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▷ (Trans)National Images and Cinematic Spaces: the cases of Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* (2001) and Carlos Reygadas' *Japón* (2002)

Introduction

In the decade between 2000 and 2010 more Mexican films have been given some form of international release than at any other time. These include *Amores perros* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2000) and *Y tu mamá también* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2001), *Perfume de violetas: nadie te oye/Violet Perfume: Nobody Hears You* (Marisa Sistach, 2001), *El crimen del Padre Amaro/The Crime of Father Amaro* (Carlos Carrera, 2002), Reygadas' three films *Japón* (2002), *Batalla en el cielo/Battle in Heaven* (2005) and *Stellet Licht/Silent Light* (2007), Fernando Eimbcke's *Temporada de patos/Duck Season* (2004) and *Lake Tahoe* (2008), *El violín/The Violin* (Francisco Vargas, 2005), *Rudo y Cursi* (Carlos Cuarón, 2008) and the horror films *KM 31: kilómetro 31/KM 31: kilómetro 31* (Rigoberto Castañeda, 2006), and *Somos lo que hay/We are What We Are* (Jorge Michel Grau, 2010). What is most significant is that despite much talk of a New Wave or *buena onda* in Mexico and a new generation of Mexican filmmakers (Menne 2007), no single vision, approach or style emerges relating to representations of the nation; rather, these films reveal a range of disparate narratives in disparate landscapes.

Thus, we have a number of thematic and narrative concerns, which include a multi-stranded take on the troubles of life and love set in an edgy, crime-ridden Mexico City in *Amores perros*; a vision of teenage travels in a folkloric, rural Mexico in *Y tu mamá también*; a young girl's hardships in an urban landscape in *Perfume de violetas: nadie te oye*; a tale of forbidden love between a priest and a young woman in a small rural town in *El crimen del Padre Amaro*; teenage identity concerns set among the interior of a working-class apartment in Mexico City in *Duck Season*; a focus on a revolutionary group in rural Mexico, and the struggle for social justice amid the repression of the authorities in *El violín*; and a series of intimate portraits of personal, sexual stories among different communities in Reygadas' films.¹ There are, of course, many other representations of Mexi-

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¹ Reygadas' films deal with the existential crisis of a city dweller in rural pre-modern Mexico in *Japón*, urban social and personal crises in *Batalla en el cielo*, and intimate portrayals of a marriage in crisis in the Mennonite community in *Stellet Licht*.

co in films that have not enjoyed international success, but this is not the focus of this paper.

Most of these films have seen a limited release at a few art cinemas or film festivals before securing a DVD distribution deal, while *Amores perros* and *Y tu mamá también* stand out in terms of their unprecedented global success. This success is due to the fact that, in contrast to many of the other films that can be firmly located within the category of art cinema, González Iñárritu and Cuarón foreground commercial aspects and apply internationally successful cinematic models to their films.² In this paper I take two examples of films from opposite ends of the commercial spectrum, *Y tu mamá también* and *Japón*, both of which found their way into international cinema spaces in the early part of the 2000s. I examine their place within the niche markets of the film industry and consider the ways in which this positioning impacts on the representation of the national and the landscape.

In broad terms, it can be argued that *Y tu mamá también* is an example of a specialized film, or a mainstream art film, characterized by its engagement with genres, while *Japón* is firmly located within the traditions of art cinema. Thus, before examining the film texts themselves, I will outline some of the central characteristics of these types of filmmaking. David Bordwell in his well-known essay “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice”, originally published in *Film Criticism* in 1979, sets the parameters for definitions for critics. He has noted that art cinema is characterised by “realism, authorship, and ambiguity”, as one of his subheadings indicates. He argued that it is “lacking identifiable stars and familiar genres” (Bordwell 2002: 97), and is a distinct mode which can be seen in opposition to classical Hollywood narrative norms through its rejection of the logic of a narrative cause and effect. There is thus frequently a “drifting episodic quality” to the narrative (96), while the characters are both “psychologically complex” and realistic (96).

Steve Neale concurs with much of this in his article “Art Cinema as Institution”, originally published in *Screen* in 1981, and he, like Bordwell, roots art cinema in a European context (his focus is on France, Germany, Italy and Britain).³ For Neale (2002: 104):

Art films tend to be marked by a stress on visual style (an engagement of the look in terms of a marked individual point of view rather than in terms of institutionalised spectacle), by a suppression of action in the Hollywood sense, by a consequent stress on character rather than plot and by an interiorisation of dramatic conflict.

He also highlights the privileged position of the director as author and foregrounds the importance of realism; he notes the primacy of “Art” in a classical and romantic sense, and like Bordwell stresses its differentiation from Hollywood products, although he focuses on art cinema as an institution, intimately linked to state film policies and constructions of national identities. For Neale, the “art cinema” label is crucial as a marketing tool allowing for the creation of “a niche within the international film market”

² These are ideas that I develop further in a monograph on the two directors, who are considered alongside Guillermo del Toro (Shaw 2012).

³ Galt and Shoonover (2010: 4) rightly challenge the Euro-American focus within film criticism, and prefer a more global and popular understanding of art cinema.

(118), sustained by the brand name of the author. It provides a “mechanism of discrimination” (119), and is a “means of producing and sustaining a division within the field of cinema overall; a division that functions economically, ideologically and aesthetically” (119). Art cinema films thus “rarely disturbed or altered” (119) the commercial film industry.

The separation of spaces for mainstream and art cinema texts has become less clear in recent years as a result of the development of popular and commercial films from around the world that defy traditional forms of categorisation. These films often adopt and adapt generic tropes found within sci-fi, thrillers, horror, gangster films and road movies, working within and at times, against these genres. This can be seen from a snapshot of films which fall into this group: *Abre los ojos/Open Your Eyes* (Amenábar, 1997), *Nueve reinas/Nine Queens* (Bielinsky, 2000), *Diarios de motocicleta/The Motorcycle Diaries* (Salles, 2004), *Old Boy* (Park, 2006), *Y tu mamá también, Caché/Hidden* (Haneke, 2005), *El laberinto del fauno/Pan's Labyrinth* (del Toro, 2006), *Låt den rätte komma in/Let the Right One In* (Alfredson, 2008), *Män som hatar kvinnor/The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Oplev, 2009), *L'instinct de mort/Mesrine: Killer Instinct* (Richet, 2008) and *L'ennemi public n° 1/Mesrine: Public Enemy # 1* (Richet, 2008), *Un prophète/A Prophet* (Audiard, 2009), *El orfanato/The Orphanage* (Bayona, 2007), *Los ojos de Julia/Julia's Eyes* (Morales, 2010), and *[Rec]* (Balagueró/Plaza, 2007) and *[Rec] 2* (Balagueró/Plaza, 2009). A number of these films have been shown at large commercial cinemas as well as at art cinemas, and have succeeded in breaking through the film festival route, which is often the last stop for many non-English language films. This has resulted in critics and journalists writing in trade papers such as *Variety*, film programmers, and bodies such as the now defunct The UK Film Council preferring to use the term “specialised”, rather than “art cinema” for this new form of filmmaking.

Y tu mamá también

Y tu mamá también certainly belongs in the category of the commercial art/specialised film, and, as I go on to discuss, presents an image of Mexico that will be familiar to tourists/travellers, an image that includes a depiction of rural Mexico for Mexican city dwellers. The budget of US\$ 5 million, while miniscule by Hollywood standards, was high by Mexican standards, as were the profits it made of US\$ 13.6 million in USA and US\$ 11 million in Mexico⁴, and it was distributed to 40 countries (Vargas 2002). The high investment in promotion in Mexico paid off (Priego 2002): the film broke existing box office records for a domestic film and was screened at 250 theatres where it took US\$ 2.2 million in its first week (García Tsao 2001b).

Y tu mamá también became a global hit thanks to the fact that from its inception its international sales were to be represented by the US independent company Good Machine International. Cuarón explains that they recouped funds before exhibiting the film as they had pre-sold it to Good Machine (Fernández 2001). Indeed, the film was

⁴ “Box Office/Business for ‘Y Tu Mamá También’”, in: < <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0245574/business>> (05.04.2011).

conceived through discussion with the director and Ted Hope, the co-founder of the company⁵. Thus, both production funding and access to transnational distribution and exhibition networks was taken care of before the film was even made. In the United States distribution rights were sold to the auteurist, independent New York-based distribution company IFC; in Mexico they were bought by the transnational corporation 20th Century Fox, and in the UK the rights were bought by the independent company Icon.

The film thus challenges frequently made, simplistic associations of non-English language films with purist forms of art cinema, and was aimed at a number of market sectors not usually targeted by Spanish language films, in a similar way to *El laberinto del fauno*. This can be illustrated through comments made by Bob Berney, at the time Senior Vice-President for Marketing and Distribution for IFC⁶:

[t]he film broke away from the foreign-language market and showed that a Spanish-language film is not a foreign-language [movie] in the U.S. The film became a crossover mainstream film with all the major theater chains wanting to play it (cited in Miller/Schiwy/Hernández Salván 2012).⁷

In plot terms *Y tu mamá también* is very simple. Two teenage boys, Tenoch (Diego Luna) and Julio (Gael García Bernal), are on summer vacation, in between high school and university, and they spend their time smoking marijuana, going to parties, and trying to seduce other teenage girls as their girlfriends have decided to spend their summer in Italy. At the wedding party of Tenoch's sister, they meet Luisa Cortés, the wife of Tenoch's older cousin, Jano. In an act of boyish bravado they tell her they can show her the most beautiful beach in Mexico, which they give the made-up name Boca del Cielo (Heaven's Mouth). On discovering her husband's infidelity, and, unbeknownst to the audience, her terminal cancer diagnosis, she takes the boys up on their offer. They hastily borrow Julio's sister's car, Betsabé, a 1983 LeBaron Station wagon, and the road trip to the paradisiacal beach begins. We thus have all the ingredients for a Mexican take on the road movie and the format for a guided tour of a cinematic trip through the country.

The journey takes them through Mexico, from the capital Mexico City through tiny, sleepy towns to their ultimate goal of La Boca del Cielo (which they are astonished to find is a real beach location), found in the state of Guerrero on the Pacific Coast. The digressive journey structure allows the Cuarón brothers to make an allegorically-based film that presents a specific vision of Mexico. This vision is rendered popular through carefully selected images and the way the film handles the genres it both relies on and subverts; the film is as much about what the characters do not see as what they do. In

⁵ "Production Notes for *Y tu mamá también*", in: <<http://www.cinema.com/articles/812/y-tu-mam-tambien-production-notes.phtml>> (01.05.2011).

⁶ Picturehouse folded when Warner Brothers took over New Line Cinema, Picturehouse being a company put together by HBO and New Line Cinema to release specialty films. Berney went on to form a new company called Apparition in 2009, but left in May 2010 (Fritz 2010). He has since been hired as president of theatrical distribution for GK Films for their new project Film District "which will function as an acquisition, distribution, production and financing company with plans to release between four and eight wide commercial releases per year" (Kilday 2010).

⁷ The fact that it was not conceived of as a foreign-language film has to do with the sizeable Latino/Latin American Spanish-speaking population in the United States.

addition, it both takes elements from and subverts the teen sex comedy with the boys' macho posturing unmasked and their inexperience and latent homosexual desires revealed. The film then, disrupts generic conventions while taking pleasurable aspects of them: namely sex and scenery. My emphasis here is on the road movie, as this is the dominant form that structures the narrative and reveals the way in which the nation is conceptualised.⁸

Laderman writes that "road movies aim beyond the borders of cultural familiarity, seeking the unfamiliar for revelation, or at least for the thrill of the unknown" (2007: 1-2), and in *Y tu mamá también* there is an interplay between discovery and familiarity central to the film's commercial viability and cross-over status as art film and commercial mainstream product. The image of rural Mexico given both to urban Mexicans and international audiences is a combination of the new and the recognizable. Cuarón, by rooting his film in Mexico, while aiming for a global audience, needs to present enough elements of the country familiar to foreigners so as not to alienate international film viewers, all the while giving them a sense of adventure and revelation.

The sense of discovery is found in the way that audiences are given the impression that they are accessing an insider's view of Mexico through the journey with the protagonists and through the narrator's commentary, which can be thrilling to foreign audiences who can experience virtual travel without having to leave their hometowns. Yet, this image of the country goes hand in hand with a reassuringly familiar Mexico. To a large degree the film presents a vision of the country that is sought out by tourists: Mexico is one of the top tourist destinations for its North American neighbours, and most do not head to the capital city but to seaside locations such as Acapulco and Cancún. Consequently, the drive through the country in search of an idyllic beach will resonate with many US citizens, and with city dwellers across the world who associate Mexico with holidays. There are many images that are almost too obviously Mexican. Thus, the film is punctuated with Mariachi bands, desolate yet beautiful scenery, and stunning beaches, while local traditions, such as villagers seeking donations for their beauty queen, are presented for the viewers' pleasure. There are also the requisite social signifiers that are internationally associated with Mexico: namely, corrupt politicians, student demonstrations and a heavy police presence.⁹ In addition to this, the characters' names provide audiences with a list of some of the most famous figures from Mexico's history, although these names must be seen as ironic and have no bearing on the characters themselves, with none sharing attributes of conquerors, the heroes of the war of Independence, or the Revolutionary leaders they are named after.¹⁰ Thus, non-specialist viewers do not have

⁸ The road movie is an unusual genre in Mexican film. Other Mexican road movies are *El jardín del edén/The Garden of Eden* (María Novaro, 1994) and *Viaje redondo/Round Trip* (2009), directed by Gerardo Tort and scripted by Beatriz Novaro, who also wrote the screenplay for *El jardín del edén*, although neither has had the success of Cuarón's film. *Viaje redondo* has been successful in Mexico, but has not been released internationally (Alvaray 2011).

⁹ Nuala Finnegan (2007: 33) has a different take on these signifiers of Mexico, and argues that they are over-determined and thus parodic.

¹⁰ Priego (2002) notes that "significantly, the last names of all the characters are clear, almost too obvious references to famous protagonists of Mexican history: Tenoch's last name is Iturbide, whereas Julio's is Zapata. Their respective girlfriends are Ana Morelos and Cecilia Huerta; Tenoch and Julio's best friend is Saba Madero, Luisa's last name is Cortés, and Tenoch's indigenous housemaid is Leodegaria Victo-

to trouble themselves with the complexities of Mexican history, but feel reassured by the reference to familiar names, while Mexicans and those with knowledge of Mexican history can share an in-joke.

This familiar Mexico shown to viewers merges with a journey of discovery through the voice-over, which disrupts any form of escapist fantasy, and which, in contrast to the traditional voice-over of a travelogue, does not tell viewers what they can see, but tells them what they cannot. Nevertheless, as is common to road movies, beauty and a sense of escape is central to the narrative: audiences are shown the delights of the paradisiacal beach of Heaven's Mouth with the characters, even as tourism itself becomes the object of critique for the film through the narrator's revelation of the fate of Chuy, the characters' personal tour guide, as I discuss below.

In many respects *Y tu mamá también* presents a guided tour of Mexico; as Nuala Finnegan (2007: 30) has argued, a tour that is off the beaten track with a guide ever present in the form of the "omniscient" narration, voiced by Daniel Giménez Cacho, Cuarón's protagonist in his first feature, *Sólo con tu pareja* (1991). In this way, the filmmakers address the audience with the implied promise that they can reveal a Mexico just out of tourists' reach: the audience is thus constructed as a traveller who is not shown Mexico through the eyes of the teenage boys, but rather the Mexico outside their field of vision. This is rather muddled by the fact that Tenoch and Julio also represent a part of Mexico and, on one level, come to stand for an under-developed nation in the process of growing up. Cuarón explains:

Thematically this is a movie about seeking one's identity and it's a journey. You have two teenagers who are seeking validation as adults and there's the woman's journey. She's seeking her identity as a free woman. Alongside them there's this country, Mexico, which in my view is a teenage country trying to find its identity as a grown-up country. That was our premise (Basoli 2002: 26).

This viewpoint clearly had particular resonance within the time frame in which the film is set, revealed at the end of the film when audiences are told of the first defeat of the PRI, the Institutional Revolutionary Party, in 70 years, locating the film in 2000.¹¹ Thus, the teenagers are intended to represent an urban Mexico, but they are also blind to their own country, seen in the representation of the "other" rural Mexico. The sense given, then, is that there is a subjective and objective reality, to both of which viewers will be given access by the film.

The allegorical ambitions of the film are made clear in interviews with the director in which he repeats the assertion that *Y tu mamá también* intended to show the "real" Mexico. In one example Cuarón tells María Delgado during a public interview at the "BAFTA Goes to Mexico" event in London in 2007, "not only was Mexico put in [sic] the map but, also, it was shown as it is without filters or make-up" (Delgado 2007). He argues that the filming techniques developed between himself and Lubezki sought to reflect this, and can be seen in the use of a distant camera, long takes and long shots

ria", and he goes on to explain who all these figures are. For more on the significance of the names see Acevedo-Muñoz (2004).

¹¹ The election was won by Vicente Fox, leader of the conservative PAN (National Action Party).

aimed to ensure that characters were not favoured over the environment. This is attempted principally by contrasting the subjective and “objective” points of view. In addition to this, the camera wanders off as if bored with the exploits of the protagonists, to focus on matters of greater import in a technique referred to as the “straying camera” by Andrea Noble (2005: 143) and “the wandering eye” by Acevedo-Muñoz (2004: 42).

A realist vision is, then, constructed through narration and image, and, at the same time, the traditional understanding of the road movie narrative format, which aligns point of view with the protagonists, is challenged. Of course, the relationship between the real and realism is notoriously slippery and directors’ assertions should not be taken at face value. Indeed, it can be claimed, as does the Mexican critic Leonardo García Tsao (2001a), that the film rests on a tourist vision, while Priego (2002) questions the notion of truthful representations of Mexico by arguing that they rest on social stereotypes and caricatures. The image of Mexico is indeed carefully manufactured and, despite the totalizing sense given through the two narrative positions, relies on a partial political and social vision that rests on an easily digestible and transportable image of the country. This is an image that allowed it to be the global hit that *Sólo con tu pareja* never was.¹²

The nature of this vision can be revealed through an exploration of the “objective” voice-over: the sound of the first level of the diegesis is cut (the world of the protagonists), while the narrator provides a commentary for events that are outside the field of vision, and either occurred in the past or are about to occur. This functions much like a filmmaker’s commentary in a DVD package, and in this way acquires additional resonance and the weight of “truth” and omniscience. Indeed, the narrator’s voice comes to be associated with the voice of the director guiding us towards what is “important”. Many of these commentaries accompany long unedited shots of the landscape, which adds to the sense of a truthful vision in the way they appear to present Mexico with little manipulation in the form of editing.

Despite the focus on death, poverty and corruption, events recounted by the narrator appear rather haphazard and lack a coherent vision. A number of critics have noted that this technique of the wandering eye or straying camera and the voice-over create a sense of a deeper, more political vision of Mexico that stands in contrast to the world of the boys and Luisa (Acevedo-Muñoz 2004; Noble 2005; Finnegan 2007). While this is certainly the case, it is interesting to analyse the nature of this political vision, and what is presented is a soft leftist form of corporate anti-globalization adopted by a film with powerful financial backers and ambitions in the global market. The film’s use of the narrator to undercut the protagonists’ point of view appears to challenge their partial view, yet its apparent totalizing vision is strangely limited and fragmented. What is apparent in the narrator’s account is the seemingly random nature of the events chosen, which display small instances of social critique and yet are lacking a defined or coherent political message. The narrator refrains from anything other than a neutral tone, merely informing on the events selected, and equal weight seems to be given to road accidents, presidential corruption, job losses, and even the fate of a group of the pigs that invade the beach.

¹² Other critics have noted that the soundtrack is also key in appealing to a global youth market (Priego 2002; Smith 2003). Finnegan (2007: 32) notes that “fashionable Western and Mexican artists feature on the soundtrack including Frank Zappa, Brian Eno, Natalie Imbruglia, La Revolución de Emiliano Zapata, Flaco Jiménez, and Café Tacuba”.

When considering the apparently progressive political vision given of the country, it is as significant to consider what is not shown/commented on. Audiences are told that Julio's sister lends her brother the car for five days on condition that she can have it for the following three weeks to take food, medicine and other provisions to Chiapas. However, no more explanation or context is given for the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, which constitutes Mexico's largest social upheaval and popular struggle of the recent historical period; indeed, the Zapatista revolutionaries and their cause go unmentioned. While Mexican viewers and those familiar with Mexican politics would pick up the fleeting reference to Chiapas and the revolutionary cause, it would be entirely lost on other foreign audiences. It is also noteworthy that Julio's sister, who is politically active and studying political science, is a marginal character and is only glimpsed once at a student demonstration. Spanish speakers can see from the placards that the demonstrators are calling for free state education, but this scene is only 23 seconds long, and no explanation of the protest is given. The following scene returns to the focus of the film: the boys are seen having fun in a supermarket preparing for their trip by buying teenage "essentials" such as crisps, beers and condoms. The film is not, then, concerned with organised political protest, and not simply because this is not of interest to Julio and Tenoch, as it is also largely bypassed by the narrator.

In addition, no real poverty is seen, and while state oppression is hinted at in the prominence of the police presence, no explanation is given for the arrests made by the police, and the audience is left as ignorant as the boys as to why arrests are being made. The boys do pay attention, at one point, when people are stopped for drug patrols, as this will affect them, but an overall sense of the film's vision of the police is lacking. Even in the more overt political moments, such as in the commentary on the President, and Chuy's loss of employment, it is unclear what the "message" of the film is. Viewers are left with a notion that there are victims of globalization and modernity; yet no alternatives are suggested, and no particular group is held accountable. A comment by Cuarón when interviewed about *Y tu mamá también* illuminates this point:

Saying "I'm against globalization" or in Mexico saying "I'm against modernity" is like saying "I'm against the law of gravity". You can be against them but there's no way around them. The question now is how to democratize globalization and modernity in Mexico, and I think that's a big challenge not only in Mexico but also in the world (Basoli 2002: 26).

It is particularly significant that there is no mention of North American tourists, who would of course be the main residents at the hotels which have put Chuy out of business. Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz (2004: 47) states with regard to this that "this 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". However, US audiences would never feel implicated in Chuy's fate, as the film makes no reference to these "spring-breakers" or to North American tourists. Indeed, I would argue that a film with global ambitions and dependent on US funding has deliberately sought to downplay any criticism of its northern neighbours.

The film seeks connections between the world outside the car window and that within the car by suggesting that Tenoch and Julio, and the urban upper and lower middle classes they represent, need to see their country and the issues affecting rural Mexico if

they are to effect any changes. However, the precise nature of the key issues and an appropriate response are uncertain. There can also be no genuine rebellion against the status quo as no alternative is offered. Ultimately, the white privileged gaze of the city dwellers is maintained, as while we see the “other” mestizo Mexico, the viewers’ emotional energy is taken up with the teenagers and Luisa. There is very little narrative interaction with the “other” Mexicans, who are all ultimately there to serve our protagonists or to give a snapshot of the Mexico that is outside the car window.

Y tu mamá también’s relationship with the real is, then, filtered through an awareness of commercial imperatives. Despite the claims of realism and the realist techniques seen in the use of the long shot, the wide panoramic shots, the incorporation of “real” Mexicans and the rejection of a subjective narration, the text offers a filmic imagining of a country that will sell to foreign audiences in similar ways as a holiday to Mexico booked with an independent tour guide, with the promise of an insight into the real Mexico a central part of the draw of the film. Poverty, death, corruption, social unrest (and pigs) may be part of the landscape of the film, but it was a domestic and international hit thanks to its focus on sun, sea, sex, stars, and sentiment as a means of generating pleasure.

Japón

Reygadas’s first feature *Japón* is a film that, in many ways, is the polar opposite to *Y tu mamá también*. It was made with an extremely low budget of US\$ 285,000 and had a limited cast and crew: the director and his father built toilets for the shoot, his mother did the painting, and his sister the catering (Stephens n.d.). In plot terms it is very simple, with a narrative structure that is more interested in the interior world of the protagonist and his relationship with the exterior natural world and the villagers who are seen as a part of this natural world, than in entertaining us with new sights and new stories at every turn. An unnamed man (Alejandro Ferretis) goes to a remote village, Ayacatzintla, in the state of Hidalgo, that has fewer than 170 inhabitants (de Luca 2010), and remains there for a period, in contrast to the protagonists of *Y tu mamá también* who pass through village after village in search of the sea. The man travels in search of death, not pleasure, as he plans to commit suicide. His redemption comes through communion with nature and with an elderly villager, Ascen (Magdalena Flores), with whom he lodges. As the film progresses, the man gradually becomes re-engaged with life and becomes aware of the landscape and people around him. This is manifested in an awakening of his sexuality, a desire for Ascen and a sexual union with her on his request, before he decides to leave the village. Part of Ascen’s house is dismantled by her greedy nephew, who wants the stones to enlarge his own house in the nearest village, and the man begins to care about the injustice of this, another signal of his desire to live. Ascen travels with the stones, and she, the labourers, her nephew and his sons all die on the journey as their truck overturns.

The film has no stars, and, as is the director’s practice, those who feature in his films are non-actors: local residents play the roles of the villagers, while Alejandro Ferretis is a family friend of Reygadas.¹³ The cinematography reflects the film’s meditative nature with

¹³ In a curious case of reality surpassing the dramatic qualities of fiction, Ferretis was found murdered with his male lover in 2004, at the age of 59. His failure to attend the awards ceremony in 2004 for the

many long static shots of the man and the landscape, as well as travelling shots of nature generally seen through the subjective point of view of the man and accompanied by a consecrated classical music score that gives the images a poetic, spiritual feel. Masters of art cinema from a range of time periods and nations (Tarkovsky, Bresson, Kiarostami, Dreyer and Herzog) are referenced in approach, images and interviews (de Luca 2010, Wood 2006: 117-8). *Japón* meets Bordwell and Neale's understanding of art cinema, then, in a number of ways that contrast with Cuarón's film. It eschews attractive stars and popular generic tropes, and there is no clear cause and effect. The film is also more concerned with the protagonist's psychosexual development and interior world, while the plot is minimalist in nature. There is some overlap in the use of a digressive narrative structure used to show (very different) visions of the land, and an emphasis on sex, which in Reygadas' case creates a degree of controversy very helpful for marketing the film in art cinema circles, and in Cuarón's makes his film appealing to youthful audiences. *Japón* shows the man masturbating to an imagined fantasy vision of a traditionally sexy young lady kissing his elderly landlady, Ascen, and his sexual encounter with Ascen also fits with the provocative sexual associations of early art films. As David Bordwell notes, "the aesthetics and commencement of the art cinema often depend upon an eroticism that violates the production code of pre-1950 Hollywood" (2002: 96). Neale's formula of the primacy of visual style and the use of "a marked individual point of view" is also adhered to in *Japón* (Neale 2002: 104). These elements locate the film within the purist spaces of art cinema, and ensure that Reygadas stands apart from the commercially orientated filmmaking of Cuarón, del Toro and González Iñárritu, the most globally known filmmakers from Mexico.

As a result, *Japón* was rewarded with festival screenings and the awards associated with these spaces. While not commercially successful, it was critically acclaimed, receiving a number of prestigious awards at international films festivals in 2002, including a silver Ariel for the best first work by a director, the Golden Camera Special mention at the Cannes Film Festival, Best First Work at the Havana Film Festival, and Best Director at the Thessaloniki Film Festival, as well as *The Guardian's* New Director's Award at the Edinburgh film festival in 2003. An early perceptive and prescient review by David Rooney (2002) correctly foresaw *Japón's* place in the international market: "World-premiered in Rotterdam and already snagged for the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes, this accomplished but difficult film should flourish on the festival circuit, with resulting critical attention perhaps easing its passage to extreme arthouse fringes." The film, again in contrast to *Y tu mamá también*, had a very limited release beyond the festival circuit, although the critical acclaim did manage to secure it DVD releases.¹⁴ It also paved the way for Reygadas' controversial follow-up *Batalla en el cielo/Battle in Heaven* (2005), and his most commercially and critically successful film *Stellet Licht/Silent Light* (2007).

In the international market Reygadas' work fits within what Jonathan Romney has called "slow cinema", a "varied strain of austere minimalist cinema that has thrived

Mexican film awards, the Arieles, for which he had been nominated for *Japón*, resulted in an investigation. He was found dead in his home in San Miguel Allende. He and his lover's bodies had been cut up, and their parts had been placed together to form a single body; the suspect was a man Ferretis had "adopted" when young (Glantz 2006).

¹⁴ It was released by art cinema distributors Artificial Eye in the UK, and Tartan Video in the United States.

internationally over the past ten years”, and is characterized by “a rarefied intensity in the artistic gaze” (2010: 43-44).¹⁵ Reygadas uses his own term “cold cinema” to describe his filmmaking, which resonates with Romney’s analysis. Of his second film *Batalla en el cielo* (but equally true of all three films), he notes:

My film exists in the landscape of cold cinema [...]. You are used to hot cinema, American film, which relies on audience identification, and fabricated emotional moments. These films you are meant to forget once you leave the theater. I want my film’s images and its characters to stay with you beyond the movie theater. And the film to be better every time you see it (Menéndez 2005).

Through text and paratext Reygadas is clearly setting out his auteurist art cinema stall, and this has a bearing on the concept of the national, as the landscape in all three of his films is used to present a subjective view of identity, not to represent an allegorical view of the nation, as intended with *Y tu mamá también*. As William Rowlandson (2006: 1027) notes of *Japón*: “Reygadas evokes a cinematic equivalent of the novelistic first-person narrative through the hand-held camera.” This is at odds with Cuarón’s approach and his selection of hyper-national signifiers, and “objective” narrative voice-over. Reygadas combines unpleasant images of everyday rural life (the killing of a pig, detailed shots of the innards of various animals, a lengthy shot of a fat-bellied boy picking his nose, a disembowelled dead horse), and juxtaposes these with the incredible beauty of the countryside lovingly filmed. Indeed, the emphasis throughout is not on the national, but on the individual man and how he evolves in intensely local surroundings, and, aside from the film’s opening which takes the man from Mexico City to his destination, the world of the protagonist is that of the tiny, isolated village of Ayacatzintla.

This is not, then, a countryside to which anyone in search of adventures would choose to travel. The fragment of Mexico shown is not folkloric in the way that *Y tu mamá también* is: there are no *reinas* (beauty queens), no dancing old ladies, no beaches, no representatives of authority beyond a likeable, simple judge who is the people’s representative. What remains is a deeply personal portrait of quiet village life made transcendental through image and music, as is characteristic of Reygadas’ filmmaking. There may be a clue in the film’s name that neither national portrait nor unique insight into the “real” Mexico is intended. For Rooney (2002), “‘Japan’ takes its somewhat mystifying title from the rising sun as a symbol of rebirth”. Reygadas confirms this interpretation in an interview (Stephens n.d.), although the director adds that he wants the title to be open to interpretation and would have liked to leave the film without a title. Despite the setting and villagers who play versions of themselves, *Japón* is not aiming to be ethnographic: “the people” are not the subject of this film; they are rather part of the landscape, and make up the artistic tableau onto which is projected a subjective, universalist take on human identity. It is significant, in this regard, that the protagonist has no name, and no back-story is provided; we do not know why he has chosen that village to commit suicide, or what has driven him to this state of despair. All we know is that he is an artist

¹⁵ Romney (2010: 44) cites examples of a number of proponents of slow cinema including Reygadas, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Béla Tarr, Lisandro Alonso, Pedro Costa, Tsai Ming-Liang, Lucrecia Martel, and Bruno Dumont.

from the city. The villagers are his other: if he can interact with them on some level he can be saved, as seen in his interest in Ascen's plight and his desire for her.

The director's intention is to take the raw material from the natural environment and the village and transform it to illustrate his "reading of the world" ("lectura del mundo") to use Reygadas's words (Alvarez 2006). He explains:

I was interested in making *Japón* in that place, in that landscape, with the people who live there, who play out their roles there, but I wasn't thinking of making a documentary of them. Rather, I wanted to capture their presence so that with my ideas and my feelings, I could transform that into something personal and give it a particular meaning (Alvarez 2006; author's translation).

Notwithstanding the highly realistic setting, then, the storytelling is highly contrived, as is the premise on which it rests: that a man can find salvation through an intense communion with the land and a sexual encounter with an elderly woman.

Reygadas' vision within *Japón* is best illustrated in the life and death scene, significantly at the mid-point of the film, where the man takes out his gun before collapsing, unable to commit suicide. This is a transcendental scene in that it illustrates the man rising above the self, and represents a fusion of the individual with cosmic forces. Classical music accompanies glorious cinematography by Diego Martínez Vignatti and is a filmic rendering of the forces of life and death with the conquest of death and a rebirth. As the man takes out the gun there is a long take of the white sky above him. This invokes the role Ascen will play in his spiritual and physical rebirth, and generates the sense of her oneness with the landscape. As she tells him during their first meeting, her full name is Ascención which comes from Christ's ascension to heaven, and the camera here ascends to the heavens, as it leaves the body of the man. He collapses and the rain falls on him as the music fills the senses and gives life to the scene. The music, sacred in nature, is Bach's "Erbarne Dich" from St Matthew's Passion, also used in Tarkovsky's *Offret/The Sacrifice* (1986). De Luca (2010) notes this and the way Reygadas, like his mentor, equates "sexual intercourse with spiritual salvation", although in a more graphic way.¹⁶ The grafting of European and Russian canonized cultural forms onto this Mexican landscape is another example of the high art tradition Reygadas utilizes to create his form of art cinema.

Following his collapse, the man is shown lying next to a disemboweled dead horse, symbolizing death, but the camera refutes death and circles around him revealing the magnitude of the landscape and dwarfing him, rendering his troubles insignificant. The use of overlapping dissolves gives the impression of a fluid uninterrupted shot. The camera uses aerial shots to take viewers higher to the white clouds and on to a space of pure whiteness wherein the sequence ends, presenting a cosmic point of view.¹⁷ The man

¹⁶ In an interesting article De Luca (2010) looks at the influences of filmmakers such as Tarkovsky, Dreyer and Rossellini on Reygadas, and examines his form of "transcendental cinema". He argues that Reygadas has a "marked concern with carnality, and its intersection with religiosity, that complicates the transcendentalism of Reygadas and sets him apart from his cinematic influences".

¹⁷ Reygadas explains that despite his miniscule budget, he managed to gain the use of helicopters via the Hidalgo tourist board in exchange for some footage of the region that they could use in promotional material (Stephens n.d.).

returns to life and to Ascen's home to make his sexual proposition to her. The scene in its entirety is an illustration of the film's auteurist, cosmic, spiritual and sexual vision, and works against any ethnographic readings.

It can also be argued that Reygadas' conceptualisation of gender identity is highly traditional and ethically problematic. Despite the provocative element of having a man in his 50s have a sexual encounter with a woman who appears to be in her late 70s, this is the old story wherein man has identity and woman is the nature that sustains him and meets his sexual needs. Ascen is seen as synonymous with the land and serves to provide the man with a reason to live. The sex scene is mechanical and uncomfortable to watch, as she passively follows the man's instructions relating to the positions she must adopt. She appears to consent in order to help save him, as he tells her this is something he needs, and she is not shown deriving any pleasure from the act. At the close of the film it is suggested that her death on a symbolic level is occasioned by the fact that her nephew has removed the stones of her house: she dies because as she is so much a part of her environment, she cannot be separated from it.¹⁸ As Reygadas tells an interviewer, "she is almost an allegory for the harshness of the canyon itself" (Stephens n.d.; author's translation). The sexual act then is seen as a symbiotic relationship between man and nature, but viewers cannot forget that a real old woman is being asked by a director to have sex on screen.¹⁹

The land, then, in *Japón* is not Mexico itself, as it is configured in *Y tu mamá también*, but rather a symbol for the condition of man and his relationship with nature. The director tells an interviewer that:

Mexico is very important but only because the films are set in Mexico. I am not a "Mexicanist" if you like. If I had to emigrate to England then I would make films in England I think. I would be interested in the same things but then England would be very important because I would try to be very loyal to the context [...] Everything deeply universal has to be necessarily very particular otherwise it's just a cartoon (Fraser n.d.).

This is, then, a film that despite its local setting could be set in any country in any village as it deals with existential, universal (masculine) questions, and is not concerned with the social state of the country.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the representations of the nation and the landscapes within *Y tu mamá también* and *Japón* fit within the cinematic spaces for which they have

¹⁸ Following on from this, it can be argued that the labourers who remove these stones also die as they attempt to disrupt the balance between man and earth. For a reading that compares the ending of the film with the ending of Juan Rulfo's classic Mexican novel *Pedro Páramo* see Rowlandson (2006: 1034).

¹⁹ In an interview Magdalena Flores explains that she did not want to take her clothes off, as she did not want her children to see her nude, but was persuaded to by the director. She says, "Carlos was very demanding, but I think what he did was correct". (In: <http://www.primordiales.com.ar/entrevistas/entrevista_con_magdalena_flores.htm> (05.09.2011).

been created. Alfonso Cuarón presents a traveller-friendly view of the country that corresponds to expectations of the commercial end of the foreign-language film market. Despite its subversions of generic conventions it relies on sun, sea, sex, stars, sentiment and soft leftist politics for its generation of pleasure. Audiences are treated like travellers with an expert guide who can show them a hidden, desirable, but also socially unequal nation. Viewers can thus take pleasure in the country while caring about a particular version of its plight. Carlos Reygadas uses the languages of art cinema to take viewers on a journey through a single man's existential crisis and resolution of that crisis, with the landscape shown subjectively through a single man's eyes.

In *Japón*, then, the images of Mexico fit in with art film audiences' expectations that an auteur will bring them his artistic vision of the human condition rooted in a symbolic vision of the local environment. Thus, art cinema's markers of long takes, metaphysical shots of the landscape, classical music, and sexuality outside of conventional acceptability, are set in a village in rural Mexico peopled by local inhabitants. *Y tu mamá también* is a performance of Mexico, filled with traditional signifiers of the nation. Neither film presents a more authentic view of the nation, but both present representations that guarantee their place in different sectors of the international film market.

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