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## BOOKS & ARTS

### Mexican cinema

## Life cuts

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### Three outstanding films herald a heady renaissance in Mexican cinema

THE golden age of Mexican cinema, through the 1940s and 1950s, established an aesthetic that was as varied as it was distinctly Mexican. Emilio "El Indio" Fernandez, Alejandro Galindo and Gabriel Figueroa are some of the great names of the era. Three new movies from Mexico, "De La Calle" (Streeters), "Amores Perros" (Love's a Bitch) and "Y Tu Mama Tambien" (And Your Mama Too), draw on this heritage and redefine it. Part of Mexico's recent cinematic renaissance, these films embrace experimentation without leaving viewers behind. All three are humanist in outlook and use contemporary Mexico as both a psychological and a physical backdrop for their stories.

In "De La Calle" Gerardo Tort tells the story of two teenagers living on the streets of Mexico city. Using a film-developing process known as silver-retain, which heightens the contrast between light and dark, he creates a world in which the lines between objects are blurred. Daylight is harsh and bleached, so that the brightness of a butcher's apron stands out against the viscera on his chopping block, while the butcher himself blends into the white-tiled wall. Stealing a ride on a ferris wheel, the two kids talk of escaping from the streets, their forms silhouetted against the electric blue of a pre-dawn sky. This is a kind of realism, albeit one that has more to do with the way Mr Tort captures the essence of a moment or an experience than with his presentation of the visible world. But as such it is an effective way to evoke the harshness of the streets.

"Amores Perros", directed by Alejandro Gonzalez Iñarritu, shares the richly textured feel of "De La Calle". Handheld cameras and Steadicams bring us into its characters' worlds. In one tense scene the camera pans quickly back and forth between two people, without cuts, focusing on their faces, effectively turning the viewer into a participant.

Mr Iñarritu follows the paths of three people whose lives are linked by a car crash. Though the film is divided into separate sections, the stories are interwoven both in the direction, with a character from one story walking through another's scene, and in the editing, in montage cuts that juxtapose different narrative threads. This serves not to confuse but rather to bind the film together. The dazzling stylistic success of "Amores Perros" is reflected in the many prizes it has won, including 11 Ariel Awards (Mexico's Oscars), a Golden Globe and the Critics' Grand Prize at Cannes.

"Y Tu Mama Tambien" is a wonderful reworking of the road-movie genre. Two teenagers, Tenoch and

Reuters



Fraternity in a grain of sand

Julio, spurred on by Tenoch's cousin, Luisa, abandon Mexico city and head for the beach. Luisa, in her late 20s and the object of their desire, joins them after learning that her husband has been having an affair. Alfonso Cuarón's directorial approach is subtle and naturalistic; he too uses light, go-anywhere equipment to personalise the film. At times the sound is cut while the action continues in silence; we wait several beats before a narrator reveals details that the characters themselves are trying to hide: a secret, a state of mind, a memory.

Mr Cuarón's camera is restless, moving fluidly from one perspective to another. At times we see the countryside from inside the car, the camera swinging round on a funeral procession or a police roadblock. Elsewhere we follow one of the three travellers, wandering off at a rest stop to look at a stall or talk to a local; or we enter the world behind the camera, following a woman into a restaurant kitchen, a maid taking food to limousine drivers. At other times the camera is part of the landscape; we are bystanders in it watching the car drive by. The road-trip format slices through a broad cross-section of contemporary Mexican issues—gender, colonialism, class. It also gives the film its energy and poignancy.

Last year "Y Tu Mama Tambien" was Mexico's highest-grossing home-grown production. It opens in New York and Los Angeles on March 15th, and across the United States on April 5th. "iAccion! Mexican Cinema Now", a festival celebrating the diversity and complexity of recent Mexican cinema, is now on at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. "De La Calle" screens on the 15th, and the festival concludes on the 23rd with Mexico's entry for this year's Oscars, "Perfume de Violetas" (Violet Perfume).

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