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Realism and National Identity in *Y tu Mamá También*: an Audience Perspective

Armida de la Garza

When referring to cinema and its emancipatory potential, realism, like Plato's *pharmakon*, has signified both illness and cure, poison and medicine. On the one hand, realism is regarded as the main feature of so-called classical cinema, inherently conservative and thoroughly ideological, its main *raison d'être* being to reify and make a particular version of the status quo believable and to pass it out as 'reality' (Burch, 1990; MacCabe, 1974). On the other, realism has also been interpreted as a quest for truth and social justice, as in the positivist ethos that informs documentary (Zavattini, 1953). Even in the latter sense, however, the extent to which realism has served colonizing ends when used to investigate the 'truth' of the Other has also been noted, rendering the form profoundly suspicious (Chow, 2007, p. 150). For realism has been a Western form of representation, one that can be traced back to the invention of perspective in painting and that peaked with the secular worldview brought about by the Enlightenment. And like realism, the nation state too is a product of the Enlightenment, nationalism being, as it were, a secular replacement for the religious —that is enchanted or fantastic— worldview. In this way, realism, cinema and nation are inextricably linked, and equally strained under the current decline of the Enlightenment paradigm.

This chapter looks at *Y tu Mamá También* by Alfonso Cuarón (2001), a highly successful road movie with documentary features, to explore the ways in which realism, cinema and nation interact with each other in the present conditions of 'globalization' as experienced in Mexico. The chapter compares and contrasts various

interpretations of the role of realism in this film put forward by critics and scholars and other discourses about it circulating in the media with actual ways of audience engagement with it.

First, a brief summary of the plot. *Y tu Mamá También* tells the story of a journey undertaken by Mexican teenage friends Julio and Tenoch with Luisa, an older woman from Spain they are hoping to seduce, to an as yet unexplored beach in the south of Mexico. The journey turns out to be a decisive one in many ways, as it becomes a search for and discovery of identity. The film features many of the generic conventions of both the teenpic and a (Mexican) version of the road movie. A realist mode is often adopted—for instance in the film's foregrounding of local landscape, use of local language, indigenous actors, spatial specificity, hinting at local issues such as military men stopping travellers on their way to the beach and so on. In this sense, this particular rendition of a Hollywood-style genre film with a national inflection is in line with strategies often employed by filmmakers in a post-national era, when attempting to produce a 'crossover' that will successfully address a national audience as well as one beyond geographical boundaries and maximize profits. (D'Lugo, 2004, p. 113) Realist conventions as featured in *Y tu Mamá* can also be understood in the same context, as part of 'the tradition of international art cinema...[of realist depictions] that became prominent in the global film festival and art house circuit by the late 1990s' and which has been central to the creation of the 'global literacy' of an incipient 'cosmopolitan citizenship' (McGrath, 2007, p. 82; Ezra and Rowden, 2006, pp. 3-4).

However, the film also features the off voice of a narrator providing additional information on the characters and situations the camera encounters —albeit not necessarily providing narrative closure by suturing over narrative gaps as is often the

case in genre film, but underscoring the partial nature or version of the ‘reality’ the spectator faces— and the camera itself at times seems to go astray of characters and scenes in the story to dwell on other people and places around, as if switching to an observational documentary mode. This in-built reflexivity results in an ambiguous, but highly successful hybrid form.¹ Apart from receiving numerous awards and prizes and becoming a sort of cult movie in the New Mexican Cinema known as the *Buena Onda*, it has been the object of some of the most interesting debate and discussion on national identity and realism on film in what is often called a ‘global era’.²

To Andrea Noble, for instance, apart from bringing ‘modernity into dialogue with tradition’ in its road movie guise, *Y tu Mamá* is mainly a film on (still not) seeing the Other. On the failure of one part of Mexico, namely the one that gained the most out of the construction of the nation-state and the revolution, represented by Julio and Tenoch, to acknowledge and address the disadvantaged situation of those Others left out of the nationalist revolutionary project of hybridization and *mestizaje*, incarnated by Indians and peasants in the film, characters they encounter, but do not see.

Ascribing what John Mraz would call an anti-picturesque stance to the representation of the latter in the film, or what Noble herself calls ‘eschewing folkloric spectacle à la Eisenstein, Figueroa and Fernández et al.’ she contends ‘the trappings of conventional documentary style’ deployed in the film serve the function of ‘exposing the human cost of advancing neoliberal reform.’ (Mraz in León, 2002; Noble, 2005, p. 144) In this interpretation, despite the conservative strand of *Y tu Mamá* qua road movie-cum-teenpic, its social-realist side still allows it to make a progressive intervention regarding the effects of economic reform on class and ethnicity, and a reflection on the nation state in Mexico today.

By contrast, Maria Josefina Saldaña Portillo brings a psychoanalytic theoretical framework to bear on *Y tu Mamá*, which to her is mainly an allegory on (the loss of) sovereignty in Mexico today, underpinned by a ‘stereotypical oedipal narrative solved positively against a backdrop of an exotic and primitive Mexico’, far removed from the anti-folkloric gaze Noble identifies (Saldaña-Portillo, 2005, p. 752). The very names of the characters, Saldaña contends, elicit a reading in which Tenoch Iturbide is to be understood as a PRI-father, whose power and authority the people, that is Julio Zapata, desire, manifested, among many other ways, by Julio’s very desire of sleeping with Tenoch’s mother as well —a desire which gives the film its name, *Y tu Mamá También*—, and by a need of both Tenoch and Julio to re-enact *mestizaje* ‘in this new, neoliberal Mexico’ by sleeping with Mum Spain, that is, with Luisa Cortés (who plays a Spanish character in the film), in a bid to incorporate ‘an ideal imperial whiteness,’ to neutralise intervention (Saldaña, 2005, p. 761).³ This however will prove impossible. Julio and Tenoch attempt to restore the consensus that prevailed —if often through co-option or corruption— under the corporatist but stable regime of the PRI, with its modicum of social redistribution. But economic forces unleashed by globalisation in the shape of NAFTA render this an impossible task. In the end, viewers learn that after that fateful journey in which they slept with each other as well as with Luisa, their friendship ended and they never saw each other again. In this sense, ‘realist’ said of *Y tu Mamá También* would have mimetic connotations, referring to its purported ability to render an accurate depiction of a historical moment in Mexico, a moment in which the transformative forces of capitalism which first fostered the nation state challenge it as it increasingly subordinates political —and aesthetic— autonomy to economic performance. In the words of Leonardo García Tsao, the film was successful, among other reasons, on

account of 'its ability to capture the Zeitgeist'. (García-Tsao in Wood, 2006, p. 90). And apart from plot, this is also obvious in the very way the film was produced: outside the realm of IMCINE, and of state financed film production, and fully funded by private sources in Mexico (Smith, 2003).

Nuala Finnegan also sees *Y tu Mamá* as being mainly about national identity, but is a lot more concerned with the way it is brought about structurally, by the interaction between the global and the local as played out in the film. Rather than providing a reading concentrating just on Mexican history, she points to the ways realism serves to situate Mexico in a global context, as with references made by the narrator to globalization, which will be the topic of the president's speech the following day; the juxtaposition of Tenoch and Julio's Mexican Spanish to that of Luisa's from Spain; and the diegetic, hybrid soundtrack (Finnegan, 2007, p. 32). She also takes the multiple references made to death, perhaps part of the realism of the *mise-en-scène*, to be a universal topic but also one deeply rooted in a specifically Mexican cultural understanding.

In short, all three accounts outlined above, and many others in the media in Mexico and abroad, acknowledge both a generic and a social-realist strand in *Y tu Mamá También*, and generally conclude it is because of the latter that, even if in a rather lukewarm manner, the film can nonetheless be inscribed within the progressive, liberating side of the realist tradition of cinematic representation. Progressive meanings also continue to be attached to the film by means of the star persona of Gael García Bernal, who claimed Julio Zapata to be the character he most identifies with from among all those he has performed, in an interview that also foregrounds his credentials as a man who taught Huichol Indians to read and write, took part in the peaceful uprising in Chiapas in 1994 and took a public stance against the invasion of

Iraq (Sullivan, 2006). As a producer, García Bernal continues to stand for indigenous causes, financing *Cochochi*, a film by Laura Guzmán and Israel Cárdenas on the life of two brothers from the Tarahumara region in the north of Mexico (MacNab, 2007).

But whatever progressive features the film would apparently derive and exhibit from its realism, as Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment have persuasively argued, the main potentially emancipatory value of realism in popular film from a cognitivist perspective lies in its ability to cue spectators into questioning the status quo, that is, into altering received schemata for making sense of their social world. ‘Our engagement with popular film is predicated on our experience of the world, but films themselves can alter the ways in which we understand and experience the world, potentially introducing alternative social and moral schemata’ (Hallam and Marshment, 2000, p. 130). Was this the case with the young Mexican audiences *Y tu Mamá También* was largely aimed at?

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From interviews I conducted in Mexico in August 2007 it would certainly seem so.⁴ While a broad range of views was expressed as regards whether they had found the film, in their words, ‘actually really very good’, ‘refreshing, innovative’ and ‘a pleasant surprise’ or ‘cheap, vulgar, and misleading to foreign audiences as to what Mexico is really like’, there seemed to be consensus that the film had succeeded in cuing interrogation of what it means to be Mexican for a new generation, one growing up in the aftermath of NAFTA. The questioning however had nothing to do with the social issues that academic and media discourses had consistently ascribed to *Y tu Mamá* as main concerns: the fate of peasants and indigenous populations both in

Mexico and when forced into migration, the rupture of the —however minimal— welfare state anchored in the nationalist-revolutionary consensus that emerged from the revolution, the human cost of globalization and the imposition of a neoliberal worldview in Latin America. The only, overriding concern mentioned by all interviewees had to do with representations of gender and sexuality, the strand of the film that is taken to be the most formulaic and conservative in terms of its deployment of realist conventions but that was, in most cases, the feature identified by interviewees as ‘very realistic’.⁵

While many interviewees interpreted the homoerotic relation between Julio and Tenoch negatively, and indeed quoted this ending as the main cause of disappointment with the film, others viewed it as simply the product of the excess that otherwise characterized Julio and Tenoch’s lives —an excess that on the other hand they regarded as ‘natural’ to the social class and age group the characters represent and in that sense not as ‘excessive’ as in a Bataillesque reading of it, signifying a surplus that would challenge the status quo. More interestingly however, many more thought in fact the main point of the film was an exploration of the boundaries that sort, classify and seek to regulate relations of love and sexual desire, particularly an exploration of how and when these boundaries are raised in relationships between men. Many of the interviewees seemed to have derived a Foucauldian concept of homosexuality from the film, namely as a category not in the realm of ‘essence’ or being, and as such a deviation from the norm that allows ‘heterosexuality’ to hold together, but in the realm of doing, that is, in the realm of contingency, and from that point of view a position to be taken —or not— in a more fluid continuum of sexual behaviour (Foucault, 1983). This was expressed in positive terms, as if the viewing of this particular behaviour on the part of the social —and Mexican— types Julio and

Tenoch are supposed to represent had been interpreted as a liberatory experience. In one of the interviewee's own words:

This story about the buddies, this sort of secret society they belong to, they are three or four guys these so-called *charolastras* and I think that is fine because I have a group of friends just like that, who are that close... [others giggle] yes, they are close and I think that this matter of sex more than homosexuality, this communion that they have, this friendship that goes beyond body matters and brings them together to become one [is the most important aspect of the film, what makes it good].⁶

Moreover, when another one of the interviewees expressed her disappointment with the film saying she had been 'let down' by 'everything that went on, and just for them to turn out to be gay in the end' another male participant replied 'they were not gay'.⁷ Yet another interviewee identified as the 'serious' or 'realistic' aspect of the film 'the feelings these two friends have for each other. That is the serious side. Because *often you cannot tell the boundaries* of friendship' and another one thought the 'realistic' side was 'the friendship that is broken'.⁸ From the discussion that ensued it was evident that the film had succeeded into cueing viewers to interrogate the meaning of categories such as 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual', and allowed for a more nuanced, ambiguous understanding of sexuality as a broad spectrum of multiple possible positions.

Moreover, drawing on Richard Dyer's seminal work on stars, in particular his argument that 'stars matter because they act out aspects of life that matter to us; and performers get to be stars when what they act out matters to enough people' I would

argue that it is in fact this alternative Mexican masculinity put forward by Gael García Bernal as Julio and Diego Luna as Tenoch that paved their way for becoming ‘stars’ (Dyer, 2005 [1986], p.17).⁹ Interviewees repeatedly identified García Bernal’s ability to perform a variety of roles in which a contestation of received sexual behaviour took place as the main reason they admired him, among these roles his character as a lascivious priest in *The Crime of Father Amaro* (*El Crimen del Padre Amaro*, Carlos Carrera, 2002) and a transvestite in *La Mala Educación* (Pedro Almodóvar, Spain, 2004). They also explicitly contrasted García Bernal with that earlier icon of Mexican masculinity enshrined in the national cinema, Pedro Infante, stating that while Infante earned his reputation and fame ‘by always playing the same character, and playing himself at that’ García Bernal had earned it by having no fixed identity, by being someone different every time while always being a version of a male they read as ‘Mexican’. That a ‘commutation test’ rendered Infante completely inconceivable in any of García Bernal’s roles, but that both were acknowledged as ‘very Mexican’ by interviewees is telling indeed about the extent to which constructions of gender have changed within the broader discourse of the nation and national belonging (Thompson, 1991, pp. 184-185).¹⁰ Significantly, García Bernal’s star image has been kept open to both female and male fan engagement with it, and although his career path has also been remarkably transnational to date, interpreting Spanish, Argentine and even Chicano characters, interviewees consistently cast him as ‘Mexican’ during the interviews.

Indeed, it is definitely true that *Y tu Mamá* was made and shown in Mexico at a time when there was intense social debate on gender and sexuality issues, which must also be regarded as part and parcel of the upheaval caused by processes of ‘globalization’ or, as more accurately put by David Harvey, by the deep social and

economic changes the passage from mass industrial production' to 'globalized regimes of flexible accumulation' has brought about, as these have entailed 'the emergence of entirely new sectors of production...new markets and, above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial...innovation' (Harvey, 1989, pp. 8-9). Some of these new markets include segments of the population previously marginalized on account of their sexual orientation, now re-conceptualized as primarily potential consumers, and all the more since they can be reached transnationally, as a niche market.¹¹ In 2000 the 'Ley de Sociedades de Convivencia' (Law regulating co-habitation) was proposed for the first time, aiming at legalising homosexual unions by granting them the same status ascribed to marriage. The law was passed in Mexico City only on 10 November 2006. Abortion too was legalised on 7 May 2007, and divorce is allowed on the grounds of domestic violence as of 21 February 2007.¹² However, all these regulations have been narrowly passed, as the conservative National Action Party (PAN) that won the general election in 2000 and 2006 with strong support from Catholic constituents has continued to oppose them. It nevertheless seems conservative positions have been losing ground, despite relative political victories.

On the whole, the characters of Julio and Tenoch are best understood within a domestic social context in which the near privatization of the film industry, the proliferation of the multiplex in the more privileged neighbourhoods of cities and price liberalization of tickets promoted a reconfiguration of the audience, who became decidedly more middle class, better educated and younger. On the other hand, the film must also be understood within the framework of trends to fragmentation and heterogenization within national boundaries that have characterized flexible accumulation, and moves towards the articulation of new markets have resulted in the—relative—empowerment of a hitherto marginalized segment of the population.

In fact, returning to specific issues of realism, there are a number of similarities between the way this was employed in Black Urban Cinema in the US in the 1990s, ‘one of those moments in the history of film when realism has been deployed progressively’ as regards representation of a marginalized segment of the population—if on ethnic grounds—and the way it was *interpreted* by interviewed audiences of *Y tu Mamá También* regardless inherent features of the film itself (Hallam and Marshment, 2000, p. 52). It is true that, in both, ‘the use of linear narrative time...coincides with a coming of age thematic...creating an overlap’ as if both the characters and the nation were coming of age (Hallam and Marshment, 2000, p. 52). In both too the stories present, realistically, ‘characters that change with the unfolding of the story line’ (Diawara, 2000, p. 255). And like the New Black Urban Cinema, which was regarded as ‘realist’ by young audiences on account of its theme—that is, Black males’ initiation into manhood— and its ‘use of hip hop culture, which [was] the new Black youth culture’, *Y tu Mamá* too was described as realist on very similar grounds: ‘The action takes place in Mexico and if you are Mexican it rings familiar when you go to see it, it brings back memories from our own experience, that is what made it popular here in Mexico, that all of us young people found some ground to identify ourselves with’.¹³

Further, Manthia Diawara has credited Black urban cinema with modifying the ‘grammar book’ provided by *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915) for the cinematic representation of Black people. Prior to the Black Urban Cinema of the 1990s, Black people appeared on Hollywood screens as ‘a problem’ who existed ‘primarily for White spectators whose comfort and understanding the films must seek...there are no simple stories about Black people...without reference to the White world’. (Diawara, 2000, p. 236) It would be somewhat exaggerated to describe *Y tu*

mamá in the same terms as regards gender, but representations that called into question essentialist notions of sexuality were all but absent from Mexican mainstream cinema before this film.¹⁴ Representations of gender that sought to portray the nation as a unified whole occurred within the framework of the family as a metaphor for the nation and were always hierarchical and mostly patriarchal, even if by the 1940s and 1950s some films successfully threatened the patriarchal ideology that was [by then] ‘so contradictory that it could no longer manage to exert full control’ (Hershfield, 2001, p. 151).

Be that as it may, what is clear is that *Y tu Mamá También* was definitely a timely intervention on a number of debates regarding social change in Mexico, employing realism in more than one way to address young audiences domestically and internationally, and which seems to have allowed for a slightly more progressive reading than would have seemed the case, despite —indeed, apparently thanks to— innovations made to its largely formulaic structure.

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Notes

¹ Box office was £16.5 million with over 400,000 tickets sold for theatrical release (IMDB).

² *Y tu Mamá También* won the award for best screenplay in Venice in 2001, and Gael García Bernal and Diego Luna (actors in the film) were also granted the Marcello Mastroianni award there. In addition, the film was nominated for the Golden Lion at Venice that year, and for both the Oscar and BAFTA in 2003. It also won the prize from the Societies of Film Critics in Boston, Los Angeles and Australia (2002), Chicago, Florida and London (2003) and a Fipresci prize in Havana in 2001 went to Alfonso Cuarón for ‘the good melange of the comic and the tragic expressed in a very sophisticated style’ (IMDB). In Mexico, it was awarded a special *Diosa de Plata* (Pre-hispanic Silver Goddess) in 2002. The *Diosa de Plata* is an award granted each year by the Film Journalists Association in Mexico.

³ PRI stands for Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party). Agustín de Iturbide ruled Mexico from 21 July 1822 to 19 March 1823. Emiliano Zapata was a revolutionary peasant leader fighting for ‘land and freedom’.

⁴ This chapter is based on interviews conducted in August 2007 among students in higher education in Mexico as part of the research for a project entitled *Transnational Cinema in Globalizing Societies*, on audience reception of transnational films, funded by the University of Nottingham.

⁵ Not that much academic and media discourse had not dealt with these aspects of the film as well. Baer and Long for example argued that the ‘social realist interstitial

scenes’ and the male voiceover impose a sort of authoritarian narrative closure on the liberatory potential of the gender and sexual —homoerotic and liberated feminine sexuality— narrative that the central plot mainly addresses (Baer and Long, 2004, pp. 150-168). Others have also seen a conservative twist in Luisa’s foreign status, ostensibly not representing a Mexican woman, and regard her death at the end of the film as punishment for her liberation.

⁶ ‘...*Esta historia como de los cuates, esta como logia que tienen, que son como tres o cuatro los charolastras, creo que está bien porque así tengo un grupo de amigos así de cercanos* (others giggle)... *si son cercanos, y yo siento que esta cuestión del sexo y eso mas que la homosexualidad, esta comunión que tienen, esta amistad que supera la cuestión corpórea y los lleva a ser uno mismo a ellos* [is the most important aspect of the film, what makes it good]’ (EA, male, age 20). All translations are mine.

⁷ ‘*Todos los acontecimientos que desencadenan y que ellos resulta que eran gays, no*’ ‘*No eran gays*’. (C, female, age 20 and A, male, age 22 respectively)

⁸ ‘*Los sentimientos que tienen estos dos amigos. Ese es el lado serio porque o sea, muchas veces no sabes cual es la barrera entre amigos o si sientes algo mas por ese amigo*’ and ‘*la amistad que se rompe*’. (TC and S respectively, both female, age 20, emphasis mine.)

⁹ Further, Dyer also argues that ‘...stars function in terms of their assertion of the irreducible core of inner individual reality’, which also points at a crucial way in which realism is used in *Y tu Mamá* through García Bernal star’s persona (Dyer, 2005 [1986], p. 10)

¹⁰ Indeed, it is no coincidence that at this time of reconfiguration of gender roles as part of the broader social reconfiguration of the national as—fragmented—markets García Bernal’s ability to impersonate was valued by respondents. As Barry King has

argued, there is an authorial dimension to impersonation as opposed to personification or casting, as the latter relies more on mimesis or direct resemblance (King, 1991, p. 176). It is therefore more reassuring to believe in a kernel of truth that holds the star persona of García Bernal together, the ultimate —presumably *real*—source of all impersonations and the guarantor of a purported identity existing beyond performance, than on a star in which persona and characters overlap, as was the case with Infante.

¹¹ B. Ruby Rich quotes the New Homosexual Film festivals in Mexico and Brazil as ‘powerful seedbeds for local production in this regard’ (Rich, 2006, p. 621).

¹² Statistics also show profound changes taking place as regards marriage and divorce in Mexico: while in 1970 there were only three divorces for every 100 marriages, in 2005 there were 12 on average. And while 51 per cent of women married between the ages of 15-19 in 1950 the percentage today is 26 per cent (INEGI, 2007).

¹³ ‘Sucede en México y tu como mexicana vas y la ves y dices: “me acuerdo cuando no se que”, no, entonces eso es lo que hizo que aquí en México gustara, no, que todos los chavos nos identificamos con ciertas cosas’ (TC, female student age 20).

¹⁴ Even in the art realm films have tended to put forward representations of either homoerotic desire, as in *Midaq Alley* (*El Callejón de los Milagros*, Jorge Fons, Mexico, 1995), or transvestism, as in *The Place Without Limits* (*El Lugar sin Límites*, Arturo Ripstein, 1978), or of homosexuality, as in almost the entirety of the work of Jaime Humberto Hermosillo. But far from being interrogated, these categories were here reified.