

"A city come alive and in constant transformation", is the setting for three stories in "The Bicycle"

By E. Guzmán

"The Bicycle" is director Sigfrid Monleón's second feature length film produced by Wanda, Índigo Media and Fénix PC. The movie, set in Valencia, narrates three stories in the different stages of life: childhood, adolescence and old age.

The cinematography was done by Alfonso Parra (A.E.C.), who already worked with Monleón in his medium-length film "Lo del ojo no es nada" (What you have in your eye is nothing), **"the initial conversations with Sigfrid about 'The Bicycle' led us to references primarily in black and white and especially to De Sica's 'The Bicycle Thief'. Our idea of the city was a black and white space, with few grays. In reality, big cities are monochromatic and only the advertising billboards on the façades cover up this fact. We tried to reduce color interference as much as possible without using black and white film. We wanted to show the city alive and in constant transformation, both of itself and the surroundings it devours, and how it interacts with the characters by creating spaces where they can express themselves and modify their behavior".** The story takes place in Valencia in more than 40 locations, both in the suburbs and the city center. But Parra tells us that he not only used references from 'The Bicycle Thief' but also from Charris' paintings, **"because his paintings are almost monochromatic. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's "Crossing Next to Schöneberg Park" was also especially revealing.**




Shots from "The Bicycle Thief"




Directed by Vittorio De Sica and shot by Carlo Montuori

To carry out the cinematographic development, Parra searched for **"a contrasted image, I mean one that lost detail in whites and blacks, like those Kodachrome emulsions from the 50s that had little latitude so the whites lost detail and the blacks became darker if they weren't lit. However, we didn't want to lose the natural, soft and, somehow, agreeable skin tones."**



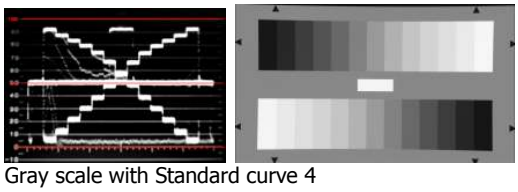

Works by painter Ángel Mateo Charris

The movie was shot in HD, a system that Alfonso Parra knows well and has used in other movies. **"The producers decided to shoot using a high definition digital system, which is really complicated when the movie takes place almost exclusively in exteriors and interiors with large windows, which of course, we wanted to see. The city exists outside but we also wanted it to be within the interior spaces.**

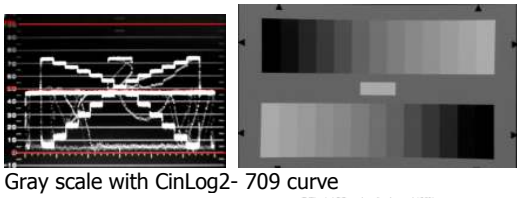


The little latitude in current HD systems and the little resolution they offer forced me to make a photographic suggestion that pushed the Sony F-900 camera to its limits."

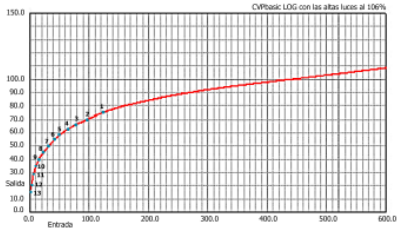
To obtain the desired results, Parra worked in several directions. On the one hand, he established the base for the cinematography in the Sony F-900 HD camera by modifying two fundamental aspects: the gamma curve and the color matrix. On the other, he used Zeiss' Digiprime lenses **"especially the 7 and 10mm lenses and, eventually, the 14mm, very wide angle lenses that could let me see the space around the characters with a high diaphragm for exteriors, normally between 5, 6 and 8 in order to focus on the city background and bring it more to the fore together with the actors. In interiors, I worked with 2.8 and 3.5 diaphragms."** And, finally, the digital grading, which, as Miguel Pérez, a grader at Fotofilm/Deluxe, tells us "**...we started working on the style weeks before the shooting began. Desaturation was one of the prevailing keynotes that brought us closer to the pictures with the stars: the characters...and the bicycle. We also tried to achieve a very cinema-like contrast, fleeing from those washed blacks, which occasionally make the use of HD obvious. We thought about using the Kodak Premier 2392 color print film, but the final decision was left to the end when the movie had been finished. I was more in favor of achieving strong blacks in the grading process, rescuing all the information possible than just altering it using a more contrasted color print material.**



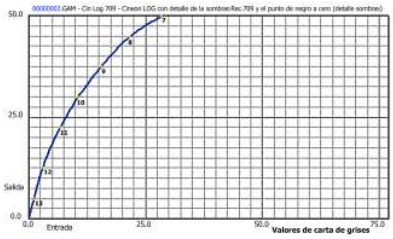
Gray scale with Standard curve 4



Gray scale with CinLog2- 709 curve



CinLog1 generic curve

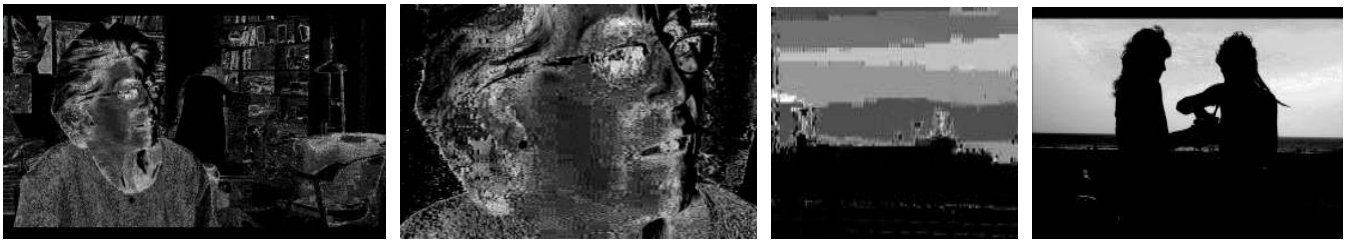


Modifying the generc curve in shadows
*Values marked in the curves correspond to the different steps in the gray scale.

The modifications carried out by Parra in the camera's gamma were based on testing the curves designed with Sony's CVPfile editor by Digital Praxis, **"these curves were created by transcribing the Cineon values in different configurations so that they can capture details in high lights and shadows"** (a detailed analysis of the curves can be found at www.alfonsoparra.com) **"Out of the five curves, we started trying out number 5, which captures the most detail, once the test was filmed, we saw there were compression effects in the medium-bright areas, which made the image unusable. Our investigation led us finally to Sony, which deduced that the curve generated so much information that the F-900's 8bits weren't enough. I then decided to use another curve, the n2, which has less detail in blacks since that part of the curve responds to the standard 709 for HD. This curve enabled us to observe that only when you push some type of mask in post-production, can you see the effects of the compression"**.

The curve's special characteristics led Miguel Pérez to carry out different tests to process the material. **"When we began testing, given the particularity of the images taken by Alfonso, due to the specific curves he used, I tried cheating my Lustre digital grading system. I made it believe I was working with logarithmic DPs, so that the grading would be done with the system's own controls and not the linear ones. The results were fantastic. Alfonso loved them, and so did we. Then I thought about obtaining the same results without cheating the system, so as to not push the curves registered linearly, and whose nature, I think, should be respected.**

And with those same images we tried grading from linear curves to obtain the same results without cheating the grading system. And it wasn't difficult. So, in the end, we opted for this way of working, since it is the truest to the HD system.



Compression effects in the Sony F-900 camera with the CinLog2 curve when pushing with masks. Details blown up.

Once the curve was decided on and its handling in post-production, Parra verified the effects of the color modification with the curve: **"In the first test, we changed the matrix's values to the old digital ones used for the Digital Betacam and we were able to observe that the desaturation and especially the modification of the reds were too much to be worked on from the camera. And although the final result was very close to what we wanted, we decided not to push the original material too much, so I modified the values in RGB over these first values and then the different tones so they could serve as a base for the grading in the movie's final configuration.**



I saturated the blues slightly, bringing them close to cyan, and I modified the yellow and green. I desaturated the red, though not too much, and made it slightly colder, towards magenta. I was able to verify that skin tones in HD are much better graded with this slight magenta deviation from the beginning than without it. Lastly, I changed the detail and some other parameters. The way the camera finally shot was put to test both in the dress, makeup and decoration rehearsals.

I made a simulacrum on my laptop of how the image would look once graded. This was particularly useful to finally have the image we wanted for the movie. We shot a few frames during the shoot to see the results and to verify that what we had designed worked."

To achieve the atmosphere for the city and the skin tones, Parra decided to work with soft and low contrast lighting, especially in the interiors. He tried to restrict the range of contrasts to what the camera could handle, **"somewhat above 8 diaphragm points with the modifications done on the camera."** As the gaffer, Salomón Lucas, pointed out, **"The daytime exterior light was worked with H.M.I. flicker free projectors, the majority with Cinepares (6 Kw., 4 Kw., 2.5 Kw., 1.2 Kw., 575k, 200 Kw.) and a good 12 Kw Fresnel, as a complement to the sunlight and treated, in most cases, through different canopy diffusers of different sizes (6 x 6, 4 x 4, 2 x 2), such as cloth, silk, gauze, etc.**





The pre-lighting of some spaces during the filming took on great importance, as Salomón tells us: **"...We did different pre-lighting, everything from the scenes in the Plaza Redonda in Valencia, where we only needed to change the light bulbs in the streetlamps (approximately 250), and placing their respective diffusers, to placing Space Lights on the ceiling of a warehouse, filtering them through silk cloth and placing masks on the background with black curtains.**

Even in the most technically complicated scene, the rave on the beach, we built a 3x3 m cube made of Meccano duralumin tube (light yet very resistant) closed with a Light grid cloth diffuser and pale violet filters, with an internal structure that housed the 60Kw lights. The lighting was provided by 30 2kw open face lights, regulated at independent sides and at a reasonable filtering distance.

The structure was raised to 20m using a crane so we could have a good working base. This in turn was backed up by 2 other cranes with Maxibrutes with 12 by 64 1 Kw. lamps. The rave scene's final look was done by Miguel in the grading: **"One peculiar situation was a night scene in an open space full of cars and people. We completely avoided blue colors (in general, absent in the entire film), achieving slightly golden tones without getting to the point of a warm deviation.**

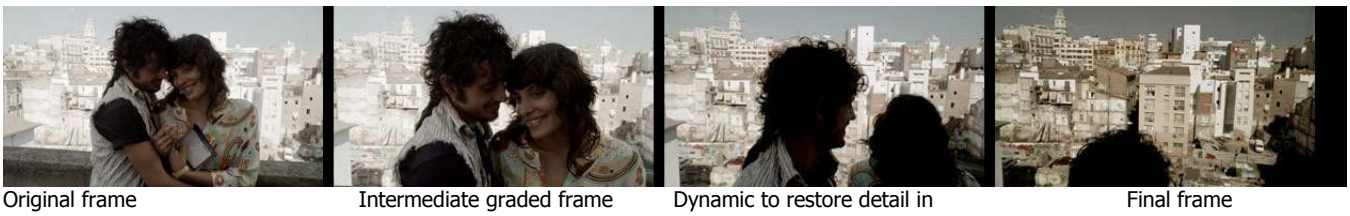


According to the specific needs of each scene, Parra filtered in camera with: "**White Promist, polas, neutral density filters and classic soft in almost all the scenes and also with a then new Tiffen filter called Glimmerglass, which produces a different diffusion from the Promist or FX. A diffusion that especially softened high lights in their outlines".**

According to Miguel, in the grading process: **"Alfonso sent me some references he had worked on, after talking to the director, of the different desaturation and contrast levels. After seeing which was the best "point" for the entire movie, I sent him several proposals through the e-mail starting from 5 or 6 frames. He liked them a lot and so I continued to work in that line. Alfonso suggested I recover the saturation in the reds somewhat, something which greatly favored the characters' skin tones; the same method also reinforced the bicycle's presence.**
Pre-grading the entire movie with these guidelines kept modifications to a minimum. Everything was practically as Alfonso and the director imagined it would be. However, the global desaturation, with the recovery of the reds, posed a problem in some shots: if certain red elements appeared in the frame, apart from the characters, they drew too much attention. They thus had to be isolated in order to considerably reduce the intensity of the reds and integrate them into the rest of the scene.



Original frame | Intermediate graded frame | Mask | Final frame



Original frame | Intermediate graded frame | Dynamic to restore detail in background | Final frame

Alfonso Parra explained how he develops his work with the grader: **"I always pre-grade at home with my computer. That way I can apply the final criteria and get to post-production with a clear idea of the outcome, which saves time, and, therefore, production costs".**

Filming was done using an Arrilaser and "**before filming the first reel, we did some tests on 8 very different shots just to see how they would respond on a traditional projection. The result was very much like what was being done in the digital projection. So we decided to film the entire movie without modifying any parameters. The only things I did adjust, after viewing those tests, were some city exteriors. I needed a bit more neutrality due the coldness given off by the cars and the pavement; coldness that, in a certain way, was perhaps excessively transmitted on to the characters",** commented Miguel Pérez.

Finally, the movie was printed on Kodak Vision material with minimum adjustments in the traditional analog grading.

Technical parameters
Sony F-900 camera with CinLog 2 curve by
Digital Praxis and modifications in the color matrix
Digiprime lenses
HDCAM format 1:1,85
Intermediate Digital
Grading: FotofilmDeluxe using Lustre
Filmed with FotofilmDeluxe using Arrilaser on Kodak 5242
Print: Kodak Vision

Translation: Edwin Castaño