Quiet Revolutions and Silent Loves: Interview with Federico Hidalgo

by Bruno Cornellier

Filmmaker Federico Hidalgo (© Photo: François Belisle)

To define Québec cinema as a "nationalized" cinema – that is, a cinema dependant upon a financial intervention of the State for its survival – entails that we first examine the discourses around which the State which subsidizes the films *imagines* the nation it wishes to govern. For, if the Québécois have been associated mainly with Catholicism and French European descent for a long time, this representation, in recent years, has had to face and come to terms with important historical, economical and political shifts. Indeed, with globalization and the rise of multinational capitalism, national cultures are increasingly *trans*national and their frontiers uncertain and in constant flux. When ' cultural nomadism ' intersects with well-defined identities, are national cinema institutions and film critics able to revisit the discourses around which they organize and govern local film production?

Premiered at the 2004 Sundance film festival, Federico Hidalgo's trilingual feature film *A Silent Love*, shot partly in Montréal and partly in Mexico, constitutes a captivating and thought-provoking example of these transnational population movements and what they imply, here and abroad, for people trying to build a place for themselves and negotiating their minority status in the new national community they embrace.

On a cold December afternoon, in an empty loft space on St-Laurent Boulevard (Montréal), Federico Hidalgo agreed to meet with us and to discuss these issues, thus sharing his unique insights and experiences as a filmmaker working in the "in-betweens" of Québec national cinema.

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B.C.: What is a national cinema? How would you define it?

FEDERICO HIDALGO: Obviously there is an economy of filmmaking. Money comes from somewhere. In the case of Canada and Québec, a lot of it comes through tax money that is redistributed into an arts community and a film industry. Your film can be a way of distributing those moneys into the industry, ending up with a film as a result, a cultural product. That is one way of discussing the issue of national cinema. Another way, I guess, is to consider films that actually discuss within their narrative what is happening in that society. Where is it going? What has happened to it? How is it changing? How do people feel about it? This can sometimes overlap with another discussion where critics see a film as, intentionally or unintentionally, reflecting certain cultural traits, or as being part of a tradition of films made in a nation.

In my direct experience presenting this film (*A Silent Love*), a lot of the time the concern about whether it is Canadian or whether it is Mexican or whether it is a mix of the two seems to be an issue that matters more to intellectuals and to critics than it does to most audience members that I have spoken with. I have been with the film many times in different festivals, here, in the US and in Latin America. People in the audience often asked us why we shot in those parts of Mexico, or Montréal. Now our concerns, I guess, rather than the actual physical landscape of the places we were shooting in, was more the social context, the social possibilities of each place. A lot of the story is obviously or implicitly about that: the possibility for love, for self-expression, for growth, etc., as it happens in one place as opposed to another. Montréal becomes a place where a number of things can happen, or open up to a young woman from Mexico. Mexico becomes a place where love can happen for a man from here. These were what was interesting to us in terms of how we represented physical spaces – as places of social or individual possibilities. But so many images and ideas circulate about what places are really like that everybody comes to the film with certain expectations about Mexico and Mexicans, Canada and Canadians. For example, several people asked me: ' I thought Montréal was a French city, so how come the film is in English? '. So I explained to them that a lot of people actually speak in English here. Or others might say: ' I have been to Mexico already. It is very pretty, with all these wonderful colonial cities '. I would reply that it is, but that there are a lot of other places too, where people live, grow up, and from which they want to leave for any number of reasons, and so on. Thus, maybe more than in other films, the issue of how we represented these specific places was foregrounded, discussed, and even contested by the audience. Even the film's characters speak of it. The professor emphasizes the fact that in Montréal we speak two languages. Then there is this sort of irony in the young Mexican wife coming here and ending up in a sushi restaurant owned by Chinese people working with a Japanese chef. So even after learning English and French, her daily life will now also include Mandarin and Japanese. That is something my wife (Paulina Robles) and I, writing the script, found intriguing about Montréal. It's a

place that is not only French and English. It has a multiplicity of languages and cultures, and it is part of our daily life. So we wanted to somehow represent that.

B.C.: Indeed, in the Montréal based weekly periodical *The Hour*, you spoke with very inspired words about the Montréal grounding of your film; about Latin American people's romanticizing of this city and of its diversity, the way it allows foreigners to reinvent themselves, etc. [1] Would this Montréal/Mile End base be a better way of understanding the film's specificity and its play of identities : that is to think of it as a *city film*, a Montréal film, rather than to think of it in terms of national cinema – the same way we could think of a Woody Allen film as a New York film rather than as an American film?

FEDERICO HIDALGO: Or even as an Upper East side or Upper West side film! [laughs]. That is true. I think we did try to add even a bit of neighbourhood specificity to the film. Obviously, the Mile End district, where the film is mostly set, is not the same as Hochelaga-Maisonneuve or Westmount. Likewise in Mexico, there are things that for Mexicans are recognizable as very specific: the type of subsidized house that Gladys and her mother live in, the reason why it stayed one storey high while the other houses surrounding it are two stories high, etc. All these things are recognizable to people that live there, and just as specific as the Mile End is to you as a member of the audience here. In some ways, it is also a film about two neighbourhoods.

B.C.: Many critics here have seemed reluctant to discuss the film as a Québécois film. I guess the fact that the film was not shot in French can somehow explain why that is, but there must certainly be other reasons. Still, it seems that it has become quite easy for critics here to simply ignore it as a part of a Québécois corpus of films, and to label it or categorize it instead as a generic ' Canadian ' film. However, this relative silence is in itself very interesting, considering the fact that the film explicitly raises and tackles major local issues and questions about nationality, trans-nationality, identity and language. All issues that have remained at the core of national discourses in Québec since 1960. I would even go as far as to say that it is actually difficult *not* to think about the film in terms of national discourses and national specificity. So why, in your opinion, this silence in Québec around the national and local grounding of your film?

FEDERICO HIDALGO: Yes, it is an English-speaking feature-length film made here in Montréal. That is peculiar in Québec because there aren't very many. Yet outside of Québec the film has been considered very much a Montréal film. Then again, one writer told me that the film had all the qualities of a ' classic ' Canadian movie. The film takes the issue of language quite seriously, and explores the importance of language, the value of it in defining yourself, the way it becomes part of how you think of your past and your future, how you think of your potential to become more or different. So we have one character who comes here and who is learning two languages, but who at the same time is missing a certain kind of romantic language – not Spanish specifically, just the words of someone truly in love with her. Then we have another character who is learning Spanish and learning to express what he was never able to express in his own language.

Because the issue of language-learning, identity and potentiality is so strong, I thought it might be interesting in a city like Montreal where language is always an important issue – a city where people discuss language in the most dramatic terms, as something that will determine the future and the possibilities of a generation of children, or that will condition in a fundamental way your life process.

Vanessa Bauche as Gladys in
Federico Hidalgo's *A Silent Love* (2003) (© Atopia)

B.C. : Concerning that, there is a very subtle but interesting moment in the film that catches my attention (or imagination). When Gladys refers to her language lessons, she mentions learning about the *Quiet* Revolution, mirroring very interestingly the title of the film, *A Silent Love*, and its focus on language issues. And considering the primacy of language (of French language) in *la Révolution tranquille*'s political discourses of emancipation, what do these issues of language, and their links with issues of identity, imply or mean for a local Spanish-speaking filmmaker from the Bill 101 generation?

FEDERICO HIDALGO: A lot of immigrants, when they come here, are very confused by the language issue and by the nationalist issue in Québec. So these French courses that are offered by the government, one of the things that you learn about is Québécois history, particularly recent history. Thus the courses try to give people a sense of why the language issue is so important here. This is also, I believe, part of the mandate of these courses, and that is partly why these courses are offered to you by the government. You are learning not only French, but also the significance of French in the society where you live. This is not obvious to you if you have grown up somewhere else, where language is not such a contentious issue. For us, that small reference in the film was a way of pointing to that specific type of language course, familiar to many immigrants,

and also of pointing in the direction of one of the themes in the film, which is the value of language in defining or redefining your identity. We are looking at the individual case of Gladys, let's say, just as the theory behind Bill 101 implies that by affecting the individual life of each one of us, you ultimately affect the society at large. Gladys in some ways represents the spirit of what the future of this society is. Her questions about language and her redefinition through language are part of the society's redefinition of itself as a society that will become more and more complex linguistically and culturally. From another angle, I think that part of the romantic image of Montréal for many of the Latin Americans that we've known (who want to come here) is due to its being seen as a place where you can grow and explore new possibilities. It is North America but it is different than everywhere else in North America. Explaining this difference is difficult. And to try to understand what it means concretely in your day-to-day life is one of the challenges that we were interested in for this film. To somehow reflect on that. What does it mean when you finally get here? You are confronted with different languages and different shocks, and you have to make your way. We chose an Anglophone protagonist partly because we were going to make this film in English – thus trying to finance it through the English divisions of different agencies – but also for more significant reasons. There is the dramatic contrast between Anglophone culture as we might know it and Latin American culture. But what is also interesting is that in Montréal, the Anglo and the Latino are both minorities. They are both either arriving from somewhere else, or estranged from what could be considered the (local) mainstream. That is something you learn when you are in Montréal. But if you are not from here you think of this guy Norman as classically Canadian. He represents Canada. He is the *Canadian Tire* guy. But if you are from here, you could see that at another level this guy is, like she herself is, a minority character. Somehow, they might identify with each other. Of course, we could not elaborate on all of this. Some things are just a little wink, like the Quiet Revolution line.

B.C.: Thus, if only for the perverse sake of ' labeling ' the film, would you, as a filmmaker, consider *A Silent Love* to be a Québécois film or a Canadian film, and does it matter?

FEDERICO HIDALGO : To me it does matter. Knowing the challenges, we still aspired to make a ' humanist ' film. We started with the contrast between cultures and people. Then we tried to arrive at something that would suggest that maybe there are as many similarities between these people as there are differences, and that similarities and differences should be equally considered. I am very proud of the fact that the film reflects or incorporates the work of many Mexican film artists, and reflects well upon a tradition of Mexican cinema, since it is also partly inspired by certain Mexican films from the 1950s: comic melodramas about family and displacement, and so on. In the same way, since we live and work here, we are also very proud of the fact that it reflects things that we have discovered by living here. In that sense, it is a Mile End/Montréal/Québec/Canadian film. And we are very happy that at different levels and to different people it reflects those different spaces.

B.C.: As for the local Québécois grounding of your film, it is interesting, or maybe even a bit provocative, that the most important French-speaking character in your film is played by Maka Kotto, a local actor (now sovereignist MP for the Bloc Québécois) who is of African origins (being from Cameroon). Could you talk to us about this choice?

FEDERICO HIDALGO : A lot of it has to do with Maka. I had never met him before. I was casting for the part of André, and we knew he was going to be a Francophone character working at an English CEGEP. That is basically all we knew about his cultural background. But after I met Maka, I really wanted to work with him. And it just seemed to be the right choice for the character who we wanted to project an immediate warmth. Then one of the issues we considered was how provocative it would actually be for Mexicans, because of the idea of a small-town Mexican woman setting up her Mexican friend with an African man – or an ' African-Québécois ' man in this case. In the generalized Mexican view, if you are being set up with a Canadian man, you are not thinking you are going to end up with a man of African origins, even though ' African-Canadians ' have been in Canada for 300 or 400 years, so it is not a question of them being necessarily recent immigrants. Still, the conception of the ' Canadian ' is that of a white European, a view that exists even outside of Canada and not just within Canada (or outside of Québec and not just within Québec). We were interested in that as well, and many of the decisions in the film, both in casting or in the script, have a kind of ' double ' reference. One is for here and one is for there. We wanted to subvert stereotypes that North Americans might have of Latinos, but also some stereotypes that Latinos have of Canadians. Let's take for instance the main idea of Norman being that quiet and polite guy that a lot of Latin Americans would have first responded to as being kind of cold and indifferent. As you get to know him, you start to realise that he is not a cold and indifferent man. He is just much more reserved than we might be used to. So, returning to the casting of Maka, my first interest was very selfish. I just really wanted to work with him as an actor. Then the implications of that decision resonated throughout the script. In the end, it is the story of many immigrants in Montréal. Some of them are Latin American, some of them come from other places, some of them are first or second-generation, or even thirteenth-generation for the French. Thus this theme resonated throughout the film even more once we cast Maka. I enjoy very much working with the actors on the script. So when I cast I really look for interesting collaborators, not just the person who would best represent the part. In each case, all of the main actors were people that brought something beyond technique, a dedication, and they participated in that spirit of collaboration. Without it, the film would not have been possible.

B.C.: Jim Leach, in an essay on Québécois and Canadian cinema, wrote that a national cinema is usually defined ' by canons of film that supposedly accord with national myths and by the exclusion of films that do not ' [2]. Consequently, depending on our belief that Canadian national cinema is a singular entity or an entity that is split in two halves (English-Canadian and Québécois cinema), the

critical discourses surrounding a film and its different readings will be organized differently. Accordingly, do you consider your ambiguous or in-between position, as a non-Francophone filmmaker in Montréal/Québec, to be a handicap or, on the contrary, does it give you more ground or freedom, or let's say less cultural *a priori* or burden, in order to make an original cinema?

FEDERICO HIDALGO : I am not sure how to answer that. However, I definitely do not think of my ' in-between ' position as an obstacle. I have met over this last year a couple of well-known French Québécois filmmakers. I have seen their films and I admire their work. I find it thought-provoking that their work is frequently accepted as ' belonging ' in a way that my work is usually not. My work is rather seen as foreign, or peculiar, as an anomaly of some kind.

B.C.: It is considered as a kind of minority discourse?

FEDERICO HIDALGO : Yes, exactly. Whether it is in Québec or in the rest of Canada. In the ROC, it is also seen as an anomaly because it is from Québec but it's not French. In Québec, the fact that so many Quebeckers go see Québécois films is very exciting. A lot of filmmakers outside of Québec envy that. We hear the same thing all the time from people who work in the agencies: How can Anglo-Canadian filmmakers make films that English-Canadians will go and see the same way that Québécois people will go and see Québécois films? I also ask myself these questions. I see the pattern here and I think that's great: there is an audience that will go see these films, that will discuss them and take them seriously. You even get editorialists writing about the social significance of a film like ??*les invasions barbares*??. As a student of film history, I know of many places and moments when films have meant so much to a society that has become very self-aware. Québec, not just in relation to cinema but in relation to many political issues, is a very self-aware society. And I mean that in a very positive sense, in a way that I would like to be able to engage with more. The fact that I can't do so easily because of language is a challenge. But I do not consider it to be a handicap.

B.C.: To put it differently, is it more difficult to navigate within this industry when your aim is to produce a non-Francophone film?

FEDERICO HIDALGO : I certainly faced obstacles, but I made the film. I have been very fortunate and I live in a situation of privilege in relation to other filmmakers. What I find are deeper obstacles, that affect the way you get feature films made in Québec, in Canada and anywhere else, are the patterns of filmmaking that are so accepted and ingrained that when someone tries to think outside of them and pitch an idea that does not fit what is considered economically viable, then it becomes really difficult to get something done. Those are the obstacles that *all* filmmakers that are trying to do something a little bit different, maybe with characters or stories that fall a little outside the accepted patterns, have to face. So I feel a part of that community of filmmakers that are all trying to think of ways to get their films made, knowing that they are not simply

trying to sell a formula-script. Those obstacles exist in Québec, in Mexico, in the US. They exist everywhere. Only there are slightly different permutations here. We have to navigate them differently. But it usually comes down to what you'd expect: you either find people who will get behind the project because they believe in its potential, or you try, over and over again, to convince people who just do not get it at all and see it as a losing proposition. Whether it is Québec, Canada or elsewhere, getting a film made comes down to doing those things. I have not yet seen or heard of a case, I have not faced a situation where someone said to me that a film would be easier to make if it were in French, or if I were French-speaking. I think generally people work in good faith and what they are really concerned about is whether a film will be good and whether you will be able to competently complete all the stages that must be completed so that the economic cycle of a film (from the actual shooting to the final stages of post-production and distribution) will play itself out. Those concerns I think are much more pressing. They have less to do, in my case at least, with nationality and more to do with the story and how recognizable it is, how comprehensible or even sellable it is. It just happens that the stories I want to tell involve Spanish because it is one of my languages and because they are very personal stories. But they also involve English, and to some degree French.

Federico Hidalgo (center) with director of photography
François Dagenais (© Atopia)

B.C.: Part of the film was shot here, in Montréal, the other part in Mexico, with a Mexican crew. What are the implications, first on a pragmatic production level, but also on an aesthetic or creative level, of shooting in these conditions?

FEDERICO HIDALGO : We had a terrific crew here and in Mexico. We took a small skeleton crew from here to Mexico (my assistant, the DoP, the Productioin Designer and so on) in order to have some kind of continuity between the two spaces. There we worked with a production company who put a crew together for us and facilitated all the production and local contractual issues. We shot in

Montréal first and then in Mexico. During our time here, our group, the crew and the main trio of actors, became very cohesive, particularly thanks to the actors. So we arrived in Mexico and very quickly our new crew became very cohesive there as well. They felt right away how commited people were to the project, particularly, again, the actors. Thus they commited themselves totally to the project as well.

B.C. : How was the film received by Latin-American audiences in the different festivals it was shown? Was it received, interpreted or thought of differently than it was by more ' westernized ' US/Canadian audiences?

FEDERICO HIDALGO : These are generalized observations, of course, but Latin American people tend to laugh more at it. They see the situation of these women as somewhat comical, how they go to a different country and talk about everything and get so perplexed. Latin American audiences also like the main Canadian character more than Canadians do, generally. They tend to see the film overall, *I think*, in a lighter, more ironic, way. They see the dark parts, the sad parts, but they laugh anyway. They also have lots of questions. One great thing about presenting the film at different festivals is that you get to see how much the film, and the entire five-year process of making it, finally completes itself when people talk about it. We spoke before of the economic cycle of a film. But for me the nicest part of the cycle concludes there with the dialogue that starts with people who have seen it, who want to talk about it and who have questions about it. A lot of people in the US found it interesting to see Mexican culture, which many people are familiar with, coming in contact with Canadian culture. They are more accustomed to seeing immigrant stories or Hispanic stories set in the States. Suddenly, to see one set here in Montréal strikes them as something out of the ordinary.

B.C. : To conclude, and I'll let you comment on this, the film is also interesting to me because of its nuances in discussing ' otherness '. Thus the film is not only about the ' evil ' and empowered Western man's gaze on the exotic Other he buys off Internet (as seems to imply Norman's feminist colleague), but it is also about the fantasies and the gaze of these so-called ' Third-World women ' in their imagining of the no less exotic and idealised Western man, ' the handsome, intelligent foreign man, buying gifts '. Here, the limitations of both sides of the spectrum collide and are put to the test of reality.

FEDERICO HIDALGO : I have sometimes described these two Mexican women as two anthropologists who come here and look at things and try to understand what is happening around them. They are very involved in their research – one of them is even married to her research! If you accept this idea, I guess this approach reverses what many people are used to, which is that the privileged reflexive view is usually the Northern view of the South. We didn't start writing this film with an agenda where we were going to subvert stereotypes, or give a voice to the voiceless. We had no particular political or cultural agenda in mind. What we were interested in was these characters in this situation. The more we

developed them in a way that we found credible and interesting, the more these women and this man became intelligent and complex, and the more the cultural and moral issues would naturally surface. It sounds perhaps kind of romantic to say it in these terms, but the more we worked on trying to give them a fully dimensional humanness, the more these issues you mention would become dramatized: the idea that these two ' gazes ' are confronting each other, or that these two gazes are available within the film. Even certain compositions would surprise me. There is one that particularly struck me. I did not see it so clearly when we were shooting it, but then I saw it in the rushes. There is a moment where Gladys is very jealous, but at the same time embarrassed of being jealous. Then Norman tells her that she should not be so childish. At that very moment, behind him, is this bookshelf with books all over the place. Behind her are all these Mexican and African masks. This composition is kind of split down in the middle and she is located as a kind of exotic object, and he is located as a sort of confused rational spirit. These things and objects within the frame were not planned out this specifically. They were in the character's apartment. But they ended up in this composition, which then seems to illustrate this point which you were discussing. I'll give you another example. You were asking me before how people of different cultures may see certain things in the film. There is an earlier moment when Gladys comes into the office and sees Norman and his ex-girlfriend. From a certain point of view, we understand Gladys is just jealous. Period. But from another point of view you see Norman and his ex-girlfriend and you see how similar-looking they are. They are both tall, thin and blonde, they have similar faces. From a certain perspective they belong together, visually. This idea that people of similar physionomic or genetic backgrounds belong together, as in a catalogue of some sort, is so imprinted in our minds that when Gladys sees it, it is not just jealousy that she feels, it is the sense of exclusion from this perfect picture of a ' classic ' North-American couple. And she can't even articulate or explain that, or the conflicted desires wrapped up in it. But when you *see* it, the impact is very strong to me and to other people who have sensed it. So these cultural issues or these self-reflexive anthropological issues are in the film, and we are glad that they are. But a lot of it emerged from searching for ways to reflect on ' basic ' human issues like displacement, culture shock, jealousy. Or simply from miscommunication between a husband and a wife…

[*Interview recorded in Montréal, December 16, 2004.*]

Film Credits

A Silent Love (dir. Federico Hidalgo, 2004)

Atopia
www.atopia.com
www.asilentlove.com

Writing Credits
Federico Hidalgo

Paulina Robles

Interpreted by
Vanessa Bauche
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Susana Salazar
Maka Kotto

Produced by
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Notes

[1] ' We picked explicit parts of Montreal we were interested in. The city in our film is meant not to just be depicted as a picturesque place, but as a set of social circumstances and social possibilities that could be attractive to a young Mexican woman coming from a village where she feels trapped. For some reason, [Latin Americans] have this romantic ideal about Montreal more than other North American cities. They talk about it as a place with a fascinating and interesting sense of freedom, and a diversity that allows reinvention of self. You can't reinvent yourself without some sacrifice of who you were before, but Montreal seems to offer that idea ' (*Hour*, September 9, 2004).

[2] Jim Leach. ' The Reel Nation: Image and reality in contemporary canadian cinema. ' *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 11: 2 (Fall 2002): 3.