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The Young, the Damned, and the Restless

Youth in Contemporary Mexican Cinema¹

Laura Podalsky

Over the past decade a growing field of research in the United States has focused on youth, film, and youth cultures. These studies have been driven by many factors, including increased awareness of young adults as an important niche market² and debates over youthful “deviance” (whether measured in terms of the supposedly anti-social lyrics of rap, violence in the schools, or the nihilism of Gen-Xers). By analyzing the filmic representation of young adults and their role as consumers, these studies explore ways in which cinematic portrayals confirm or resist dominant youth discourses and ways in which young people respond.

Similar studies in Latin America have been scarce, despite the recent proliferation of films about young adults. The “New Argentine Cinema” has produced many intimate tales about the young in low-budget works like *Pizza birra faso/Pizza, Beer, and Cigarettes* (Adrián Caetano and Bruno Stagnaro, 1997) and *Nadar solo/Swimming Alone* (Ezequiel Acuña, 2002) as well as in more commercial films about middle-class youth like *No sabe, no contesta/Doesn’t Know, Doesn’t Respond* (Fernando Musa, 2002). Colombian director Víctor Gaviria’s films on marginalized youth (*Rodrigo D: No futuro*, 1990 and *La vendedora de rosas/The Rose Seller*, 1998) have won international acclaim. In Mexico the growth in youth cinema can be traced to the 1980s, when the media conglomerate Televisa began to produce films with already

contracted pop stars like Luis Miguel, Lucero, and Gloria Trevi.³ Since the early 1990s, films like *Pelo suelto/Loose Hair* (Pedro Galindo, 1991), *La primera noche/The First Night* (Alejandro Gamboa, 1997), *Amores perros/Love's a Bitch* (Alejandro González Iñárruti, 2000), and *Y tu mamá también/And Your Mother, Too* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2001)—all of them featuring young leads—have been top Mexican box-office domestic draws, occasionally and remarkably rivaling imported Hollywood blockbusters.⁴

The Mexican films share a number of thematic preoccupations and stylistic tendencies with their U.S. counterparts. As in *Rebel without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955), *Pretty in Pink* (John Hughes, 1986), and *Boyz in the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991), the Mexican works tie youthful deviance to the “crisis” of the traditional family and feature the sort of spatio-temporal disjunctions typical of U.S. music videos. Nonetheless, there are key differences. Mexican films more typically tie their lament over the fall of patriarchal structures to a macro-political critique. As noted by numerous historians, from the 1930s until the late 1980s, the Mexican state acted as benevolent guardian that successfully “managed” its citizenry through top-down policies and pro-nationalist rhetoric. By the late 1980s the privatization policies initiated under President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (hand-in-hand with the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA]) severely undercut the state’s ability to play benefactor to established interest groups and many cultural institutions. As argued by Alex Saragoza and Graciela Berkovich, starting in the 1990s, Mexican films registered this shift through allegorical narratives that comment on the decline of the patriarchal state in narratives about private lives.⁵ At the same time, the youth films’ disjunctive aesthetic highlights their protagonists’ spatio-temporal isolation to register a decentered subjectivity typical of those living in “industrializing” countries whose place in a globalizing world is particularly uncertain. In analyzing such works, a cue should be taken from scholars like Rob Latham who look beyond the practices and representations of young adults in both individual and larger socio-political realms to see how the concept of “youth” functions as a mediating socio-cultural mechanism during different stages of capitalist development.⁶

Thus, it is important to situate recent youth films alongside concurrent public discussions about “the problem of today’s youth,” which vary regionally but frequently intersected in the Latin American context with issues over the legacies of the past and the significance of neo-liberal economic globalization. Do young adults ignore local histories of repression (a question that has particular resonance in countries like Argentina that experienced military dictatorships in the 1960s–80s)? Are young adults apolitical? If so, what does this mean for the future of the nation? And, of particular importance, in an economic climate that supports the unfettered flow of goods across national borders, have young adults abandoned social commitment to follow the siren call of individualistic consumerism and the seductive beats of transnational

youth culture? Although Latin American youth generally do not wield the type of disposable income that some young Americans can,⁷ the proliferation of malls in urban centers and the commercial explosion of Spanish-language rock music are indications that both local and global culture industries have begun to target that sector of the population.

In Mexico debates about youth have been closely related to the country's amazing neo-liberal transformation over the past two decades (late 1980s–present). Throughout this period, young adults have become newly “visible” as important social, political, and economic agents (as members of urban gangs; as swing voters in the landmark presidential election in 2000; and as a new niche market⁸) and, equally crucial, youth have served as a symbolic repository for ambivalent feelings about the fall of past Mexican social models in the face of new cultural globalization.

In this context it is profitable to examine contemporary cinematic practices in Mexico that both support official notions of “youth” as a socio-cultural category and chart new emergent, quasi-oppositional identities and subjectivities. In her excellent book *Emergencia de culturas juveniles: estrategias del desencanto* (2000), Mexican communications scholar Rossana Reguillo argued that cinema was one of the only discursive arenas capable of adequately representing young adults fully. She felt that only film offered “interesting analytical and critical approaches to the traditional sites of adolescent socialization [like] the family [and] work, [while at the same time] not ‘losing’ the adolescent subject.”⁹ Although much more skeptical than Reguillo about film's abilities to critically apprehend young subjectivities, I nonetheless consider the issue of the utmost importance.

The Rhetoric of Deviance and Cinematic Representations

Youth has often been defined as a transitional period and young adults as unstable. Frequently these assumptions have produced rigid classifications that divide young adults into two categories: the properly socialized and the troublesomely marginal.¹⁰ The former follow the instructions of social and political institutions (the family, the Church, the educational system, the State, etc.), while the latter resist such imperatives, either deliberately or not. In modern Latin America discourses about juvenile deviancy can be traced as far back as the 1950s, when many countries in the region, including Mexico, experienced significant economic restructurings.¹¹ Between the late 1960s and the 1990s, the role of young people in revolutionary struggles, in the growing drug trade, and in the context of increasing economic polarization produced even more extreme notions about them as deviant subject-citizens.

The controversy that arose in Mexico during the late 1980s over the *chavos banda* (working-class youth recognizable for their spiked hair, leather jackets, and punk music) demonstrates how debates about youth reflect larger socio-economic concerns. The controversy also underscores the media's

stimulation of public concern about the young as a “problem” and its call for state intervention. In the late 1980s, during grave economic difficulties, the Mexican media began to “bombard” the public with versions of the *chavos banda* as “drug addicts, killers, robbers, alcoholics, depraved creatures, good-for-nothings or simply as gang members.”¹² The news outlets were responding, in part, to young dress codes and confrontational gang names (e.g., Punk Shits, the Defective Ones, Sex Lepers, Snots, the Stained Ones) as much as to supposedly criminal behavior. As marginalized youth became more “visible,” the middle classes called upon the state to control them.¹³ As it had done in the past with labor unions and neighborhood organizations, the PRI-led government (under President Salinas de Gortari) attempted to both co-opt the gangs (by formalizing their connections to the PRI) and to repress them (through direct police actions and censorship of state-sponsored radio programs directed by and for marginalized youth).¹⁴

This would not be the first or last time that state policies bolstered ideas of troublesome youth in order to the benefit the ruling party. In the subsequent PRI-led administration of President Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000), these debates led some officials to call for harsher sentences for minors and for a reduction in the age at which minors could be tried as adults (from eighteen to sixteen years).¹⁵ Even though these changes never occurred, the debate promoted the administration as a stabilizing force in the face of growing crime.¹⁶ Alongside the get-tough policies, the government also cultivated co-optative strategies. At the end of its term, as the 2000 presidential election approached, the Zedillo administration created the Instituto Mexicano de la Juventud (IMJ)/the Mexican Institute on Youth to reach out to young adults to more fully incorporate them into the national life.¹⁷ The IMJ took over the scholarly journal, *JOVENes*, created an archive for ‘zines and other types of cultural self-produced youth materials and, in 2000, carried out the first comprehensive, nationwide *Encuesta* or poll of Mexican youth. The Zedillo administration’s two-prong policy initiatives (one repressive; one accommodating) can be seen as sides of a very large coin aimed at buying the PRI political capital during a crucial electoral period. Despite such efforts, the PRI lost both the presidency and the youth vote. Many young people were drawn to the rhetoric of change and greater inclusion championed by pro-business conservative Vicente Fox, the candidate for the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN).¹⁸ But once in office, the Fox administration treated young people as a problem—just as had previous PRI-led administrations.¹⁹

These responses were further evident during the international Summit of the European Union and Latin American countries held in Guadalajara (Mexico’s second largest city located in the conservative state of Jalisco) in May 2004. When university students protested the inequalities resulting from the latest neo-liberal reforms, police responded by jailing some one hundred marchers under questionable circumstances. Their tactics were brutal enough to attract the attention of Amnesty International, as well as European

parliamentarians who wrote letters of denunciation. Under great pressure to demonstrate Mexico's stability, municipal officials found a willing partner in the mainstream Mexican news outlets which functioned as "an echo chamber for a [collective] imaginary filled with fear and lacking in scapegoats," facilitating the normalization of state repression as crucial to national "progress."²⁰ In their coverage, newspapers (like *Mural*, *La Reforma*, and *El Universal*), TV stations, and online news services minimized the police violence and emphasized the damage caused by demonstrators. The media's visual illustrations of young adults pounding on the shields of impassive policemen literalized the characterization of young adults as "ungovernable bodies."²¹ Such images functioned as "proof" that state repression was justifiable and the reporting effectively steered attention away from the issues. As Reguillo has noted, the obsession with youth criminality blames those who have benefited least from globalization, not only for "obstructing socio-economic progress" but also for their own marginalization.²²

The portrayal of chavos banda and student activists as "ungovernable bodies" is bolstered by the media's other adolescent: the good consumer. Although an in-depth analysis of the representations of "good youth"—which are abundant in music-video shows, daily telenovelas like Televisa's *Amigos y rivales* (2001–02), and newspapers' weekly "youth" sections—exceed the possibilities of this essay, a few observations can be made. As suggested by Raymundo Mier and Mabel Piccini in their study of Mexican television, many "youth programs" promote traditional pro-family, pro-capitalist values even as they seemingly give voice to rebellious teens. In music-video shows like *Telehit* (1993–), stylishly hip VJs help domesticate the "naked . . . torsos, extravagant hair styles, [and] obscene gestures . . ." displayed by performing musicians.²³ Aside from demonstrating dominant society's tolerance for "difference,"²⁴ the music-video shows situate their viewers as consumers who are encouraged to "buy into" a delimited notion of rebellion—as if it were a commodity. The popular early evening television "youth telenovelas" similarly circumscribe youth frustrations. Although the leads may be emotionally unstable, they are meticulously groomed and, for the most part, ultimately redeemable. By "packaging" youthful rebellion and providing "positive" models, these programs further stigmatize working-class youth, student activists, and others who fall outside of the norm.

To what extent does Mexican cinema participate in an "ungovernable bodies" or "good kids" binary? It is tempting to draw a distinction between young adults in "industrial" or mainstream films and in "independent" or alternative productions²⁵ because one could argue that mainstream films like *La primera noche*, *Por la libre/Dust to Dust* (Juan Carlos de Llaca, 1999), *La segunda noche/The Second Night* (Alejandro Gamboa, 2000), *Amar te duele/Loving You Hurts* (Fernando Sariñana, 2002), and *Ladies' Night* (Gabriela Tagliavini, 2003), to name only a few, are prone to facile moralizing. As in traditional telenovelas, their young (and mostly privileged) protagonists live in a fairly

hermetic fictional world of carefully appointed interiors and picturesque exteriors; moreover, the characters have well-defined problems that have well-defined solutions. In contrast, independent films or videos, like *Lolo* (Francisco Athié, 1991), *Aquí no pasa nada/Nothing Happens Here* (Carlos Salces, 1992), *Perfume de violetas: Nadie te oye/Violet Perfume: No One Is Listening* (Marysa Sistach, 2001), *Seres humanos/About the Living* (Jorge Aguilera, 2001), and *Mil nubes de paz cercan el cielo, amor, jamás acabarás de ser amor/A Thousand Clouds of Peace* (Julián Hernández, 2002), which frequently are more formally experimental, and often feature a grittier, less polished mise-en-scène, seem to offer an acute social critique by using marginalized youth or lower-class struggles to reveal inequalities and/or by refusing to provide easy resolutions. Nonetheless, this opposition between “industrial” and independent films grossly simplifies the present condition of youth films in Mexico, which are often marked by unexpected nuances and contradictions, and it is important to move beyond traditional categorizations. As shown by *Amar te duele* and *Y tú mamá también*, mainstream cinema can pose noteworthy critiques of class inequality, and some independents like Jorge Aguilera’s *Seres humanos*, which focuses on privileged youth, can have a polished big-budget look.

Although Mexican youth films as a whole tend to portray their protagonists as “ungovernable bodies,” some highlight youthful desire in tales of sexual coming-of-age while others explore violence as the more negative outcome of such desires. Despite the films’ efforts to highlight a young perspective with compassion, many betray a conservative subtext by associating youthful indiscretions with the crisis of the patriarchal structures in Mexico. Adolescent sexual awakening frequently functions as a central theme in films like *Anoche soñé contigo/Dreaming about You* (Marysa Sistach, 1992), *Un hilito de sangre/A Trickle of Blood* (Erwin Neumaier, 1994), *La primera noche*, *La segunda noche*, and *Y tu mamá también*; or as an important subplot in films about less privileged youth like *Un año perdido/A Lost Year* (Gerardo Lara, 1992), *El cometa/The Comet* (Marysa Sistach, 1998), and *Un embrujo/Under a Spell* (Carlos Carrera, 1998). Although there are clear differences, they are often organized around the patriarchal point of view, the male heterosexual experience, and a fetishization of the female body. *Y tu mamá también*, a coming-of-age story in which an older Spanish woman tutors two young Mexican men in the art of pleasuring women, is perhaps the best-known example. This tendency is also evident in Alejandro Gamboa’s *La primera noche*, a box-office hit in Mexico. The director’s successful follow-up film, *La segunda noche*, seemingly offered a new take on the same theme by presenting three female adolescents’ first sexual encounters. Nonetheless, the exploration of the thoughts and feelings of the women does not prevent an objectification of the female. Its opening sequence features many shots of the three dressing and undressing themselves. The film’s conservative inclinations are particularly obvious in its depiction of Susana, the only one to decide not to have sex with her boyfriend, as the most stable and sympathetic. In essence, *La segunda noche*

reiterates the refrain that “good” girls who abstain from pre-marital sex are ultimately happier.²⁶

While youth films about the middle-class often revolve around a sexual coming-of-age, those featuring the working-class tend to focus on violence and criminality. Generally, this appears in both mainstream films like *Amores perros* and the less commercial *Lolo, Hasta morir/Til Death* (Fernando Sariñana, 1994), *Perfume de violetas/ Perfume of Violets*, and *De la calle/On the Street* (Gerardo Tort, 2001), all of which are ambivalent about how class relates to crime. By privileging the perspective of their poor protagonists, these films help to attenuate the concept of such youth as violent “other” (as in news reports) or as poor-but-ethically-pure moral exemplars (as in telenovelas). For example, Sistach’s *Perfume de violetas* places a protagonist’s criminality against parental neglect and family poverty, which eventually lead to the young woman’s rape by her stepbrother’s friend. Yet, despite the care taken to make their characters’ plight understandable, these films’ depiction of young violence as a consequence of uncontrollable bodies further weakens their efforts to underscore structural inequalities.

Their narratives often lay the blame squarely at the feet of dysfunctional families. Indeed, parents often function as a key subplot in big productions like *La primera noche, Amores perros, La segunda noche, Por la libre*, and *Piedras verdes/Green Stones* (Ángel Flores Torres, 2001) as well as in independent ones like *Aquí no pasa nada, Lolo, Perfume de violetas*, and *De la calle*. By frequently characterizing the father as distanced, absent, authoritarian, or perverted, these films comment on and, indeed, lament the patriarchal family loss. There are several absent fathers in *Amores perros* and, despite its feminist inclinations, *Perfume de violetas* suggests that, by themselves, mothers are incapable of controlling their offspring. In *La segunda noche*, Susana is not only the most morally-grounded of the three protagonists, she is the only one whose parents are not divorced.

Music-Video Aesthetics and Postmodern Sensibilities

In contrast to their conservative thematic subtext, Mexican youth films explore new ground with their cinematic aesthetic. Its presence, in some part, can be attributed to the fact that directors like Alejandro González Iñárruti, Jorge Aguilera, and Ángel Flores Torres have worked in advertising and on music videos.²⁷ Note that the term “MTV aesthetic” is employed more suggestively, than definitively. It refers less to the use of music than to aesthetic music-video tendencies such as stylistic virtuosity and spatio-temporal disjunctures.

The much-cited *Amores perros* is an excellent example. Its breathtaking opening scene immediately places the viewer in a car chase without prior narrative framing and the rapidly sequenced shots prompt the viewer to rely on composition and editing cues to understand the chase. Besides the quick

alternations between the two vehicles and the use of a zoom lens, the film adds extreme close-ups (of strained faces, of bloody hands on bloody fur) and the jerky feel of a hand-held camera. The tight framing telegraphs the pressure experienced by the principal characters (whose names we don't know), while the hand-held camera expresses the precariousness of the situation. Curiously, music is almost entirely absent. Nonetheless, *Amores perros* participates in the music video's aesthetic economy, the techniques of which, in this opening scene, underscore the urgency and fear of the two young men and their desire to avoid their pursuers.

The distinctive look of *Amores perros*—specifically, the blue tone brought out in the images in the first and third parts familiar to U.S. viewers from the original *CSI* TV show set in Las Vegas (CBS, US, 2000)—makes the shots appear both hyper-real and, also, stripped-down. The bluish cast makes humans seem pallid and the environment cold and antiseptic. The cinematography brings out the primal starkness of the working-class neighborhoods with their pock-marked walls, tree-less streets, and hopelessly old cars. The shots imbue these neighborhoods with a beautiful ugliness intended to captivate middle-class spectators who, without such aesthetic sleights-of-hand, might not be disposed to look at life “over there.”

Julián Hernández's low-budget independent film *Mil nubes de paz* is quite different in directorial intent and commercial appeal but the precocious rigor of its shots of an even-more downtrodden Mexico City achieves a similar effect. Hernández's black and white film has images composed in a granular texture that make the urban landscape appear eaten away by acid. In *Mil nubes*, the very deliberate pictorial attention serves an expressive purpose, as the shot compositions capably convey the loneliness of Gerardo, the lead. The framing and camera movements isolate him in front of graffiti-filled walls or away from other characters.

Some Mexican critics have derided these films as music-video rip-offs. Carlos Monsivais has gone further by denigrating *Amores perros* and *Y tu mamá también* as examples of a “postmodern cinema” that finds inspiration in “music videos, the films of Quentin Tarantino and Abel Ferrara, and . . . profane speech (the ‘fuck off’ ad infinitum) that . . . is the prologue to and continuation of violence.”²⁸ In the rush to denounce the new film aesthetics as a derivative marketing ploy, such critics overlook the possibility that the style of *Amores perros*, *Mil nubes de paz*, and other “youth films” approximate their young realities. Indeed, one of E. Ann Kaplan's central arguments about MTV is that it “reproduces a kind of decenteredness, often called ‘postmodernist,’ that increasingly reflects young people's condition in the advanced stage of highly developed, technological capitalism evident in America.”²⁹ The way in which Mexican youth experience the current moment is not entirely different but the more acute socio-economic polarization that exists within Mexico and the gross disparities between it and its influential northern neighbor instantiate a more intense decenteredness. Many films attempt to

capture that experience by placing greater emphasis on the interior life than on linear events. Whether through the brevity (or length) of the shots, the exaggeration of certain tones or the purposeful jerks of a hand-held camera, these films convey the rhythms of everyday life as experienced by young adults in ways that make their sensibilities palpable to spectators.

The careful imaging of entrapment (as in *Amores perros*) and existential desolation (as in *Mil nubes de paz*) corresponds to the importance attached to individual actions in contemporary youth cultures, as discussed by Reguillo.³⁰ What this focus means is highly debatable. One might argue that the individualism of youth cultures is the result of the breakdown of traditional socializing institutions like the family, the Church, and schools³¹ and, a reflection of the individualizing logic of the neo-liberal market as well as the fall of Marxist social paradigms. There is little doubt about the political risks and theoretical problems in reifying the individual. But, as noted by Mexican social scientist Rogelio Marcial and Rossana Reguillo, the respect that many young adults have for the beliefs of others is based on an egalitarian vision of society much more radical than the mere “tolerance” voiced by the Mexican state.³² This deference is apparent even in those groups deemed most antagonistic by dominant society, like Mexico’s anarcho-punks and raztecas (a term indicating a mingling of Rastafarian and “Aztec” traditions). In both, the veneration of the individual is concomitant with a collective identity used as a bulwark against the global marketplace, whether through activism or rejection of industrial goods in favor of artisanal goods.³³ In this context, these cited youth films, can be seen as a creative response to marketplace individualism.

The films’ incorporation of a music-video or publicity aesthetic captures the sensibility of contemporary youth in another important way. As well documented by Kaplan and others, those “genres” do not follow Aristotelian unities.³⁴ Space-time continuities are subordinated to 1) the synchronization of music and image; 2) the visualization of lyrics or “message”; and/or 3) the creation of fetching images that incarnate a certain quality associated with the song, artist, or product (e.g., irreverence, nostalgia, hip-ness, etc). In films like Ángel Flores Torres’s *Piedras verdes* and Jorge Aguilera’s *Seres humanos*, playing with space and time transmits an emotional state to the spectator viscerally. For example, in one sequence in *Piedras verdes*, past and present flow together in exaggerated temporal continuity through repeated tracks left and right as the camera follows different characters answering the door for sequential drug buys. Both furnishings and lighting change after each completed track to suggest the passage of story time. However, the constancy of the moving track creates a continuity of screen time that then disorients the spectator. Through this conflation, the film not only portrays its characters as trapped in a vicious, dead-end cycle but also manages to draw the spectator into their emotionally confused state.

Aguilera’s *Seres humanos*, about a trauma suffered by a family whose very young daughter dies in an accident and what happens in the ensuing years,

similarly taps into affective experience. Dulce, the mother, becomes a successful emcee of talk shows that become increasingly sensationalistic. Derek, the father, retreats into a fantasy about his daughter's imminent return. Damián, the son, is detached and suicidal. The plot is extremely episodic, more an accumulation of isolated tableaux than a series of "seamlessly" linked events. In *Seres humanos*, depicting what happened is less important than examining the mental-affective states of the three main characters. Unlike the scene in *Piedras verdes*, which compressed time, *Seres humanos* captures an emotional state by detaining or elongating time—not through slow motion, but rather through shots whose meaning slowly emerges by accumulating associations.

These films convey new sensibilities arising out of socio-historical formations—specifically, digital culture and globalization. As noted by urban geographer and cultural theorist David Harvey, our current experience of time-space compression deeply influences our subjectivity. Clearly, young adults are not the only ones affected but, whereas forty-, fifty- and sixty-year olds often find the home computer, for example, a radical transformation, younger people experience such technologies as normative. As a result, they are more apt to conceptualize space in terms of infinite, overlapping networks, rather than territories defined by borders. Similarly, time is measured more by gigabytes than by hours, days, months, and years. Thus, the importance of spatial contiguity and temporal sequence has lessened in favor of an expectation of instant (virtual) presence. As a recent TV ad for a computer giant reminded us with shots of smiling children in a school in Africa, smiling adolescents in Norway, and smiling businessmen in Russia—each group standing next to a computer—all forms of distance no longer matter—we are "connected." This rupture of older notions of space-time is apparent in the practices of PC- and Web-users who manipulate multiple windows at will, write or speak with anyone anywhere, create virtual identities untethered from material spaces and personal histories or enter game zones.³⁵

What these new films share is the exaltation of a continuous present and an effort to draw the spectator into lived experience. Iñárruti's *Amores perros* develops multiple overlapping narratives. Hernández's *Mil nubes de paz* includes spare temporal markers (e.g., in lighting changes that signal daytime or nighttime) that make it impossible to decipher a precise chronology. In Flores Torres's *Piedras verdes*, the new configurations are presented fleetingly, as in the above-mentioned sequence that "expands" time. In Aguilera's *Seres humanos*, they are articulated in the film's episodic nature and in isolated sequences as the plot jumps. All of these films invite the spectator into an immersion of frenzy, dread, and anguish, an immersion that may have something to do with what anthropologist Carles Feixa calls "youthful chronotopes."³⁶

The representation of these spatio-temporal disjunctures and "expanded present" also registers the specificities of Mexican "progress" in a particular historical trajectory of the latter half of the twentieth century.

Starting in the late 1950s, dominant “developmentalist” discourses suggested that Mexico (and, indeed, the rest of Latin America) “lagged behind” the United States and Europe in economic and political terms and that, with the proper infusion of foreign capital and political mentoring, those countries could “jump forward” to share the stage with the forward-looking United States. Indeed, recent neo-liberal promises to bring Mexico up-to-date can be seen as a variation on that logic. In an oblique fashion, the contemporary Mexican youth film registers this sense of being “out-of-sync” with the times.

To best appreciate the way this cinema captures an emergent sensibility among Mexican youth, it is essential to examine the type of ironic spectatorial relationship proposed by the aesthetics of at least some of these films, which share with U.S. counterparts like *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) and *Kill Bill Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003, 2004) a calculated meta-cinematic awareness, an irreverent attitude, a certain theatricality, and an appreciation for the grotesque. In the case of Mexican cinema, the best example might be *El sueño del caiman/The Dream of the Crocodile* (Beto Gómez, 2002), a semi-cult film among both European youth (who saw it at film festivals) and Mexican youth.³⁷ The film puts much emphasis on intertextual references. From the very first scene in the bedroom of young Iñaki (where a poster of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, US, 1974) hangs on the wall alongside another featuring Ché Guevara as a Clint Eastwood-like action hero with a huge pistol) to the final sequence’s homage to *Dog Day Afternoon* (Sidney Lumet, US, 1975), *El sueño* places itself in a tongue-in-cheek relationship to the action or suspense film. By invoking the figure of Ché as cinematic hero in its opening (well before the debut of Walter Salles’s *Diarios de motocicleta/Motorcycle Diaries* [AR/US/CU/DE/MX/UK/CL/PE/FR, 2004]), the film anticipates its later political critique of revolutionary politics when Iñaki realizes that his father, El Vasco (the Basque), did not flee Spain because of his political activities, but rather because he was a criminal. This mocking attitude toward the liberatory possibilities of politics warns spectators not to take anything too seriously. This satirical stance extends to other matters. The inclusion of Doña Carmelita, a transvestite apartment manager, allows the film to poke fun at traditional gender roles as Doña Carmelita conforms more closely to the ideal role of a proper lady than do her fetching nieces, for whom she cares as if they were her own children. *El sueño*’s parodic relationship to genre films and the exaggerated performance of its characters break with the realist aesthetic that the film appears to mimic in other ways. It suggests that everyone in the world is performing a well-rehearsed role and encourages us to laugh at the excesses of Doña Carmelita and the other characters. The film’s kitsch aesthetic (present to a lesser degree in other Mexican films like *El tigre de Santa Julia/The Tiger of Santa Julia* (Alejandro Gamboa, 2002), and in certain scenes from *La segunda noche*) proposes a pleasure beyond that of identification—that of in-house

knowledge, rewarding recognition of allusions to other films and showing the screen as a window onto other windows not as one onto reality. In referring obliquely to particular socio-historical conjunctures (i.e., revolutionary and separatist movements in Latin American and Spain), *El sueño* retains a notion of the extra-textual and demands that the spectator employ his/her knowledge of historical events to fully enjoy the narrative.

If such socio-historical references become a mainstay of Mexican youth cinema, they would mark a decisive break from mainstream U.S. youth cinema. This is a distinct possibility as the invitation to spectatorial irony is also present in imported television programs like *The Simpsons* and the pop-up videos that are a cable staple in Mexico and Latin America and in programming like the shows seen on Retro, an Argentine cable station carried on Mexican cable television in the early 2000s. Retro recycled old U.S. TV series (like *Get Smart*, *Starsky and Hutch*, and *The Brady Bunch* that had first debuted on Mexican television in the 1970s) as well as old movies, like those of soft-core porn star Isabel Sarli. It presented these programs to its viewers with a sly wink, offering them the opportunity to laugh at the programs' low-quality production values and old-fashioned morality and, at the same time, to indulge in nostalgia.³⁸

Such irreverence (indeed, its very marketability) is a reaction to the contemporary scene—one in which traditional identities (whether class, region, or nationality) are more tenuous, in which the legitimacy and efficacy of social institutions like school and the family are questioned, and in which socio-economic change has been rapid and constant. In Mexico, these shifts are a result of several factors, including the dismantling of revolutionary nationalism (present since the 1920s), the rise of neo-liberal economic policies concretized in the 1994 signing of NAFTA, and the electoral defeat of the PRI in 2000 (after seventy-odd years in power). In this uncertain context, young people have adopted a more detached attitude.

What such attitudes ultimately mean is debatable. For critics like Monivais, hyper-referential "youth films" are a sign of socio-cultural decay as their popularity signals hedonism, solipsism, and, in the worst case, an inability to think critically about the world. For others (especially those who study youth cultures like Reguillo, Marcial, Henry Giroux, and Ryan Moore), such attitudes are an understandable response to contemporary life. This generation emerged as an audience in the mid to late 1980s when they tuned into Alejandro González Iñárruti's smash hit radio show on WFM (Televisa Radio) in Mexico City,³⁹ the first interactive program on the FM dial, where he and his co-hosts continuously satirized the world at large. Debuting shortly after the 1985 earthquake that devastated the city and demonstrated the federal government's failures, the show's irreverence caught on quickly. In this context, the ironic stance promoted by films like *El sueño* and the recycled imports shown on TV allow Mexican youth to feel up-to-date with worldwide youth trends while at the same

time scorning any belief that their (or Mexico's) socio-economic situation will radically improve.

Scholars like Reguillo and Marcial argue that political and social cynicism do not prevent the young from perceiving themselves as agents able to intervene in their world. For Reguillo, this

“cynical disenchantment” . . . allows young adults to continually question the system, without a fatalistic attitude, but at the same time without excessive enthusiasm . . . ; with a sly grin . . . that points out and pokes fun at contradictions in the limited public spaces available to them: the neighborhood, concerts, fanzines, walls, public demonstrations, parties.⁴⁰

In Mexico, today's youth differ from those in the 1980s; whereas the latter were often heard to declare the impossibility of the future (“no hay futuro”), today's young adults speak, more often than not, in more projective terms: “there won't be a future” [“no habrá futuro”].⁴¹ The shift is small, but significant; it points to the importance of living in the present in such a way as to guarantee that the future will be better. As documented by Marcial's ethnographic study of youth cultures in the conservative city of Guadalajara, this commitment is not political in a traditional sense—certainly not when measured against the type of activism displayed by the Zapatistas in the state of Chiapas since 1994 (the year that NAFTA was enacted) or by groups aligned with the Oaxaca teachers' union in 2006. Rather, young political interventions include dressing differently or coloring one's hair and, thus, defying official tolerance; selling hand-made goods and rejecting the consumption of mass-manufacturing; creating alternative spaces like the Tianguis Cultural (an alternative open-air market in downtown Guadalajara) as well as new socio-political networks; and, at times, participating in demonstrations.⁴² These actions are not revolutionary (i.e., are not aimed at a radical restructuring of society). They do not propose macro-level policy shifts (as do the Zapatistas in terms of NAFTA) nor make specific claims on behalf of a community (as do both the Zapatistas for indigenous groups and the Oaxaca protestors for teachers). Nonetheless, these actions function as interventions that recognize the importance of participating in one's society at a local, national, and/or global level. If the transformative possibilities of such actions are limited, they nonetheless offer important challenges to the status quo—particularly in the case of Mexican society. While such individual acts may not rupture dominant discourses, they do help constitute alternative communities, concretized in the Tianguis Cultural, which, in turn, struggle against state efforts and dynamize civil society.⁴³

With all this in mind, it is fruitful to see cinema as a site of negotiation where spectators as well as cultural industries struggle to articulate youth. Without denying the importance of youth studies, we must be equally attentive to how the very notion of youth has served capitalist growth in both indus-

trial and postindustrial phases. Future studies of Mexican, Argentine, Brazilian, Colombian, Venezuelan, Cuban, and other Latin American (as well as Asian, African, and Indian) cases must be a vital part of this discussion.

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Notes

1. I want to thank Joe Austin and Juan Carlos Vargas for their thoughtful comments on earlier versions of this essay; Drake Stutesman and John Crider, for their editing expertise; and Rogelio Marcial, upon whose work this article depends. This research would not have been possible without the support of a Fulbright–García Robles research grant.
2. According to Frances Gatewood and Murray Pomerance, young adults in the United States spend more than \$153 billion per year (“Introduction,” *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood* [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002], 15). See also Gayle Wald, “Clueless in the Neocolonial World Order,” 120, and Cynthia Fuchs, “Too Much of Something Is Bad Enough: Success and Excess in Spice World,” 349, in the same volume.
3. Laura Podalsky, “Out of Depth: The Politics of Disaffected Youth and Contemporary Latin American Cinema,” in *Youth/Culture/Shock: Teenagers in International Cinema*, ed. Timothy Shary and Alexandra Seibel (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 129n2.
4. Podalsky, “De la pantalla: jóvenes y el cine mexicano contemporáneo,” *El Ojo que Piensa*, no. 6 (November 2004); available at www.elojoquepiensa.com.
5. Alex M. Saragoza and Graciela Berkovich, “Intimate Connections: Cinematic Allegories of Gender, the State, and National Identity,” in *The Mexican Cinema Project*, ed. Chon A. Noriega and Steven Ricci (Los Angeles: UCLA Film and Television Archive, 1994), 28–31.
6. Latham’s argument is more radical than what I have been able to suggest in this essay. See his *Consuming Youth: Vampires, Cyborgs, and the Culture of Consumption*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2002.
7. Clearly, this statement pertains to young adults as a social sector. In every Latin American country, there are plenty of adolescents from privileged families who have disposable income and whose consumer possibilities are similar to those of middle- and upper-class youth in the United States.
8. As I have discussed elsewhere, young adults have become an important market share for the Mexican film industry, particularly through the synergistic marketing tactics of new private production companies, including Altavista (*Amores perros, Por la libre y Nicotina*) and Anhelo (*Y tu mamá también*) (Podalsky, “De la pantalla: jóvenes y el cine mexicano contemporáneo”).
9. Rossana Reguillo, *Emergencia de culturas juveniles: estrategias del desencanto* (Buenos Aires: Norma, 2000), 44. In an article published in the same year as her book,

- Reguillo also highlighted the importance of musical forms to the constitution of youth identities ("El lugar desde los márgenes: Músicas e identidades juveniles," *Nómadas* 13 [2001]: 41, 45–49).
10. Mexico's Reguillo (*Emergencia de culturas juveniles: estrategias del desencanto*, 31) as well as Britain's Dick Hebdige ("Posing . . . Threats, Striking . . . Poses: Youth, Surveillance, and Display," in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton [London: Routledge, (1983) 1997], 400–401) and Valerie Walkerdine (*Daddy's Girl: Young Girls and Popular Culture* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997], 80) have critiqued such discursive maneuvers.
 11. Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 37–40.
 12. Héctor Castillo Berthier, "Cultura y juventud popular en la Ciudad de México," in *México joven: políticas y propuestas para la discusión*, ed. Rafael Cordera, José Luis Victoria, and Ricardo Becerra (Mexico City: University Nacional Autónoma de México, 1996), 213.
 13. Castillo Berthier, "Cultura y juventud popular en la Ciudad de México," 214–215. See also Hebdige, "Posing . . . Threats, Striking . . . Poses: Youth, Surveillance, and Display," 401–402 for a theoretical discussion of how youthful "posing" functions as tactical resistance.
 14. Castillo Berthier, 213–14; 216–28.
 15. Rogelio Marcial, *Jóvenes en diversidad. Ideologías juveniles de disenso: discursos y prácticas de resistencia*, doctoral thesis (Zapopan, Jalisco: Colegio de Jalisco, 2002), 268.
 16. Had this initiative been successful, it would have reversed a progressive historical trend: the 1871 Penal Code defined majority age as fourteen, and the 1929 Penal Code defined majority as sixteen. See Francisco Javier Bravo Ramírez, "El marco jurídico de la juventud mexicana," in *México joven: políticas y propuestas para la discusión*, 249).
 17. The IMJ replaced the ineffective Consejo Nacional de Recursos para la Atención a la Juventud (CREA), that had served as the government's principal office on youth from 1977 to 1988. See Marcial, *Jóvenes en diversidad. Ideologías juveniles de disenso: discursos y prácticas de resistencia*, 259–71, and Castillo Berthier, 212, for an overview of the evolution of these different governmental bodies.
 18. Mario Ramón Silva Rodríguez, "Los jóvenes y el nuevo gobierno," in *Fox, A un año de la alternancia*, ed. Joaquín Osorio Goicoechea (Tlaquepaque, Jalisco: ITESO, 2001), 90.
 19. This was evident in Fox's appointment of conservative party member Cristian Castaño as the IMJ's new director. Castaño ignored previous studies of Mexican youth (particularly the *Encuesta*) and implemented top-down policies that disregarded the input of young adults (Marcial, 275–80).
 20. Reguillo, *Emergencia de culturas juveniles*, 155. In her book, Reguillo refers to a general trend, rather than to what happened at the 2004 Summit in Guadalajara.
 21. Reguillo, *Emergencia*, 79.
 22. Reguillo, *Emergencia*, 20–22.
 23. Raymundo Mier and Mabel Piccini, *Desierto de espejos: juventud y televisión en México* (Mexico City: Plaza y Janés/Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 1987), 327, 339.

24. Mier and Piccini, *Desierto de espejos: juventud y televisión en México*, 337.
25. The former are made by companies like Televisine/Videocine, Altavista, and Anhelo with strong commercial imperatives and, in the first case, important ties to the type of mainstream news outlets previously discussed. Televisine/Videocine is the production company and distributor associated with Grupo Televisa, the largest media conglomerate in Mexico; its television programming includes news programs, variety shows, and the ever-popular telenovelas. In contrast, the latter “independent” productions are made by companies that do not form part of larger conglomerates. While the distinction between these two types of productions is valid, the term “industrial” is quite awkward as most analysts agree that Mexican filmmaking has entered a “post-industrial” moment; since the mid-1990s, production has fallen precipitously (to the lowest levels since the 1930s), and state support has diminished radically (Juan Carlos Vargas, “Agonía postindustrial [1990–2005],” *Proceso* 17 [September 2005]: 16).
26. One refreshing exception to this combination of patriarchal fetishization and conservative moralizing is Carlos Salces’s unsentimental view of adolescent sex in *Aquí no pasa nada* (1992). A key scene shows the daughter and her boyfriend having sex in her bedroom with explicit shots of their naked bodies. Nevertheless, the images never fetishize them. Containing little dialogue, the scene portrays their sexual encounter as pleasurable and matter-of-fact, rather than earth-shattering for either character. Thus, it goes one step further than *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (Amy Heckerling, US, 1982), an important film that nonetheless ultimately re-sacralizes adolescent sex (Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in American Cinema*, 228).
27. The stylistic affinity between Aguilera’s *Seres humanos* and Iñárruti’s *Amores perros* (particularly the two films’ bluish palette) is not surprising as Aguilera worked at Zeta Producciones, a company specializing in publicity work that Iñárruti helped found (Marién Estrada, “Zeta o el binomio cine-publicidad,” *Milenio-Semanal* [26 March 2001]: 62).
28. “Lo local y lo global,” *Público* (21 October 2001): 21. See Julia Elena Melche (“Entre amores y perros,” *Reforma-Magazine* [25 June 2000]: 5) and Jorge Ayala Blanco (“González Iñárruti y el neotremendismo chafa,” *El Financiero-Cultural* [19 June 2000]: 108) for similar criticisms of the MTV aesthetic of *Amores perros* as well as Guadalajara-based film critic Hugo Hernández who calls Ángel Flores Torres’s film *Piedras verdes*, a “a cheap prayerbook for the hurried, modern screen-surfer [that] returns again and again to the form of music video and offers up fast-food gurus who blithely prescribe such helpful hints as ‘the desert is like a mirror’” (“Empieza tarde y termina temprano,” *Mural-Primera Fila* [16 March 2001]: 8).
29. E. Ann Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture* (New York: Metheun, 1987): 5.
30. Reguillo, *Emergencia*, 19–21, 126, 132, 142.
31. Reguillo, “El lugar desde los márgenes: Músicas e identidades juveniles,” 41.
32. Marcial, 113–17.
33. Reguillo, *Emergencia*, 112, 128, 150–51, 153.
34. Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture*, 33.

35. The Net has an even more radical influence on the way in which we conceptualize space by offering no single, privileged vantage point from which the viewer can situate herself as the master-of-all-I-survey.
36. Cited in Marcial, 78.
37. Gustavo Moheno, "Su 'caimán' los convence," *Reforma-Gente* (18 November 2001): 2, and Guillermo Vaidovits, "El sueño del caimán," *El Informador-Artes* (6 April 2003): 7.
38. As noted by Rodolfo Kuhn (*Armando Bo, el cine, la pornografía y otras reflexiones* [Buenos Aires: Corregidor], 1984) and Victoria Ruétalo, despite the many scandals, Sarli's films are remarkably moralistic. Ruétalo notes that Sarli's later films became so outrageous that they invited "the spectator [to] look twice and laugh" ("Temptations: Isabel Sarli Exposed," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 [2004]: 89). Their kitsch appeal has found a market in the United States, where they are being distributed by Facets Video.
39. Aldo Montemar, "Ladro mucho: González Iñárruti," *El Informador: Día Siete* (25 June 2000): 8.
40. Reguillo, *Emergencia*, 103.
41. Reguillo, *Emergencia*, 15.
42. Marcial, 165–76, 186, 190, 214, 370–92.
43. Marcial, 87–88, 390–391, 405–410.

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