

Analyse and discuss the representation of ONE OR MORE of the following in Alfonso Cuarón's
Y tu mamá también: class, gender AND/OR sexuality

(Danny Concha)

Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* (2001) is, in every sense, a piece of hybrid cinema which straddles between global and region-specific filmmaking conventions. It is a 'Mexicanised' teen/road movie which combines internationally-recognised genres with aesthetics and social commentary concerning contemporary Mexico. Despite (or perhaps because of) its immense commercial success – with significant profits amassed in Mexico (US \$11m), the US (US \$13.6m) and distribution across 39 countries – *YTMT* has often been criticised for its lack of depth, scope and authenticity. Whilst the film's marketability undoubtedly owes itself to the popular appeal of its ostensibly generic celebration of hedonistic male-centred sexuality, I propose that Cuarón does in fact achieve a certain level of depth in its representation of class, gender and indeed sexuality; a depth which transcends the limitations of the teen/road movie genre, albeit only to a certain extent.

By all accounts, Cuarón's initial representation of sexuality in *YTMT* is undoubtedly generic and highly conventional. Noble claims that 'the film follows the logic of the road movie as a vehicle for a male-centred escapist fantasy'¹, which is clearly reflected in the film's instantly-recognisable plot structure; two sex-crazed adolescent best friends – Tenoch Iturbide (Diego Luna) and Julio Zapatero (Gael Garcia Bernal) – set out on a road-trip adventure through rural Mexico with the shared goal of seducing and sexually conquering the attractive "older woman", Luisa Cortés (Maribel Verdú). Given this, the narrative can be seen to align itself closely with the characteristic features of the teen/road movie genre; a genre which Haywood considers to be a somewhat exclusive 'genre for boys', which celebrates a 'totally heterosexualised' male bond whilst objectifying and relegating all female characters to a 'marginalised' role which merely serves to 'guarantee the heroes' heterosexuality'².

¹ Andrea Noble, "Seeing the Other Through Film: From *Y tu mamá también* to *¡Que viva México!* and Back Again. *Mexican National Cinema*, (Routledge, 2005) pp.123

² Susan Haywood, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, (London Routledge, 2002) pp.52

This vision is firmly established in the film's opening sequence, as both Tenoch and Julio are introduced in highly sexualised contexts which privilege the male over the female. In both cases, the characters are depicted having sex with their girlfriends – Ceci and Ana – in parallel scenes that project a distinctly male gaze; a gaze which marginalises, objectifies and eroticises the female. The film itself opens *in medias res*, with Tenoch at the point of climax in an intensely eroticised scene, due largely to the use of warm lighting and enhanced diegetic moaning sounds (Still A). The ensuing dialogue projects the film's male gaze, as Ceci is made to promise that she won't "coger con ningún italiano... ni con ningún pinche gringo mochilero" in an interchange that is at once both humorous and deeply possessive and objectifying. This male-centred perspective of women is further developed in the following scene, as Julio's girlfriend Ana is depicted in pseudo-pornographic terms. Ana is made to embody the nymphomaniac 'teen movie' stereotype by immediately revealing full-frontal nudity and demanding that Julio also climaxes inside her so that she can "llevarme un poco de tí conmigo" (Still B). Both female characters are objectified and thus function as mere plot devices (alongside Julio's activist sister who provides the boys with their vehicle), to spur the film's sex-obsessed narrative forwards. For this reason, there exists the common misconception that *YTMT* concerns sex and little else³.

Cuarón's decision to place male sexuality firmly in the foreground may well boil down to the fact that 'sex sells', in a commercial sense. This is suggested by Acevez-Muñoz, who claims the film 'capitalises on its emphasis on sexuality... to "pass" internationally'⁴, and references the global popularity of hit films such as *American Pie* (1999) and *Road Trip* (2000) as examples of the blueprint which *YTMT* consequently chose to emulate. This assertion is strengthened when we consider that the film was promoted in a way that 'unashamedly play[ed] for pleasure', given that the *YTMT* official website chose not to focus not on the film's potential for national allegory or transgressive scenes of sex and gender relations, but instead invited online visitors to engage in a puerile game of 'shoot down flying phalluses that flit across the screen'⁵. In light of this, it is apparent that Cuarón's representation of sexuality in *YTMT* was, at least partially, conditioned by a desire to create a commercially 'sellable' product.

This said, the film's generic representation of sexuality is undermined and, to some extent, questioned. Cuarón achieves this predominantly through his depiction of Luisa as a psychologically complex and sympathetic individual. Indeed, Luisa is presented as a protagonist

³ See Lacey's review *The Global Times* – "Y Tu Mamá También: Sex, sex, and oh, did I mention sex?"

⁴ Ernesto Acevedo-Munoz, "Sex, Class, and Mexico in Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también*". *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* (CSFC, 2004), pp.39

⁵ Paul Julian Smith, "Heaven's Mouth", *BFI Sight and Sound* pp.2

in her own right and is not subject to the same objectifying/eroticising gaze that define the film's other female characters. Indeed, Luisa embodies what Muñoz terms as *YTMT*'s 'counter-epic function', as she is the instrumental component behind the film's tendency to engage in 'non-hegemonic storytelling' and the 'deconstructive focalisation on the marginal'⁶. In contrast to Tenoch and Julio, Luisa's introduction is accompanied by an in-depth biography, delivered through the film's extra-diegetic voice-over narration. The biographic details – which reveal that she was orphaned aged ten and subsequently nursed her ailing grandmother – serve to undermine the film's initial objectifying/eroticising gaze. Audiences are invited to empathise with Luisa as a complex character, thus dispelling the possibility of her becoming just another marginal figure to guarantee Tenoch and Julio's heterosexuality.

Whilst Cuarón systematically adds depth to Luisa's psychological complexity and emotional predicament (with an ominous visit to the doctor and her husband Jano's confessed affair), her complete removal from the eroticising male gaze is suggested in the scene where the boys spy on her on the first night of their trip. During this sequence, in every sense reminiscent of the *American-Pie* 'teen movie' narrative, both the boys and viewer expect to voyeuristically witness a sexualised image of Luisa in her room. This expectation is ruptured as the POV shot instead reveals a weeping (and fully clothed!) Luisa, whose figure is framed within the claustrophobic mise-en-scène of the cheap motel setting, shot in deep focus with the out-of-focus foreground image of the broken windowpane adding to the sense of emotional suffering and self-fragmentation. The contrast between the boys' voyeuristic mischief (Still C) and the subsequent image of acute emotional pain (Still D) further disrupts the generic expectations of the teen/road movie and exposes the film's initial focus on hedonistic sex to be both frivolous and disengaged.

This said, Luisa also plays a more active role in undermining the film's male-centred representation of sexuality and gender. Throughout the road-trip dialogue, Cuarón reverses conventional gender roles by having Luisa instigate and direct the boys' misogynistic banter and by emphasising that it is the *female* who is experienced and authoritative when it comes to sexual matters. Shaw asserts that the presence of Luisa means that 'the boys' macho posturing [is] unmasked and their inexperience... revealed'⁷, which can be clearly observed in the scene where Luisa shocks the boys by asking whether they have ever pleased their girlfriends "en el culo". This climactic moment – in response to Julio's cocky remarks that "yo...hago de todo" – exposes the boys' behaviour and relentless boasting as a form of 'counterfeit *machismo*'⁸. Whilst their

⁶ Muñoz, pp.40-3

⁷ Deborah Shaw, "(Trans)National Images and Cinematic Spaces: the cases of Alfonso Cuarón's "Y tu mamá también" (2001) and Carlos Reygadas' "Japón" (2002)". (IEV, 2011), pp.121

⁸ Muñoz, pp.42

dramatic reaction to this perceived taboo may be considered as an indicator of their latent homosexual anxieties, it also marks Luisa's transition from passenger, to a position of total authority. As the instigator becomes educator, it is Luisa who is placed firmly in the metaphorical driving seat.

This gender role-reversal becomes crystallised when Luisa seduces each of the boys in turn. This pivotal sequence of events transforms Luisa from sexual *prize* to sexual *agent* as she becomes the 'seductress' in the narrative rather than the generic role of 'seduced'. This transformation is suggested by Baer, who argues that whilst 'Luisa constitutes a projection screen for the fantasies of Julio and Tenoch... she is also represented as a powerful manipulator who plays the two off against one another in order to fulfil her own desires'⁹. The dynamics of this active manipulation are clearly reflected in the cinematography and blocking of the Tenoch/Luisa seduction scene, whereby the medium shot is positioned behind Tenoch – wearing only a towel – thus exposing him as vulnerable and powerless; a depiction that is further enhanced through Luisa's authoritative dialogue, in which she demands "quítate la toalla" *and* "porque no te haces una paja" (Still E). Tenoch's feeble reluctance – captured the muted line, "no" – is at once emasculating and victimizing, thus confirming that the male gaze has been reversed and it is Tenoch (rather than Luisa) who becomes objectified and eroticised; a full reversal of the film's initial vision.

Luisa's emasculating role in narrative leads Baer to assert that she is a 'castrating woman'¹⁰. Whilst Baer applies this more in terms of national allegory, it can equally be applied to representations of sexuality and gender, as Luisa's actions undermines both conventional notions of masculinity and indeed heterosexuality. Through sex with Tenoch and Julio respectively, Luisa – either purposefully or inadvertently – deconstructs any sense of triumphant, masculine sexual conquest as in both cases, the sex is clumsy, short-lived and ends with both boys in an apologetic and child-like stat, cradled by Luisa in positions of total dependence. This emasculation is taken even further by Cuarón in the concluding moments of the road trip, when Luisa initiates a homoerotic encounter between Tenoch and Julio, where they are compelled – once more, through sex – to kiss passionately like lovers. In this sense, Donapetry is correct in asserting that Cuarón ultimately 'displays the typical machismo of his juvenile male characters and everything it represents, only to turn it inside out'¹¹, as Luisa forces them to confront not only the fragility of their gender assumptions, but also of their very sexuality. In this sense, Luisa 'castrates' the

⁹ Hester Baer and Ryan Long, "Transnational Cinema and the Mexican State in Alfonso Cuarón's "Y tu mamá también"". *South Central Review* (JHUP, 2004) pp.162

¹⁰ *ibid*, pp.163

¹¹ María Donapetry, "And Your Motherland Too: The Body of the Spanish Woman in *Y tu mamá también* (Chasqui, 2006), pp.91

fundamental male-centred principles that have come to define the road/teen movie genre.

Furthermore, Luisa's actions contribute to the representation of fragile male sexuality as a fundamental rivalry. This is explicitly expressed through the voice-over narrator's revelation that Luisa had broken "el equilibrio natural" of their friendship, which materialises at the point in which the boys reveal, in turn, that they have broken their *Charolastra* pact by sleeping with each other's girlfriends. Whilst these revelations compel the audience to re-evaluate even the most insignificant sexual banter – right down to the jokes about comparative penis – as indicative of a latent sexual rivalry between the two, Baer argues that the implications are wider reaching. For her, this absurd sexual rivalry exposes much deeper underlying class tensions between the wealthy and well-connected Tenoch and lower-middle-class Julio. She claims that up to the point of confession, both boys have been engaging in 'shared masturbatory fantasies which maintains their...cross-class social bond', before adding that 'when clear demarcation of ownership breaks down and they admit to sleeping with the same women, this social bond becomes tenuous'¹².

This is explicitly explored in the car bust-up scene, which Muñoz describes as 'the most violent moment in the film, and one that underscores the question of class differences as even more important than the sexual plot'¹³. This is evident as Tenoch and Julio, fuelled by a sense of betrayal, reel off a string of class-based insults; Julio is branded a '*pinche nacote*' ('commoner') and '*arribista*' ('social climber'), whilst Tenoch is spat at for being a '*purruri de mierda*' ('shit-faced yuppy'). This aggressive exchange communicates Cuarón's own vision that 'the situation with the girl [Luisa] is a result of something that's going on between them which boils down to class conflict'¹⁴. Class tension is thus represented as the key obstacle in the boys' friendship; a notion that is visually depicted in the blocking and cinematography of the scene (Still F). It is notable that it is Julio who is positioned outside the car, in an inferior and more desperate position. He is represented as an *outsider*, banging on the window; an image that can be further analysed in light of Finnegan's reading of 'thresholds' in the film, as he considers doors and windows to function as motifs to signify 'barriers which seem open but are ultimately impenetrable'¹⁵. Thus the window of the car effectively symbolises the invisible barrier which divides Tenoch and Julio, as class conflict is presented as an unspoken yet tangible force in their relationship.

¹² Baer, pp.162

¹³ Muñoz, pp.46

¹⁴ A.G. Basoli, "Sexual awakenings and stark social realities: An interview with Alfonso Cuarón" (Cineaste, 2002), pp.28

¹⁵ Nuala Finnegan, "So what is Mexico really like?" Framing the Local, Negotiating the Global in Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también*. (Shaw ed.) *Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Breaking with the Global Market* (Plymouth, 2007), pp.40

Cuarón utilises two recurring and innovative cinematic techniques – the so-called ‘wandering eye’ camera and the voice-over narrative – to convey his representation of class as an unspoken, invisible tension. The first clear instance of the ‘wandering eye’ occurs when the camera pans through images of both Tenoch and then Julio’s domestic interiors, thus sharpening the contrast of wealth in their lives. Whilst the pre-Colombian ornaments simultaneously capture both the opulence and hypocrisy of the Iturbide family, the cramped conditions and washing hanging from a high-rise balcony reflects the relative poverty of the Zapateros household. This is further developed through the strategic use of voice-over narration, which elaborates on these unspoken class differences and anxieties, which ultimately strain the boys’ relationship:

“Entre lo mucho que olvidaron mencionar fue como Julio prendía incendillos para esconder el olor cuando iba al baño en casa de Tenoch, o como Tenoch levantaba con el pie el asiento del baño en casa de Julio”

These unspoken class differences, revealed through pan-shots and voiceover, are reflected in shots such as that of the motel scene (Still G), and suggest a disjunction between the ‘plot’ and the larger ‘story’ at work in the Tenoch/Julio friendship. Indeed, Noble notes how Cuarón is constantly ‘underlining the gap between the audio-visual knowledge of the viewer and that of the protagonists’¹⁶, thus placing the viewer in a privileged position of knowledge. Whilst the class conflict is clear to the audience, it remains concealed from the boys until their violent confrontation.

In addition, this representation of class tension on the personal level contributes to wider considerations of class inequality in Mexico as a whole. This is suggested by Noble’s opinion that *YTMT* ‘invariably fulfils an allegorical function with national inflections’, which invites the audience to ‘extend its understanding of the sexual and social betrayals that define the protagonists’ relationship, to the tensions that... separate urban, modern Mexico and its rural, indigenous counterpart, which is tantamount to a form of betrayal’. This link between the personal and the national, the microcosmic and macrocosmic, is suggested not only by the characters’ explicitly allegorical names, but also by the fact that Cuarón deploys the same aforementioned cinematographic techniques – the ‘wandering eye’ and ‘voice-over narration’ – to engage with wider social realities. This is evident with the representation of Chuy as a fisherman, who, according to the narrator will never fish again due to touristic developments in his homeland. For Noble, the tone of narration thus acquires a ‘distinct political charge, exposing the precariousness of the lives of the poor and also the human cost of advancing neoliberal reform’¹⁷.

¹⁶ Noble, pp.141

¹⁷ *ibid*, pp.143-5

However, whilst *YTMT* may seem set on exposing, undermining and ultimately criticising Mexican realities, this never fully materialises. With regards to class struggle, it would not be unjust to criticise Cuarón of completely shying away from any meaningful political commentary. Returning to the Chuy sub-story, no specific critique is expressed and more crucially, no one is blamed for the class inequalities that arise from globalisation and reform; a reluctance which Shaw attributes to the fact that ‘a film with global ambitions and dependent on US funding has deliberately sought to downplay any criticism of its northern neighbours’¹⁸. Likewise, the representation of gender and sexuality is also left half-baked as the film’s dominant female protagonist is consequently killed off and both Tenoch and Julio retreat back to the very status quo which the road-trip was supposed to liberate them from. Far from offering a solution to their latent sexual rivalry, homosexuality is rejected entirely by both boys and effectively ends their relationship. In a similar manner, the class conflict in their relationship remains firmly in place as Julio feels compelled to pay their final restaurant bill together, unable to bear the implications of accepting their class differences.

All in all, the depth that Cuarón achieves in his representation of class, gender and sexuality in *YTMT* never fully breaks away from the conventions of the Hollywood narrative. As Shaw notes, the film commences and indeed concludes with representations that are ultimately ‘filtered through an awareness of commercial imperatives’¹⁹. Despite setting out to dismantle generic masculinity, reverse traditional gender roles and expose latent class tensions on both personal and public spheres, *YTMT* falls frustratingly short of anything ground-breaking. Yet, considering the financial rewards and international recognition that mainstream, popular cinema offers to Latin American filmmakers, it is hardly surprising that Cuarón opted for marketability over depth.

¹⁸ Shaw, pp.124

¹⁹ *ibid*, pp.125

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FILM STILLS



(Still A)



(Still B)



(Still C)



(Still D)



(Still E)



(Still F)



(Still G)