A propósito del rodaje de "Nubes de verano"



Nubes de Verano, a film directed by Felipe Vega and produced by Tornasol/Messidor films, shows how the life of a couple on holiday in the Catalan Coast becomes threatened by infidelity with the apparition of an antiquarian in Calella. The film was shot on location by the cinematographer Alfonso Parra (AEC), who has collaborated with Felipe Vega in previous projects.

Jesús Solera: How did you and Felipe Vega approach the film's photography? Did you have any filmic or pictorial referent?

Alfonso Parra: We had few specific conversations because we have worked before on several production and we have a similar approach to filmmaking, with a few common referents: those that approach reality from particular moments, with a minimal intervention from the viewer, even though this is quite determining. This, which we had already used in documentaries, was the basic premise for the movie

JS: So this was the result of conversations that came up during the years?

AP: Definitely, during the years in which we?ve worked together these ideas have formed and we knew we wanted to approach the film in an almost documentary way. This doesn't mean however to just grab a camera and shoot it any which way, but in the sense that the camera and the point of view are inconspicuous; as if in the situations that develop between couples, in bars, in restaurants, in the street?we had placed a camera to watch in that instant, as if we were witnessing their lives without them being aware of it.

JS: The absence of the director, up to a point.

AP: Absolutely. It was as if, for the spectator, we didn't exist. An almost perfect documentary.

JS: I imagine it was Felipe Vega who decided the location, in this case the Mediterranean. Do you know why he chose the Mediterranean instead of another area?

AP: Primarily because the whole film takes place during the vacation period, and obviously we needed a place that suggested that. The sea, the beach and the sun immediately create that association. The Mediterranean is an area he knows very well and he saw it fitting to set the story there.

JS: I mention this because the light in the Mediterranean is very particular, could the film have been shot in the Algarve, or in the beaches in Galicia?

AP: Yes, it could have been shot in these places.

JS: Would it have changed a lot?

AP: Visually yes, the film would have been completely different and not only because of the different light, but because of the landscapes, the colours and the locations.

JS: Would it have changed in relation to the story you were telling?

AP: I still think that the look of the film should form an integral whole with what is being told. Felipe made a very interesting proposal for the photography of the film by attempting to capture Mediterranean light as it really is. He wants the spectator to experience this light in an organic way, very much like the way one sees it and feels it in reality, and for that feeling to be constant throughout the film, so the doubts that arise over the couple about infidelity were a contradiction with what was being expressed visually: that feeling of holiday, of beach, of sea, of light?This is juxtaposed against the emotional shadows that are generated in the characters? relationships. I thought it was a very interesting proposal.



Con la luz mediterránea no existe la sombra negra, sino una "sombra iluminada"

JS: I'm intrigued to see how you have dealt with this kind of light considering neither of you are from the Mediterranean, whether you have explored it from within or as outsiders. Its usually the latter, I can tell you because I am Mediterranean.

AP: Yes it will be interesting. Seeing is something that is not only in the eyes but also in the brain, in the sounds and in the smells?So when I arrived the first thing I did was to get immersed in this light and this atmosphere. I had two referents in this process: Sorolla and Pla. On the one hand, there was the way that Sorolla reflects Mediterranean light: the shadows in his paintings are full of light in themselves. On the other hand there were the descriptions that Pla made about the light in Calella and in Palafrugell where he lived, when he says that in the summer ?that light sets on your brow and causes a kind of stupefaction?. This sentence determined the look of the film; I lived there for two months and there is a point when the heat is so strong and there is so much light that it causes a kind of bewilderment. Given these referents, and once I was already in the area, I tried to feel first and then rationalise all this information to be able to approach the techniques for photographing that part of the Mediterranean. The determining aspect is the fact that light is everywhere. You have the impression that not only the sun illuminates but that light is coming from everywhere around you: the sea, the beach, the sand, the green from the pine-trees, the white walls of the houses?Sorolla said: it seems as if light emanates from the objects themselves. It does so in a damp atmosphere, giving the impression that the light is in the air as well, and that makes the shadows have a lot of light. Shadows are not created by the absence of light, they just have less of it. Another important consideration is the fact that the light is ?yellow?. With all these elements I created a picture of the place to capture on the photographic emulsion. The ultimate aim was to achieve an image that was attractive but that was in some way bewildering because it had to reflect the characters confusion without being too obvious.

JS: You have talked about a ?lit? shadow, about the non-existence of the black shadow. This is one of the characteristics of the Mediterranean light, but for me there is another important aspect of it which is its brightness. Brightness is everywhere, in the waves in the sea, in trees? leaves?

AP: I think its more accurate to call that reverberation; there occurs at times an extension of the light beyond the shapes, due to the damp atmosphere we talked about earlier, which produces a reverberation which is somewhere between the concrete brightness you mention and a brightness in the whole. The reason I call it reverberation is because it's not uniform, some things shine more than others, they reverberate more than others. You can see this in Sorolla's paintings, the women's white dresses on the beach reverberate a light that the wet body of the boy lying on the sand does not have. For me it was important to reproduce that feeling in the photographic emulsion. I chose several solutions that combined to create this effect. The main one was to overexpose the highlights, which adopt a presence and strength

that they otherwise wouldn't have. I supported this with Promist filters, which soften the outlines, specially on the whites, and they extend the light beyond the outline that frames it. This way I think we achieved a certain reverberation in the light.

JS: You have explained which techniques you used to tackle this reverberation, but how did you approach the shadows we talked about?

AP: By specifically lighting the shadows, specially in exteriors which is where they are harder to control I reduced significantly the contrast ratios, at 2:1 and less. In interiors, where it is easier to control, I created a light without shadows because I felt it was important that there be a continuity between the exterior and the interior instead of a clear break, although with slight differences. I like the feeling of being in the sun and feeling the sudden coolness when you go indoors. The first impression is of darkness, but in reality it's a very faint shadow which by contrast with the exterior gives you a feeling of peace, of tranquillity. To maintain this feeling I underexposed the emulsion, so that by later transferring lower than usual I would obtain a degree of smoothness in the dark. At the same time, I lit the shadows with enough detail so that the final result would be of a peaceful space to contrast with the harsh exteriors. There are nevertheless interiors-day, like the stationers where the girl works, where the fluorescent light is on and through a door we have some sunlight. I wanted to respect this somewhat artificial feel that one has in spaces that are not exclusively sunlit. This is different in the case of the rented summer house: by day there is only sunlight.



Para conseguir una sensación de tranquilidad en interiores, el contraste con el exterior se subexpuso la emulsión, para luego positivando más bajo de lo normal conseguir una suavidad en la oscuridad, y al mismo tiempo, iluminando con detalle suficiente en las sombras, de forma que la sensación final en los espacios fuera una luz sin sombras con cierto grado de oscuridad.

JS: What about the exteriors, when we talk about ?DAY?, at what times were you shooting?

AP: We worked pretty much at all the times with available sunlight. These were obviously set by the production department, but that was good for me since I was looking for strong light. It was interesting to work at high noon, because the sensation was very bewildering, and by supporting it with promists I think we achieved the general feeling of heat, of a vibrant light that overwhelms. Even in the scenes where the couple is arguing and there is a great dramatic intensity everything is visible. I did not want to play with darker backgrounds to create dramatic tension, I was after the opposite idea, so that the aggression between them is shown as clearly as possible.

JS: That reflects what happens in the story, where feelings come into the light.

AP: The risk this involves is that the images might not have depth, that they end up being flat, because the feeling of volume and 3 dimensions is given by the way you distribute shadows. What we wanted in exteriors as well as in interiors was to avoid having an excessive contrast , because that is used nowadays to add a dramatic quality to the image that would have been out of place in this film.

JS: If we talk about contrast we have to address the issue of emulsion. Until now emulsions were made to obtain a lot of contrast, it's the trend that has killed film photography, because it leads to absolute homogeneity. We already had trouble reducing the contrast during a recent shoot. Have you found an emulsion that helps to reduce this contrast?

AP: We have used Fuji emulsions from the F Series which have a wide latitude in the negative; they are generally emulsions with very little contrast and with intense colours without being over-saturated. I think this is an important distinction to make, a colour can be intense while not being excessively saturated, and it doesn't have to be a cartoon colour. That is what Felipe wanted, that the film was vibrant not only in the light but also in the colours: these had to be intense without being chromes, which is what usually happens, although I think this trend is fading away. In the last years it was the norm to use very saturated colours, very primary colours, which are the ones that saturate best and are best reproduced on film. I didn't want these colours and neither did Felipe,because the cartoon colour becomes something unrealistic and this film had to be naturalistic.

JS: Therefore in dealing with the colour, did you work in terms of language or aesthetic? The norm nowadays is to use colour on a purely aesthetic basis, without using it as a tool of the cinematic language. We talked before about space, if you don't have so much support from the contrast and the shadows, colour can be used to define the space, although its not used for that anymore. In this decision the key players are the cinematographer and the director but also the art director.

AP: It was basically discussed between Felipe and the art director. It was very simple because it's a film that takes place in the summer so we dressed people the way they would really dress in the beach, wearing colourful clothes without being extravagant. The protagonist of this film is a coroner; he is not going to dress in colourful clothes because the character is not like that; he wears normal t-shirts like you and me would wear on the beach. His wife, who is a teacher and paints watercolours, normally wears light clothes, made of linen or cotton, very elegant. The only character who uses more colours and flowery prints is the girl working in the stationery but even this is not excessive, nothing of what is shown strays from reality.

JS: So we could say there is a realistic approach to colour...its not flashy...

AP: Absolutely not. There is not one attempt at being showy in lighting, make-up, costume, or mise-en-scene, not even in the way the camera moves...There hasnt been either a conceptual or symbolic use of colour.

JS: How have you used the emulsion to control colour?

AP: I dont usually like to change emulsions from interiors to exteriors, or night to day, I prefer to use only one and work with it in one direction or another depending on the look we have to give it. My initial intention was to use a 500D by Fuji but I also made some tests with the 250D and the 500T, and after examining the contrast ratios, the colour saturation, the response to over or under-exposing, the control over film grain, etc. I decided to go for the 250D , which has proven to be a fantastic film because it can handle over and under exposing without problems, without generating too much graininess in either case and maintaining a rather outstanding colour consistency under both circumstances. It also maintains a tone in the colour characteristic of the F series, very faint, almost pastel; finally we also made Fuji positives. The dealers we? ve seen throughout the seven weeks of the shoot confirm a relatively low contrast after working on the over and underexposition and the filters, and which corresponds quite accurately with the idea we had. For interiors and night exteriors however, I normally used the 500T because the 250D was not sensitive enough when it came to exposing and I could confirm the predictions made by the tests: that the 500T offers more contrast, so I had to work with more light to reduce its relation.

JS: And the lenses?

AP: I had two options, I could use Zeiss 2.1 or the Zeiss Ultraluminous. Athough I knew them already, I tested them both and, as I expected, the ultraluminous one gives harder edges and are a bit crisper than the 2.1, but I chose the latter for their softness.

JS: Were there any problems with the intensity of the light?

AP: No, only in one night sequence at the promenade beside the seaside, in which we only wanted the light from the street lamps; I like the colour deviations produced by mercury or sodium steam lamps but I also wanted the night to have a lot of light so that everything could be seen, without dark areas or very high contrasts. So most night sequences were lit, trying to respect this light deviation that I mentioned, and with the only exception that we shot the sequence in the promenade without any support having to force the F-stop by a point in the 500T. The result is an increase in the grain, which is visible without being bothersome.

JS: Continuing with the colour and the light, these change a lot in the Mediterranean. Nykvist said that when he came to work here what impressed him most was the speed at which the light changed, something that he, being scandinavian, was not used to; there the light remains stable for hours. How did these changes affect the raccord?

AP: The colour temperature of the light changes, it goes from colder to warmer, the brightness of the yellows diminishes and of course you have the magnificent pink shades at sunset and the spectacular salmons. I tried to shoot each sequence as quickly as we could to have as little light variation as possible. When that wasnt possible, I basically put a lot of light into the shadows with HMI, I used filters to correct the colour temperature so that, at least in this stage where we could affect the results, we had a similar colour correction in every shot. I worked with lots of filters, Calcolor, Yellows, Salmons, Pail gold...but in general we didnt need excessive degrees of correction because the small modifications in light and colour can be done at colour grading. Even though we didnt do that many, when shooting at sunset and dawn we have found the usual rush and anxiety due to light changes.

JS: Can we see these natural changes from sequence to sequence?

AP: No, because following Felipe's directions we decided to show a constant light condition, that light is constantly stupefying.

JS: You havent been faithful to the real light changes. You have set a light tone but you havent focused on it, which is a risk when you are dealing with such beautiful light.

AP: Exactly, I have respected the nature of the light but not its transformations, because it wasnt necessary for the story. We had to give the light a certain weight and this monotony contributes to it. The setting in terms of photography has to be pleasant to look at, it should never interfere. Thats why it has to be coherent, even

monotonously consistent, so there is a clash between the photography which remains the same and the feelings of the characters that come to the fore and change.



JS: What about the skin? How did you treat it? I imagine they were all tanned.

AP: The main part of the work was carried out by Montse, the make-up artist. Her proposal, which was very appropriate, meant that the actors? tanned skin would be shiny. Its unusual for a make-up artist to want the actors to have shiny skin but I thought that it would give that reverberating quality to the light which we mentioned before. It has been very hard work for Montse because if you go beyond that point of reverberation it doesnt work but she has located where it happens. Obviously the tan of each of the actors was different, with bronze, green or blue dominances. I always tried to have white light reflecting off the actors faces in the close-ups, so that the tone of the skin looked natural. The light comes reflected from all around us, if there is a tree on that side the face looks green...so I used white drapes, cloths, filters that reflect the white light that comes from the sky. If I couldnt use the one from the sky because it was too cool or too hot, I would create it myself by reflecting it from white surfaces to give it a neutral tone that can be reproduced in the film as a natural quality. For example, in the summer house the couple has rented, the walls are of an earth-brown colour, with lots of orange; everything that was outside the shot was covered in white fabric and I filled with fluorescent screens (which also increased the level of the shadows) when it was not enough because I didnt want the orange tones on the skin that the walls reflected.



Solamente en los planos con cámara-car se ha utilizado el video-assist

JS: How important were the locations?

AP: We were very demanding with the locations, because the locations were crucial in this film. Of course it depends on where you set the camera, because you create volume depending on the lens. Almost all the film has been shot in 40mm except some shots which we did with longer lenses and only once or twice did we use less than 40mm. Just like there is a uniform background created with light there has to be a uniform pattern in the creation of space; a determined lens and the distance of the characters with regards to that lens is what gives the audience the feeling of space. Similarly its important to maintain the F-stop consistent: all the exteriors have been shot with an F-stop of 5.6 and the interiors at 2 and 2.8. With this opening you focus the audiences? gaze where you focus and the background fades progressively. The only exception was the sequence at the archeological site at Empuries, where the characters lose one another: we used very large depths of field, F-stops of 16, which means that practically everything was in focus. We did this so the spectator had to search within the space of the screen and convey the feeling of these characters who are looking for each other. When they meet, we reverted to the former F-stop, to direct the gaze of the spectator again. This kind of work also costitutes the photographic image.

JS: Certainly, focusing and depth of field are an important part of making up a shot. Did you play with changing focus between the actors?

AP: No, in general they were always in focus in exteriors and in interiors we gave priority to one or the other.

JS: You didn't make a choice?

AP: We decided during the sequence, but by rule of thumb, in the shot-reverse shot over one of the actors? shoulders, the foreground was softer while the mid-ground was in focus It was also a rule, when an actor came close or walked away from the camera, not to ?follow? him with the focus but to let them get in or out of focus progressively. It was important as this centres the audiences? gaze on the actors, and because this is a film about characters the audience has to be with them the whole time. That makes the scene at the archeological site significant, because its a break from the rest of the film.

JS: Besides the demands of the story, the dampness in the atmosphere prevents having a crisp image and invites to shoot slightly out of focus, while at the same time the intensity of the light creates a large depth of field. How did you resolve this apparent contradiction?

AP: The feeling of depth and crispness is achieved not only through the lens and the diaphragm, it can also be done by overexposing the emulsion in exteriors and using a polarizing filter, which we have sistematically used to clean the atmosphere and boost the colours. To achieve the idea I had about Mediterranean light I also filtered on Promist...

JS: Why didnt you avoid the polarizing filter directly?

AP: Because then the emulsion captures the image with excessive lack of crispness, very differently from the way the human eye sees it. It was necessary to clean the atmosphere to have depth of field but if I had left it that way we would have lost the feeling of reverberation in the high lights, which expand a bit further creating a kind of curtain veil in the image. The combination of all these elements, contributes to create on the screen that feeling you talked about of great depth without a great sharpness.



JS: We can conclude that to reproduce light, it must be re-invented. You have captured the light but you have also created it.

AP: Of course, the whole photographic process demands a reconstruction.

JS: So, what Nestor Almendros said about when he began in France, where he opened the windows and shot with that light...? The light that would be captured wouldnt be that one, it would be a different one.

AP: Of course, one would only capture the light that the emulsion was able to capture. It will look less to what the human eye sees than if you modify it.

JS: You have to paint the light then, with whatever tools you have.

AP: Thats right.

JS: We have talked about the physical and technical aspect of dealing with light, tell me about the feelings it evokes in you. For me its essentially sensual, very appropriate for this kind of story.

AP: Although its a cliche, for me this light is an invitation to live. Its full of joy and vitality, it opens you to the senses, and to a certain extent, also to contemplation

JS: Its nevertheless a contemplation that doesnt go further.

AP: Its a contemplation that is self-contained, its not mystical, its not transcendent. There is nothing more than the pleasant feeling of being surrounded by nature, of being a part of it.

JS: The problem is that this pleasant environment can lead to an easy aestheticism, something empty. Have you avoided this in the film? Even when we talk about feelings, these are not the most profound thing that human beings possess...

AP: That you should discuss with Felipe, but I dont think its attempting to go further than what it is: a situation of perceived infidelity that brings doubt to a couple that has been married for 10 years, and the group of characters that are displayed around them. Its the audience who must extract their own conclusions. Our opinion is that in the end the film is quite bleak, not very sympathetic towards the characters and by extension towards humankind, because of their way of interacting and relating, with Mediterranean light as a backdrop!

JS: To conclude, a few specific questions. How much stock did you use? What was the shooting ratio?

AP: We didnt use a lot of material, we had just about what we needed. We used around 102,000 ft of film. I couldnt say the exact ratio but we usually got the shot in

the third or the second takes, and there were a lot of single takes. The most bothersome was that we had a lot of mobile dolphin.

JS: Do you like to operate yourself or do you avoid it if the production allows it?

AP: I like operating. In a different kind of film I would leave it to someone I trust, but in this kind of film I prefer to do it myself, for me light and framing are inseparable.

JS: Have you shot without monitor?

AP: Yes, which was surprising for part of the crew who were not used to working without it. After the first week they were very pleased about it. For me the relationship between the director and the DoP is closer without the monitor, which usually distances the director from the tripod. Obviously its another tool that can be very helpful, specially when doing mobile dolphin or steady-cam, but I dont think its essential. Not using it also strengthens the trust between the camera crew and the other departments.