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MASTERCLASS

ALFONSO CUARÓN



Introduction by Despina Mouzaki, TIFF's director, Georges Corraface, TIFF's president, Alexis Grivas, TIFF's international programme coordinator, and George Krassakopoulos, film critic and discussion's moderator.

Alfonso Cuarón

I just want to thank everybody here in Thessaloniki. It's true that a couple of years ago, I was invited and it was very sad for me that I couldn't come, but actually I think that it was very sad for Guillermo [del Toro] and Alejandro [González Iñárritu] that we couldn't come, because all the rest of the Mexican community was here but the three of us were shooting simultaneously. And this morning I was having breakfast and I realized I was in front of Mount Olympus, so that was very auspicious. I saw who lives there and I hope he blesses the whole morning.

George Krassakopoulos

You mentioned the word "community". So, there is a bond that unites, especially you three, Alejandro González Iñárritu, you and Guillermo del Toro, but the rest of the Mexican film community together. Is there something that binds you?

Alfonso Cuarón

I think so, yes. We've been very lucky, very blessed there. I think that historically this has very strong reasons and I guess that the Mexican reasons can be translated into a problem of our generation: because of the difficulty of access to financing in the past created a very competitive atmosphere between filmmakers. When we were young, in Mexico, there was, as we used to call it, a very "cannibalistic" community. Rather than being a community to help each other, it was a community to stab each other, because there was a limited budget for films every year so everyone was trying to get that budget. And that translated into anger from the older generation for which the younger generation was the enemy. It was the generation that was going to steal the few funds that you had.

I'm generalizing a bit because together with that, there were really beautiful and generous people. I have to say they are a minority. I think that something we had in common, particularly Guillermo del Toro and I, is that we were sheltered by those generous people. And I can say names, people like Felipe Cazals. In a way, it was a matter of having the same attitude that these people had towards us and trying to transfer it to the rest of the community, the people that were following us. But the rest, I have to say, is just life and coincidences.

George Krassakopoulos

But you knew very early that you wanted to become a film director. You started shooting films when you were 12. Being a hard thing to do in Mexico, did this discourage you at a certain point or were you determined to move along?

Alfonso Cuarón

When I was a kid, I just wanted to make films. Like in the beginning of a Scorsese film where it says "Ever since I remember, I wanted to be a gangster". Ever since I remember, I wanted to make movies. I had a super-8 camera and I was shooting with it all the time; well, most of the time I was without film because my family couldn't afford it. So, the rare times that I had film, I saved it to do a little movie. At that time it was my dream to be a filmmaker and I was watching every single film that came in Mexico. There was an amazing period in Mexico of cine clubs, a lot of European and Asian films together with the Hollywood films. But then reality hits you when you go to film school and you start learning; for many years I thought it was maybe a dream. I worked for many years as an assistant director and at some point I thought that maybe that was it; that there was no way into making films.

George Krassakopoulos

And then you made your first film and it was a huge success in Mexico and it brought you to the States. This was the reason you went to the States, to work there. How was this transition from being to a place with no fans for cinema to a place where you could be a Hollywood director?

Alfonso Cuarón

I'm going to answer that by talking about parallel paths with Guillermo and Alejandro. Because I think that Guillermo and I represent in a way the tendencies of the oldest generation even if we were the same age -the three of us- but Alejandro arrived at cinema in a more oblique way. I met Guillermo early on, I was an assistant director, I knew about this freak from Guadalajara that used to do special effects and everyone was talking well of him and I was living in a cannibalistic community that hated him before knowing him. Then, the sister of Pedro Mendaris put together a television show that was half an hour every week; it was like a horror show, a little bit like "Twilight Zone"; we called it the "Toilet Zone" because of the budget. I did my first one and I heard that Guillermo had done his first one. So, I finished my first one and I was waiting in the production office and finally this freak from Guadalajara walks into the place and he says "You're Alfonso, right?" I said, "Yes". "Oh, I watched your show. Your part is from a Stephen King short story". I say, "Yeah, do you know it?" He says "Yeah, the story is great" and we start talking about how great is the story. And then, after we praised the story, he looked at me and said "But then, if the story is so great, why does your show suck so much?" And immediately, I liked the freak from Guadalajara because then we started talking and he explained to me why my story sucked so much and he was so eloquent explaining to me what the problems of the story were. It is very rare to find such honesty combined with such intelligence.

So, from then on we bonded, but the thing that we had in common, Guillermo and I, is that from early on, from the start, we'd always been the blue collars of cinema. I did 15 feature films as a boom operator; I had a child that is not a child now -he has his film here- very early in my life, so my priority was to support him more than film and I wanted to support him in the context of trying to make a film. So, all that time I had just been a worker. I did many films as a boom operator, I worked in different departments, camera department and I did a little DP but mostly assisting directing, while Guillermo was in the same situation with make-up because from early on he also had a family.

So, cinema had a mystery. I was very blue collar, if you want to say, and with that also came a lot of insecurities. So, when I did my first film and Guillermo did his first film -he started shooting six months after me- Guillermo's path and mine had always been very parallel and what happened is that in order to do the film the way I wanted to do it, I burned my bridges with the film community in Mexico. So, my transition was not something I was seeking for because I did not want to go to do films elsewhere; it's just that I burned my bridges in Mexico.

George Krassakopoulos

In what way?

Alfonso Cuarón

When I did my film, I had certain ideas about how I wanted to do the film and what I required for the film. Assisting a lot of films in Mexico, mostly some European and American films shot in Mexico, I realized there was a universe outside Mexico and that's the thing. Mexico lived for 80 years under the same political system, which was a very isolating system and it was in the best benefit of this system to isolate artists and intellectuals. So, everyone had to live in this bubble.

Because of the access I had, working with foreign productions, I realized there was a world elsewhere and part of my thing was that I wanted my films to travel. I didn't want them just to be for here. I wanted something to be part of a world community. And when I expressed that to the film institute, their answer was that nobody cared about Mexican cinema, not even Mexicans. And that was the Mexican film community. So, then I started doing things my own way, approaching people,

getting connections to festivals and to different markets. And that was not very well received. They pretty much threatened me and I didn't take the threat and the rest is history.

George Krassakopoulos

After that, you went to Hollywood. Before we go there, let's watch a clip of one of the films you did there. It's not one of your favorites, I think, but let's see it anyway.

(screening)

Alfonso Cuarón

Why that scene?

George Krassakopoulos

So, that was from "Great Expectations", a film you had problems with, as far as I know, but it wasn't the first that you did in the States. The first one was "A Little Princess"

Alfonso Cuarón

That's the one I like. Why did you show this one?

George Krassakopoulos

It's more interesting to talk about the films you don't like.

Alfonso Cuarón

Okay, it's true.

George Krassakopoulos

So, how did you go to Hollywood after all?

Alfonso Cuarón

I spent every little penny I had in doing my film, I borrowed a lot of money and I made an amazing sale to Miramax with my film and went to the Toronto Film Festival.

George Krassakopoulos

It's "Solo Con Tu Pareja".

Alfonso Cuarón

"Solo Con Tu Pareja". And because I was rich and because I made an amazing sale, I even flew friends to Toronto, and then the night after the premiere, the screening -the premiere was fantastic- I learned that they walked out of the deal, so I was really poor.

George Krassakopoulos

And you paid for the tickets?

Alfonso Cuarón

That was pathetic because I had only one return ticket from the Festival with Carlos, my brother, who was sleeping with me in the same room and literally we didn't have a penny. So, we had to go to this hospitality suite for the filmmakers and we got all the carrots and all the coca-colas and we brought them home. It sounds funny now but it was pathetic. And we brought them home. And there were these people - I didn't know how things worked there- that started asking me if I had representation and I thought they were lawyers because of the deal with Harvey Weinstein.

And then they said that they were managers and agents and they wanted to have lunch with me -and the magic word was lunch. So, we got to have lunch or dinner preferably and I ordered a lot of food and the rest to go, you know, in my doggy bag and took it to Carlos. So, I met a lot of managers and agents and they offered me to go to Los Angeles. For me, it was -what I wanted to say with Guillermo and me- the path and the early path, everything was necessity. It was really trying to survive. At the end, I went to Los Angeles, I signed with this agent and he showed the film to Sydney Pollack, he liked the film and I started developing something with Sydney Pollack and I realized that going back to Mexico as an as-

sistant director or to do documentaries or promos for the government -that is what people who were surviving doing- and I realized that developing projects in the USA was a better option than that.

George Krassakopoulos

And then “A Little Princess” came along, which is a film that you still have in your heart.

Alfonso Cuarón

It's the only one that I liked of the ones I've seen, but apparently it's the one you skipped.

George Krassakopoulos

Why do you think this is your favorite film? What makes it so special to you?

Alfonso Cuarón

I don't know. It's funny. I haven't seen any of my films ever since I finished them; I finish them and I never see them again; it's so weird to watch scenes here.

George Krassakopoulos

Would you like to see them again?

Alfonso Cuarón

No.

George Krassakopoulos

Why not?

Alfonso Cuarón

The only time I did that was in my first film. I was editing maybe the first film or “Y Tu Mamá También” and this film was going to a festival and we had to make a new print and I was in the cutting room and they brought me the print to check the color and I said “Okay, just put it in the Steenbeck to check the color”. So, they put it in the Steenbeck -the editing machine- and I started moving it back and forth and I started cutting the print because I was not happy with the cuts and then in the festival there were a lot of splices.

That's one reason. Another one is that I want to have the memory of the experience of making the film more than the film itself. “A Little Princess” was an amazing experience. It's a film I always felt very connected with. It was just a joy. I guess I was going through the similar process like the girl, at least in many ways. The first film, all the way to this last one, is that my biggest collaboration has always been with Emmanuel Lubezki, the cinematographer.

George Krassakopoulos

With whom you have worked in all your films except “Harry Potter”.

Alfonso Cuarón

Yes, because he was not available. And something we're doing is what we used to call 'subjective universes'. That is to craft universes from a standpoint of the perception of the main character. In other words, what you see is not real. What you see is through the veil of perception of the character. And something what we had in common in these films is that everything was green. In those first three films, everything, absolutely everything, costumes, props, everything was absolutely green and that was part of enhancing that universe.

Another thing that Lubezki and I had in common with Guillermo del Toro is that we were coming from a Mexican cinema that was thematically very rich but technically very poor and we were overreacting to that. I think the biggest school of Lubezki was really trying to learn how to use light, maybe in a not so self-conscious way, the same way that my early work is very self-conscious in terms of style, but it was probably an overreaction to where we were coming from.

George Krassakopoulos

And after “A Little Princess”, we come to “Great Expectations” which was a bad experience. Did it play a role in your moving back to Mexico and doing “Y Tu Mamá También” or not?

Alfonso Cuarón

What happened is that - I shouldn't be mean with "Great Expectations" because the irony of life is that this is the movie that I got most congratulated on. So, I should let it go. After "A Little Princess" I was traveling a lot. In between films, I used to just travel everywhere and "A Little Princess" was fantastic because I would try to take it to special places; it also has to do with the experience of the film as well. My most beautiful film experience I ever had was with "A Little Princess". I took the film to Sarajevo during the war and it was the first screening that children had in 4 years and the reaction of the kids with the film was fantastic.

And it was during that period -I think I was in Paris- that I started receiving offers because "A Little Princess" was such a critical success in Hollywood. I became the flavor of the month, if you will. And they started sending me a lot of stuff. So, they sent me this script and I said no and then they sent it to me again and again and eventually the producer who was a really cool guy, Art Linson -he works a lot with Mamet and Sean Penn and De Niro- started calling me. He is a very charming guy and then he started involving De Niro in the whole thing and I have to say that I started being seduced for the wrong reasons.

George Krassakopoulos

The idea of working with De Niro, for instance?

Alfonso Cuarón

Well, the idea of working with De Niro and all these important people. So, I ended up saying yes and it was this thing that the script was not there and I had the sin of arrogance -I'm going to make it work- and we started shooting and the script was not working and we started overcompensating with form, with visuals. Whatever was not in the page, we tried to convey it with visuals. Lubezki would arrive to the set every morning and he was like "Next time, trust your instincts".

At the end, it was a very difficult experience because I didn't like the interference of the studio; the studio was interfering a lot and I didn't like the process. I felt like I was doing a film that I was not fully controlling. But I have to say that I got nice friendships out of there. The same producer that I hated, I ended up loving. De Niro, we've got a great relationship, and with Ethan and the cast.

I remember looking for locations at the end of the film and I was sitting with Chivo -Chivo is Lubezki, the cinematographer- we were in the van and we were looking at some places down in New Jersey and I said "You know what? Next time, this subjective universe has to die. Next time, let's just surrender ourselves to reality". And from then on, I also decided that I need to take full control of my work. And something that I regret about my stepping in Hollywood is that I used to develop and write my own stuff or collaborate in the writing of my own stuff.

So, you arrive in Hollywood and you start reading scripts and every morning you receive a package of scripts and you forget about how it is to read novels, you forget about reading anything. You use written scripts and if you have all the standards in the scripts, you don't write. You don't have time to write your own stories because you're reading crappy stories. You don't have time for anything. You just read the scripts and then you start the competition, not like the one I was escaping from, but fighting for the same script that is a good script and you have 35 people wanting it. The only thing that I regret about my early period is that I lost 2 or 3 years of my creative life reading scripts and looking for projects. So, finishing this, I just started generating my own projects.

George Krassakopoulos

Would you say that this experience taught you something?

Alfonso Cuarón

Yes, definitely. I mean, it taught me that I have to go back to what I know how to do. I mean, taking control of my life, not only my career. The career is one thing, but it's also about your life, about not putting yourself in the hands of other people, of people that are going to give you work and

also taking responsibility of what you're doing. In other words, it's not "Oh, I'm going to see which movie is going to come to my hands in order to make my life decisions". It's to make my life choices and it has to be an organic thing that has to come from your own standpoint. It's like taking full control of things.

George Krassakopoulos

So, speaking of taking full control of things, I think we can now see a clip from "Y Tu Mamá También".

Alfonso Cuarón

Yes, that's a little better.

(screening)

George Krassakopoulos

So, this was a road movie. Would you say it was a movie to discover Mexico all over again for you?

Alfonso Cuarón

I had been living in Mexico for quite a few years then and I really needed to go back to that, to come to terms with Mexico. I remember calling Carlos. I was living in New York, we sat in the little garden I had and I said, "You know, we're going to write a movie and as soon as we finish it, we start shooting". He said, "Who's going to produce it?" I said, "It doesn't matter. We're going to do a movie and if necessary, we're going to do it with a little video camera, three people in a car and the moment we finish writing the script, we're going to shoot it".

And that's pretty much what happened. And that's something that I learned in the process, that when you start controlling the thing, you start dictating everything and there's this expression that 'if you start the train, people are going to hop into the train'. If you wait for the train to leave the station, you're going to wait there for ages. So, you have to go there and completely start the train. And what happened with the little video project I was going to do - I was going to do it in video then - is that we decided to do it in 16 mm and then Chivo arrives with 16mm and because everything was going to be so white, it was kind of grainy and we couldn't see the definition, so we ended up with 35mm.

Something that happened was that the film was going to be about identity or the so-called identity, the transition from teenage years into adulthood, but also we wanted to make a comment about our country and the so-called identity of our country. We believed that it was a country that was seeking its identity as a "teenage" country, going into a more "grown-up" country, so we wanted to do this parallel journey.

What started happening during discussions with Chivo early on is that now he has to be approaching everything as not subjective; you just observe things in the distance. And that observation starts to happen when the character is as important as the environment, as the social context. So, in order to do that, you don't do close-ups because in close-ups you're favoring character versus environment. So, everything had to be very wide in the sense that you give up; you don't want a balance between character and environment. Actually, what you're seeking for is something dialectic, or a clash between context and environment.

So, the film had to be shot very wide, without close-ups, and to respect an idea of real time as much as possible. Here's one of the scenes, maybe the only one in which there are actually cuts because "Y Tu Mamá También" is a film with very few cuts; a lot of the scenes are just one shot deals. And that's something that we've been exploring ever since then.

George Krassakopoulos

It's something that you even do in "Children of Men" I would say.

Alfonso Cuarón

And even "Harry Potter" is shot like that. It's a bit more controlled, but I remember the studio freaking out that I was not doing close-ups.

George Krassakopoulos

How did the Mexican film community receive you, coming from the States and Hollywood?

Alfonso Cuarón

Nothing happened. I didn't announce it much because we wanted to keep it quiet and small so we just went to do the film. What was great was that at that point I was already collaborating with Alejandro who had just finished doing "Amores Perros". So, it was great because more than collaborating with the old guard or my generation, I was collaborating with Alejandro -I learned about Gael through Alejandro as well.

And you have to understand that at that point Alejandro was seen as the worst horror because he was a commercial director in films and everybody, the entire establishment was looking at him with scorn. So, it was more going under the radar until towards the end of the whole process. And under the radar means being more in collaboration with Guillermo. Ever since, we are passing our scripts to each other. The ending of "Y Tu Mamá También" for instance was Guillermo's idea. Or with "Amores Perros" I got involved from the very early draft, same as Carlos. So, it was already a group of people collaborating there.

George Krassakopoulos

And this was a huge success, this film was a commercial and a critical success and I guess it's the reason, although from this one all the way to "Harry Potter" might seem a bit strange. You've been offered to do the third "Harry Potter" film.

Alfonso Cuarón

Yes, but what happened is that right when I was doing post-production of this, I wrote "Children of Men" and my plan was to do "Children of Men" right after this one. But what happened was that the studios didn't want to do "Children of Men"; it was too weird for them at the time. And I found myself unemployed again and with a lot of debts, because I put my own money in "Y Tu Mamá También" and the way it works in cinema is that even if it is a success, you don't get your money until way later; so I was looking for something more available.

George Krassakopoulos

But, at least this one was picked up for the States and it was actually released there.

Alfonso Cuarón

That was the thing. The film was released everywhere and it's one of those happy stories of a film that cost nothing and had a world release and important distributors. It was a film with a very good release.

But then, I had really worked so much in "Children of Men" and I was a little frustrated when the thing collapsed. I received a call -I was actually with Gael and Diego in London- telling me if I wanted to do "Harry Potter" and then I was just making jokes about that. And I was in a restaurant with Gael and Diego and we were laughing so much making very dirty jokes about Harry Potter -imagine all these magic brooms and the witches- when a messenger arrives from Warner Brothers to deliver me the script and part of the joke was that together with the script, there was this contract that I had to sign.

George Krassakopoulos

To get the script?

Alfonso Cuarón

Yes, a confidentiality agreement. So, I signed it and the rest of the night was just jokes and jokes. I put the script in the bag, I didn't even open it, I was thinking what to write, what to do, and few days later, I'm talking to Guillermo and I start making the Harry Potter jokes to him, and he starts laughing and laughing and at that time, I hadn't seen the films, I hadn't read the books, I had just heard about them. And Guillermo starts laughing and I said to him "And you know, the stupid thing

is that these people offered me Harry Potter”.

And then Guillermo got pissed off at me and said, “Well, have you read them?” I said, “No, I haven’t read them. You know I don’t like that kind of stuff”. And he says, “You’re an arrogant prick. You have to read them first and then complain about them. And before you read them, I have to tell you something. You have to do it. You’ll be perfect for that”. And then he said “Number three is the best; you have to do it”. And it was weird that he said that. At first I thought he was joking. Then I read the book and I understood what he was talking about. And then, I read the script that Steven Kloves had done -he’s a great writer in filmmaking- and I decided to do it. And I don’t regret one second of the process, which lasted for two years. The truth of the matter is that it becomes something more than filmmaking, it becomes a little bit of endurance because it’s such a long process; it’s a very slow process because of the visual effects and all that. I will say something very cowardly; everything that surrounds the J.K. Rowling creation involves this beneficial energy and I find myself two years of my life surrounded by that beneficial energy; it’s amazing.

George Krassakopoulos

So, there is a part of magic in Harry Potter after all.

Alfonso Cuarón

Yes, but I have my own theories about that. It’s just that you probably have the single book that has been read the most in the world right now and everybody had such a good will towards it, so that permeates everything. Harry has a special kind of gentle energy together with good will -I don’t know if that happens because of the success of the franchise- but that’s what I experienced around it and it was very good.

Now, the “Harry Potter”. I talked with J.K. Rowling before about how she understood her book because I saw the parallels with reality and I said “Azkaban is Guantanamo, right?” and she says, “Yeah, you can say that”. And I said “If you look at the story, it has the same descriptions of these tortures in Abu Ghraib”. She said, “Did you notice that? Yes, maybe”. And Lupin the werewolf is like this guy, the uncle that does smack right? And she said, “Well, maybe you’re right”.

And we started talking about how that was a way of trying to make a fantasy film with a base of reality. The only moment that I had a little bit of a problem was when Newsweek published the launch of the third film when I was starting the shoot, with big headings that said, “Voldemort is Bush, Fudge is Blur”. I had mentioned that and eventually they asked me not to say those things when I was doing the film and I agreed because those were not my characters, they were J.K. Rowling’s characters, but that was in a way the beginning of the approach of the “Harry Potter” film.

George Krassakopoulos

Okay, so we can see a short clip of it.

(screening)

A death. How fitting! It was considered to be the darkest one of the “Harry Potter” series when you did it and I think it’s J.K. Rowling’s favorite film of the lot. Is that true? This is what I read at least.

Alfonso Cuarón

I don’t know. I just know that J.K. likes the film very much. I really connected with her. I think she’s a very smart lady. The last time I talked to her was when she was finishing her last book and she called me because she liked “Children of Men”. I saw the last one, I think it was the fifth, in the theatres, and I didn’t like the ending, the second part, but it was one of those things that I felt was going in the right direction. And there’s something I have to say about the producers. David Heyman is taking care of the franchise. So, I’m proud to be a part of that.

George Krassakopoulos

Was it a bit scary to be part of such a big thing? I mean, Harry Potter is not just a book, or a film, it's a cult, let's say. Was this intimidating to you?

Alfonso Cuarón

The difficulty here was how to do something which was turning into a machine. There were already two films, there was a casting place and a signing place, and there were a lot of things already in place. Guillermo del Toro told me "You have to do this but if you do it, you have to surrender yourself to the material, don't try to do your own shit. Just surrender to the material". And that was part of the thing. It was an exercise. That was very interesting, how if you put yourself at the service of something, and you strip your ego from that standpoint and you try to do what is right from that standpoint, it's an interesting process because little miracles happen.

Early on, I threw the I-Ching, the Chinese oracle and the big definition, the big judgment that I-Ching said is that building upon what is being corrupt gives you good fortune. And that was the issue a little bit. I knew that I couldn't just change the design because it would alienate the fans of a movie that was already successful. But I could transform the design. So, I worked with the production designer accommodating the design so that for the people who had seen the previous films it wouldn't be alien, but at the same time it would be a completely different thing.

The biggest thing was costumes, for instance. The costumes had nothing to do with the others. Instead of doing this '50s reality that the other films had, I said, "Let's do contemporary costumes and see how kids are dressed nowadays". Even the logo of Harry Potter looks exactly like the previous one because it had that thing, but it was already skewed, changed; everything was about adapting what was already there. The good luck was that Chris Columbus had chosen amazing actors so I already had a lot of stuff to play with and it was great. It was a good thing.

George Krassakopoulos

And after "Harry Potter" you now have another fantasy film, but a fantasy of a different kind. "Children of Men" is not your typical science fiction movie. It's more rooted in reality. You adopted the book to make it more realistic. Was it your vision to make a parallel for what is happening right now in the world with this film?

Alfonso Cuarón

After "Harry Potter" Universal was okay with doing "Children of Men". It was fantastic because the two years that I was doing "Harry Potter", I was living in Britain. So, as opposed to before, I wrote "Children of Men" during visits to Britain, after I had already worked there, in a set that is a microcosm of social dynamics. So, I could understand a lot of the idiosyncrasy of the Britishness. That was fundamental for the re-write. Another thing is that "Harry Potter" was my kindergarten for visual effects, so I learned so much about visual effects and obviously, after "Harry Potter", the studio said "Yes, we'll do this movie" because it's a very expensive movie that was very unlikely a studio movie. That was part of the problem why the studios didn't want to do it; I never considered it a fantasy. I didn't want to do a fantasy. I didn't even want to do a science fiction movie.

From the book, we took the name and the premise of infertility and the name of the character. Tim Sexton and I, my writing partner, we just rewrote and reinvented pretty much the rest. And the idea was not to do a science fiction movie, but a film that would be a comment about the state of things. Except the three or four conventional things that we had to use to make sure it is understood we are in the near future -meaning transforming cars, billboards etc.-, the iconography had to be only iconography of stuff that you recognize and the other is part of human consciousness about the recent history of the last ten years. So, we did a big research for the film to create the sociological and political landscape in which the film was taking place, an ideological landscape and an iconography where we wanted just to refer to things that have been happening around from Iraq to Sri

Lanka, to Northern Africa, to Northern Ireland and use that iconography and repeat it in the film, in its context.

George Krassakopoulos

This is the year that unites all three of you. Iñárritu and Guillermo del Toro and you in that it was considered to be the big invasion of Mexican talent into Hollywood. Did you sign this deal that you are going to produce and direct films for which studio?

Alfonso Cuarón

It's independent; it's called Cha Cha Cha, so nobody was first. Cha is first and the second is Cha. Well, it happened to be the year where our projects were parallel. We went together in pre-production, in production and post-production and then in promotion. And here we put everything. It happened one more time. Life coincidences put everything in sync and we were collaborating in each other's scripts. I produced his film with Guillermo, but we were also collaborating with Alejandro and Alejandro with Guillermo.

We went to production pretty much at the same time, to post-production the same thing; I took a little longer because of the visual effects of my film and of course because it being a studio film you have to follow the schedule of the studio. And then we went into promotion, in which pretty much they offered to give me this thing called the Gotham award, that is a big award in New York for cinema, and the message was that I would only accept if the award is for the three of us and from then on we kept using the same philosophy. And when we started promoting the films, we decided to talk about the other films as much as we talk about our own films. At first, the studios were very upset, because the distributors were very upset. But eventually they realized that it was something that was adding rather than subtracting. And that's something that we learned. I think that, for instance, in Mexico, more important than our films is that message of community. That is what really matters. Even if people don't like our films, I think that they appreciate the idea of community and how this Gestalt is stronger than trying to do things on your own.

George Krassakopoulos

So, would you say that the situation now in Mexico in the cinematic community has changed since you started? Do you think that this thing that you three are doing has an effect?

Alfonso Cuarón

I think more than anything, I'd put it the other way round. I believe that what we are doing is connecting with the younger generation and that they are the real masters. It's not that we are setting an example and throwing it to the younger generation. What we are doing is that we're absorbing the example of the younger generation and we have big means of communication just because position that we have obtained in the media. But we're not anything like speakers of something other than a bigger Gestalt that is created -which is, I believe, the younger generation. In many ways, not only in terms of cinema, I think, but socially and in many other things.

What happens in cinema, and that's the thing that excites me so much about the youngest generation -I'm talking about the generation that is in their 20s or even late teens- is that it is the first generation that not only was it born with a video camera, but they were born being shot by a video camera. It's the first generation that happened to and because they were born being shot with a video camera, cinema has become something organic in them. They were born with DVDs that have 'behind the scenes'; everything that was the big magic trick, all this mystery is lost. This generation recognizes where there is a visual effect and where there isn't. They grew up with little cameras, facilities to edit in their own room but this thing, I think, is so important for the mystification of cinema. When our generation was growing up, it was like going to the magic show and you would see the magician and you would say "Wow! How did they do that?" And you fixated a lot about how you would do that.

The younger generation knows the tricks. You cannot bullshit them. So, for this younger generation, cinema is something that goes beyond the magic trick. It's something that is way more important than the magic trick. Together with that, because you have the new mediums, and also the new means of distribution, which are now in constant reinvention, there is also the demystification of what my generation was about. And the demystification of the previous generation is even worse, in relation to that "cannibalism", because you have to fight for your place, for your money, you need connections; you need to go through the ladder of cinema.

Now, anybody can do a film. I think that a lot of filmmakers are coming and just because it's so easy to do a film and just put it in YouTube, anybody can do a film, and most of them suck, but there are the guys who have the rigor; you don't have to teach rigor at schools. That rigor is something that real filmmakers are going to have in their own accord. So, I find that the revolution that is happening right now is way more important than the revolution from black and white to color, and probably as important as the revolution from silent films to talkies, but with a big difference. In silent and talkies, film went backwards because when sound was invented, everything was just about the dialogue and all this amazing cinema that was developed until the late 20s pretty much disappeared to do this staged to-the-word shot.

Now, something different has happened, a new language, a new perception, a new eye has been born. Some of those young filmmakers are in line with the older generation, and they are going to do interesting stuff. The ones that I am really curious about are the ones that are really challenging everything. The guys that are doing films out of nothing and by this I don't mean they cannot do big productions, but is this big production useful from a standpoint in which you know the tricks, so you are not going after reality anymore; because my generation too, absorbed video as a way of showing reality.

I have a big problem with reality. I think that reality is very dangerous. There is nothing more real than a reality show. And I think that they search for reality, but they should start searching for truth. And you can find truth in many different forms. You can find the truth the way Guillermo del Toro finds it in "Pan's Labyrinth" or you can find truth through realistic approaches, like Alejandro in "Babel". But the important thing is truth, not just because you have something that looks real, but because it's truthful as well. And what I love about what this new generation is coming to is that they go beyond this magic trick. That beyond is truth, and that truth is taking shape in new models and in new forms.

And what I'm excited about is that that translates into many other endeavors of humanity with that young generation, more than with the models of the 20th century. I believe that the younger generation is going to come with a Copernican revolution where they are going to tell us that the earth is not the center of the universe. The earth is spinning around the sun and with that you have to completely re-conceive absolutely everything. And I believe that together with this cinema that we're talking about -which is in the hands of the younger generation- those new models will come that are unthinkable from the standpoint of politics and ideology. One thing I share with Guillermo and Alejandro is that our duty is not for us to come up with those models, because we don't have that wisdom or that aperture or whatever; our duty is to create the environment and the conditions so that the next generation can come up with the models.

George Krassakopoulos

One last question from me before we take questions from the audience. Your son, Jonás, is part of this generation. How does it make you feel, apart from proud?

Alfonso Cuarón

A little old.

George Krassakopoulos

A little old? So, we can take your questions now if anyone wants to ask something.

From the audience

Θα ήθελα, αν μπορούσε, να αναφερθεί στη σημειολογία των χρωμάτων που χρησιμοποιεί στις ταινίες του.

Alfonso Cuarón

Early on, we were doing this “Toilet Zone” for TV. For some reason, we painted one wall green, I was with Lubezki, and we liked it and in the next show we decided to keep on following that palette. Eventually and very organically another thing that happened was that I particularly liked to compose a lot in the frame in the early days. So, just by composing in the frame and discriminating elements, meaning getting rid of these and putting others and accommodating the whole thing, at the end of one of these TV shows, Chivo said “Do you realize that everything ended up being green?” It was very unconscious. And then we did it consciously for three films, in which everything was green. Why? I don’t know. I just know that each color carries an emotion and for us that was the kind of emotional palette that we wanted.

But ever since then, we decided to completely get rid of that even since “Y Tu Mamá También” in the sense of not controlling color, allowing color to be just a random effect of the environment. I don’t want reality because I live reality but yes, there is a tendency with Lubezki to subdue the colors. He finds that the negative is brighter than the perception your eye can have. So, usually we tend to subdue the color a little bit.

The funny thing is that “Children of Men” ended up being kind of blue and people praised that blue and Chivo and I hated it, but it was a mistake we couldn’t correct because when we went into the digital intermediate, they ran one process and because the film was going to be released, we didn’t have the time to go back to the whole thing and it ended up being a little more blue than we would have liked. Generally speaking, Chivo and I like the color of the pure negative rather than the intermediate because once you go into the digital intermediate, you can never recover exactly the same shades of color that you have in the negative.

From the audience

Συναισθηματικά, για σας, τι σημαίνει το πράσινο που χρησιμοποιήσατε στις πρώτες ταινίες;

Alfonso Cuarón

I cannot really explain an emotion; I can’t point that finger on what it is. Green is just to make me happy. I like green; I use a lot of green.

From the audience

Βλέπω ότι στις ταινίες σας, όλοι οι χαρακτήρες έχουν κάποια ψεγάδια, δηλαδή μάλλον αυτό τους κάνει πιο ανθρώπινους. Για παράδειγμα, αυτό φαίνεται και στον τρίτο Harry Potter όπου τα δύο πρώτα δεν ήταν τόσο σκοτεινά και όπως ακολούθησε και στο τέταρτο του Mike Newell ήταν επίσης σκοτεινό. Θα ήθελα να ρωτήσω, δηλαδή, αν τα ψεγάδια στους χαρακτήρες σας γοητεύουν γι’ αυτό και τα χρησιμοποιείτε τόσο πολύ όπως και στα πολύ προσωπικά σας σχέδια, όπως το «Θέλω και τη Μαμά σου» που ναι μεν ήταν ένα road movie το οποίο είχε μια άλλη διάθεση, δηλαδή έχει και κάποια κωμικά στοιχεία, όμως οι χαρακτήρες είναι σκοτεινοί.

Alfonso Cuarón

I don’t know. I’m not looking into darkness in terms of character. I’m just looking in terms of the normal ambiguity and complexity that I think people have; all humanity has that. For me, the mental thing is not to put moral judgment in the characters. I don’t know if these things are flaws. I guess they are because we are all flawed. But what I’m trying to not react to is the moralistic side, to when redemption has a moral value.

I think redemption is something amazing when it has a spiritual overtone but not a moral or moralistic overtone. It’s not about transcending. It’s not about the drunk who’s now not drunk. That by itself is very empty. It’s more like the Hollywood approach to character in which it’s this thing: if you

behave correctly, you are going to be rewarded. If you act wrongly, you're going to be punished. I think the perfect example of that is someone I really admire: Woody Allen. And you can see in his best films, like "Crimes and Misdemeanors", that crime actually does pay. You can kill and get away with it.

It's very different from an external standpoint than from a spiritual standpoint. You can see in the Woody Allen film that the character got away with it and actually he's going to have a great life; he's going to have success but you know that inside there's something that is broken and that inside is what makes the characters really interesting, that spiritual inside that has nothing to do with success and with money. And actually the great thing about "Crimes and Misdemeanors" is that you realize that that character is not even aware that he's broken inside and that makes him even more broken.

From the audience

Your most popular films are very quintessentially English stories, "A Little Princess", "Harry Potter" and "Children of Men". Is there something about English literature that appeals to you in comparison to American stories?

Alfonso Cuarón

The truth of the matter is that these are coincidences. "A Little Princess", I didn't know it existed when I read the screenplay by Richard LaGravenese. About "Harry Potter", I hadn't even read the books when it was offered to me and with "Children of Men" I never read the book. But what is obvious is, yes, there is a connection there. I've been attracted to those literature materials. When I was growing up, I used to read quite a lot of British literature. Why not American? That I don't know. Strange. But why not Mexican? Why only American and British?

From the audience

But you've done Mexican films.

Alfonso Cuarón

Yeah, but not based upon books. You're right. Maybe there's a coincidence. But now I'm living in London. But the funny thing is that particularly in my 20s I read more American literature. I was way more attracted to American literature. In my teen years I was really attracted to British literature and then in my 20s I was all about American literature. So, I don't have a straight answer about that. I don't know.

From the audience

I'd like to ask you if the kind of camaraderie that you have with Alejandro and Guillermo is something that you could have or that you started to have where you live in London or in Los Angeles with directors that you feel close to, I suppose maybe Burton, or others. Is it something that you could have imagined developing outside of your strictly cultural route?

Alfonso Cuarón

Totally. There are two things. One is the friendship. The friendship is just friendship. It takes time, it takes history and you create new friends and you develop that friendship, but in terms of cinematic camaraderie, that has been happening for a long time. I find that you start connecting with people that think alike and in my path I encounter a lot of generous people. In Mexico, there are other guys too. Like Carlos Reygadas. He's another important person. I think he's one of the most important filmmakers in the world nowadays. I consider Carlos Reygadas one of my masters and I'm not afraid of saying it now that he's not present. And I really enjoy collaborating with Carlos because we collaborate creatively. And I enjoy any collaboration that you learn something out of; like when he questions my stories, or whenever I go to his cutting room and we talk about his things. Also, with Walter Salles in Brazil, for instance, but that's also very organic because we share Gael. I have to say that Gael is a point of connection with a lot of this stuff.

In Britain, for instance, I'm close with Pavel Pavlikowski, and once you're in a community, you start meeting other people. I was going to do a Bond movie years ago and it was thanks to Joel Cohen that I didn't do it, so I'm always going to be eternally grateful to him. In Spain also, I have a bunch of really close friends. What is happening more and more these days is that filmmakers from different tendencies invite each other -and I'm sure this has always been the case but I see it now as more widespread - inviting each other to collaborate. For example, Alejandro has his own thing with Sean Pen in which he went to the cutting room of his last film and they were together and gave notes and things like that. So, definitely, that is happening. For instance, Guillermo has his own relationship with Matthew Cassidy. Carlos Reygadas, I think, is with Gaspar Noe. I know Tim Burton from a friendly standpoint than actually collaborating in specific projects. So, yes, I don't think it's about passports there. I think that language is cinema and my nation is cinema.

And it's good that we talk about Mexico and all that but I don't believe in Mexican cinema. I think we're going to be very unpopular. I don't believe in Greek cinema and I couldn't care less about Greek cinema or Mexican cinema. I care about filmmakers. And I love filmmakers that have strong and cultural roots. I find that fantastic. I think that one thing out of the diseases that we're carrying from the 20th century is the disease of national identities and I think it's worth living in a world where what we need is to try to find rules of engagement between people but not put identities in between.

I fully admire filmmakers and it has to do with that. The whole thing with Alejandro, Guillermo and I happened because we grew up together and that's a natural thing. But it has nothing to do with making a Mexican thing. Julian Schnabel is another person that we love to collaborate with. I have a great relationship and we may collaborate soon with Crialese; I find he's an amazing filmmaker. And the great thing with Emmanuele is that he's not only a great filmmaker, but he's starting to become a really good friend. But this has nothing to do with flags or passports.

Alexis Grivas

Do you believe that the power of the three caballeros, as they call you around, can be beneficial to the Mexican filmmakers? I'm referring to what you did earlier this year when you came back from the Oscars with 17 nominations and some wins and you steered the whole Mexican community in Mexico City with the law and everything. Do you think you could have a positive influence on what is happening in Mexico for the filmmakers and not for the community?

Alfonso Cuarón

It has to do with that. Yes, I think that what Alexis is saying is that during the whole time with the Oscar bordello, we decided to use the perks of that because we knew we had the biggest spotlight and it would be irresponsible not to use that spotlight. In Mexico there were a lot of laws that Mexican filmmakers were pleading for in order to make better conditions for the industry, so we went to Mexico for that.

From the outside you see the fractures that a society can have and the industry can have and how filmmakers are completely in polarization with exhibitors for instance and at the same time with distributors and sometimes with television. So, what we did is go like Kofi Annan and talked with each one of these guys to try to create a plan in which everything could work out together with the government and make sure that they would approve one law that would facilitate money for filmmakers.

I think all this is beneficial, but I'll tell you the real benefit. I think that the law now, it may change again but in principle, they approved the law. I still believe in industries as well. It's very likely that if they pass this law, more films are going to be made. I'm happy about that because then a lot of people that live from cinema, workers, will have more access to work. That doesn't mean that they are going to make better films. A lot of those industry laws benefit the industry, not necessarily cinema.

I'm very happy about that but by the same token, if I had a little power in some other things, I wish I could have done something for education, or for food or for health, but for those things I don't have an influence in my country. In a way, I feel these are more important things than the film industry in my country. I care about filmmakers at the end, not about an industry that is not necessarily going to generate good films.

That's one thing. But on the other hand, I think that the most important and the most beneficial thing is the message that was sent not only to a community of filmmakers, but a community at large in Mexico. In a country where everything is polarization, where everything has to do with the political administration and the profit -which is pretty much what happens in the whole world- everybody is on their own. Everywhere in the world, social work is completely out of the question. There isn't a sense of social work. Now it's all about what is going to make money even if there is no social advancement.

I think that this message, of Alejandro, Guillermo and I going there at that moment, was important and I think that camaraderie of ours is more important in Mexico than our films. It's about trying to bring concord, harmony rather than disruption, seeing that there is a way in which you don't have to stab the one next to you in order for you to succeed. That is a little bit of what is happening in the culture in Mexico.

So, I think it's beneficial. I don't know. Again, for filmmakers it is beneficial in the sense that if anything, when we were starting we had to knock doors. Now the doors are open, and now it's up to filmmakers. What I mean is you go to a market, Guillermo and I used to go to that market with our first films, and nobody wanted to see a Mexican film. Now the market wants to see Mexican films. There is something that is changing, yes, but I have to say it one more time; that energy that we're trying to bring is nothing that we're inventing. We're just borrowing the energy of the younger generation and we're expressing it, because we have the microphone, the new tendencies of a younger generation in a broader way.

From the audience

You seem interested in political issues and "Children of Men" was political in a more obvious way and also in Del Toro's "Pan's Labyrinth" there was a political idea behind the whole fairy tale and also "Babel" had a political issue behind it. Do you think this has an impact to the viewers? Do you want to have a political statement with your movies?

Alfonso Cuarón

I would like to believe that part of the whole thing that those three films talk about is how actually ideology and bastard politics are behind pretty much the world that exists in-between the real communication of people. I don't think they are and I hope the films are not trying to make a political statement, rather than creating a fabric in the filming which politics is a part of; I feel that contemporary humanity is being bombarded with a lot of things and this is part of the problem and not the solution; and I think it's important that before you create models, you have to create a diagnosis first, like when you go to the doctor. You go and you see what diseases you have before you create the models of how to cure them. And the political diagnosis, I think, is very important. But I hope that the films are not just political.

George Krassakopoulos

That was all the time we had for today. I would like to thank you all for being here and I would like to especially thank Alfonso Cuarón.

Alfonso Cuarón

Thank you. Ευχαριστώ.

