

WHAT THE EYE DOESN'T SEE

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Translated by Kate Richardson

“You want to make ten thousand bucks?” I said to Leobardo as I lit a cigarette, exhaling slowly, giving him time to weigh the offer. I visualized a close-up of his puzzled stare, now even more perplexed than when I invited him to sit down and offered to pay for his drinks.

“I don’t screw fags,” he declared. ‘Indignant,’ as the parenthetical notation in the script would have put it, followed by ‘he gets up and leaves.’ But instead he just sat there with his tough guy face, drinking his beer, which undermined the credibility of his line.

“Me neither,” I said.

“Cheers to that,” he toasted.

I smiled, satisfied with the effectiveness of my improvised camaraderie. I raised my margarita, mentally noting that in cantinas it’s always better to drink beer so that nobody mistakes refined taste for fagginess. I ordered the last round,

emphasizing last. I had a hunch that the possibility of being cut off from the alcohol supply would at least pique his financial curiosity. Leobardo tried to take increasingly smaller sips, but his ethylic restraint diminished rapidly.

“So what do I have to do?” he finally asked, ‘with resignation.’

“I’m looking for actors for a movie and you fit the type.”

Incredulity spread across his bloated face, but he reined it in to talk business.

“Dang...ten thousand bucks?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Is it going to come out in theaters?”

“No, it’s a different type of movie.”

“If this is a kiddie porn thing, I’m out.”

But something in his voice made me certain: at this point he’d be willing to do anything.

“No, it’s nothing bad,” I assured him.

“Well...ten thousand bucks.” He savored the amount for a minute, perhaps calculating its value in drinks.

During the silence I imagined a scene in which Leobardo knocked back beers in fast motion, the empty bottles accumulating around him. I liked the image, even though it was a tired cliché. He said yes before even asking what the plot was. We agreed to meet the next day in the same cantina. I would bring the script so that he could read it on the way to the studio. It wasn’t a difficult role, I said, and in fact it wasn’t.

The four principal actors were all portside bar recruits. It was necessary that they be anonymous because the intention was to make the tape look authentic. Before proposing anything I managed to find out a little bit about their lives. It was easy. Drunks always appreciate a good listener. I looked for a certain type: lonely, hardened alcoholics. Nobody drinks alone unless they have a miserable life, and a miserable man is capable of accepting any proposal.

In less than ten days I had the whole cast: an unemployed bricklayer who had thrown out his back, making him incapable of carrying cement blocks; a fugitive school teacher who'd lost his job after impregnating a student; a fisherman who customarily drank away his earnings during hurricane season; and Leobardo, a guy who drank by pure vocation, a fierce critic of TV movies, which he classified as unrealistic visual trash, and newsstand detective literature, which he considered the only genre capable of expressing the utter cravenness of man. They were all alone for more or less the same reason: nobody could stand them.

"It's fairly simple," I told them once all four men were assembled and staring into the studio lights like scared rabbits. "You all are part of the Los Calvos gang. You're members of the Sinaloa Cartel and you've been detained by the Tactical Unit of Special Operations of the Preventative Police Force of Acapulco. You're here to give statements about the recent murders. You should look scared, but at the same time determined to tell the truth. Don't let the lights and the camera make you nervous. We're going to rehearse. You'll get used to it."

"Do I really have to wear this red shirt?" asked the teacher. "It makes me look like a homo."

“It’s a cinematographic technique that draws attention to an important character,” I clarified, “You’ll notice that you have the most lines, and what you say is key to understanding the plot.”

“Don’t even bother explaining anything to that idiot. He doesn’t understand a damn thing about art,” Marcelo replied from the back of the studio as he scratched his head with the barrel of his gun. “He’s paid to do what he’s told.”

“Are they actors too?” Leobardo asked.

“Yeah, them too.”

“And some of the best,” added Marcelo. “I’m the head of the Tactical Unit, and while y’all are only in this scene, I’m in the whole movie.”

He paused for dramatic effect. My ersatz barroom assassins gaped at him, as if trying to match up his face with a still from a Mexican B-movie. If I hadn’t known otherwise, I myself would have easily confused him with one of those second-rate actors who play the villains in Almada brothers movies.

“But we’re actually undercover Zetas,” he continued in a confidential tone, “the armed wing of the Gulf Cartel, as you know. And what this is all about is making a video that blames the other gang for everything that’s been happening so that we can use the police to shoot them at close range.”

“That doesn’t concern you guys. Let’s start rehearsal,” I intervened. If given the chance, he was liable to brag all night about narco conflicts, of which he believed himself to know more than God in heaven.

“We lost him,” said the teacher, moving his index finger in a circular motion around his temple.

Not even I could stop myself from laughing.

“Inside joke,” said Leobardo when Marcelo asked what the fuck was so funny.

I asked my four actors to sit in front of a wall covered in brown butcher paper and to put their hands behind them as if they were tied behind their backs. First the construction worker in a white shirt, then the teacher in red, after him the tanned shirtless fisherman, and finally Leobardo wearing a light grey t-shirt.

The camera focused the four characters in a full shot; I yelled “Action!” and the teacher, immersed in his role, began to say that they were responsible for the shootings behind the convention center, that it was all part of a Sinaloa Cartel plan to eliminate the competition of minority gangs in the port city and retain full control of the plaza. It would have been pretty convincing if it weren’t for the damn bricklayer, who couldn’t stop giggling each time he looked at the camera. We had to repeat the scene several times, never managing to get through it without laughter.

“Shut up, asshole. You’re ruining the movie,” yelled Marcelo.

“It’s just rehearsal,” said the bricklayer by way of apology, and proceeded to guffaw heartily, which pissed off Marcelo even more.

To distract them, I asked for the makeup artists. For having been captured in a shootout they were too clean. I needed them bruised, and the fisherman, who was to appear shirtless, needed a bleeding wound in his side. That is, if the ‘producer’ wanted it to be really convincing.

“We don’t have the budget for that bullshit; we’re gonna have to do the makeup another way,” declared Marcelo.

With a gesture to his men they began to beat the supposed narcos, and shot the fisherman in his left side.

“Is that OK? Or do you want it on the other side?” Marcelo asked me.

“There is perfect,” I said without looking at the wound, as if that was enough to ignore what was happening.

They didn’t hit the teacher as much for fear of limiting his ability to deliver lines. Leobardo was the only one who put up a fight. Two men grabbed him so that Marcelo could deliver the blows. With my back turned to them, I heard the screams, the insults, and I heard Marcelo saying between each punch that it was necessary to make the scene realistic. I turned around to confirm that Leobardo had kicked him in the balls.

“If it were a fight between two gangs, y’all would also have to look scraped up!” he yelled, trying to escape.

The Tactical Unit drew their pistols, sat the four men down by force, and tied their hands behind their backs, this time for real.

“There’s your makeup. Speak up if you want more.”

“I don’t want to be in this movie anymore,” squealed the boatman, doubling over in pain; he tried to stand up, but they returned him to his seat with a pistol whip.

“This movie *will* come out,” fumed Marcelo, and he ordered me to continue with filming. “And this take better be fucking amazing if y’all don’t want to leave here with a bullet wound.”

When I called “Action!” for the thirteenth time of the night, the bricklayer began to cry. The teacher said his lines with such conviction, frustration, and exhaustion that not even Sean Penn could have done it better. The bruised faces of the others, their expressions of silent defeat, were truly a work of art.

I yelled “Cut!” and was about to turn off the camera when one of the guys from the Tactical Unit stopped me.

“You’re in the frame,” I said to Marcelo as he slowly approached Leobardo.

“Make it so you don’t see me.”

I tightened the shot. Marcelo put his pistol up to Leobardo’s temple. He didn’t see him; he looked at the camera. He looked at me.

The shot rang out and his left eye gradually closed as blood oozed from his ear and mouth, but his right eye stayed open, looking at me. He didn’t scream, perhaps because he didn’t have time or because, deep down, he had hoped that the bullets were fake.

The other three shrieked and closed their eyes before being shot, so in the end it was only Leobardo’s right eye that stared at me, as if protesting the indecency of having deprived him of the enormous number of beers that he could have bought with those ten thousand pesos that I had promised.

I shut off the camera. Marcelo said that the ending he had proposed was better, and that with his ‘special effects’ nobody would doubt the authenticity of the tape. He also asked that I send him a copy of the final images because he wanted keep them as a memento. The Zetas cleared out the bodies and left me in the edit bay with the videotape.

In these cases it's best to present a long uninterrupted take so that it doesn't look edited. The trick is deciding where it starts and where it ends. No fade-ins, open directly on the scene, just at the moment when the teacher—that is, the head of the Los Calvos gang—accepts responsibility for the crimes; then, a cut to eliminate the part where you hear my voice. The scene transitions with a zoom in on the fourth man in the row. A hand enters the frame and fires. Leobardo's right eye looks at me from the screen.

“Hardboiled and realistic,” I think to myself, “he would have liked it, without a doubt.” I make a promise: when they pay me—after I make the copies and send them to national TV—I'm going to buy ten thousand pesos worth of beer and drink all of it on his behalf.
