

FICUNAM 2015

An interview with Alejo Moguillansky, co-director of *The Gold Bug*

By David Walsh
20 March 2015

I spoke to Alejo Moguillansky, the co-director of *The Gold Bug* in Mexico City.

David Walsh: Can you explain a little about your background?

Alejo Moguillansky: I'm from Buenos Aires, and I studied filmmaking at the Universidad del Cine in Buenos Aires, where most of my generation of filmmakers comes from, with lots of exceptions of course. I graduated in 2001. I shot my first film in 35mm, it's entitled *The Woman Prisoner* [*La Prisonera*, 2005]. I was very concerned with [Michelangelo] Antonioni and [Robert] Bresson at the time.

DW: These are not the influences that would immediately come to my mind in regard to your present film.

AM: That first film is very mysterious, obscure. It's very distant. It's clearly different from my most recent films. At the same time, I can say about *La Prisonera* it's also clearly the movement from reality to fiction. The starting point was always reality. In that particular case, I'd say it's a matter of finding fiction in the relationship between the characters and the landscape, no matter whether it's a metropolis like Buenos Aires or a city by the sea during winter. Anyway, it's a very dark film.

DW: Your name is Polish?

AM: Yes. Ukraine, Poland. My father's family came to Argentina during the first Jewish immigration at the beginning of the 20th century. My great-grandfather was a Jewish gaucho. Yes, Abraham Moguillansky was a Jewish cowboy. He used to cross the Andes mountains with cows and horses, and such. My mother's family came as part of the immigration in the 1930s, escaping anti-Semitism in Poland. They were

farmers in Poland. The spelling of the name is a mistake made by immigration officials.

DW: How did *The Gold Bug* get made?

AM: It's unusual, because our production company, El Pampero Cine, doesn't get any national subsidies, no money from the Film Institute in Argentina, for example. Somehow we manage to produce films. And the problem is always the same, we don't make a penny from the films. The financing is different each time. It's always difficult, but that is not unusual, this happens for many filmmakers. We manage to produce a lot of films, whether that's good or bad. The films are being shown at film festivals, and the alternative cinemas in Buenos Aires and Argentina.

At the same time, you might say it's impossible to shoot one film a year if you're under the bureaucracy of the official subsidies coming from the National Institute. Let's be frank: Independent films, cinephilia, or even small films with brave intentions are not part of the agenda of the Film Institute in Argentina at present.

In any case, we persevere ...

DW: What's the origin of the idea for this particular film?

AM: I was trying to get money for another film, which is titled *The Submarine War*, which has not been shot yet. I was in the absurd situation of "pitching" the film [to potential investors], which is the only time I've done that. I hope it will be the last time. You become like a car salesman.

I was pitching the idea to Europeans, for the most part. The independent Argentine films are often supported by various European funds. CPH Docs in Copenhagen invited me to participate in this strange project, co-directing a film. The original idea was a

Scandinavian director with a non-European director. I accepted the proposal, it's not often that someone comes along and gives you money for a film. They chose as the co-director Fia-Stina Sandlund. Then I realized why they paired us together. Fia is more of a contemporary artist, and associated with feminist activism.

DW: The film satirizes all that. Is she aware of that?

AM: She likes the film. The situation was clear to me. There was this contemporary artist, living in New York, with money from the Swedish film institute. She has done films that are shown in theaters, but also museums. We didn't understand each other all that well. I'm a cinephile, immersed in film. She uses film as another language.

Fia is obsessed with Victoria Benedictsson [1850-1888], a Swedish author who committed suicide. Victoria was a sort of inspiration for Strindberg's *Miss Julie*. Fia has made a trilogy of films about her.

So we decided to make a film about this absurd situation. A Scandinavian feminist contemporary artist and a Latin American director ... this was more interesting than anything else we could come up with. She was involved in the preparation of the film. I wrote a treatment.

However, Fia was a character in the treatment and she told me she was not happy being on the screen, that she was paranoid about this. I got angry at this point. Then I realized that in her own films she's never in the image. We hear her, but don't see her. I never found out whether it's paranoia or some kind of dogma she has about it. Anyway, this is the reason she is only a telephone character, we only hear her voice.

So, we have this group of Latin American "pirates," prepared to do anything we have to do to shoot a film, on the one side, and this sort of European political correctness, on the other side. This happened in the production of the film and it is the subject of the film. We make some jokes about this, but it's based in truth.

DW: There's something comforting about the presence of Edgar Allan Poe and Robert Louis Stevenson.

AM: Perhaps this has something to do with childhood. They're wonderful storytellers.

DW: There is a naïveté, an innocence. I enjoyed this film. I see a lot of dreary films, where individuals take twenty minutes to walk down a corridor, this is

considered innovative, this is the avant-garde. I don't think life is like this. Your film is more lifelike. The way people actually are.

AM: It's strange. Today the critics perhaps more than the filmmakers are afraid of humor. I don't know why.

DW: It's brave today to make fun of feminism. We are not admirers of identity, gender politics. On the other hand, the two women characters are like real women, lively, subversive and difficult.

AM: I think this film laughs at itself. I would like to do that.

DW: If you put the humor aside for a moment, there is a serious logic. Here are the Latin Americans, somewhat oppressed, fighting amongst themselves, and the Europeans or Americans end up stealing everything.

AM: Yes, there is a logic there. That's the way it is. It's the truth of the situation. Fia is the owner of 51 percent of the film. I'm the owner of 49 percent of the film. Why? Because she's European. This is not part of the story of the film! This is the truth. Almost everything in the film—except of course the treasure—is true. That is my wife, that is my daughter, those are my friends, that is my production house. That is my car. I don't want the film to be perceived as ironic, or ridiculous. It's made with a sense of humor, but also melancholy. At the heart of it is the process of making a film with friends.

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