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CMLT 4210

3/7/13

The Motorcycle Diaries, And Your Mother Too:
Perspective on the Road to Revolution

Where *Y Tu Mamá También* signifies an end to one social order, *The Motorcycle Diaries* chronicles the beginnings of another. What is unique about both road films is how they link the physical movement of travel to the movement of ideas and within society. In each, we follow the story of two young men who discover there is more to the bond between them than mere friendship. Their relationships with each other and the experiences they share with those they encounter during their journeys speak to the complexity of human interaction and how those dynamics apply to social conventions, the intertwined struggle for power and prosperity, and the role of perspective in identification with the self and with the world.

Both stories take place on the cusp of several different types of revolution. Politically, *Y Tu Mamá También* is set in 1999, the turn of the century and the turnover from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) to the Centrist Democrat International Party (CDI) with the election of Vicente Fox (Sherman). Similarly, the thematic undercurrent of class disparity Guevara witnesses on his travels becomes a major influence in his decision to abandon his future career in medicine in order to aid his people more directly from a political angle. Having been exposed to the hardships his fellow citizens deal with daily, Ernesto experiences a revolution within himself as he realizes he is destined to walk a different course in life. For Tenoch and Julio, revolution takes yet another form. Cuarón combines the idea of teenage rebellion with that of sexual liberation. In another sense, Louisa declares sovereignty over herself and her body, throwing

caution to the wind as she joins the boys on their trip. For her, the journey represents a final crusade against cancer, a swan song she sings with her sex. Tonally, Cuarón and Salles diverge in the presentation of this theme, one taking an incredibly candid and unabashed approach, the other opting for a more cinematic and dramatic style.

Both films portray the blending of social class though through different lenses. In *Y Tu Mamá También*, Cuarón blurs the line with sexual synthesis, most significantly during the characters' engagement in an alcohol-influenced threesome. In *Motorcycle Diaries*, Salles symbolizes this with Ernesto's climactic struggle across the river, physically and figuratively allying himself with the lepers' plight. Both instances demonstrate the coming together of people from different backgrounds and upbringings who in some parts share common cultural elements yet perhaps contrast in their levels of self-awareness and by extension their understanding of this overlap. For example, *Y Tu Mamá También* makes the nature of the characters' coalescence very clear to the audience via voice-over narration, choices in cinematography, and aspects of mise-en-scene, yet the characters themselves essentially remain oblivious. Thus this idea of fusion is achieved primarily through dramatic irony. In addition, this removes the audience from the narrative, drawing on the postmodern convention of reflexivity to provide a platform for character and contextual analysis. Conversely, the characters in *The Motorcycle Diaries* gradually gain perspective about their world through the subtle and not-so-subtle shifts they experience as they travel between various physical and cultural boundaries. The audience's awareness develops alongside theirs, allowing for a more direct and personal application of the film's themes while adhering to a more traditional film style.

In their own ways, *The Motorcycle Diaries* and *Y Tu Mamá También* emphasize the role of power in different kinds of relationships and how it affects the involved parties' happiness and

overall sense of prosperity. On several occasions, Ernesto and Alberto's status as men of science becomes significant in how they are regarded by those they interact with. When "La Poderosa" breaks down, the mechanic they visit becomes much more willing to assist them once they reveal they are "doctors," while the physical loss of transportation also represents a loss of power as they no longer have dominance over the land, less control over time, and diminished status appearance-wise. When they reach the leper colony however, the inhabitants respect them for the medical prowess despite them being outsiders, even going as far as to throw Ernesto a birthday party, everyone enjoying the festivities and air of solidarity despite illness and disparate upbringings. When the two encounter the Communist mining couple, there is an obvious division in power on two accounts. First, that they are upper middle class and therefore seen by society as more important or desirable on the basis that wealth is power, and second, that the mining couple extinguishes whatever remains of Alberto and Ernesto's previous desires for adventure and adjournment of responsibility. In regards to the audience's perspective, this signifies the movie's turning point, showing Ernesto becoming more humble and self-aware, as demonstrated when he reveals that he gave away the bathing suit money. At the close of the movie, Ernesto realizes that despite a noble doctor's career waiting for him back home, that kind of life won't bring him happiness, and that in his current state he is powerless to help people in the ways he truly wants to, sparking him to revolutionize himself and later his country.

In *Y Tu Mamá También*, there are several different power shifts between all three of the main characters, primarily concerning their sexual relations. Intercourse is often associated with an oscillating scale between dominance and vulnerability. Being with an older, more mature woman puts the boys in a position of subordination in terms social hierarchies and experience, yet they also try to trump each other by revealing they both had sex with each other's girlfriends

and insulting one another's lifestyles. Louisa reasserts power as she emasculates them, forcing them to obey her stipulations and end their quarrelling. From then on, they seem to view each other more as equals, making both peace and love in the final days of their romp. However, one year later, neither boy appears particularly content. They left home with the simple intention to have a good time, and yet they have come out of the experience less happy than before, their friendship ruined, their socio-economic standings and the hubris and wild abandon of their previous years together rendered obsolete. Correspondingly, Alberto and Ernesto, also having set out in good spirits, return from their trip sobered and subdued by the reality of life divest of the vain expectations cultivated by the ease and security their affluence previously allowed. Through the exploration of these character transformations, each film deconstructs and reconstructs the definitions of "power" and "prosperity," stripping both terms down to a very raw base.

Towards the end of *Y Tu Mamá También*, there is a very noteworthy shot of Louisa on the phone making her final goodbyes to Jano. Through the doorway, the boys are shown enjoying a game of foosball, but around the corner Louisa cries quietly to herself, privately lamenting her misfortune. The juxtaposition of these starkly contrasting emotional tones creates a moment of silent commentary regarding the delicate nature of society in that people can go about their lives completely unaware of the inner turmoil and aspirations that flood and frame the minds of those around them, everyone working in time to the predetermined rhythm society pounds into them even as they become saturated with a strident symphony, a stubborn beating of hearts bursting with all shades of pride, passion and pain. Applying MacCannell's notion of the "ethics of the pleasurable imaginary," (190) puts an interesting spin on how we view each character's motives and emotional-cognitive state, adding another layer to the context of perspective in terms of the power-prosperity dynamic. It would seem that Tenoch and Julio

derive pleasure from the trip, by seeking to “fill [their] lack,” while unbeknownst to them, Luisa uses the trip to “honor [her] limits and hide [her] lack” (191) as a victim of cancer and a failed relationship.

Rather than presenting this theme of perspective via cinematographic techniques, *The Motorcycle Diaries* interweaves it more subtly throughout the narrative. Keeping in mind the distinction between story and plot, Salles’ structural choices prove effective because they allow the audiences’ understanding of the emerging socio-political undercurrent to be transformed alongside the characters’. On the other hand, the muting of diegetic sound, along with the unnamed narrator in *Y Tu Mamá También* deliberately disengages viewers with the story surrounding the three main characters, forcing the audience to examine the story in a larger context, closer to how it truly is as opposed to how they themselves regard it. In terms of analysis, the latter provides a more provocative platform from which to evaluate the film’s message in real time, yet *The Motorcycle Diaries*’ format offers a compelling, albeit dramatized, historical fiction story that paints a backdrop for the ensuing political era. From a postmodern approach, the contrast in plot structure parallels to the very idea the directors communicate – that we must not discount the importance of the progression of perspective in understanding texts in the hope that, like the characters they chronicle, we can use them as tools to increase our self-awareness in order to consciously contribute to the evolution of the ideologies that shape our behavior and perception and affect how we communicate academically and artistically.

While these two films share many thematic parallels, ultimately they diverge in their scope of exploration. *The Motorcycle Diaries* demonstrates the necessity of introspection in order to recognize one’s potential, determine one’s truth and goals, and combine these elements to better the world, even if to a smaller degree than Guevara. *Y Tu Mamá También* reflects upon

how dissociation from oneself and one's culture creates dissonance in the relationships one tries to pursue as it becomes more difficult to identify with what and who resonates on a deeper level that transcends verbal or physical communication. Ironically, and perhaps because of this message, an argument can be made that it is a much more personal movie. Despite that the portrayal of the characters' relationships is believable in both films, *The Motorcycle Diaries* feels more traditional stylistically speaking, while *Y Tu Mamá También* is somewhat less conventional, reflecting the rawness and randomness of real life. However, Salles pays homage to this idea at the end of the film, utilizing actual footage from the original trip of non-actors posing starkly during the credits, and putting the reality of a fictionalized journey into perspective.

Combining all these elements together creates an appropriately complex collage depicting civilized society on a universal scale. There is a moment in *Motorcycle Diaries* in which Ernesto chooses not to wear gloves while examining the leper patients. In this instance, he displays a form of intimacy separate from the kind Julio and Tenoch lust after. Put both side by side however, and what does it show? That in the end all humanity craves is love? Yet we are capable of so much destruction and brutality, as the inequalities depicted in both stories attest. They demonstrate how people so often fight for both rights and wrongs, and all at once conflict becomes war and war becomes revolution.

At one point in *Motorcycle Diaries*, Alberto comments, "A revolution without guns? That will never work!" In some ways, this statement is accurate, as guns do indeed represent a form of power as literal weapons one can use to change or seal another's fate, as a way of playing God and inciting fear or stifling another's words, yet a different form of power. Tenoch and Julio use their words to seduce Louisa, and she uses her own to put the boys in their place, just as the leper girl, with a little word like "why?" has a profound impact on Ernesto's self-image by indirectly

asking him to reevaluate his purpose in life, just as we use them to analyze films and make fun of our mothers. But what is power really? Toss it among all the rest of the social constructions we've fashioned ourselves and it loses definition just as easily as any other. Considering the aforementioned analogies, can we then truly analogize our industrialized way of life to "civilization" when in so many ways we remain underdeveloped and less prosperous compared to so-called "primitive" societies? If we too travelled across countries to become "closer to the earth," or inadvertently closer to each other, perhaps we would discover something of an answer within ourselves. It seems fitting to explore the universes of the human mind as well, for as vast as the world is, the worlds within us are often far greater.

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