

RIBBON OF CINEMA: MOEBIUS

By Nathaniel Moss

"SHE HAD BEEN working on the script for a year, and at the end of the year some guy comes up to her and says, 'This thing is absolutely crazy. It's so stupid. It's philosophy and science fiction. It's nothing. It's a mix of bullshit.'" Gustavo Mosquera describes the conversation as if it happened yesterday, though it was actually almost three years ago. The bearded 37-year-old filmmaker from Argentina is defending one of the students who labored to bring his latest picture to life. "She came to me and said, 'I don't know what to do.' And I said, 'Carry on. Don't suffer. Don't listen to that anymore. Follow me.' You know I sounded like Jesus. 'Trust me. Trust me. It will be great. But we need to go to the end, because if you don't go to the end you will have nothing to show.'"

No one understands the meaning of those words better than Gustavo Mosquera. *Moebius*, his second feature film, is the very model of pluck and perseverance. Produced on a shoestring budget with the assistance of another professor and 45 students in a graduate workshop at the Universidad del Cine in Buenos Aires, the story owes more to the literary and metaphysical ideas of Jorge Luis Borges and M.C. Escher than to traditional notions of Hollywood storytelling. Less than a year after its release, the film has appeared at festivals around the world, won awards for its cinematography and sound, attracted the interest of American distributors, and been hailed a triumph by international film critics.

So why, at the moment of his greatest personal and professional success, has Mosquera packed his bags and moved to California? The cynical answer might have something to do with Willie Sutton's old line about robbing banks: it's where the money is. But there's a deeper reason. Despite his proven ability, Mosquera remains curiously underappreciated in Argentina, where *Moebius* has been tagged by many as a "student film." It's unfortunate. If Gustavo Mosquera is a gifted teacher – and he surely is that – he is an even more gifted director. The picture boasts finely nuanced performances and out-

standing technical work. Indeed, it is not hard to see why fellow countryman Luis Puenzo, director of the Oscar-winning *The Official Story*, calls Mosquera the best filmmaker of his generation in Argentina. His relative obscurity reflects the current malaise of the movie industry there. Had it been possible to produce *Moebius* independently, Mosquera would never have turned to his students. As it is, he and his young crew have created a remarkable film that deserves a wide audience.

The picture begins in the nerve center of a fictional labyrinthine subway system in Buenos Aires. Signal lights mysteriously trip. The eerie Doppler of an invisible train approaches out of nowhere, then fades. In time we learn that a subway train with over thirty passengers has disappeared. To find it, the Director of the transit system, Marcos Blasi (Roberto Carnaghi), enlists the help of a young topologist named Daniel Pratt (Guillermo Angelelli), whose architectural firm designed the complex network of subway lines. Pratt's investigation leads him to the apartment of Hugo Mistein (Jorge Petraglia), his former mathematics professor. Finding the door locked and Mistein not at home, Pratt befriends a young girl, Abril (Annabella Levy), whose mother keeps a key to the apartment. She lets him in, whereupon he finds the original plans to a peripheral line that connects the many branches of the Buenos Aires subway system.

Eventually Pratt comes to the conclusion that the closed subway network, with its infinite connections, has begun to operate like a Moebius strip, the curious inverted loop first identified by German mathematician August Moebius. The missing train, #86, has "disappeared" into another dimension, running at an infinite speed on an endless loop. Of course this explanation does not sit well with Blasi and the other disbelieving bureaucrats. A train disappeared? How can this be? It's not possible. "And yet," replies Pratt, "it has happened." A suspenseful science fiction drama, the film doubles as a magical-realist metaphor for the "disappeared" persons

of Argentina's long, dark military era.

The film ends dramatically with Daniel Pratt unwittingly stepping on board Train 86. Noting the date on a passenger's newspaper – four days previous – Pratt realizes his predicament. As the train gathers momentum he moves from one car to the next, taking in the blank faces of the unknowing passengers. Finally, inevitably, he confronts his old



teacher, Professor Mistein, alone at the throttle. Mistein explains that the train is now traveling at "the speed of thought" when it suddenly emerges from a tunnel into a station in a burst of light and energy. In this climactic moment, the film shifts wondrously from dizzying fast-mo to sensual slow-mo. As each of the commuters – awaiting the next train on the platform – sits, stands or walks alone, lost in thought, Train 86 passes through unnoticed. The moment is sublime, a virtuosic feat of pure cinema, enriched by the deeply felt score by Mariano Nuñez West.

In developing the story, Mosquera worked with four student screenwriters in his graduate workshop, along with executive producer Maria Angeles Mira, another teacher at the university. The students read philosophers whose work resonated with the themes in the film. "We thought of Einstein, too," Mosquera adds. "He says that if you are traveling at an infinite speed you can see a fixed point, even though from that point you

could not be seen." As Train 86 passes along the subway platform at the end of the film, only the young girl Abril sees Pratt. Says Mosquera, "She's following the train. She's looking inside the train and the guy inside is looking at her. It's a connection. And the professor is talking about this connection, but not only in terms of the girl. The professor is also

footage, transferred to video, was projected at normal speed on screens set up on the track beside the subway. The resulting illusion is marvelous: the train appears to fly along the tracks, deep into the tunnels. In fact, the filmmakers rarely left the station.

Mosquera honed his directing skills at the Centro de Experimentación y Realización Cinematográfica (CERC) in the early Eighties. He was one of three students in a class of 25 (Mira was another) chosen to direct a thesis film. After graduating from CERC in 1986, Mosquera directed his first feature, *Times to Come*. Based on a true story, it follows an innocent bystander accidentally shot by a policeman during a demonstration. Mosquera will explore this theme further in his next film, *Pargue Chas*, adapted from a comic-book series by Argentinean writer Ricardo Barreiro, who was tortured during the dictatorship. Barreiro's comics cleverly blend politics and science fiction. Mosquera notes that "one chapter deals with a car that kills people. It learned to kill because it was a car used by the military."

Another comic Mosquera hopes to adapt for film is *The Eternaut*, by Hector Oesterheld, also a victim of the Dirty War. In the story, poisonous green snow begins falling in Buenos Aires one day. Oesterheld's comic, written in the early Sixties, appears on the surface to be a straightforward metaphor for nuclear winter. Actually, though the story was inspired by the Cold War, it is about an alien invasion. "They choose Buenos Aires," says Mosquera, "because it's in this fucking country where nobody will notice. The people are involved in politics and they don't understand anything. Can you imagine Argentines trying to stop an extraterrestrial attack?"

Mosquera speaks with pride of his students' accomplishments, of the sound and cinematography awards won by Martín Arinaschi and Abel Penalba, respectively, at the International Festival of New Latin American cinema in Havana. And yet when the subject of doing another film with students comes up, he is less sanguine. *Moebius* took over three years to complete, during which time he received no money beyond his teacher's salary, roughly \$300 a week. The \$250,000 budget from the university covered film stock, materials, and sound, leaving little for post-production. During the editing, Mira laid out funds from her own pocket. The

irony, she says, is that "I don't believe that other producers would have invested a single dollar in this film."

In the coda to *Moebius*, Train 86 "reappears" at a Metro platform, but without any of the passengers on board. A bureaucrat from the Mayor's office tells Blasi smugly, "Take it to the garage and let's forget the whole thing. Nothing happened here." After the Mayor's representative leaves, Blasi finds Daniel Pratt's notebook on the floor of the train. He reads Pratt's last words: "When I got to the 86 train and met my old teacher, tired of repeating always the same story, tired of fighting and being ignored, I felt he was entrusting me with his time. It's easy to understand why I choose to follow his steps, instead of uselessly trying to explain to a bunch of fools something they don't understand. Anyway, the old man was right. We live in a world where nobody listens."

It is a world Mosquera knows only too well: "Every time I go to the National Film Board, or to producers, they don't want to hear me. And then when I finish a film, the people say, 'Oh, that's really good.'" This year at Argentina's largest festival in Mar del Plata, *Moebius* was the only Argentinean film for which additional screenings had to be scheduled because of audience demand. And yet it was shown out of competition. "I will tell you something very important," says Mosquera finally. "As I was writing the script for *Moebius* with the students, and as we shot the film, I began to realize that I am Daniel Pratt. And now the people in Argentina ask, 'Where is Gustavo Mosquera? He has disappeared.'"

Back in Buenos Aires, Luis Puenzo looks at Mosquera's decision practically: "I think somehow that it's a shame that Gustavo has to go to the United States to further his career. But on the other hand I think that he deserves to find his space. He is a very talented guy." Whatever success or failure he finds as an expatriate filmmaker, Mosquera has already left an indelible mark in the Argentine cinema. "Neither men nor time disappears without leaving traces," Mistein tells Pratt at the end of *Moebius*. "This is the thing that I really think," says Mosquera. "I am leaving now from my country, but I am sure the people who saw *Moebius* will remember me. It's my trace." ☾

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Guillermo Angelli
with director (right)
Gustavo Mosquera

talking about the big connection between the people and 'missing people.'"

These "missing people" are the civilians killed during the "Dirty War," the years of military dictatorship in Argentina from 1976 to 1982. Under the regimes of Videla, Viola, and Galtieri, some 30,000 political opponents were killed, imprisoned, or "disappeared." When Raul Alfonsín was elected president in 1983, hundreds of military personnel were put on trial, leading to the conviction of numerous former junta members. But the prosecutions, hailed by the civilian electorate, were not enough to protect Alfonsín from an economic crisis in the late Eighties. The next (and current) president, Carlos Menem, pardoned many of the convicted military officers for their human rights violations, and the crimes of the Dirty War remain a crack in the firmament of Argentinean civil life.

TO SAVE MONEY on his film, Mosquera resorted to a variety of technical innovations. One of the most interesting was the use of rear-screen projection for certain shots on board Train 86. Since one of the conceits of the film is that the train approaches an infinite speed, these shots required that the view out of the subway windows reflect that speed. The actual subway train could barely muster 25 kilometers per hour. From a moving train, Mosquera and his students slowed down the camera and shot images of the subway tunnel walls. The resulting