

Federico Hidalgo, Argentine-Canadian filmmaker

Peter Rist¹

¹ *Peter Rist, PhD is a Professor of Film Studies at Concordia University, Montréal, Québec, Canada. He has published extensively on East Asian film, and his latest book, Historical Dictionary of South American Cinema, has recently been placed on the list of “Best Reference Titles, 2014,” by Library Journal.*

E-mail: peterist@videotron.ca

Abstract

Argentine-born Federico Hidalgo, his Mexican-born wife Paulina Robles and many collaborators including his former students and fellow professors at Concordia University have made four fiction feature films together over the last 10 years. Only the first of these, *Un amore silenzio/A Silent Love* (2004) has gained international exhibition and recognition. This is unfortunate because Hidalgo's films present a highly original and stylistically creative approach to the problems faced by Latin American immigrants and visitors to Canada/Québec, including their spatial orientation.

Key words: Latin-American (exile), (Canadian) immigration, independent (filmmaking).

Argentine-born film director Federico Hidalgo, together with his Mexican-born producer/script writer wife, Paulina Robles have developed an interesting body of fiction feature films, mostly made close to home in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, that explore the situations of exile and multiculturalism. Hidalgo was born in Mendoza (1961) and moved with his family to the U.S. and Canada and back to Argentina, where in 1975 the political violence in his home country made it impossible for his parents to continue to live there. He completed high school in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada (1976-79), after which he travelled extensively throughout Latin America and Canada (1980-85). In 1985 he moved from Toronto to Montreal, where he worked in theatre initially as an actor, and later as a writer and director. He co-founded a number of theatrical groups that focused on performing plays with a political edge, e.g., on unemployment, immigration, Central American conflicts, and apartheid. Through his working in legitimate theatre, Hidalgo realized he enjoyed collaborating with others, an attitude he has continued until the present day.

A degree in Political Science that Hidalgo had begun at York University, was completed at Concordia University (1990), and while doing this he began acting in student films, and from 1990 to 1997 he was firstly an undergraduate then a graduate student in film production, receiving BFA and MFA degrees from the Cinema Department (now known as the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema) at Concordia. The film production and animation programs within the Faculty of Fine Arts tend to encourage individual creativity, enabling Hidalgo to find his own “voice,” while he was there. He made a number of 16mm short films during this time in Canada and Mexico, including his first, second and third-year undergraduate, prize-winning projects, *Walker* (1991, 10 min.), *The Case of Danny Lester* (1992, 20 min.), and *Another City* (1993, 25 min.) in Montreal, and a co-directed documentary film in Mexico City, *Lotería* (1996, 22 min.) *Another City* is remarkable for a student film, featuring fine acting performances and high quality black and white cinematography, editing and sound design. Thematically, it looks ahead to Hidalgo’s more recent films, with its ambiguous storyline of a young man who decides to stay, while his family and friends are getting ready to leave a fictional, visually deserted city for no clear reason. There is a suggestion

of the environment being under threat, perhaps atmospherically, perhaps by a military invasion, and even a possibility of a futuristic dystopia. In any event the tone is lightly comic and extremely mysterious.

While he was still a student, Hidalgo was teaching English as a Second Language at McGill University, and even before he received his MFA he was employed as a Part-time instructor of undergraduate Film Studies in the Concordia University School of Cinema. He became very popular with students, especially when teaching Film Aesthetics and Film Directors courses, and he is now a regular professor of film production, where at different times he has been in charge of all three of the core Filmmaking courses (I, II, and III) as well as Writing for Film.

He and Paulina had great success in getting their first fiction-feature film project off the ground, *Un amor silencio/A Silent Love* (2004), securing funding from Telefilm Canada and Quebec's Société de développement des entreprises culturelles (SODEC) that enabled them to hire a very prominent Mexican actress, Vanessa Bauche (Susana in *Amores Perros*, 2000), who had already won two Silver Ariel awards—The Mexican film industry “Oscars”—including Best Supporting Actress (Mejor Coactuación Femenina) for *De la calle* (2001). Half of the film was shot in Metepec (an hour outside Mexico City) with a Mexican crew and half in Montreal (mostly in the cosmopolitan Mile-End district) with a Quebec crew. For producer/distributor, Pascal Maeder, and his company Atopia Films, it was his first fiction feature project. Significantly Maeder and the cinematographer, François Dagenais had been fellow-students with Hidalgo at Concordia University, and with his wife co-writing the script, and with some of his own students—e.g., Sophie Farkas Bolla as an “assistant production coordinator”—being hired as crew members, *A Silent Love* set the pattern for the director's desire for collaboration.

Unusually for a film made in the Province of Quebec, where the first language is French, *A Silent Love* was shot in English and Spanish. Norman (Noel Burton) is a quiet, middle-aged, English Canadian CEGEP college film professor who meets up with the attractive, much-younger (28 yr.old) Mexican woman, Gladys

(Bauche) through an Internet matchmaking service.² He travels to Mexico City to meet her and bring her back to Montreal, and at her home he agrees to also host her widowed mother, Fernanda (Suzana Salazar) for a period of time until his wife-to-be is fully oriented. Gladys is not at all docile. She is very smart, independent and headstrong, and more interested in companionship than money and getting a Canadian passport. Increasingly, Norman becomes attracted to Fernanda, while at a dinner party at his house, one of the guests, Molly (Paula Jean Hixson), a feminist, questions the old-fashioned colonialism of male-order brides from less affluent societies. Gladys befriends her and heightens her own awareness of political issues. Gladys rapidly becomes fluent in English and seemingly learns French, also. She gets a job at a Chinese-owned sushi restaurant, where she learns from the Japanese sushi-chef, eventually producing hot “Mexican” sushi. One can imagine her learning both Mandarin and Japanese. On the other hand, Norman never attempts to talk to his wife in Spanish, but he does markedly improve his Spanish-speaking skills with Fernanda. He understands that he and Gladys are not well “matched” and their growing apart overshadows the second half of the film.

One of the strengths of *A Silent Love* is how it reflects the wide-ranging multi-culturalism of Montreal, and Canada, in general. The most important French-speaking character in the film is played by Cameroun-born local actor Maka Kotto, who has become famous for being a prominent separatist, and MP, initially (in 2004) for the Bloc Québécois.³ Interestingly, Kotto plays a friendly CEGEP co-worker who Gladys wants to connect up with a Mexican friend of hers, Ana Francisca (Regina Orozco)! As Hidalgo states in an interview, “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

² Special to Quebec, the CEGEP (*Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel*, General and Vocational College) junior college system includes a required two-year enrollment for entry into any of the province's universities.

³ The Bloc Québécois is the Federal political party that supports the separatist agenda of the Provincial Parti Québécois. Although the Parti Québécois has won the Provincial election on a number of occasions, most recently in 2012, when Kotto became Minister of Culture and Communications, the Bloc was formed on the understanding that it could never win the Federal election, but would serve the interests of Quebec nationalism.

'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 ..."⁴ Later in the same interview, Hidalgo discusses how they wanted to tell a story of "many immigrants in Montréal. Some of them are Latin American, some come from other places, some of them are first or second-generation, or even thirteenth-generation for the French. Thus this theme resonated even more once we cast Maka [Kotto]."⁵ Ultimately, *A Silent Love* successfully managed to subvert stereotypes of race, language and gender, in particular those of mail-order brides, cross-cultural communication, male desire, and in Scott Foundas' words the film was "commanded by" Salazar's intelligent performance, "who basks gloriously in one of those rare roles that allows an actress of 'a certain age' to seem funny, sexy, vital and entirely unafraid to show a few wrinkles."⁶

A Silent Love premiered in the Dramatic Feature, World Cinema section of the Sundance Film Festival, where it was received very well, and garnered a very positive *Variety* review from Foundas (7 March, 2004). It received its Mexican premiere at the Guadalajara International Film Festival (25 March, 2004), and, later in the year Hidalgo and Robles won Best Screenplay awards at the Brooklyn International Film Festival and the Miami Latin Film Festival, where Salazar also received a mention as Best Supporting Actress. Unfortunately, because the film had its North American premiere elsewhere, it didn't screen at either of the major international film festivals in Montreal or Toronto, but in October 2004 it did receive a limited release in Quebec/Canada and the U.S., where it received numerous positive reviews from New York and Los Angeles film critics. Most surprisingly perhaps, in 2005, *A Silent Love* received Genie nominations for Best Screenplay and Salazar's performance (as Best Supporting Actress) from the Canadian Film Academy (the industry's Oscar equivalents).

⁴ Bruno Corneiller, «Quiet Revolutions and Silent Loves,» *Nouvelles vues* sur le cinéma québécois, no. 3 (Printemps 2005). http://cinema-quebeois.net/edition3/pdf/Quiet_Revolutions&Silent_Loves_2.pdf

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Scott Foundas, *A Silent Love*, review, *Variety* (7 March, 2004). <http://variety.com/2004/film/reviews/a-silent-love-1200534670/>

The success of *A Silent Love* enabled Atopia to produce (four) and distribute (nine) more feature films over the next three years, including Hidalgo and Robles' second fiction feature, *Imitation* in 2007, and two successful French-language films, Noël Mitrani's *Sur la trace d'Igor Rizzi* and Sophie Desraspe's *Rechercher Victor Pellerin* (both 2006). Spinning off from the story of their first feature, *Imitation* again stars Bauche as Teresa, a Mexican woman who travels to Montreal looking for her husband, Angel (Conrad Pla), after he had, apparently deserted her. She meets a grocery store worker, Fenton (Jesse Aaron Dwyre), who falls in love with Teresa and convinces her to let him help her find Angel, whom she calls her "brother." Fenton and Teresa criss-cross Latino Montreal, persuading a series of characters to reveal clues that will finally lead them to Angel. Teresa keeps more than one secret of her Mexican past from Fenton, involving a \$25,000 shipment of strawberries, which became spoiled. She also steals Fenton's car, although this doesn't delimit his devotion. There are comic and ironic moments in *A Silent Love*, that according to Hidalgo were appreciated more by Spanish- than English-speaking audiences, and *Imitation* has more of these, especially involving the secondary characters the searching couple meet. Indeed, *Imitation* is more episodic and ambiguous in its narrative structure, which probably limited its theatrical success. It was shown in a couple of U.S. film festivals and received a limited release in Canada, but only two reviews, both Canadian remain linked by *Rotten Tomatoes*, the most extensive English-language film review website.⁷

Imitation's lack of exposure is very unfortunate because, as a film, it was actually more interesting than *A Silent Love*. A pattern was also set for Hidalgo's following projects and for Maeder's distribution efforts. Hidalgo made a very low budget, personal feature documentary, *New Tricks* (2009) for his own production company, Another City, which was distributed by Atopia, but by the time he got to make his third fiction feature, *L'incrédule* in 2010, the DVD market was beginning to collapse while Maeder was seeking to expand Atopia's distribution arm. Online distribution was, and still is too unstable to help finance theatrical runs for lower budget films, so Maeder was unable to

⁷ <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/imitation/>

promote *L'incrédule*, Hidalgo's most personal, most experimental and, arguably his best film, to appropriate festivals and theatres. Distribution in general is a struggle for independent filmmakers, and the plight of *L'incrédule* is surely not an isolated case of an excellent, innovative work remaining virtually unknown to the world of film criticism.

Co-produced by Hidalgo and Patricia Diaz for his own company, Another City, *L'incrédule* (The Skeptic), which roughly translates into English as "The Incredulous One," was made almost entirely in Spanish, with Montreal-based Latin American immigrant (and refugee) actors playing almost all of the roles.⁸ Hidalgo had written the script a year before, and his wife Paulina Robles encouraged him to make it even though they had no funding in place. They managed to make the film on a miniscule budget, in part by having some access to Concordia University film equipment, and by employing a crew consisting of some current and former students, including Glauco Bermudéz (cinematography), Diego Rivera Kohn (editing), and Hidalgo's teaching colleague Michael Yaroshevsky (associate producer). Somehow they were able to build a number of interior sets for *L'incrédule*, designed by Amy Keith. After the shooting phase, they were finally able to get post-production money from SODEC and were able to finish the film in 2011, although it didn't get a limited release until August 2012.

Tomás (Marcelo Arroyo) and Sofía (Marcela Pizarro) are visited in their home by a financial analyst, Mariano (Claudio Cáceres). Mariano's wife Luisa (Francesca Bárcenas) is nearby, so the couple invites her to come in, also. All four of these, the film's principal characters, were born in Latin America, and we learn that Tomás was the earliest to arrive in Canada, when his parents fled political strife in the 1970s. He is probably Chilean and grew up in Montreal, and has adapted well to Canadian life, speaking French fluently. Sofía is a photographer and her husband secured them a contract to produce a series of photographs of telephone booths. Mariano used to be an engineer, but presumably couldn't practice (or get a job in his field) in Quebec, while Luisa,

⁸ With the exception of Marcelo Arroyo, who is of "Chilean descent," and was, presumably born in Canada

a proud teacher had just been fired for the second time by a nursery school. They are recent immigrants, and she seems strongly affected by feelings of alienation. Nonetheless she adopts a positive attitude and suggests that they all go into the business of *charuflauta*, a mysterious apparently curative procedure for melancholic loneliness. When the team visits their first clients, Jaime and Yolanda Perez (Léo Arguello and Luz Tercero), it becomes apparent that for the Perez couple a *charuflauta* is some kind of bug that has presumably infested their kitchen cupboards. But we never see any bugs, and while the meaning of *charuflauta* remains ambiguous, the concept has managed to bring even more Latin American immigrants together. The scene ends with a party where the Perez children dance to a Cumbia record. In addition, Tomás, who all along had made sarcastic remarks about the words and actions of the expanding group, finally drops his guard and becomes warm and friendly. Having insisted on always filming empty phone booths, Tomás seems happy in the film's final scene to find two strangers enter the frame of his camera, which is set up to photograph the last telephone booth in the series.

Although the action of *L'incrédule* is limited to house (and the potential *charuflauta* office) interiors and telephone booth/landscape exteriors on the outskirts of the Montreal suburbs, the care with which they have been chosen and framed is exquisite. Strikingly, for a film with minimal action and sparse decor, Hidalgo and Bermudéz chose to shoot with a widescreen aspect ratio. Often, in interior scenes, the film camera is facing the wall, perpendicularly and there are no reverse angle shots. Normally one would understand this strategy to be “theatrical,” except that the distance of the camera to the human subject varies, and sometimes there is no foreground space visible, only actor-occupied mid-ground, and a very plain wall behind, with a single hanging poster, painting, photograph, or other artwork. On the one hand, such framing and composition is reminiscent of Jean-Luc Godard/Raul Coutard's reflexive, modernist (or “post-modernist”) films of the mid- to late-1960s—e.g., *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* (1968)—where the strangeness of the image suggests alienation and fragmentation. On the other hand we are reminded of Sofía and Tomás' work as photographers. Indeed in almost every case where they are practicing their métier, we do get shots of the tripod-mounted still camera pointing directly at the

film camera as perfectly reverse-angled views from the perspective of the phone booth, as subject. There is always time for us to think about the composition of the frame and the position of the film camera, so that we realize how different the interior and exterior scenes look and feel, while also understanding how odd both visual strategies are. I am persuaded that the filmmakers must have had access to a portable telephone booth, since it is hard to believe that such isolated locations, seemingly far from any habitation, would have been chosen by a telephone company, knowing that there would rarely ever be a paying customer in the vicinity. (This has been confirmed by Hidalgo.) Remarkably, the choice of framing and camera distance for the interior scenes is appropriate for showing the growing bonds between people, so that in the last communal scene, inside the Perez's living room, the camera is at a long distance, enabling all six adults and the two Perez children to be shown together. The intimacy of the human subjects that culminates in this scene is suggested as much by the cinematography as by their actions.

As with all of Hidalgo's films, there is a light, humorous strain running throughout *L'incrédule*, especially in relation to the mysterious nature of *charuflauta*. Mood, theme, and character development are more important than the plot, per se, and Hidalgo, with his background in Latino theatre, and Robles with her writing skills and command of the Spanish language worked in close collaboration with the actors to create their performances and fine tune the dialogue. In fact, *L'incrédule* is a remarkable achievement: a film that successfully combines all-around collaboration with a coherent, organic visual style. Perhaps it is not surprising that this film was not a box-office or critical success in its home province of Quebec. Despite its French main title, and fully sub-titled release copy, there are only a few words in French—most notably, Tomás' phone call with his boss—and most of the characters complain about how they are treated as foreigners in Montreal. Of course, the point here was not just to address the situation of Latin American immigrants, being stuck in a "middle-ground" trying to adapt to Quebec culture, but to recognize the problems faced by newly arrived immigrants anywhere in the world. Hidalgo and Robles have clearly brought their own personal experiences to their films, but through a great deal of abstraction—we never see the city of Montreal,

or even, recognizable suburban areas; the characters talk a lot, maintaining their native language, but rarely discuss their backgrounds or concrete experiences—the social contexts become universalized.

In their other films, they have expressed very clearly the extreme diversity of the ethnic, racial and linguistic components of cosmopolitan Montreal, and as they have become more innovative and ambiguous in their narrative and stylistic approaches, so they have become less obvious in expressing Quebec or Canadian societal issues. Indeed, it is unfortunate that neither *Imitation* nor *L'incrédule* were showcased at events such as the independent film festivals of Rotterdam (International Film Festival Rotterdam, IFFR) or Buenos Aires (Festival Internacional de Cine Independiente, BAFICI), where they may well have been admired for their originality/creativity. As it is, Hidalgo's fine first feature, *A Silent Love*, which is much more mainstream and (perhaps, significantly), more socially relevant than his subsequent work, remains his only well-known film. Perhaps things will change with his latest effort, *La concierge*, which received its world premiere at the annual exhibition of Quebec-made films, Les Rendez-vous du Cinéma Québécois in late-February 2015, and is due to be released in April by Atopia in a (mainly) French-language version. However the synopsis indicates that it is a very episodic work. "A concierge [Hidalgo, himself] shows a small apartment to a series of visitors: a woman recently divorced, a widower, an immigrant artist, a youth striking out on her own..." the synopsis also reads as if *La concierge* is both ambiguous and, like *L'incrédule*, visually concerned with relationships between personages and architecture: "Each visitor feels an immediate attachment to the place, and appeals to the concierge to grant them the tenancy..."⁹

⁹ <http://www.anothercity.ca/synopsis/>

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