "I interviewed a lot of second ACs, but it was hard to find someone in the proper physical condition," notes Zabe. "It's hard on the system at that altitude, which is about 2,500 meters [more than 8,000']. Joakim, who flew in from Switzerland, is a snowboarder and climber, and Eduardo is a climber and also an inventor, so he assisted with roping and tying down the bounces. If we needed a bounce, we would build it together and tie it down, and if we needed to build a dolly, we'd build it together."

Shooting was accomplished almost entirely with available light, controlled with bounces. The Kodak negatives — Vision2 50D 5201 for exteriors, Vision3 250D 5207 for daylight interiors, and Vision3 500T 5219 for night interiors — were sensitive enough to make this possible. "It was tricky for the 5207 to get enough level inside the house," says Zabe. "The windows were small, and the bedroom scenes were challenging because that room featured very, very dark wood. We had some 12-by-12 UltraBounces kind of far away, trying to get something going into those windows." A Chinese lantern was occasionally used to diffuse the light indoors.

For the two scenes involving the red demon, Zabe "used 1/2 or 1/4 CTB on the windows to cool the light and create an early-dawn feel," he says. "We had our first AD, Alex Ezpeleta, who is tall and lanky, dress in a greenscreen suit and walk around with a toolbox. The effect was completed at [visual-effects facility] Twin Pines in Spain. The only other digital effect created was a shot of an auto-decapitation."

For the bathhouse scene, Zabe filtered some of the location's fluorescent lights. "We found red plastic tube covers in a store in Mexico City, and used these to filter about half the fluorescent lights, with the other half left unfiltered, to create contrast between the red and blue," he says. "As the scene progresses and the



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Above: A Vantage Film Squeeze Diopter creates a blurred, doubling effect around the edges of the frame during a family outing to the beach. Right: The production used director Carlos Reygadas' house for scenes set in and around Juan's home.



characters go deeper into the bathhouse, we filtered more of the tubes, and in the final shot, most tubes were filtered red. We also did tests on the steam, trying to figure out if we were going to use real steam or a smoke machine. We ended up using a combination."

Post Tenebras Lux features a number of extended camera moves over rough terrain, and these were mostly accomplished with an EasyRig, with a few Steadicam moves thrown in for a varied feel. The opening sequence of the young girl on the field with the dogs and livestock, shot around magic hour over three days, was largely a Steadicam sequence. "We actually thought we could shoot it in two days, but it was a very short window of time," says Zabe, who operated the camera when Reygadas did not. "We didn't have a Steadicam for the last day. There was some-

thing in the relationship between the girl and the animals that wasn't quite there with the Steadicam, so we did a third day winging it on the EasyRig." Steadicam was also used for two walking shots from the POV of El Siete, a character who brings the class conflicts at the movie's heart into semi-focus.

It was EasyRig all the way on a precarious donkey ride up the mountain. Reygadas operated a reverse shot with the rider perched "almost on the tail of the donkey," Zabe recalls. "That was done on a wing and a prayer, basically minimum focus. When we were on top of the mountain, we had an EasyRig, some apple boxes, some straps and sandbags, and a donkey, and we were scratching our heads trying to figure out how we would do it. That's when ropes and knots and that sort of stuff come in very handy!"

Because Reygadas and Zabe were so familiar with the location, they knew what to expect from the weather. They shot during the rainy season partly because they wanted fog in certain scenes. Still, weather can be as difficult to direct as children and animals, and it did not always cooperate. "We climbed to the top of the mountain a couple of times thinking we'd get the fog, and then we didn't get it, so we just had to go back down and try again another day," says the cinematographer. "That was a pretty extreme hike, a couple of hours up the mountain lugging the equipment."

But in all, it's the way Zabe prefers to work. He started out doing special-effects photography primarily for Mexican commercials and music videos, and moved on to features with *Duck Season* (AC April '06). He met Reygadas because that film shared production offices with *Battle of Heaven*, the director's second feature. "We realized there were coincidences in the way we wanted to work," says Zabe. "We were both looking for a minimal crew and just a different approach to filmmaking." In 2006, they made *Silent Light*, a tale of adultery in a Mennonite community that was "a beautiful experience for everybody. It was a long shoot, a small crew — almost a perfect project."

Zabe speaks with great satisfaction about the "DIY" nature of *Post Tenebras Lux*, citing a scene in which the falling rain gathers in what looks like pools of blood on the ground. To achieve it, explains the cinematographer, "we rented a couple of 30,000-liter trucks and some hoses, put some red food coloring into the trucks, and then had that rain on everybody. We tweaked it a tiny bit in the color correction, but not too much. It was pretty old school. It was a romantic way of shooting. We just went out with some friends to a mountain."

TECHNICAL SPECS

- 1.33:1
- 35mm
- Moviecam Compact
- Arri Master Prime
- Kodak Vision2 50D 5201;
- Vision3 250D 5207, 500T 5219
- Digital Intermediate



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