

The Very Latest in Mexican Cinema

Leonardo García Tsao*

Just when everything seemed lost for Mexican cinema, after the so-called “error of December”¹ and the dismantling of what had once been a solid industry, middle-class audiences decided on its salvation. This is the same middle class that had turned its back on domestically made films for decades. Surprisingly, a 1999 bitter-sweet comedy, *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* (Sex, Shame and Tears) by Antonio Serrano turned out to be the most successful domestic production in history, beating out Hollywood blockbusters like *Star Wars* prequel *The Phantom Menace*. That success was evidence of a new kind of audience, basically young, that goes to shopping-mall multi-cinemas attracted by films that portray their own culture. While it may be natural to identify with a pair of teen-age lovers aboard the *Titanic*, with all its limitations, *Sex, Shame and Tears* prompted different, more immediate reflexes and ways of thinking.

* Film critic.

Since then, because domestically made films showed important box-office potential, the numbers for the distribution and exhibition of Mexican film changed significantly, and those who had seen the local industry as an inevitable evil began to see possibilities for it. A few years ago, big movie theater chains like Cinemark or Cinemex used different stratagems to get around the legal requirement of putting Mexican films on their screens because they considered them box-office poison, and showed Hollywood products instead.² This is no longer the case. Now Mexican first-run films frequently screen in the same number of theaters as the latest, highly publicized gringo blockbuster. Before, opening a Mexican movie in 250 theaters would have seemed like a pipe dream. Today this is commonplace for films distributed by companies like 20th Century Fox or NuVision, with massive publicity campaigns.

Although it would be premature to call it a resurrection, it is true that production has recovered. This year we can expect about 30





▲ *Love Is a Bitch*, 2000's top box-office hit.

full-length movies from Mexico's industry, which means that the growth rate has been more or less 10 percent a year. And while a great part of this production still depends on state support through Imcine, the government film production institution, private companies have emerged with new strategies, different from the old, obsolete dynasties that ruled Mexican cinema from the time of the so-called Golden Age. Altavista Films, Argos, Producciones Anheló and Titán are some of the companies that have put their money on commercial cinema capable of attracting middle-class audiences without insulting their intelligence.

Amores perros (Love Is a Bitch), Alejandro González Iñárritu's first film, is precisely one example of this rare phenomenon: it is a praised and much-awarded film in prestigious circles that at the same time was the year 2000's top box-office hit, showing that good returns can be achieved by a two-and-a-half hour drama with a complex narrative structure. This Altavista Films production showed that although the public prefers light comedies, it can also be interested in other proposals.

Last year, the same premise was proven by two urban dramas about marginalized young people: *De la calle* (Streeters), the debut of director Gerardo Tort, and *Perfume de violetas. Nadie te oye* (Violet Perfume - No One Hears You) Maryse Sistach's fifth full-length feature. The first is a hyper-realistic adaptation by prominent playwright González Dávila that draws a picture of the nocturnal, violently sordid world of some Mexico City teenagers with an urgency that is never morbid. The constantly moving camera and the abrupt cuts of the editing reinforce that strategy to bring the audience a sense of the immediate.

Although *Violet Perfume* focuses on the specific problem of the growing number of rapes in Mexico, the film avoids sermonizing by situating the conflict in a broader context, that of the interrupted friendship between two lower-class teenage girls; this gives the story its emotional force. Sistach films her story with the verisimilitude of a documentary, allowing it to develop with the naturalness of daily life, even at times when it could have succumbed to melodrama.

The existence of a large number of women film makers in a country known for being macho is noteworthy. This year we are expecting the commercial release of work by Marcela Arteaga with her documentary *Recuerdos* (Memories); Marcela Fernández Violante, with *Piel de víbora* (Snake Skin); Dana Rotberg, with *Otilia Rauda*; Eva López-Sánchez, with *¿De qué lado estás?* (Which Side Are You On?), to be released abroad as *Francisca* and Guita Schyfter, with *Las caras de la luna* (Faces of the Moon). The time when Fernández Violante was the only active woman director seems very far away indeed.

Without a doubt, comedy is king, whether it be a satirical look at Mexican life or as a friendly allusion to certain neuroses of Mexico City's middle class. Released after audaciously eluding the threat of censorship, *La ley de Herodes* (Herod's Law) (Luis Estrada, 2000) was of capital importance for showing that the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and other sacred cows had stopped being untouch-

able. Although the satire on institutionalized corruption was a crude caricature, the excess was necessary to make effective its virulent critique of a system that was about to come to an end in the very year it was being shown.³

Other satires have been more moderate in their attacks, although they feed on figures and situations that any Mexican citizen who watches the news would recognize. *Todo el poder* (Gimme Power) (Fernando Sariñana, 2000) posits a superficial denunciation of urban crime associated with police corruption and even has a happy ending. *En el país de no pasa nada* (In the Country Where Nothing Happens) (María del Carmen de Lara, 2000) makes pleasant fun of the figure of the dishonest Salinas-administration politician from a woman's point of view, while *Un mundo raro* (A Strange World) (Armando Casas, 2001) focuses on the murky world of commercial television to establish the moral differences between common criminals and the amoral television personalities they admire.

Without a doubt, comedy is king, whether it be a satirical look at Mexican life or as a friendly allusion to certain neuroses of Mexico City's middle class.



▲ Marysé Sistach's films develop with the naturalness of daily life, even when they could have succumbed to melodrama.

Photos on this page reprinted courtesy of Imcine

By contrast, Mexico City comedies have centered in general on the crisis of the couple. The extraordinary success of *Sex, Shame and Tears* had a precedent in *Cilantro y perejil* (Coriander and Parsley, released as *Cilantro and Perejil*) (Rafael Montero, 1996), one of the few good movies that came out during the industry's dry period. Also well received by the viewing public, although panned by the critics, was *El segundo aire* (Second Chance) by Fernando Sariñana (2001), another attempt at presenting infidelity as a symptom of generational malaise.

Certainly, the most unexpected incursion into this genre was *Vivir mata* (Living Kills) (2002), by Nicolás Echevarría, previously a director of documentaries and of the epic-mystical *Cabeza de Vaca*, one of the most highly acclaimed prize-winning films of the 1980s. *Living Kills* tries to bring together two storylines of today's Mexico City comedies: the search for a partner in love and the testimony of just how uninhabitable the city has become.

But the film is flawed: it cannot bring off the comedic tone that would do justice to its ambitions. Instead of transcending mere realism, *Living Kills* is content with being whimsically picturesque.

The preoccupation with love relationships in Mexico City found its teenage version in *La segunda vez* (The Second Time) (Alejandro Gamboa, 1999), whose best feature is its lack of pretension and the honesty with which it treats its female characters. Teen love was also the pretext for existential exploration on trips to the provinces, the subject of the irregular *Por la libre* (released as *Dust to Dust*) (Juan Carlos de Llaca, 2000), the incoherent *Piedras verdes* (Green Stones) (Ángel Flores Torres, 2001) and, of course, *Y tu mamá también* (And Your Mother, Too) (Alfonso Cuarón, 2001), the film with the largest viewing audience last year in Mexico.

Winner of last year's Venice Film Festival and purchased for distribution in several different countries, *And Your Mother, Too*, a film

Moderate satires have fed on figures and situations that any Mexican who watches the news would recognize.

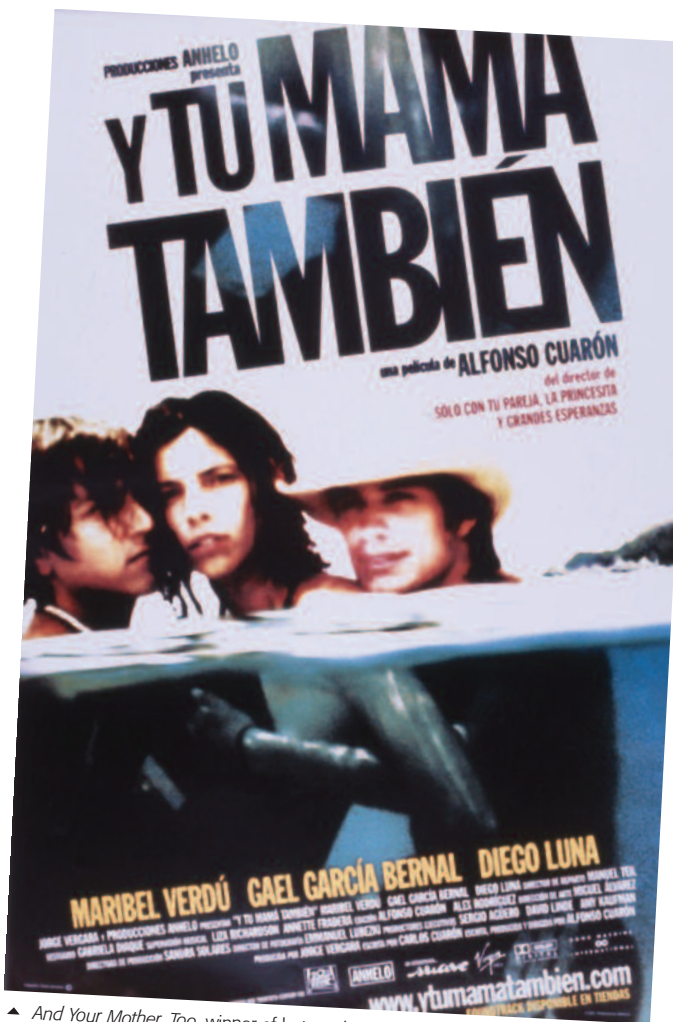


Tiempo y Tono Films, S.A.



Tiempo y Tono Films, S.A.

▲ *Streeters*, the debut of director Gerardo Tort, is an urban drama about marginalized young people.



▲ *And Your Mother, Too*, winner of last year's Venice Film Festival.

Cinefeca National Photo Archive



▲ *A Strange World* focuses on the murky world of commercial television.

Reproduced courtesy of Imcine

that marks Cuarón's return to Mexican cinema, is a complacent combination of road movie and adolescent comedy centered on a ménage à trois among a Spanish woman and two teenage boys obsessed with sex. The movie slyly suggests a critical view: while the protagonists throw themselves into directionless hedonism, the audience catches glimpses of real problems in the national situation, ignored by these privileged teens. However, *And Your Mother, Too* ends with guilt and punishment for partying, a moralistic discourse rather more suited to past generations. Perhaps it is not happenstance that the three most successful films of recent years —by Serrano, González Iñárritu and Cuarón— share this moral outlook whereby the character that departs from the norm gets his/her just desserts. Could it be

that the broad middle-class audience is unconsciously seeking to reinforce these Catholic precepts?

For this author, the most interesting recent contribution from a novel film maker is *Cuento de hadas para dormir a los cocodrilos* (Fairy Tale to Lull Crocodiles to Sleep), the second feature film by Ignacio Ortiz Cruz.⁴ Despite its pretentious title, this film takes an untraveled road. It is not a comedy, although it has dashes of humor; and the action does not take place in Mexico City, but in the beautiful arid countryside of Oaxaca. This history of a family curse over time (a heritage of insomnia and fratricide) escapes the literary conceits of magical realism to find its own language. This is the kind of production —audacious and rigorously personal— that has kept Mexican



▲ *Sex, Shame and Tears* became the most successful domestic production in history.

cinema alive even in its most unfortunate times. **MM**

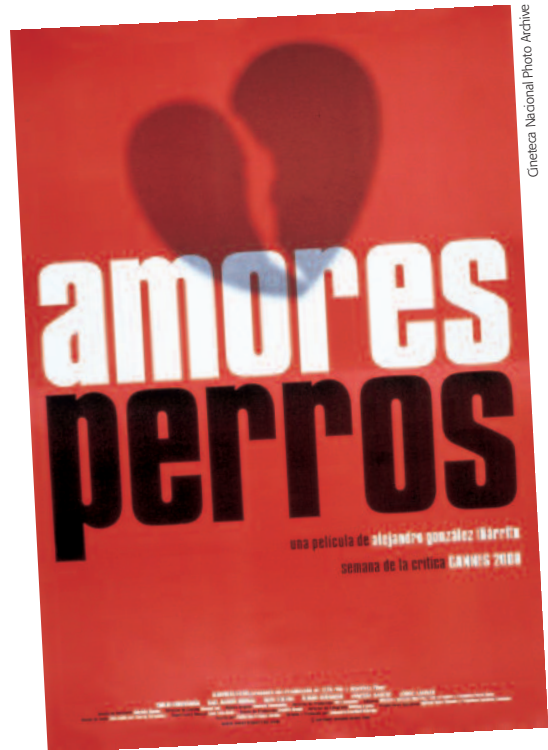
NOTES

¹ "The error of December" is the popular name for economic policy decisions announced in December 1994, a few days after President Ernesto Zedillo was inaugurated, that led to one of the country's worst economic crises in its history in 1995, similar to Argentina's current straits. [Editor's Note.]

² Mexican law requires movie houses to show at least some Mexican films; percentages have varied from 10 percent to 30 percent of the total. [Editor's Note.]

³ Release of this picture was held up for several months before the July 2000 elections, when Vicente Fox won the presidential elections, a first-time victory over the Institutional Revolutionary Party after 72 years in power. [Editor's Note.]

⁴ Ortiz Cruz is currently one of the most prestigious Mexican playwrights.



Gneteca Nacional Photo Archive