

Road Movies Mapping the Nation: *Y tu mamá también*

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Introduction

In this paper I investigate images of individual and national identity in the recent successful Mexican road movie *Y tu mamá también*, directed by Alfonso Cuarón.¹ This film forms part of the growing canon of Latin American road movies, with the generic tradition of parallel journeys of internal and external discovery lending the genre to a discussion of identity politics. The journey that structures these films is often motivated by a quest, although as a rule the experience of the journey itself proves more important, and movement functions as a catalyst for personal development. As the protagonists struggle with the uncertainties of the unfamiliar, they are inclined to self-reflection through developing new relationships with their travelling companions and acquaintances.

In origin, this genre was constructed as a male escapist fantasy, inheriting frontier symbolism (masculinity, individualism, and aggression) from the Hollywood Western, with the road offering an escape from the female domestic sphere.² However, over the last fifteen years the road movie genre has made a departure from its patriarchal, masculine roots, and filmmakers from across the globe have used the genre as a vehicle for the representation of otherness: subversive parodies of the genre can make a space for those traditionally marginalized, in terms of race, class, gender, or sexuality.³ Two familiar examples of this trend might be *Thelma and Louise* from 1991, and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* from 1994;⁴ I argue that *Y tu mamá también* also offers a subtly subversive view

¹ *Y tu mamá también*. Dir. by Alfonso Cuarón. 20th Century Fox. 2001.

² Shari Roberts, 'Western Meets Eastwood: Subtext, Genre and Gender on the Road', in *The Road Movie Book*, ed. by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 45-69.

³ Susan Hayward, *The Key Concepts in Cinema Studies* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 53.

⁴ *Thelma and Louise*. Dir. by Ridley Scott. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. 1991. *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Dir. by Stephen Elliot. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. 1994.

of the construction of sexuality, and promotes a more inclusive vision of Mexican national identity, in terms of race and class.

Y tu mamá también tells the story of two teenage boys, Julio (Gael García Bernal) and Tenoch (Diego Luna), who invent an imaginary idyllic beach called *Boca del Cielo* (or Heaven's Mouth) in the hope of enticing Luisa (Maribel Verdú), the Spanish wife of Tenoch's cousin, to take a trip with them. Luisa accepts their offer, much to the boys' surprise, and, despite the invented destination, they set off on a road trip from Mexico City to the Pacific coast. Ultimately, the journey ends with a shared sexual experience which destroys the boys' friendship, followed by the death of Luisa, who had secretly been diagnosed with cancer. The film is structured as a coming-of-age tale for the initially immature teenagers, thanks to the intimate social and sexual experiences shared by the three travellers. Along the way an apparently omniscient and objective male voice-over informs the viewer about the protagonists' thoughts and feelings, and also tells anecdotes about other minor characters, offering us a socio-political commentary on contemporary Mexico.

I was drawn to examine this film for two reasons: firstly, the inclusion of characters from across the class and race spectrum in Mexico, and secondly, the interesting gender dynamics within the narrative. The film suggests an interest in gender roles and relations by offering the contrasting manifestos that direct the characters' behaviour: the first declared by the teenage boys, and the second by the older Luisa. By allowing Luisa's rules to regulate the final part of the journey, the film appears to subvert the traditional masculine bias associated with both the road movie genre and images of Mexican national identity. The voice-over-narrated snap-shots of the different classes and races which co-exist in urban and rural Mexico also suggest a wider vision of the nation than we might expect from mainstream cinema.

Section 1

My film analysis begins with images of national identity, exploring the

representations of utopian spaces. I analyse the recurrent theme of death, and identify whom the film includes within the imagined community of the Mexican nation.

Search for utopia

What puts these characters on the road in the first place? The driving force behind the movement is the search for a kind of utopia, a common theme in both Latin American and other road movies. The characters are nominally motivated to embark on their trip as a quest for an (imaginary) idyllic beach, although escape from the restrictions of the domestic sphere comes much closer to their true motivations. The beach as a utopian space echoes Lúcia Nagib's work on images of the sea in Brazilian cinema: in 1964 the sea was cast as paradise in *Black God, White Devil*, while the sea became nostalgia for a lost national paradise in *Foreign Land* in 1995.⁵ The teenagers may deliberately set out for an imaginary place, but ultimately this paradise proves itself to be a real part of Mexico, suggesting an extremely optimistic view of the nation.

By the end of the film, however, the beach has been sold for tourist development at the expense of local fishing rights: the global tourist industry is seen encroaching on and destroying the rural paradise, and the fate of the nation seems more problematic as different sectors compete for space in the modern nation.

Julio and Tenoch see the road trip to their utopia as a chance to experience freedoms denied in 'normal' life, plotting the Mexican teenagers into a familiar cinematic history of rebellious youth. However, in his investigation into the rise of car culture in Germany and the USA during the 1930s, Paul Virilio contests the common association between movement and freedom, instead seeing the promotion of the automobile as the 'permanent exploitation of the ignorant masses' aptitude for movement as a social

⁵ Lúcia Nagib, 'Visions of Paradise in Contemporary Brazilian Cinema', World Cinemas Conference, University of Leeds, 25-27 June, 2002.

Black God, White Devil. Dir. by Glauber Rocha. Facets Multimedia Distribution. 1964.

Foreign Land. Dir. by Walter Salles. Videofilmes Produções Artísticas Ltda. 1995.

solution’; in other words, movement substitutes for social change.⁶ On this point, the film offers an interesting comparison of car use between Julio, whose youthful rebellion involves a road trip to the beach, and his sister, who takes part in left-wing political demonstrations and needs the car to deliver basic supplies to the poor. The journey only offers the travellers a temporary freedom, a final fling before entering adult society, or before dying.

In fact, death features more prominently than freedom in this film, despite the youthfulness of all three protagonists. How the Mexican filmmaker represents and uses death makes an interesting comparison with typical North American attitudes and with the road movie’s generic history. Cuarón’s film is located within the Mexican tradition explored by Octavio Paz in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*.⁷ Paz explains the Mexican close relationship with death as derived from the combination of Indian and Catholic beliefs in resurrection, as well as from the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a female incarnation of both fertility and war, life and death. In the USA, in contrast, a fearful respect for death and the spiritual afterlife seems to have melted away during the twentieth century under a wave of neo-hedonism that encourages death to be invisible and unmentionable. Supporting this point, Jessica Mitford has written an exposé of the North American funeral industry, which profits from the general public’s ignorance and grief with elaborate post-mortem beauty treatments.⁸ Images of death and violence still have their place in North American culture, however; for example, they are treated as ‘masculine’ themes within the conventional definition of the road movie, themes inherited from its cinematic forefather, the Western.

These cultural differences between Mexico and the USA pave the way for a different representation of death, as for Cuarón it is neither violent nor ‘masculine’, but natural and inevitable. Death itself is not rejected in *Y*

⁶ Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics: an Essay on Dromology*, trans. by Mark Polizzotti (New York: Semiotext(e), 1986), p. 28.

⁷ Octavio Paz, *El Laberinto de la soledad* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1993).

⁸ Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death Revisited* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

tu mamá también, but the cruel circumstances of the deaths of some of the poorest Mexicans are used as a tool of criticism. Luisa dies relatively young, but she dies peacefully; in contrast, the voice-over reports on the victims of car accidents and heat exhaustion, who are also victims of poverty and exclusion from the nation. Drawing our attention to their deaths serves to emphasize their invisibility in life. Moreover, the fact that these snapshots are presented to us as the protagonists remain blissfully unaware en-route to the beach adds to their poignancy.

Following city-dwelling characters as they search for a coastal utopia sets up the familiar urban versus rural dichotomy, although in this film both spaces can be seen as either utopian or dystopian—the city is the site of corruption and social disintegration, but also of political activism, education, and employment; the countryside is peaceful and family-orientated, but also very poor. Portraying positive and negative aspects of both spaces suggests the film-maker's desire to present a balanced and socially inclusive vision of the Mexican nation, acknowledging its problems while celebrating its strengths. As an image of the nation, the film perhaps calls for recognition of national heterogeneity rather than any social revolution, but in some way, acknowledging inequalities might be considered as an important step towards solving injustices.

Imagined communities

While the road movie genre has undeniably strong US roots, Cuarón has made this a definitively Mexican film by locating his characters within the national history and contemporary politics of Mexico. In an interview, the director acknowledged the deliberately symbolic names of the protagonists, their surnames being appropriate to their social backgrounds while representing periods of Mexican history which maintain a heavy influence on the modern nation—Luisa Cortés and the fifteenth-century Spanish conquest, Tenoch Iturbide and the nineteenth-century early independent elite, and Julio Zapata and the twentieth-century revolution.⁹ Furthermore,

⁹ Audio interview with Alfonso Cuarón: extra feature on UK DVD release of *Y tu mamá*

we are told by the voice-over that Tenoch was christened with an Indian name for political reasons; this acknowledges Mexico's Indian heritage while making a wry comment on the political favour to be won by paying lip-service to the Indian population. The three protagonists display little personal interest in national politics or current affairs, but through their family connections we learn something about the state of Mexico today. On the one hand we have Tenoch's father, the corrupt senior politician, and on the other hand we have Julio's sister, the left-wing activist.

As the film develops, Cuarón widens the range of Mexican characters, expanding the imagined national community beyond the urban middle classes. The film departs from typical road movie style when the camera leaves the protagonists to follow peripheral characters, and in its use of the voice-over: the diegetic sound periodically cuts out, and the omniscient narrator explains hidden details about both the protagonists and more minor, sometimes invisible, characters. For example, this technique is employed to relate details of the Mexico City road traffic accident which delays Julio and Tenoch. Employing an art-cinema technique, the voice-over contradicts the boys' own explanations, revealing how easily they can misinterpret their surroundings—they suspect another left-wing demonstration has caused the delay, but in fact the road has been partially blocked by the body of a migrant worker who was run over as he struggled to cross the busy road on his way to work. The stark contrast between the boys playing immature games in the car and the narrated story of the dead man emphasizes the teenagers' ignorance about, and distance from, their poorest countrymen. While the central narrative focuses on Julio, Tenoch, and Luisa, the voice-over broadens the visible class spectrum of the film and represents some less familiar aspects of Mexico, revealing some of the problems facing the often ignored subaltern population.

también. Dir. by Alfonso Cuarón. 2001.

Hernan Cortés led the 1519 Spanish expedition to Mexico, conquering the Aztec Empire within two years of his arrival. Agustín de Itúrbide was a hero of Mexico's War of Independence and the first Emperor of Mexico (1822-23). Emiliano Zapata was a radical hero of the Mexican Revolution (1910-20).

Section 2

Moving on to personal identity, I shall look at images of gender and sexuality, and at how the characters' experience of physical movement can test, change, and determine their identity.

Gendered mobility

According to John Durham Peters, travelling is a gendered experience, with a 'pejorative link between mobility and femininity': through the ages, embarking on any kind of journey has usually been more acceptable for a man, while the female traveller has often signalled promiscuity and immorality.¹⁰ The teenage characters seem to follow this tradition when they invite Luisa on the trip with the specific aim of sleeping with her, believing this to be a more attainable goal on the road than at home. Luisa does become sexually involved with both Julio and Tenoch, but she arguably takes on a masculine role on the road, instigating and controlling her sexual experiences. However, Luisa's behaviour also conforms to the stereotype of the sexually confident older woman, therefore reducing the gender role reversal implications.

Away from the gaze of friends and relations, travelling means greater sexual freedom for the three protagonists, while also prompting some emotional progress, a typical generic feature. The teenagers enter adulthood, while the secretly ill Luisa comes to terms with her impending death. However, the boys' story could stand alone as a male-centred buddy movie and coming-of-age tale—the narrative focuses on Julio and Tenoch growing up and crystallizing their adult personalities (which, I shall later discuss, includes rejecting their homosexual experience for the sake of their heterosexual identities). The buddy movie has traditionally been reserved for male character development. In this scenario women are usually peripheral at best, and then only used as catalysts for male change, while guaranteeing the heroes' heterosexuality.

¹⁰ John Durham Peters, 'Exile, Nomadism, and Diaspora', in *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*, ed. by Hamid Naficy (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 17-41 (p. 26).

On some levels Luisa's character *is* secondary—she has less screen time, and she dies before the end of the narrative, which means the boys' stories frame hers; furthermore, she's a Spanish character in a film focused on Mexican identity issues. And Luisa does serve as a catalyst for the boys' development—she instigates the *ménage-a-trois* which ends their ultimately doomed friendship. However, we are also encouraged to identify and sympathize with Luisa, and we have privileged access to her thoughts and feelings, through the voice-over, as we do with the boys. Nor is she a static character: she makes her own emotional journey in coming to terms with her imminent death. She regains a sense of control over the remainder of her life, the shock of her cancer diagnosis having inspired her to leave her unfaithful husband and stand alone for the first time. Luisa's growing sense of power as an individual is perhaps most obvious in the scene where she loses patience with the teenagers' mutual betrayals (each boy having slept with the other's girlfriend) and replaces their code of conduct with a new set of road-trip rules.¹¹ Previously, Luisa was afraid to offer her opinion amongst her husband's friends, and silently accepted her husband's infidelities. In contrast, through her declared manifesto she rejects the role of sexual object, and demands that her views be heard and respected.

Luisa is undoubtedly less peripheral than women in more traditional road movies, and she actually subverts rather than guarantees the boys' heterosexuality, but I would argue that the different inner journeys faced by the male and female characters still remain traditionally gendered—Luisa's personal journey is towards the peaceful acceptance of her fate, i.e. passivity, while the boys are busy discovering and constructing their adult identities, i.e. activity. Ultimately, Luisa is disposed of by the narrative, and the audience is left to focus on the primary male protagonists.

¹¹ Julio and Tenoch claim to abide by their self proclaimed '*Charolastra* Manifesto', which includes not sleeping with another *charolastra*'s girlfriend. Luisa's Manifesto includes refusing to sleep with either boy again, controlling the music and topic of conversation, and delegating all chores to the boys.

Identity through movement

The narrative centres on the teenage boys and their experiences on the road: movement, as well as serving as a catalyst for self-discovery, actually determines their identities, in terms of how, why and where they move, following the argument of the previously cited Durham Peters. His chapter explores the idea that attitudes to movement, place, and concepts such as home and nation form an important part of an individual's or a community's identity. This links in with road movies, a genre in which 'the trope of the road still requires the concept of home as a structuring absence', according to Pamela Robertson.¹² The contradictory desire for home and away inspires both the teenagers' enthusiasm for adventure and their abrupt return home; and although Luisa will never go back, she also maintains a link through phone calls to her husband.

In *Y tu mamá también*, movement functions as an important tool in forming Julio and Tenoch's adult identities, because away from home these characters can move to, and through, the limits of their previous experience. Cuarón's film concentrates in particular on the new sexual experiences which will test and define personal boundaries for the boys. Explaining this focus on teenage sexuality on the Latino Review website, the director made the following comment on the teen films he had seen: 'most of the movies did not reflect an honest portrait of teens; either they over-romanticized that period or exploited it. I wanted to do something different.'¹³ With this goal in mind, Cuarón creates sex scenes that are graphic without being pornographic, under the direction of the cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, who adopted a *cinema-verité* style (including hand-held cameras and low contrast) to bring an un-staged and realistic atmosphere to the sex scenes.

The film is also not afraid to blur the boundaries between

¹² Pamela Robertson, 'Home and Away: Friends of Dorothy on the road in Oz', in *The Road Movie Book*, ed. by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 271-286, (p. 271).

¹³ <http://www.latinoreview.com/moviereviews/2002/ytumama/ytumama.html> [accessed 12/10/04].

heterosexuality and homosexuality—from the outset the teenagers combine a macho heterosexual competitiveness with an easy acceptance of Daniel, a homosexual friend of theirs, and an open sharing of their heterosexual experiences. In an effort to protect and consolidate their friendship, Julio and Tenoch have drawn up the *Charolastra*'s Manifesto, which demands total loyalty to those admitted into the *Charolastra* club. However, during the course of their road trip their secret sexual betrayals are revealed, and the journey results in their shared homosexual experience—a brutal honesty from which they both recoil. The journey goes too far, and they reject what they find (Tenoch is even sick the following morning—suggesting a physical reaction to both the alcoholic excesses and the sexual activities of the previous night). Although they appear to accept their gay friend, they still deny that homosexuality could form part of their own selves. In their ability to repress this act through their unspoken pact of silence, we see how the teenagers carefully pick and choose the experiences that will form their adult personalities. The boys are consciously constructing their identities as they grow up, and they hurry home from the beach looking for the security of home after the ambiguities revealed on the road: freedom proves too dangerous when it allows them to overstep the traditional boundary of male friendship that excludes desire.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Y tu mamá también* displays a combination of subversive and conventional attitudes in its exploration of personal and national identity. Cuarón makes effective use of the road movie genre as a tool of criticism against certain perceived injustices and misrepresentations, although his topics and methods are also limited.

In terms of personal identity, the film uses a depiction of teenage sexuality to blur the boundaries of sexual identity. The overactive libidos of the teenage boys reduce every relationship to the sexual, ultimately even their own friendship. In an unguarded moment the boys share a sexual experience; but in the sober light of day they consider the social implications

of their actions (including the potential loss of family support and social position), and surrender their friendship in order to protect their heterosexual identities. This situation lends the film a subversive aspect, because it implies that distinct categories of sexuality are socially constructed rather than naturally determined. Cuarón also plays with the generic trope of character development through movement, by having his male protagonists gain self-knowledge only to suppress what they find. In terms of gender roles, however, the film is less subversive than it originally seemed. While Luisa has a significant role, this road movie is still principally focussed on the experiences of the male characters.

In terms of national identity, premature or violent deaths of *campesinos* and migrants are used to criticize aspects of the contemporary social and political situation. The various anecdotes and peripheral characters that surround the central trio all combine to create a wider representation of the Mexican population than is conventionally found in mainstream cinema. But while *Y tu mamá también* undoubtedly promotes the inclusion of different races and classes within the national community, the view points of subaltern characters are only related through the voice-over, rather than through their own voices: it could be argued that this strategy casts the filmmaker in a paternalistic role in relation to the disenfranchised Mexican poor. However, the objective style of the voice-over could also be designed to increase the credibility of the facts presented to the audience: as a device more commonly associated with the documentary, the voice-over encourages us to accept these facts as a reality.

I would argue that Cuarón uses the road movie structure to subtly subvert the rigid categorization of sexuality, and to widen the imagined community of the Mexican nation. Recently, Michael Chanan traced an enduring allegorical style, from the militant Third Cinema of the 1960s through to contemporary Latin American art cinema, which ‘throws the nation as an imagined community into disarray by giving image and voice to the marginal and subaltern’.¹⁴ Alfonso Cuarón’s *Y tu mamá también* lies at

¹⁴ Michael Chanan, ‘Latin American Cinema: From Underdevelopment to Postmodernism’

the crossroads of Latin American art house and mainstream cinema, adopting and adapting the road movie genre to include aspects from the margins of the Mexican nation within a commercially successful film.

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