



Casa Roshell

Camila José Donoso

Producer Juan Pablo Bastarrachea, Maximiliano Cruz, Sandra Gómez, Garbiñe Ortega. **Production companies** Tonalá Lab (Mexiko-Stadt, Mexico), Interior XIII (Mexiko-Stadt, Mexico). **Written and directed by** Camila José Donoso. **Director of photography** Pablo Rojo. **Editor** Camila José Donoso. **Sound design** Mauricio Flores. **Sound** Isolé Valadez. **With** Roshell Terranova, Liliana Alba, Lia García, Diego Alberico, Cristian Aravena.

Colour. 71 min. Spanish.

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You'd never know this is your home away from home. The surveillance camera outside shows a drab reception area and an unremarkable street in Mexico City; inside, the lights flash, but the tables are empty. Yet preparations are soon underway and fixed categories cease to apply: stubble is removed, make-up applied and strands of hair are teased into place; the camera is trained not on the men themselves, but what they see in the mirror. There's time for a lesson before the festivities get going, to practise walking, consider the letters of the alphabet, think about what sort of girl to be. Music plays, drinks are served and the last boundaries are suspended: those between man and woman, gay, straight and bi, past and present, reality and fiction. The people chatting at the tables or waiting before the darkroom are shot to resemble characters from a film, impossibly glamorous, which doesn't mean their stories aren't true. Whenever film stock replaces the digital images, it's like a symbol for the memories Casa Roshell contains, the spectres of all those who came here and no longer felt alone. No matter how small the utopia, the world outside can still catch up.

James Lattimer

A place of transformation

In 2014, I lived in Mexico for a while due to the release of my first feature film, *Naomi Campbell*. During the screenings of the film, which stars a transsexual woman, I met important trans activists; one of them took me to a club and introduced me to Roshell Terranova and her house of transformation, the place where this project was born, and where I met the people who star in this film. *Casa Roshell* is very intimate; it was filmed with a reduced crew made up of friends who accompanied me during the research process, where I collected hours of audio material from inside the club that inspired and created dialogues in the film. It is important to explain the bond that I had with Roshell, Liliana, Lia, Paula Jessy, and other girls of the house, since the work and creation are completely tied up to my relationship with them. Beyond capturing a theme (transsexuality, for example) I wanted to capture the experience of being at the club for one night, with the intimacy and the things that happen. In fact, the research process was much longer than the filming itself. It was very important for me not to fall into conventions or clichés and to explore our existence inside this trans space created by Roshell.

Camila José Donoso

"I am interested in trans topics because of that freedom that belongs to them"

How was your first encounter with this place and its protagonists?

Camila José Donoso: I was presenting *Naomi Campbell* and conducting a workshop called *Transficciones* in Mexico City. At that time, I was invited to Club Roshell, where the film is set, by a trans friend. It's a very open place, but at the same time you need an invitation. It's a private club mainly for men who lead an apparently straight life. Their desire to cross-dress is repressed and Roshell is the only place where they can do drag. It's a familiar place that could seem like your grandmother's house from the street. And then when I walked in, I found this very Mexican thing of a very kind place, where you feel comfortable, at home. That's the main thing allowing these straight men to have the confidence to dare to cross-dress there. Roshell (the owner) teaches them how to feel and be treated as women. In the beginning I started going because I loved the place in its austerity and simplicity. The people who go there are grown-ups; it's not the drag of RuPaul and YouTube tutorials. It's cross-dressing that's less worried about success, because it's done by men who are sixty years old, and that fascinated me.

What was your approach during that research period?

I developed the film over six months thanks to a residency grant for living in Mexico. I got along very well with the girls of the club right from that first encounter. So when I came back from Chile, with the help of that residency, that confidence increased. But I realised I was interrupting certain conversations, since I was a foreigner and a lot of attention was paid to me, therefore they weren't following a 'normal' club day. So Lili and Roshell started making audio recordings for me with their mobile phones, which are part of the finished film. Because of the film, many of the girls have come out. Their gender expression in the film made them stop caring if their family knew about it. That level of trust was developed throughout those six months of research.

Can you further explain how you wrote the script for Casa Roshell?

I had a close collaborator named Lia, who is a very close friend and is my age. I gave her an audio recorder, like the ones press reporters have, that she stuck in her bra. I had a lot of confidence in her giving me a different perspective from what Roshell and Lili did.

When Club Roshell was closed, I spent the days listening to these audio recordings and transcribing the hours that seemed interesting for me. I also did this with the audio recordings from Lili and Roshell's telephones, who kept them recording all the time. That's how the dialogues were created for the film. There's only one scene that I wrote myself, which is the scene with the doctor and the lawyer.

But the script in general was made up of fragments of those audio recordings, and the challenge was for the girls to re-enact these scenes during shooting, interpreting themselves and remembering conversations that maybe happened only few months ago, or sometimes a decade ago. We found powerful stories like the one about the two brothers who found each other at the club, saying timidly, 'I know you from somewhere.'

Shooting took only six days, at the end of those months of writing and research. That time we spent going to the club, and having the help of Lia, Roshell, and Lili, was much more important than having an extensive shooting time.

How did you manage the short production schedule?

I made a hard decision about characters. I've been following characters for a long time. In *Casa Roshell* I needed to break with that. There is not one story that is continued in the narrative; they all get lost in the night. The spectator only knows a fragment of them and that was a very clear decision to me. Some people insisted that I go to their houses, get out of the club or the like. But I loved this idea of Club Roshell being an oasis, being a shelter in its darkness.

And above everything else, I cared about the affection I witnessed, and this was probably the biggest challenge for me to translate in *Casa Roshell*. Affection is an aspect of drag very rarely seen in the representations that we have on TV or in cinema, etc. It's always drag queens fighting, being mean to each other, as if a lot of solidarity didn't exist between them. It was important to break with those stereotypes and show a different space.

This existentialism of *Casa Roshell* is also born out of the failure happening outside of it. Club Roshell is clearly not the type of club where everyone is pretending to be happy, taking smiling selfies. They go there to reflect on themselves. It's the main difference with other drag clubs.

The men were also a big challenge during shooting. The girls use the term 'transfans' to refer to the men who attend the club without cross-dressing. I'm always representing from a woman's perspective, from the feminine, so I wondered how I could approach them. On top of that, there's a strong sexual energy around the club, and I really wanted to focus on specifically those days, when this vibe is very heavy, with lots of sexual encounters happening in the darkroom. Obviously these men, not hidden by cross-dressing, wouldn't dare to appear in the film. These are guys with very conventional lives, working in banks and those sorts of jobs. That's why there are three actors in the film performing as 'transfans', based on the ones that I liked the most at the club.

There's some very interesting work on the sound in the film and how the off-screen space is constructed. How did you create these elements?

I've always enjoyed films with moments like that. We're a generation charged with way too many images and I would rather play with imagination in cinema and let the spectator figure out what's outside the image. But this off-screen space is also based on these audio recordings from the research. It happened a lot that I was transcribing something in the sound space of Lia's recordings, and then other conversations got intermingled. When you go to a club it's always like this, it's impossible to truly know someone or something during one night, you only have fragments. This was my point of view for the film, a one-night time period at Club Roshell.

I find it more important for a movie to leave you with beautiful sensations than an understanding of something concrete. I wanted to represent this feeling of retaining only fragments. I discovered a lot of poetry in those recorded conversations. During my transcriptions of those audio recordings I could grasp some of Casa Roshell's philosophy, and that's there in the film.

How did this topic of trans identity affect the formal decisions in the film?

The main point is that I was trying to avoid binaries, oppositions, because that's what trans is. And as far as film genre is concerned, *Casa Roshell* also avoids binary categories and is neither documentary nor fiction. Aesthetically, I was looking for austerity in the mise-en-scene. Each scene was composed with only one shot, and there are very few shots that are repeated. Only one scene is further decomposed.

The idea of trans identity was mainly in the treatment of time; that's crucial for me. My experiment was to create a sort of 'trans trance' of one night.

Thinking about your work so far, is trans cinema a genre that you'll continue to develop further?

It's difficult to answer your question right now. I wouldn't like to constrain myself to these 'transfictions', though I've been aiming to write a book about it, without reducing or simplifying this cinema. That's my current challenge. I'm interested in trans topics because of that freedom that belongs to them, not the other way around. It would be easy to keep doing the same thing. But I do have a posture, and it's the reason I speak about filmic 'transfictions' and not hybrid forms.

I made these films not in order to develop a trans cinema but because I'm politically and personally engaged in trans-feminist activism. I have a true relationship with it, you know? It's not a theme for me. I'm not one of those filmmakers writing about trans topics as the new trend in the market. I see myself as coming from another angle because I relate to it for real. I'm not visiting places; I represent things where I belong.

Interview: Isabel Orellana Guarello, January 2017



Camila José Donoso was born in Chile in 1988. While studying film at the Universidad Mayor de Chile, she made several short films. Camila José Donoso runs the experimental film school Transfrontera in Arica, Chile, where she also teaches. She works closely with the Chilean documentary filmmaker Ignacio Agüero. Following her first feature-length documentary work *Naomi Campbell* (2013), *Casa Roshell* is her second feature-length film.

Films

2005: *Camino gris/Grey Path* (22 min.). 2006: *La niña y el río/The Girl and the River* (18 min.). 2010: *Zonas seguras/Safe Zones* (18 min.). 2011: *La muerte de la loca* (16 min.). 2012: *Una vida mejor* (32 min.), *Insistencia del género* (11 min.). 2013: *Naomi Campbell* (83 min., co-directed by Nicolás Videla). 2017: *Casa Roshell*.