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Sex, Class, and Mexico in Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también*

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Woman is… the Enigma.
Octavio Paz[1]

The recent success of some foreign films in the American art-house exhibition circuit could be interpreted as a sign of the crisis of national specificity in commercial World cinemas. The apparent neutralization of culturally specific topics, the globalization of cinematic language, and the hybridization of genre configurations may have aided the popular acceptance in the U.S. of such films as *Life is Beautiful* (Roberto Benigni, Italy 1998), *All About My Mother* (Pedro Almodóvar, Spain 1999), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, Hong Kong, Taiwan 2000), *Amélie* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, France 2001) and *"Talk to Her"* (Almodóvar, Spain 2002).[2] The Mexican films *Amores perros* (Alejandro González-Iñárritu, 2000) and *Y tu mamá también* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2002) seem to have followed this trend by becoming not only available through commercial if limited US exhibition venues, but also accessible to the U.S. public as products of a new kind of global film language that is non-nationally specific. In these two films the language of violence and sexuality, and a postmodern generic malleability overtake the details and nuances of national topics as treated regularly in Mexican films, so they become "universal," while being allowed to keep their original Spanish titles. A closer look, however, reveals the inherent Mexicanness/*Mexicanidad* of these films present in the treatment of women and violence and the development of historical Mexican cinema topics in the narrative. *Amores perros* and *Y tu mamá también* (both Oscar nominees) capitalize on their emphasis on violence and sexuality respectively (the lingua franca of contemporary cinema) to "pass" internationally, but in the context of contemporary Mexico and Mexican cinema in general both films continue the historical trajectory of Mexican cinema when it comes to the presence and meaning of female characters and the treatment of national politics, class relations, and the economy.

Gender, Class, and the Nation in Mexican Cinema

Mexican cinema has evolved greatly in its one hundred-year history. It has developed from the constitution of a "national" cinema in the 1920s and 1930s, to the mythmaking "foundational fictions" of Carlos Navarro, Emilio Fernández, and Fernando de Fuentes in the 1940s, to the myth-shattering realism of Luis Buñuel's *Los olvidados*,[3] and the exploitation "*cabareteras*" and nightclub films of the 1950s and 1970s. Its most enduring iteration is the "Golden Age" of Mexican Cinema (from the 1930s through the 1950s), in which the mythification of national history, characters, and imagery was cemented in the widely seen films of Emilio Fernández, Fernando de Fuentes, and a few other directors. In this "Golden Age" the idea of a national fiction was well articulated, and with the economic support of the State, Mexican cinema created a vision of the nation that became consistently multiplied in films of various genres. This image of Mexico emphasized the celebration of a status quo of gentle patriarchs governing their estates and families with a stern hand, *macho charros* singing their way into the hearts of fair maidens and through honor matters, and in the case of Fernández's films, the creation of an idealized, romantic view of the Indians who were in reality, largely marginalized.[4] These constant topics were present in the underlying celebration and affirmation of *machismo* and the values of the (mostly Creole) Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920. Joanne Hershfield deftly summarizes these ideas under the concept of the *madre patria* or "Motherland" as:

> [A]n attempt to forge a national solidarity among the diverse elements of the Mexican population despite differences of language, ethnic and cultural traditions, class, race, gender, and regional affiliation… By privileging a common (if invented) history, the Spanish language, a national system of education, and the mestizo as the quintessential Mexican, la madre patria (sic) came to signify a united Mexican nation.[5]

The process of cultural appropriations, symbols, and practices that constitutes the *madre patria* is also visible through the history of Mexican cinema in the ways in which female characters are often symbolic of national mythology and history itself. Of all these female figures, the most recurring and insistent are

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the "Goddess mother," the Virgin of Guadalupe (in various incarnations), and "La Malinche," the treacherous Indian woman that myth, legend, and history have marked as translator, lover, and victim of the Conqueror Cortés and as "Mother" and traitor to all Mexicans. Jean Franco has referred to La Malinche as "inevitable" in Mexican narrative after the independence, symptomatic of women's place in Mexican history, literature and, eventually, the cinema.[6]

According to history and legend, Malinche worked as Cortés' interpreter from 1519, later became his lover, and contributed to the fall of the Aztec Empire in 1521.[7] Also Malinche and Cortés had a son, Martin, legendarily recognized as the first Mexican "Mestizo." Thus Malinche is symbolic of the conquest, the nation, and the national identity, all of which are issues interdependent on questions of sexuality and violence. In Mexican cinema the woman's body (through motherhood or prostitution/sex and violence) constitutes the site where "the nation" is articulated. As Jean Franco has written, women in Mexican literature and films are too often projections of Malinche: their actions always lead to betrayal or self-destruction, and they are "the root of all trouble."[8] Joanne Hershfield has also synthesized the juncture of women's meaning in Mexican cinema as archetype, evolving from the specific elaboration of a virgin/whore dichotomy in Mexican history and narrative. Paradoxically, Malinche is both reviled and necessary to Mexican mythology and operates, writes Hershfield, as a sort of "Eve… both Mexico's first Mother and the betrayer of Mexico… [She] provided a specifically local manifestation for the discourse of patriarchal nationalism."[9]

Through its *machista* imaginary Mexican cinema has customarily placed women in that same position (and variations thereof). The works of Franco, Ana López, Hershfield, and more recently Elissa Rashkin certainly point out that pattern in Mexican cinema.[10] Rashkin summarizes the model concluding that "the veneration of the suffering mother and the vilification of the treacherous bad woman functioned to displace women as historical subjects and replace them with symbolic figures whose repetitive trajectories were depicted as essential to the reproduction of the social order… of a clearly patriarchal nation-state."[11] In recent Mexican cinema the traditional pattern of women's position and narrative significance has been challenged. Some films since the 1990s have either allowed women to render "another" view or have revised, satirized, and even reinvented the meaning and position of women in Mexican cinema. Two recent Mexican films of great acclaim at home and seen in the U.S. and the U.K., *Amores perros* and *Y tu mamá también* have introduced women characters whose presence calls for the need to re-inscribe women's narrative agency and responsibility and have proposed new ways of approaching national identity in the times of globalization and postmodern narratives. These films' surprising crossover appeal with English-speaking audiences also calls attention to the revision of sexuality and violence as global topics, while remaining fiercely nationalistic in their attention to details concerning the national economy, class, and gender differences as well as the re-telling of the national foundational myth. *Amores perros* and *Y tu mamá también* are only deceptively apathetic to national cinema topics with their postmodern aesthetics and somewhat experimental narrative and structural techniques, and yet they directly revise Mexico's "inevitable" meta-narrative of Malinche and comment on the currency of its cultural and social value in the post NAFTA, globalized economy. Structural experimentation allows for the films' crossover appeal with U.S. and other foreign audiences, while their narrative attention to women as "symbolic figures" and their revision of the national foundational myth makes them also critically and "inevitably" Mexican films. Below, I will analyze specifically some ways in which Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* continues a revisionist trend that questions the position of women vis-à-vis narrative in contemporary Mexican cinema, and how the film re-articulates classic topics of Mexican film in the context of post-NAFTA and post-PRI social and economic realities.

Y tu mamá también and the "counterepic"

In contrast to classical Mexican cinema's attention to historic topics, mythmaking and epic national fictions, these recent films seem to be rehearsing the practice named by Néstor García Canclini as "counterepic." In his book *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, García Canclini analyzes current, postmodern cultural practices in Latin America pointing out the tendency of some artists to be "suspicious of any historical account governed by a homogeneous Truth (of class or nation)."[12] In his conclusion, drawing from contemporary examples from Chilean, Argentine, Cuban, and Mexican arts, García Canclini writes:

> In choosing an interrogative or doubting relationship to the social, [the artists] produce a "counterepic." If there is no longer *one* coherent and stable Order, and if the identity of each group is not associated with a single territory but with multiple scenarios, and history is not directed toward programmable goals, then images and texts cannot be anything but a compilation of fragments, collages….[13]

It is as if Mexico's economic and political crisis after NAFTA, the U.S. financial bailout of 1995, and the fall of the PRI's rule of over seventy years all point to a new identity crisis that these new films, and particularly the phenomenal "crossover" hits *Amores perros* and *Y tu mamá también* need to address. Of special interest is the practice in *Y tu mamá también* of specifically reversing and revising the myth of Malinche in order to compose a new national identity equation in which the historic themes of sex, gender, *machismo*, and the revolutionary ideology are faced with a more brutal, more honest reality.

Y tu mamá también explores the construction of national identity in Mexican cinema by appropriating and cannibalizing names, character types, and narrative strategies generally associated with the conservative classical cinema. The film tells the story of two Mexico City recent high school graduates (one from the working class, the other one extremely wealthy) whose boredom and sexual curiosity lead them to go off on a beach trip with an "older" Spanish woman named Luisa (Maribel Verdú). The trip inevitably leads to seduction, but it is the class tensions and the film's attention to the contradictions between the story and tradition that lead to the major discoveries faced by each protagonist. The trio of characters, their relationships, their class differences, and their trip of "discovery" through a portion of the national territory all reveal themselves as deconstructive of conventional Mexican cinema topics and ideology.

To begin with, the names given to the lead characters by screenwriters Carlos and Alfonso Cuarón are all significant in Mexico's history and national identity. The Spanish woman's name is "Luisa Cortés," the last name of the Spanish conqueror of Mexico, Hernán Cortés, also Malinche's legendary lover. The working class boy's name (Gael García Bernal) is "Julio Zapata," bringing up a necessary association with the name of Revolutionary hero (and national icon) Emiliano Zapata. A folk hero to many, Zapata fought for land reform in the first decade of the revolution, following the new government's initial reluctance to effect true social changes in that area. Significantly, the current pro-land reform Indian movement in the southern state of Chiapas, calls itself "zapatista" in honor of the peasant and working class leader.

The rich boy (played by Diego Luna) is named "Tenoch Iturbide," given to him because of his father's "sudden urge of nationalism" upon entering public service when the boy was born. This narrative detail refers indeed to PRI politicians who, as far back as the 1930s and 1940s, named their children with traditional Mexica (Aztec) names drawn from the chronicles of the Conquest and other historical sources. "Tenoch" is based on the name of the capital of the Mexica ("Tenochtitlan", or "Mexico Tenochtitlan"). The name was also used by the residents of the City to refer to themselves as "Tenochca" or "residents of Tenochtitlan."[14] Thus, Tenoch's name directly revisits the "*Indigenista*" ideology of the first few decades of the Mexican Revolution when the concept of a historical continuity between modern Mexicans and the Aztec/Mexican Empire conquered by the Spanish was concentrated into the glorification of the Indian (Aztec) past. The Mexican Revolution re-invented the country as a Mestizo nation, while in reality, the contradictions of class, and a Creole/bourgeois ruling party, perpetuated poverty and alienation for millions of Indians and their descendants. In the film, the name Tenoch is sharply brought up as a contradiction, as a sign of the superficial quality of Mexico's Revolution in the long term. The sarcastic, yet reliable voice-over narrator (by Daniel Giménez Cacho) informs us not only specifically that the boy was originally going to be named "Hernán" (the name of the Spanish conqueror), but also that the choice of "Tenoch" came when his father went into the government "infected (*contagiado*) by a sudden urge of nationalism." And yet, the last name Iturbide is a classic Basque-Spanish name, and Basque nationalism claims a high degree of ethnic purity. The names of the three protagonists thus bring up major ingredients of the national foundational and revolutionary mythology of contemporary Mexico, inviting analogy with the relations between these three characters. They also suggest the possibility that in this narrative representatives of the class and ideological tensions in contemporary Mexico will forge a new concept of national identity negotiated over the desired yet "decaying" body of the Spanish woman.

While the last names of "Cortés" and "Zapata" are offered at face value, the name Tenoch (the son of a Harvard Ph.D., undersecretary of State) comes with a narrator's commentary, a practice that becomes a selective pattern throughout the film. Time and again, the unidentified omniscient narrator intervenes to qualify, editorialize, and emphasize points of the story that are marginal, or marginalized by the main narrative but that "he" wants to address. These detours regularly create a counterpoint with the story visually told on screen, suggesting that there is more to this story, and that what we see is only a selective portrait of the nation. The most significant contribution of the narrator's interventions is that they bring up intersecting narratives which raise questions and poke holes into any assumption of a "straight," or hegemonic national history, in spite of the revelation of the nationally significant character names. The narrator appears as one of several narrative formal strategies in the film that characterize it as "counterepic."

Early in the film, one of those detours is the brief introduction of Julio Zapata's sister. Once the boys are introduced, it is promptly revealed that Julio's sister is a sociology major at UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico) and an activist and supporter of the zapatista movement in Chiapas. Later, while the boys literally "fart around" in the car they reach a traffic jam, which they immediately blame on some "fucking demonstration." But the narrator intervenes to state the facts, which are alien to the story itself and yet, help to qualify the fiction. The narrator states "that day there were three demonstrations throughout the city, but the traffic jam that kept Julio and Tenoch was caused by a pedestrian who had been run over by a car." Significantly, although the narrator does not follow up on the story, he tells us enough to reveal its significance. The dead man was a bricklayer from Michoacán who had come to the city for work, and who had died while attempting to cross the highway on his way to a construction site, instead of reaching the far away pedestrian over-

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pass. Julio and Tenoch marginalize the bricklayer's story, quickly driving by the scene of the accident. They seem only interested in drugs, alcohol, hard rock, and sex. The narrator however gives us the victim's name, his occupation, and the exact circumstances of his death, emphasizing the difficulties of surviving in the city and the inept facilities provided by the government. Julio and Tenoch insistently ignore everything but their own juvenile desires, while the narrator points toward many other things that are going on around them.

Julio and Tenoch's trajectory takes them from the counterfeit *machismo* of their juvenile games and sexual relations with a couple of girlfriends, from the narcissistic attention to nothing but their immediate desires, to the confrontation of their class differences and their ineptly hidden homoerotic desires. The homoerotic tension is always present in the film, in spite of its violation of the aggressive Mexican-Revolutionary *machismo*. The two boys visit an exclusive country club to which Tenoch's father belongs, and in the showers they show a genuine (if badly disguised) interest in each other's genitals. While ridiculing the size and appearance of each other's penises, they also call each other "faggot" and pretend to insult the other by commanding fellatio. This early homoerotic theme is temporarily diffused by the introduction of Luisa Cortés, the thirty-something Spanish woman, married to a cousin of Tenoch, who they meet at an exclusive, high-class wedding of another rich relative of the Iturbides. Significantly the wedding takes place in a luxurious bullfighting arena, a popular sport in Mexico yet symbolic of the Spanish side of national culture. Among the guests at the wedding is the president of the Republic himself, who Tenoch's father (Emilio Echevarría) publicly salutes for his "enormous modesty." The boys introduce themselves to the beautiful Luisa, who the narrator explains, is an orphan, brought up in Madrid by a "spinster Francoist aunt." Julio and Tenoch announce their plans to go to the beach the next week to get away from the city and invite Luisa to a fictional place by Mexico's Pacific coast, in the state of Guerrero. A pre-modern utopia, the hidden beaches of "*Boca del cielo*" are supposedly off the beaten paths and as yet unspoiled by tourists. "Only the local fishermen know it," the boys tell Luisa, invitingly. Luisa's initial rejection of the invitation, while polite, certainly marks her relative sophistication in comparison to the boys' juvenile strategy of seduction.

Courtesy IFC Films/Good Machine International/Producciones Anhelo.

Luisa Cortés, "*la españolita*" (Maribel Verdú), and the boys meet at a bullring, an appropriate setting that emphasizes her Spanishness and the Mexican nation's cultural heritage.

The episode ends with little more than establishing the plot point of the protagonists' acquaintance. By the end of the wedding sequence, however, the narrator returns to offer more information that, while insignificant to the film's plot, is essential for offering another detour into the film's deconstructive or "counterepic" function. The narrator explains that the President left the wedding to attend a meeting "to decide about the candidate for the next election" and that the next day, the President publicly denied "the government's involvement in the Cerro Verde massacre, and later that day left for Seattle for a globalization conference." This added information, which the narrator delivers in an already familiar monotone, emphasizes the contradiction of the government's position: accused of a peasant massacre, and at the same time complicit with a globalization strategy that would probably be negative to many Mexicans. The topics of this film keep emerging as the story advances and while the "plot" is offered as a story of seduction and coming of age, the "story" includes ramifications that speak to Mexico's current political and economic conditions. It is also significant, that the narrator's voice is always heard over a noticeably dead sound track: music, background noise, sound effects, and diegetic dialogue are muted in favor of the narrator's voice. As a soundtrack design practice that is very unusual, disruptive even, it emphasizes the significance of these apparent detours.

At the end of the first narrative act, after meeting Julio Zapata and Tenoch Iturbide, Luisa goes to a physician, picks up some "test results," and learns of her inevitable death, although the details of that revelation will not be made clear in the narrative until later. The voice-over narrator vaguely refers to the matters of fact: that she picked up the results and while in the wait-room answered a magazine test which suggested her life was unfulfilled, missing some adventure. "Luisa disagreed," says the narrator, but the point works as the last pretext before the story takes the form of a travel narrative. The film sharply contrasts Luisa's desperation with Julio and Tenoch's blind, infantile energy. The following scene shows the boys back at the country club pool competing with each other in swimming and masturbating contests while fantasizing about Salma Hayek and Luisa, "*la españolita*." A high angle, long shot shows the boys side by side lying on adjoining springboards masturbating, and finally an underwater shot shows a squirt of semen in the water. The scene cuts directly to Luisa in bed, half naked, crying alone in her vulnerability. By this time, after Luisa knows that she is dying, she receives a call from her husband, Tenoch's cousin Jano (the Spanish name of the two-faced Roman god of beginnings, the past and the future), who is away at an academic conference. Sounding convincingly repentant, Jano reveals that he has been repeatedly unfaithful. Suddenly the paradox of this woman's body takes central importance to the narrative: she is rejected by her husband, in a manner of speaking, desired by these two youthful, energetic boys, and yet only she knows that she is dying, her body deceptively healthy on the outside only. As a narrative device, Jano's infidelity and Luisa's disease are both significant: one triggers the trip of (re)discovery through the Mexican countryside that the film invites us to, and the other announces the inevitable outcome of Luisa's death, suggesting the analogy of the land and the woman's body common in Mexican cinema since the 1930s.

Gender and narrative agency

The central conflict of the film, however, soon turns to class differences and tensions, a theme that directly addresses the "classless" fantasy of the Mexican Revolution. After the revelation of Luisa's condition, the trip to the invented utopia of "*Boca del cielo*" becomes the quest of this travel narrative. Luisa records a message announcing that she is leaving her husband, Jano, and calls Tenoch in the morning to ask about their beach-travel plans. A sprawling steady-cam shot through the house reveals the magnitude of the Iturbides' wealth: through the rooms of the mansion we see Tenoch's former nanny and current servant, Leo (an Indian woman from Tepelmeme, we soon learn), walking upstairs only to serve Tenoch a sandwich and answer the telephone ringing right by his side. The scene dramatizes the Iturbides' status and their hypocrisy: they name their son with a Mexica Indian name, but Tenoch himself seems to exploit this woman, who affectionately calls him "Nene." On the phone is Luisa Cortés inquiring whether the beach trip invitation is still valid. Of course, Tenoch accedes immediately, fantasizing about the seduction of the "older woman."

The Iturbides home is juxtaposed to the apartment shared by Julio Zapata, his mother, and his sister. When Tenoch calls Julio about the plans, we see one of the first instances of the wandering eye (or " I") of the camera in *Y tu mamá también*. In a similar formal strategy to what the voice-over narrator and the soundtrack as a whole have been practicing, the camera too becomes independent from "the story." It might be useful here to introduce a theoretical precedent on the function and placement of the voice-over narrator in *Y tu mamá también*, since his presence in the film is significant in alternately questioning and reinforcing the shifts in narrative agency that I will be describing below. In this film the voice-over narrator qualifies as one that is extra-diegetic, that is, outside of the temporal and spatial limits of the story itself, and hetero-diegetic since the narrator is not one of the characters in the story at any point. These categories, from Genette's *Narrative Discourse*, have been adopted to the specifics of filmic narration by a number of critics and theorists, and seem apropos to the counterpoint brought up by the "I" of the camera and the narrator as storyteller in *Y tu mamá también*.[15] In this film, the voice-over narrator exists outside of the story and instead of giving us framing or clarifying information, his function seems to be one of editorializing, qualifying information that is neither always pertinent nor essential to the main narrative. Furthermore, the narrator's operations independently from "the camera" or cinematic narrator amount to different "points of view" or "focalization." In the Genettian sense, "focalization" allows for such non-hegemonic storytelling practices as what I argue characterizes this film as a "counter-epic." There are arguably, three separate levels of focalization in *Y tu mamá también*. One is what I refer to as the "I" of the camera or the cinematic "angle of vision" of what the technical apparatus typically "sees," hears, and presents to the spectators. Another one is the voice-over narrator who affords us a different level of knowledge, besides the limits of the story, but equally significant because it gives us extremely privileged information about the characters' inner feelings and states of mind, about things that have happened or even will happen outside of the diegetic time and space.[16] The third one is that of the three main protagonists as they challenge each other for some degree of access to the narrative agency. The typical functions of the "camera" are violated in this film when in select occasions it looks away from the principal narrative.

So, while Julio speaks on the phone to Tenoch, the camera explores the three-room flat where the Zapatas live, showing the small rooms and cheap furniture, and the view outside the windows: the drab buildings of a "middle-middle" class neighborhood. We learn that Julio's mother is employed in some sort of clerical position in a law firm. The contrast is dramatic and the class differences between these two young men, with names so symbolic in Mexican history, will ultimately prevail over everything else. The camera's wandering eye is logically absorbed into the film's narrative, suggesting the theme of "exploration" (of the national geographic space, of the woman's body, of real settings, people and locations) as a recurring motif in the film. As in the previous scene where Julio and Tenoch had driven by the bricklayer's accident, the camera repeatedly abandons the scene's apparent action to pursue and explore something else, something marginal: in this case, Julio Zapata's "life" and social condition. Similarly, soon after that, the camera visits Luisa in her apartment as she is getting ready to leave and waiting for the boys to pick her up. While Luisa waits, the camera turns independent and shows us the modest apartment she shares with her husband, room by room and then, in the same shot, it shows the middle class neighborhood outside the window. The shot is exemplary of the sense of narrative realism in *Y tu mamá también*. While the fiction of the narrative rehearses a new equation of the national foundational myth, the voice-over narration delivers "facts" that are essentially irrelevant to the story, and the camera insists on revealing the very real locations, situations and people around it.

Once the trip to the shore begins, the film finally settles

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into the familiar form of a road movie, of a journey of discovery, a contemporary Mexican bildungsroman. In this case there is a "new" Mexico that needs to be rediscovered, "reconquered," and reinvented, so to speak, with the mediation of the foreign woman. The first stop in the way, for gasoline, suggests the very reflexive nature of this travel narrative. Tenoch is in the driver's seat, while we see Julio walk to the car with a few groceries through the back window. Through the frame within the frame of the car window (a motif that is repeated later in the film) we see Julio in the foreground, the PEMEX gasoline station in the middle ground, and an imposing mountain range in the background. In the upper right hand corner of the car window, crowning the frame-within-the-frame, lays a tiny sticker with the image of Emiliano Zapata, iconic, unmistakable with his mustache, *sombrero*, ammunition belt, and guns. The set-up of the shot and its condensation of Mexican icons, symbols, and industry, seem too deliberate to be ignored. Just before the beginning of this travel of discovery, the film presents a condensed view of Mexican motifs: the nationalized oil and gasoline industries, one of Mexico's most determined triumphs after the Revolution; the mountains so prominently displayed and exploited as symbols of the nation in classical cinema; and the image of Zapata, which has become at once a commodity and a true inspiration for current revolutionary groups. But Julio and Tenoch, as they go by their trip repeatedly ignore and even look away from a country that otherwise seems eager to reveal itself to them. Through most of their trip the two young men are oblivious to many leads and alternative ways that remain unexplored, except for the brief moments of visual independence or focalization that the camera initiates itself. They drive past a little VW beetle with a poor, crowded, yet happy wedding party inside. They drive by a sign announcing the exit to Tepelmeme, Tenoch's nanny's hometown, which he anxiously acknowledges, but does not mention. They pass on the road a two-car religious caravan with a group of women singing a hymn to an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the back of a truck, but they barely have time to see it, immersed in some inane conversation about the rules of their friendship. The sequence is symptomatic of Julio and Tenoch's attitude toward Mexico itself, a motif throughout the movie: they just pass it by (its symbols, its meanings, its people, its little decrepit towns), aggressively failing to see it. It takes the mediation of Luisa for Julio and Tenoch to "rediscover" the country and themselves. We have seen signs of that obliviousness before in the film, of course—with the highway accident, and in contrast with Julio's sister, who is involved with the Zapatista rebels in Chiapas—while Julio literally spends his time masturbating by the pool and farting in the car.

The first drive sequence reveals something else with a new intervention by the voice-over narrator. While Julio and Tenoch recite for Luisa the ten commandments of their friendship (the "Charolastra" manifesto, stating among other things that they would never have sex with a friend's girl, and that "the truth is the greatest thing, but it's unattainable") the narrator intervenes to add an editorial commentary, a counterpoint to the "truth" supposedly revealed in the conversation. The narrator, whom by this time has acquired the authority of a speaking subject, tells us that when the boys visit each others homes, Tenoch avoids touching anything in Julio's bathroom with his own hands and that Julio always lights a match after using Tenoch's bathroom to get rid of odors. These details, seemingly unessential to the central story, point out how, contrary to their superficial claims, Julio and Tenoch's friendship is still mediated by a profound awareness of their class differences.

The first leg of the trip takes Julio, Luisa, and Tenoch to a small rural town where they stop at a modest eatery. They serve themselves beers and drink while Luisa tells some story about Jano. A beggar approaches the table, slowly but determinedly, and extends his hand out. Barely looking at the man, Tenoch and Luisa take some coins out and give them to him. The man drifts off and the camera follows him, seemingly uninterested in the three protagonists (and by extension, the main narrative), and independently explores the establishment: the empty tables, the beer posters on the walls, the beat-up jukebox. The camera's slow and curious pace finally reaches the kitchen where we see a whole other world back there. There is an apartment with living quarters; there are women washing dishes, cooking, having a drink, listening to the radio, even dancing; real people whose stories are marginal to the narrative but who at least momentarily, the camera cannot resist.

This new moment of revelation of that which is marginal to "the story," is juxtaposed to the boys "view," to their angle of vision once they arrive in the motel where they will spend the night. Their sexual curiosity leads them to spy on Luisa once she has gone to her room. Julio and Tenoch come out and look through a broken pane in Luisa's window, hoping to see her naked, but find that she is just sitting in bed crying. Suddenly embarrassed, they withdraw and go back to their room. Even though for a moment the shot of Luisa through the broken window seems to take the boys' point of view, once they leave the camera lingers, independently looking through the window. The scene actively denies the boys' narrative agency. While the original shot suggests their subjectivity and angle of vision (or even their point of view), that illusion is taken away by the camera's independent gesture.[17] One of the effects of such a formal strategy is that it raises questions about spectator identification. By denying Julio and Tenoch's agency, the shot suggests (as the film soon establishes) that the "story" here is not about the boys, but about the trip itself, and especially about Luisa's trajectory. There is no mystery to the boys' quest as an organizing narrative structure, but there remains the "mystery" of the woman's body, and Luisa soon takes on the narrative agency.

The "road movie" resumes the next morning, and whether it is Julio or Tenoch in the driver's seat, they have little narrative agency. They smoke marijuana, and the drug seems to help Luisa open up and speak about sex. It is Luisa who initiates the sexual conversation, which soon turns rather explicit. She asks the boys a number of sexual questions with a provocative, aggressive attitude: "Did you want to see me naked last night and go whack off? Have you had sex with girls other than your girlfriends?" Their embarrassment suggests that they have not, despite their answers. And the rest of the film emphasizes Luisa as the main narrative agent, displacing the boys' apparent agency up to that point.

As the sex talk continues in the car, Luisa tests the boys with questions about their sexual strategies, putting in evidence their lack of experience. The breaking point comes when Luisa asks if any of them "ever wiggle [his] little finger up their [girlfriends'] ass." Julio and Tenoch are visibly alarmed with the question protesting simultaneously "*¡¿en el culo?!*" as if the thought of any form of erotic anal stimulation was taboo. Significantly, at that moment the boys and the narrative react similarly: the car breaks down with a loud bang and a cloud of smoke, dramatically stopping the advance of both the narrative and the sexual quest. The moment puts in further evidence their homoerotic fears, their counterfeit *machismo*, which barely disguises their true desires. Furthermore, the forced stop caused by the car failure forces the boys to interact with the real people of the small roadside town, in a way that they have thus far avoided, immersed in their fantasies and ignorance. Julio, Tenoch, and Luisa are suddenly faced with the reality that the boys in particular have been avoiding. They drink coconut water at the roadside stop, exchange small gifts with the locals, and discover something about these people's lives. But Luisa is the only one who actually makes a connection. She meets a 98 year-old woman with a dead granddaughter also named Luisa, and once again comes into the consciousness of her own mortality. In the solitude of her dingy motel room, she cries again.

Courtesy IFC Films/Good Machine International/Producciones Anhelo.

As in the classic road movie, Luisa (Maribel Verdú), Tenoch (Diego Luna), and Julio (Gael García Bernal) struggle for access to the narrative agency in *Y tu mamá también*.

Paradoxically, the forced narrative stoppage in the boys' sexual quest leads to Luisa's final adoption of the film's narrative agency. When Tenoch comes to her motel room to ask for shampoo, clad only in a bathroom towel, she actively, decisively, and quickly seduces him. She commands him: "jerk off and I'll show you my tits." He obeys, and she guides him, with her hands even, through a clumsy, quick intercourse in which he ejaculates almost immediately childishly moaning "*mamacita*, *mamacita*." Julio inadvertently sees Tenoch and Luisa in their brief sexual encounter, and the projected primal scene (emphasized by the word "*mamacita*") makes him very angry. But Julio's reaction is not directly about Tenoch and Luisa, but as the narrator tells us, he compares the feelings to a real primal scene when Julio discovered his mother "in his godfather's arms." Julio reacts with anger and a grave sense of betrayal to "his mother's" sexuality, Malinche's crime. The event leads to the boys' first real confrontation. In his moment of rage, Julio's revenge is to tell Tenoch that he has had sex with his girlfriend.

The narrator intervenes here once more to clarify, comparing Tenoch's feelings at the revelation to the time when his father (undersecretary of State) had to flee the country when it was discovered that he had participated in a scheme to import contaminated corn destined to Mexico's poor. Luisa, says the narrator, "realized that her transgression had broken the natural balance" of the relationship. Thus politics, motherhood, and sexuality serve as the ground where class tensions emerge: the revenge of Malinche. The boys' heated argument about the girlfriend's sexual affair escalates violently, mediated by *machismo* and homophobic insults. Tenoch calls Julio "a little faggot" and adds: "you fucked the friendship, you fucked the trust, you fucked my girlfriend, you fucked me." The argument goes on all night, with Julio seemingly apologetic by the end.

Back on the road the next morning, Tenoch (who is driving and, thus, holds the illusion of control and narrative agency) is inclined to make a possessive claim about his "coupling" with Luisa, which she quickly rejects. Insulted by the rejection, Tenoch pulls over the car and walks away, cursing angrily. Luisa immediately takes over and rapidly effects Julio's seduction. The results are identical to sex with Tenoch: Julio is clumsy, desperate, and also ejaculates immediately. Luisa holds Julio in her arms in another "motherly" gesture, consoling him when he apologizes for his poor performance. Luisa's attempt at leveling the playing field between the boys backfires, as Tenoch's possessive reaction leads to the most violent moment in the film, and one that underscores the question of class differences as even more important than the sexual plot. While Julio is driving (once again, the action of driving is deceptively suggestive of narrative agency in the road movie) Tenoch confesses that he too has been having sex with Julio's girlfriend, and Julio's reaction is identical to Tenoch the night before: he brings the car to a screeching halt, gets out of

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the car and screams a tirade of insults at his friend through the car window which separates and frames the two characters. When both Julio and Tenoch are at their angriest, expressing unbridled, unrepressed feelings, they resort to insults of both class and homophobic content. Amidst calls of "fucking faggot, " etc., Tenoch calls Julio "*pinche nacote*" and "*arribista*" which translate roughly as "commoner" and "social climber," and Julio replies "*pirrurri de mierda*" or "shitty petty bourgeois."

As it is usual in the movie, Luisa is the only one who sees the truth, calling attention to their violation of their own principles (the "*Charolastra*" manifesto), and accusing them of "just wanting to fuck each other." Luisa brings up the matter of a failed philosophy and their failure to hide their own homoerotic desires, despite their *machista* façade. The violent argument is not only framed and divided by the car window, but there is also a small sticker on the window with Mexico's tricolor flag and the word "Mexico" printed on it. From outside the car Julio spits on the glass and along with it on the Mexican national symbol. The confrontation, which begins over possession of Luisa's body and access to her sexual favors, quickly degrades into an argument on homophobia and thinly disguised class tensions. Luisa walks away, extremely angry, her last words still resonating in the desolate landscape. The boys agree to end the fight, but also agree that their differences are now irreconcilable. Judging by the lingering words, what remains more dramatically unresolved is their class difference. The sequence is significant in unveiling the failure of Mexico's revolutionary philosophy, a problem already suggested by the film's attention to economic and social problems seen in the narrative detours. The dramatic and symbolic presence of the Mexican flag in the scene and the glass separating the characters underscore these problems by framing them in a very specific context that bypasses the sexual quest as something only incidental to the true plot and meaning of the film.

While Luisa finally agrees to rejoin the boys in the search for "*Boca del cielo*," she now sets her own rules, which include no more sex ("unless you want to fuck each other"). They agree to her terms and promise to set aside their differences for the rest of the adventure. Unbelievably, to their own surprise, the three inadvertently find the pre-modern, pre-Columbian utopia by the shore, where some tensions are indeed mended. They set up tents, swim in the ocean, lie on the warm sand, play soccer by the beach, and meet a local fisherman (and his young family) who becomes their guide. The fisherman's name is "Chuy Carranza" (Silverio Palacios), another character with a common yet historically charged Mexican last name. "Chuy" is a common nickname for "Jesús" and Jesús Carranza was the name of the father of Venustiano Carranza, a Coahuila state governor who rose to the top of the Constitutionalist movement in the 1920s.[18] The patriarch Jesús Carranza owed his fortune to his support of nationalist president Benito Juárez, who had granted Carranza lands confiscated from wealthy landowners in the 1860s. Significantly, Juárez was the leader responsible for the ousting (and execution) of Emperor Maximilian, and he is historically regarded as having rescued Mexico from foreign invasion. In the film, Chuy Carranza's presence is both tragic and prophetic, and he emerges as symptomatic of Mexico's current economic crisis and the threat of a new kind of foreign invasion. While Chuy takes Luisa, Tenoch, and Julio to the hidden pristine beaches around "*Boca del cielo*," the narrator once again intervenes to intersect and clarify the story with a different meaning that the protagonists themselves do not experience. "By the end of the year," the narrator tells us, "Chuy and his family will have to leave this place to give way to the construction of an exclusive hotel… Chuy will try to give boat service to tourists, but will be blocked by the Acapulco boat owners union, protected by the Tourism Council. Two years later he will end up as a janitor in the hotel and will never go fishing again." The utopian setting sought by the protagonists will come directly under the threat of development, tourism, and the new economic and labor conditions dictated by NAFTA. While the narrator's comment is not pertinent to the plot of *Y tu mamá también*, it becomes relevant in the film's criticism of contemporary Mexican economic policy and the threat of new forms of foreign intervention. This is particularly underscored by what Luisa and the boys discover upon returning to their camp a day later. In one of the most bizarre incidents in the film they find that their lost, pristine stretch of beach has been invaded by a stray pack of pigs escaped from a nearby farm. The pigs destroy everything, scatter their belongings, defecate inside their tent, and eat their food. The sequence, while bizarre, cannot be ignored as it follows the narrator's commentary about the future of Chuy's family and the threat to everything posed by development and tourism. The film arguably suggests that this type of destruction comes as a byproduct of tourism; the

Class tensions are the most distinctive feature of Julio and Tenoch's relationship. They explode into class-based insults, significantly separated by a sticker with the Mexican flag on it.

Courtesy IFC Films/Good Machine International/Producciones Anhelo.

sequence is arguably analogical of the negative impact of the yearly invasion of American college spring-breakers to Mexico's coastal resorts, from Cancún to Cozumel, to Puerto Escondido.

The destruction of their camping site leads Luisa and the boys to rent a room from Chuy's family for their last day together. In their final drunken meeting, the three take tequila shots and drink beer, and as with the marijuana episode earlier in the film it leads Luisa to a new, last moment of revelation. Aware of her destiny (as we know she is terminally ill) she drinks "to life." "You two are so lucky to live in this country," she tells the boys: "You breath life in Mexico. To Mexico! To magical, musical Mexico!" Perhaps appropriately, Luisa's toast to "life" and "to Mexico" is met by the boys' customary "juvenile" sexuality. Unaware that Luisa is dying they drink to the pleasures of masturbation, to being "cum brothers" (because they have been sexually interchanging girlfriends), "to blowjobs," and in a return to sexual insults, Julio drinks "to your mother too" ("*…y tu mamá también*"), suggesting he has either had sex with or desires Tenoch's mother. Luisa gives them some pointers about sexual activity, telling them that they must learn to "go down" on a woman, to make the clitoris "their best friend," and finally she leads them in an erotic dance that seems inevitably destined for seduction.

Seemingly breaking her own oath not to have sex with them, Luisa takes Julio and Tenoch to her room. The three begin kissing and caressing, and Luisa seems to understand her position here all too well: while she seemingly performs fellatio, the boys finally lock lips and kiss passionately, like true lovers. She abandons them, thus not breaking her oath, while emerging prophetic in her sentence about the boys' true desires. Julio and Tenoch wake up the next morning naked in bed, embarrassed and physically ill. Their sexual quest and their fights over possession of the woman's body leads paradoxically to their coming to terms with their own heretofore thinly veiled desires.

Conclusion

The allegorical travel over the national territory in *Y tu mamá también* is also one of discovery of certain types of "truths" and experiences that the boys have ignored thus far: about Mexico's economy, about their prejudices, about class differences, and the contradictions they pose in the country of the first revolutionary society of the 20th century. The film's final act, beginning with Julio and Tenoch waking up in bed the morning after their mutual seduction (mediated by Luisa) reveals the boys' failure to confront the reality she has shown them. They act embarrassed, barely speak to each other, and find themselves in need to return to Mexico City. On the trip back, the narrator tells us, Julio and Tenoch do not exchange a word. Significantly, all they have left to tell each other cannot be spoken about: the discovery of their own hatred and homosexual desires. That revelation in the film is comparable to their failure to "see" Mexico as well. In *Y tu mamá también*, the emotional and intellectual alienation of Julio and Tenoch is regularly contrasted with the marginal stories about places, people, and the landscape that constantly try to reveal themselves to the boys. Meanwhile the two points of focalization, the independent eye of the camera on one hand, and the editorializing, extra-diegetic and hetero-diegetic voice-over narration on the other, call our attention to both "the rest of Mexico" and the ignorance of these unlikely heroes. Furthermore, Luisa's tragic destiny is not met with a sense of defeat, but relief.

Luisa, who has severed her last remaining ties with the rest of the world (she is an orphan with no relatives, and she has left her husband), decides to stay behind and explore the beaches of the Mexican southwestern Pacific coast. She is determined to live her last few weeks in the intoxication of this beautiful country, this "pre-modern utopia" that will soon be destroyed by development and its inevitable flip side, dependency. Luisa's knowledge that she is dying is the type of narrative information shared only by the intermittent narrator and the spectator, but not with her co-protagonists. She ultimately is offered as a kind of sacrificial body. However, while the spectacle of this woman's body is exploited for voyeuristic pleasure in the movie, as female characters are so often destined to be, Luisa's exercise of narrative agency in the film, her omniscience, initiative, and decision-making, denies any passive implications to her position in the narrative.[19] On the contrary, Luisa's agency subverts classical narrative and serves as the locus for the revision and inscription of a new type of Mexican foundational fiction. With its counter-epic function in *Y tu mamá también*, the nation is rediscovered as a place of contradictions, where *machismo* is unveiled as a façade hiding homoerotic desires, where divisions of class are revealed as latent and leading to violent confrontation, and where instead of "treachery" (like Malinche) the woman mediates all meaning.

In his last intervention, the narrator introduces Julio and Tenoch's last meeting. They stopped seeing each other, the narrator states, and then in a direct reference to Mexico's contemporary politics the narrator informs us: "the next summer the official party lost the election for the first time in 71 years." That implies that Tenoch's father has lost his political power, bringing up some sense of "equality" between the boys now. The direct reference to the defeat of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in the 2000 elections during the boys' last meeting invites an analogy with their relationship. Contemporary scholars have seen the triumph of the National Action Party (PAN) and the election of President Vicente Fox as a sign of Mexico's current political maturity and of the democratization process paradoxically stalled under the rule of the PRI.[20] Julio and Tenoch's last meeting, where Tenoch informs Julio of Luisa's death of cancer in the coastal town of San Bernabé, has the double effect of underscoring their social difference (particularly marked by their manner of dress), and of portraying them finally as "equals" (in the knowledge they have acquired through their bildungsroman). Furthermore, the implied loss of the Iturbide's political power as a coda to the boys' adventure and after the violent arguments spiced with class-based insults that they have had functions as a necessary narrative closure. They will never meet again, but they have also found out some things about themselves, and there is a sense of comeuppance that they both seem to experience. Like the PRI at the end of the 20th century, Julio and Tenoch are due for the recognition that their façade of ignorance, *machismo*, and narcissism is vulnerable, that their philosophical manifesto, like Mexico's revolutionary rhetoric, is only as solid as the paper on which it is printed. In *Y tu mamá también*, the Spanish woman's body becomes the site where Mexico's current economic, political, and class tensions are revealed as failures of the revolutionary state.

Note

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1 Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad*. (New York: Penguin, 1997) 89.

2 The dates given for these films are those of the U.S. theatrical release.

3 On Buñuel's specific impact on the evolution of Mexican cinema, see my *Buñuel and Mexico: The Crisis of National Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

4 See the definitive study, Carl J. Mora's *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). See especially chapters 3 and 4. See also Carlos Monsiváis "Mexican Cinema: Of Myths and Demystifications" in *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*, eds. John King, Ana M. López and Manuel Alvarado (London: British Film Institute, 1993) 139-146.

5 See Joanne Hershfield, *Mexican Cinema/Mexican Woman, 1940-1950*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996) 48.

6 Jean Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) 131.

7 See Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992) 98-101.

8 Franco, *Plotting Women*, 131-132. See also Sandra Messinger Cypess, *La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991) 156.

9 Hershfield, *Mexican Cinema, Mexican Woman* 19-20.

10 Ana López "Tears and Desire: Women and Melodrama in the "Old" Mexican Cinema" in *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*, eds. John King, Ana M. López and Manuel Alvarado (London: British Film Institute, 1993) 147-163.

11 Elissa Rashkin *Women Filmmakers in Mexico: The Country of Which We Dream* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001) 2.

12 Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 279.

13 Canclini 279.

14 See Hugh Thomas, *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortés and the Fall of Old Mexico* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993) xix.

15 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980). On Genette's classifications as adopted in film studies see David Alan Black, "Genette and Film: Narrative Level in the Fiction Cinema" in *Wide Angle* 8.3-4 (1987): 19-26, and Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-over Narration in American Fiction Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 42-49.

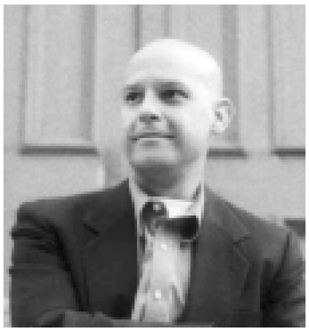
16 Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 161-211. See also Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics* (London: Routledge, 1992) 87-95.

17 The principles of spectator identification in the cinema are, in part, theoretically explained by the concept of "suture" which suggests that the typical arrangement of shot/reverse shot, given from a certain character's angle of vision (or more vaguely "point of view") give the spectator an illusion of presence in the world of the fiction, through the character's projected perception. In *Y tu mamá también*, this arrangement is occasionally denied to the male characters, when "the camera" independently looks without taking their presumed angle of vision. There are many writings on these concepts, but among the essentials, see Christian Metz "Some Points in the Semiotics of the Cinema" in *Film Theory and Criticism*, Fifth edition, Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 68-89. Also in Braudy and Cohen see Daniel Dayan, "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema" (118-129) and Kaja Silverman, "[On Suture]" (137-147).

18 See Michel J. Gonzales *The Mexican Revolution, 1910-1940* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002) 5-10, 112-115.

19 The definitive study on the gender "division of labor" in classical narrative cinema is, of course, Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," widely anthologized, recently in *Feminist Film Theory, A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (New York: New York University Press, 1999) 58-69.

20 Caroline C. Beer, "Institutional Change in Mexico: Politics After One-Party Rule," in *Latin American Research Review* 37.3, (2002): 149-161.



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