

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Y Tu Mamá También (2001)

Alfonso Cuarón

OVERVIEW

When it was first released, there were a few problems due the number of scenes featuring sex and smoking marijuana, both of which obscured the fact that this is, at its heart, a road trip movie. The road trip is, for two teen-age friends, a coming of age experience, while it is, for the older woman who befriends them, a kind of dying wish. In both cases, it's an end of innocence for all involved, and as such, the movie plunges the viewer into the heart of a kind of innocence of experience that triggers deep emotions. In just a few words, the plot involves the final summer before college when two best friends, Julio and Tenoch, spend time with an older woman, Luisa, who is the wife of Tenoch's cousin, while their girlfriends are out of town. Triggered by the news that her breast cancer is in an inoperable late stage and that her husband has cheated on her, Luisa agrees to travel with Julio and Tenoch across rural Mexico to the mythical (which turns out to be real) beach town of Boca del Cielo. What they experience along the way transforms them in many ways: stories told about their experiences, narratives that shape their perception, the narratives built into the places they visit (sites of terrible accidents, political contexts and events, economic migrations) and in the traditions they observe and experience (the traditional Mexican food, the beautiful Mexican coast, the desert, the winding roads through the mountains). With the voice-over and a documentary hand-held camera style of filming, the people seem uniquely rich and textured, engenders both nostalgia and a sense of the sublime.

STORY

On the surface, this is a road trip movie featuring two male teenagers and a female acquaintance, who decide, on a whim, to drive from Mexico City to the Pacific coast. Also, on the surface, it's about the way that Mexicans live, starting with privilege and entitlement (a politician and his family, with elaborate weddings and memberships at an exclusive country club), then traveling into the twists and turns of the road as it bends through mountains, deserts, coasts, pueblos. The stories, misunderstandings, sexual tensions, and appetites enveloped into the history of the places they travel through, and the food, drink, hotels, sand, surf, churches, albarrotes (small family-owned stores), restaurants, cantinas, which give it an indelible imprint of Mexico, not only of its appearance, but more importantly, the heart and soul of the people. The plot is relatively simple: Julio and Tenoch are trying to find the best way to make it through the summer while their girlfriends are traveling in Europe before they change their lives and start studying at the university. Julio and Tenoch are innocent creatures of pure appetite: they eat, they drink. They happen to meet Luisa, the wife of Julio's cousin, Jano. They banter a bit about places they've been. Tenoch and Julio invent a beach place, "Boca del Cielo" and claim it's the most beautiful beach in the world and that they're planning to visit it. That seems to be the end of it, until the next day when Luisa calls them and asks if they're still planning to go. In their eagerness to say "yes," they do not inquire why she is interested. They do not know (although the viewer does), that Luisa's husband, Jano, called and confessed he was unfaithful to her. They also do not know that she was just informed that she has Stage 4 cancer. We as viewers know that she is in a hyper-real state of being, intensely aware of life and every precious moment of it. Because the viewer has inside knowledge, the road trip is fascinating, and the squabbles, misunderstandings, and intemperance are all framed in a larger panorama of life, death, coming-of-age, and endings. And, even as Julio and Tenoch open-heartedly try to sample all possible carnal indulgences, we know that they do so because when this road trip is over, they will have matured and will no longer have the same adolescent mindset. We also know that when this road trip is over, Luisa will be facing the very end, and so this "last hurrah" is even more poignant. Like most road trip movies, traveling way from the stifling, congested, corrupt city represents a move toward nature and freedom. It also means a journey another state of mind or state of being.

The road trip itself is a punctuated narrative: Julio and Tenoch share stories and then question each other about their sexual exploits; the towns they pass bring up memories and historical facts, which are narrated to us by the omniscient voice-over narrator, and finally, the mise-en-scene is stunning inasmuch as the Mexican landscape and small pueblo-scapes become a character in and of themselves. As they drive, they share stories about themselves and discuss their sexual transgressions. Julio and Tenoch try to outdo each other, confessing that they've slept with each other's girlfriends, and Julio even claims to have had sex with Tenoch's mother, but it's not clear if this is even true. That night, Tenoch, upset with Julio, leaves his room and passes Julia. Julia, tearful, has just spoken with her husband, Jano, and explained why she left him. She seduces Tenoch, and they have sex. The sexual rivalries trigger heated arguments, and Luisa threatens to leave.

The main action of the film has to do with the road trip to the Boca del Cielo (which turns out to actually exist), and the intense experiences along the way, which include camping on the beach, the ocean, and a final scene of seduction in which Luisa dances with both, then stimulates both Julio and Tenoch at the same time. This is a turning point; and the line that Julio and Tenoch crossed with each other is something they do not want to face. Luisa stayed at the ocean to continue exploring beaches and coves, while Julio and Tenoch return, uneventfully, to Mexico City. After they return, they do not see each other for more than a year, and when they do, it is the last time. They have changed; the events of the road trip matured them, perhaps even frightened them as they faced an abyss they feared. Tenoch tells Julio that Luisa died a few months after they left her at the beach; she lived her final days to the fullest.

The true story has to do with how the viewer gains insight into the shaping of identity and the depth and richness of the characters who, even though they may seem to be involved in rather simplistic activities, are participating in traditions and beliefs that date back to even pre-Hispanic times. Mexican independence, clashes, civil war, conflicts, along with the traditions of church, traditional dances, town patron saint festival days, weddings, funerals, and traditions of food and drink interweave. The technique is very realistic; the viewer feels the dust on the road, hears the music, almost perceives the smells and tastes. By the end, we see Julio, Tenoch, and Luisa as complex, multi-dimensional individuals. There is a deep sense of nostalgia and the week-long trip has the feeling of a dream or a life-changing memory.

Notable techniques:

Voiceover Narration: The voice-over tells the back-story and also tells the overall significance and meaning of the actions, many of which may seem trivial, but turn out to be formative and as such, deeply moving. For example, as they pass by a village around a curve, and see two wooden crosses, the voice explains that if Julio, Tenoch, and Luisa had passed by here several years before, they would have seen a woman weeping hysterically at the death of her two children.

Documentary-style handheld camera: The point of view of the camera and the movement give the film a documentary feel, and emphasize realism. The handheld camera creates a sense of authenticity. The angles are often at eye level and shot from, for example, the back seat of a car, which generates immediacy and intimacy.

THEMES

Innocence vs. Experience: While Julio and Tenoch consider themselves experienced, inasmuch as they do everything possible to satisfy their appetites. Nevertheless, the progress of the film shows them to be very innocent in terms of the world, of who they are, and the relationship between confusing and conflicting desires and what it means to be human and alive.

Sexuality: Julio and Tenoch are sexual beings, and in their youth, they have healthy appetites. In fact, much of their time seems to be dedicated to the quest of satisfaction. For example, Julio and Tenoch have access to the country club on Mondays, when it is closed to patrons. In one memorable scene, they swim in the pool and then, jump out, lie on the diving boards and stimulate themselves as they discuss different girls they know.

Coming of Age: The road trip leads to deeper self-knowledge and encounters with darker truths about themselves that made them reflect on their own sense of identity, and also their overall place in their society. After Boca del Cielo, it was no longer possible to live in adolescent bliss where the chief concern is the satisfaction of appetites and living completely in the moment.

Love: There is a tremendous difference between love and sex, and for that matter, there is a huge difference between fraternal love and carnal love; when the two intersect, confusion occurs.

Loyalty: Julio and Tenoch are loyal friends, and are very close, tight friends, but the road trip breaks their friendship apart. They find that their bonds were rather fragile, after all. But, on a deeper level, they are loyal to what it means to be Mexican; the family values, the ties to traditions (Pre-Conquest as well as Colonial), and ties to the Mexican volcanoes, desert, mountains, and beaches.

CHARACTERS

Julio: Friend of Tenoch whose parents were relatively wealthy, which gave him privilege but not as much as Tenoch. He lives in Mexico City during a time of tremendous political unrest, and the rural population is involved in uprisings. Julio, however, is relatively uninterested in politics or the economy. As an adolescent male, Julio is most concerned with satisfying his appetites and joking around with his best friend.

Tenoch: Son of a prominent and very wealthy politician. His life is of privilege, to which he is largely oblivious except for being aware that he has to behave properly in public (which inspires him to rebel). He attends the weddings and other politically-motivated spectacles of his father, and he interacts with his extended family without ever understanding or becoming conscious of the fact that there is dramatic income and social inequality even in his own family.

Luisa: Luisa is of Spanish descent, and she speaks with a Spanish / Castilian accent. This sets her apart and gives her the impression that she is of high social status. The reality is that she has a very low level of education, due to the loss of her parents at a young age, and her relatively impoverished childhood. Thus, she has a sense of inferiority, as well as an ongoing sense of loss and grief, not only for the loss of her parents, but also her first love, who died in a motorcycle accident. She married Jano, the cousin of a high-ranking politician, but it is not a happy union, and he is constantly correcting her and elevating himself over her. She finds out in the same day that she has incurable cancer and that her husband has been cheating on her. The shock is enough to inspire her to go on a very impromptu road trip with two immature yet sweet and well-meaning teenagers.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Julio: The son of middle class parents, his father disappeared when he was young, and his mother works hard to raise him. His sister is politically active and leftist, meaning that she is part of a tradition that upheld the rights of the indigenous and rebelled against the often authoritarian rule of the elites, whose influence traces back to the Spanish conquest and privileging of those of Spanish or European descent. He is more or less oblivious to politics, but the road trip and the people, places, and political memory start to awaken him.

Curious: At first, Julio is remarkably unaware and seemingly indifferent to the world around him. However, he is curious about Luisa, and as he starts to understand her life and her background, he starts to think about many of the political issues that his parents have talked about during his childhood, and that his sister, an activist, is involved in.

Idealistic: Julio has no political leanings, but as time goes on in the movie, he awakens to the demonstrations and protests against social inequality and the dire poverty of the working classes. The omniscient narrator explains what is happening behind the scenes, and what has happened politically, so that the viewer sees just how Julio has almost no choice but to become very idealistic as he matures.

Proud: He knows that his friends, who are wealthy and from politically connected families, look down on him for being of middle class origins. He feels some resentment toward it, but more than anything he seeks to make his own way in the world, and is relatively free to do so, as opposed to Tenoch, whose family is pressuring him to study economics.

Tenoch: Tenoch is the son of a Harvard-educated economist and the Secretary of State. Tenoch is short for “Tenochtitlán,” an Aztec city, and was inspired by his father’s sudden burst of nationalism. Tenoch’s father is corrupt, which is a fact generally accepted by both Julio and Tenoch. The omniscient narrator voice-over explains that Tenoch’s father will not be the “tall hog at the trough” forever; in the next election, his party will be voted out.

Rebellious: Tenoch’s father wants him to study economics. Tenoch wants to study literature and become a writer. The pressure put on him by his father makes Tenoch rebellious.

Insatiable: Part of Tenoch’s frustration makes him channel his frustration into his appetite for adventure, sex, and drugs. At times he seems insatiable for those, but later we realize that his insatiability is really for living life, and for feeling the depth of intense experiences. It is here that we see his artistic, writerly spirit.

Entitled: Tenoch’s father’s position has resulted in a life of privilege and wealth. Even though he rebels against his father, and is not in agreement with the lifestyle, he is the beneficiary of entitlement, and takes very much for granted the ability to have access to country clubs, travel, expensive equipment. However, the trip starts to change him.

Luisa: Luisa’s parents were killed in a car accident when she was ten, and she was raised by an aunt who was an adherent of Generalissimo Franco in Spain. She wanted to travel, have a career, and study, but she had to stay at home and take care of her aunt in her last years. When her aunt passed way, Luisa studied to become a dental technician. She married Jano, who often mocks her and cheats on her.

Insecure: Due to her unrealized dreams and the mistreatment of her husband, Luisa is very insecure and quiet. But, knowing her cancer is late-stage and her husband will never change, Luisa takes risks and embraces life.

Adventurous: At the end, Luisa embraces life and everything that it symbolizes: nature, ocean, self-acceptance, and sexuality. She wants to do everything possible to experience life, not intellectually or at a distance, but by means of physical contact. Thus she seduces and is seduced by both Julio and Tenoch.

Romantic: The director’s hand-held camera shots, many shot from the periphery, give the viewer a voyeuristic feeling, and, combined with the narration of the omniscient voice-over we start seeing Luisa as a romantic; not only in her feelings, but also in the philosophical, Kantian sense of the term, inasmuch as she bases her beliefs and her behavior on her individual perceptions and experiences. Thus, to gain knowledge about life, one must experience it. And, she does.

Philosophical: When the three finally do find a place called Boca del Cielo, Luisa runs into the ocean and lets the foam and spray flow over her. Life is to be lived in the present, she says. She dances in the surf, and she cries out to Julio and Tenoch: “Life is like sea-foam -- so give yourself away to the sea!”

Review Questions:

In Mexico City, Julio and Tenoch battle the daily frustrations of traffic jams, accidents, and protests. They also see dirty, poorly designed infrastructure, and examples of human misery, even as they have a chance to spend time in oases such as the country club and expensive homes (paid for through corruption). What are some of the elements in the film that criticize Mexico’s politicians and ruling elites?

Julio and Tenoch's friendship dissolves after the road trip, but Cuarón (the director) does not explicitly say why. There are several friendship eroding moments. What are the implications of each of the following? Julio and Tenoch have had affairs with one another's girlfriends; they are from antagonistic social classes; they embrace and kiss each other while Luisa is stimulating them in a sexual encounter.

Why and how is this movie much more than a simple coming-of-age road trip movie? With the hand-held camera, the innovative mise-en-scene with unusual angles and shots, and the omniscient narrator voiceover, the film is able to establish a sense of authenticity, and also to connect past and present. The repeating motifs of the beach, of water, and of the landscape give one a sense of the beauty and majesty of Mexico, with its rich culture and historical heritage. Please describe two or three scenes that illustrate how the film is much deeper than a typical coming-of-age film.

How does the director suggest that nostalgia and grief are an essential part of the Mexican identity? Describe the scenes that represent accidents or political tragedies in the past, and also various family histories, such as that of Luisa and that of Chuy's family.

References

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