Paul Julian Smith

MEXICAN
Screen Fiction
Mexican Screen Fiction
To Mexican friends
Mexican Screen Fiction
Between Cinema and Television
Paul Julian Smith
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I would like to thank, above all, the five audiovisual professionals who kindly and generously responded to my questions and whose answers are reproduced as an Appendix to this book: Jesús Mario Lozano, Daniela Michel, Alejandro Ramírez, Roberto Fiesco and Leticia López Margalli. Their contribution is invaluable.

Thanks are also due to my editors at Film Quarterly (Rob White) and Sight & Sound (Nick James, James Bell and Kieron Corless); to Raúl Miranda López and his staff at the Cineteca library; and to John Thompson at Polity for his kindness and impressive efficiency. Much of the material included here has been presented at conferences and lectures in Mexico, the US and Europe, and I am grateful for audience responses there, especially at ‘Mexican Itineraries’ organized by Oswaldo Zavala at the Graduate Center in 2012.

Julia Tuñón and Guillermo Orozco have been great inspirations in film and TV studies, respectively. Patricia Torres’ work on cinema reception has also proved invaluable. My students and colleagues at CUNY Graduate Center, especially in the Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Program (José del Valle, Isaías Lerner and Lía Schwartz) have created the precious and productive environment within which this book was so happily written.

All of the ‘Jump Cut’ texts were first published in Sight & Sound, with the exception of the last, which was first published in Film Quarterly. Part of chapter 1 was published in Spanish as ‘Revisiones del cine mexicano’, Casa del Tiempo [Mexico], 29 (March 2010), 46–9; and parts of chapter 2 in Film Quarterly and as ‘Report on

This book is dedicated with affection and respect to the Mexican friends who have opened up a new world to me over the last ten years.

New York City, November 2012
Introduction:
Mexican Screen Fiction

This book is the first to examine audiovisual fiction in Mexico since 2000, examining film and television together. Most of the material it treats remains very recent and has thus not yet received critical attention.

As is well known, cinema in Mexico was revived at the start of the millennium with the critical and popular successes, at home and abroad, of Amores perros (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2000) and Y tu mamá también (Alfonso Cuarón, 2002). Since that date production has increased to a healthy seventy features a year and Mexico’s films now encompass a wider range than any comparable country: from austere art films, generally shown at international festivals and little seen in Mexico itself, to popular genre movies, localist in theme and audience, via the works of transnational auteurs such as Alfonso Cuarón, Alejandro González Iñárritu and Guillermo del Toro. It is striking that as I write these words (May 2012) the three films chosen for the Best Mexican Feature competition at the Ariel Awards 2011 are remarkably diverse: art movie Miss Bala (Gerardo Naranjo) (which I treat at some length in this book), riotous comedy Nativity Play (Pastorela, Emilio Portes) and a mid-market network narrative highly reminiscent of González Iñárritu, Days of Grace (Días de gracia, Everardo Valerio Gout).

Meanwhile television, although still largely subjected to the exhibition duopoly of Televisa and Azteca, has nonetheless broadened its offer, going beyond traditional telenovelas to produce for the first time higher value series and mini-series, especially in the criminal and historical genres, and staking a claim to being the most vibrant, as
well as the most pervasive, national narrative. While film-makers complain that, unlike in Spain, there is no Cinema Law obliging TV companies to cross-subsidize feature films, there has in fact been a convergence between the two media in the industrial, aesthetic and thematic fields, and one that has generally gone unnoticed. It remains the case, however, that the worlds of cinema and television (both for practitioners and academics) remain separate. My intention, which may well prove polemical, is thus to bring them together, calling attention to their commonalities.

Paying close attention to the text of these rich screen fictions (for the first time in the case of television, whose researchers, in Mexico as elsewhere, rarely focus on content), this book draws on multiple sources. These include media theory, recent Mexican scholarship on cinema and TV audiences (especially the pioneering work of Patricia Torres San Martín and Guillermo Orozco Gómez), internet fan forums, and the trade and general presses. Scholarly debates in Mexico on violence by scholars such as Rossana Reguillo are also addressed in detail. In addition to this academic focus, the book provides some of my own journalistic reportage from the Mexican media scene. It also pays proper attention to the film critics of the Mexican newspapers and magazines, who often give the most incisive and far-sighted commentary on their country’s cinema: Carlos Bonfil (above all), Leonardo García Tsao, Fernanda Solórzano and (also a distinguished historical researcher) Jorge Ayala Blanco.

The book begins by charting the audiovisual territory. The first chapter argues for a revision of contemporary Mexican cinema in the light of a new relation to the visual heritage of the ‘Golden Age’ of the 1940s, new attention to gender and the role of women, and a re-reading of the ‘national’ in national cinema. It also examines three features by young directors which blur the barrier between art cinema and popular film. The second chapter gives an account of the two most important festivals in Mexico (the very different Morelia and Guadalajara) in the years 2009 and 2011. Festivals are now the most important venues for the screening of many local films, which often fail to make it to theatres at home. My chapter offers a panorama of recent cinema and gives an industrial account of conditions of production, distribution and exhibition for the new decade, including the fraught relationship with television.

The second pair of chapters (chapters 3 and 4) is more textualist and compares and contrasts single films by two very different auteurs. Julián Hernández is an openly gay art director who now has three small budget features to his credit, films which have received wide festival acclaim. Funded, surprisingly perhaps, by the cultural institu-
tions of the Mexican government, Hernández appeals to the trans-national register of European art cinema even as he engages with highly local elements of mise-en-scène and narration. Here I examine his first, distinctive feature, *A Thousand Clouds of Peace* (*Mil nubes de paz*, 2003). Guillermo del Toro, on the other hand, is of course a celebrated transnational film-maker who has worked widely in Mexico, Europe and the US. Chapter 4 examines *Pan’s Labyrinth* (*El laberinto del fauno*, 2006), a film shot in Spain (arguing that it is a Mexican who has made the most original contribution to the cinema of the Spanish Civil War) and which, in spite of its wager on cultural distinction, relies on a horror genre that has a distinct history in both countries.

The third pair of chapters (chapters 5 and 6) makes the transition to television via genre once more and the (still) marginal subjects of the young and women. In the first, *Rebel* (*Rebelde*, Televisa, 2004–6), a notoriously successful teen telenovela, is contrasted with *I’m Gonna Explode* (*Voy a explotar*, Gerardo Naranjo, 2008), an accomplished art movie also with adolescent protagonists. I argue that the feature film coincides thematically and even formally with the TV series, even as it seeks to distance itself from the critically reviled medium of television. Chapter 6 in this pair deals with two innovative TV shows on the rare theme of female killers. In *Women Murderers* (*Mujeres asesinas*, Televisa, 2008–10), the dominant broadcaster adapted an Argentine police format of one-off dramas to a Mexican setting to great effect (when exported to the US this series beat the English-language networks in the ratings). In the second, *The Aparicio Women* (*Las Aparicio*, Argos, 2010–11), independent Channel 3 breached the broadcasting duopoly with an innovative telenovela that featured an all-female cast and an explicitly feminist and lesbian agenda. Both fictions boasted expert cinema-style production values, casts and scripts.

The final pair of chapters compares perhaps the most important theme in contemporary Mexico, namely violence and insecurity, in the twin media of film and television. Chapter 7 addresses three films in distinct genres in order to investigate their specificity: a mordant political satire, *Hell* (*El infierno*, Luis Estrada, 2010), a popular farce, *Saving Private Pérez* (*Salvando al soldado Pérez*, Beto Gómez, 2011), and the ambivalent art movie, *Miss Bala* (Gerardo Naranjo, 2011). The final chapter traces the histories of violence in two big-budget mini-series shown in 2010: *In the Sewers* (*Drenaje profundo*, Azteca, 2010) is an expert genre piece (between police and horror), which, it is argued, obliquely addresses Mexico’s violent past as well as its bloody present; *Cries of Death and Freedom* (*Gritos de muerte y...*)
libertad, Televisa, 2010) is a prestige production made for the Bicentennial year of Independence, which, beyond celebration, suggests that violence is at the very origin of the state. The Conclusion highlights the links between cinema and television in the current decade.

These formally written chapters are supplemented by what are called ‘Jump Cuts’, interpolated reviews of ten feature films released between 2001 and 2012 originally written for Sight & Sound and (in the final case) Film Quarterly. While these texts, which were composed on the occasion of each film’s initial release, lack the academic apparatus of referencing to be found in the main chapters, they supplement scholarly reflection with a sense of journalistic zeitgeist, which I believe is essential when treating contemporary material. Moreover, they widen the scope of the book to include a number of directors who are both established (Alfonso Cuaron, Alejandro González Inárritu, Maryse Sistach, Carlos Reygadas) and new and little known (Jorge Michel Grau, Michael Rowe, Paula Markovitch). Both the main chapters and the Jump Cuts are presented in broadly chronological order, thus giving a sense of how Mexican screen fiction has developed over the course of the first decade of the millennium.

My own text is supplemented and complemented by an Appendix made up of extended interviews carried out in 2012 with five audio-visual professionals, whose work I address at different points in this book: a feature director, a festival director, an exhibitor, a producer and a TV screenwriter. What is striking in the responses of my interviewees (which I have limited myself to translating from their original Spanish) is how much, from their distinct professional perspectives, these distinguished figures both coincide with and diverge from one another, thus offering invaluable evidence for the richness and complexity of the current Mexican audiovisual scene.

As will be evident, the first chapters focus mainly on institutional questions (production, distribution and exhibition in theatres and at festivals). But I have attempted to integrate such quantitative material into the close qualitative readings of texts that follow. Thus the opening chapter on ‘revisions’ of Mexican cinema includes an initial account of the current situation in Monterrey (taken from Lucila Hinojosa Córdova), which it juxtaposes with Julia Tuñón’s feminist reading of Golden Age cinema, and case studies of three low-budget fiction films. The festival chapter includes a detailed account of a Forum on the Future of Mexican Film that I was privileged to attend in Guadalajara. The case studies of film-makers that follow take the conditions of genre and nationality (and gender and sexuality) as necessary and perhaps productive material constraints on unfettered
auteurship, even as they provide close readings of individual features.

In the second half of the book, youth culture is framed within Gabriel Orozco’s analysis of ‘televidencia’ (the particular mode of TV consumption), while femme fatale drama is read in the light of strains in the hegemony of both the telenovela and Televisa, the still-dominant genre and broadcaster. And in the last pair of chapters, film fictions of violence are contextualized by two contrasting accounts of the cinematic scene in 2010, while TV histories of violence are placed within the framework of twin surveys of the televisual year.

By using a wide range of sources for this quantitative material, I hope to give a nuanced account of the field (indeed, some of these sources contradict each other). And by offering close readings of all my chosen texts I am suggesting that even those that are wholly deprived of cultural distinction (most blatantly, teen telenovelas) are more complex and significant than they may at first appear. Certainly my aim is to contest the consensus of foreign film scholars and critics, who tend to focus on the small number of art movies that gain international distribution and are barely screened at home.

Such rare and little-seen features, whatever their artistic virtues, can hardly be called representative of their home nation and need to be supplemented by an awareness of TV series (like Rebel) and popular movies (like Saving Private Pérez) that have audiences in the millions. Moreover actors and, increasingly, directors migrate freely between the two media of film and television. It thus makes little analytical sense to separate the two vehicles of Mexican screen fiction that go to make up what is now de facto a single audiovisual sector. While, as I mentioned earlier, many Mexican film practitioners and scholars display an intense hostility to television, there exists one important scholarly precedent for my transmedia study, albeit for a slightly earlier period and on a more specialized topic: Raúl Miranda López’s expert monograph on Televisa’s neglected feature film production (2006).

Over the last decade of visits to Mexico, since I conducted the research for my book on Amores perros (Smith, 2003), I have been struck by two things: how an apocalyptic view of the (nonetheless very real) scourges of violence and corruption has made some citizens forgetful of their growing economic success and democratic gains since the turn of the millennium; and how a similarly negative attitude towards Mexican feature films and (on the rare occasions that they are treated seriously) television series have made critics and viewers blind to the increasing wealth of offer in both media. Curiously this instinctive hostility towards local production and
continuing reluctance to think of cinema and television together occurs not just in Mexico, but also in Spain, a territory with which Mexico would otherwise seem to have little in common. I have published an earlier book on that country with similar intent and title (Smith, 2009b).

This book is, then, like its predecessor, the fruit of the pleasure I have felt in discovering and exploring screen fictions of the current decade, aided in this case by the invaluable guidance of Mexican scholars and friends. It is offered to readers in the hope that others may find that same pleasure in some of those texts (fragments of which are readily available on the internet), even if my accounts of them may prove polemical. Certainly my writing could hardly match the richness and diversity of Mexican screen fictions themselves, so self-evident to any knowledgeable and sympathetic observer.
Mexican cinema is on a roll. Despite the political turmoil and crisis that plague the government-funded film institute IMCINE, it has produced a string of local hits. These have most recently been crowd-pleasing comedies that couldn’t be more different from earnest art movies by the likes of Arturo Ripstein that are usually distributed abroad. Domestic cinema may even survive proposals, condemned by Ripstein and others, to increase the market for US imports – now shown only with subtitles – by dubbing them into Spanish. Nostalgic for the Golden Age of the 1940s, when the Mexican industry was one of the world’s largest, boasting stars like Dolores del Río and directors like Emilio Fernández (not to mention Buñuel), local producers hope this latest revival may be here to stay.

Alfonso Cuarón’s smart and sexy road movie Y tu mamá también broke the all-time domestic box-office record for a Mexican film, taking $2.2 million in its opening week, despite a widely ignored ‘X’ rating that should have excluded much of its target audience. A reprise of the oldest story in the book, Y tu mamá también tells the tale of two teenage hedonists, wealthy Tenoch (Diego Luna) and poor Julio (Gael García Bernal), who take off from the city with unhappily married Spaniard Luisa (Maribel Verdú) in search of a mythical beach called Boca del Cielo (Heaven’s Mouth). Y tu mamá también is both a love-triangle and a coming-of-age movie in which, in the familiar cliché, ‘none of them would be the same after that summer’.
Writing in *Variety*, Mexican film scholar Leonardo García Tsao dismisses the film as a ‘south-of-the-border *Beavis & Butthead*’, its protagonists ‘oversexed and underdeveloped’. He also describes the theme of a boy’s sexual education by an older woman as a fantasy ‘straight out of *Penthouse*’. There’s no doubt many viewers read the film in this way: a glance at the messages posted on the film’s official website confirms this salacious response. But most of the film’s frequent and graphic nudity is male, for example when the two boys are shown desperately servicing their girlfriends before the latter leave on holiday in the opening sequences. In a later shower scene, Luna gamely wears a prosthetic glans (unlike the actor, his character Tenoch is circumcised). To accuse the film of crudeness is not only to misread its grungy technique but to confuse the characters’ viewpoints with the film’s own. Apparently a slight comedy, packed with the lewdness for which Mexican speech is famous, *Y tu mamá también* subtly revises models of gender and national identity for a new Mexico and a new international audience.

Cuarón himself is eager to disassociate himself from what he calls a ‘cinema of denunciation’: the explicitly political output of an earlier generation of engaged auteurs who explored poverty and exploitation among the underclass, or attacked US imperialism. Cuarón is willing to risk being branded as superficial because his film is entertaining, treacherous because it draws on US culture, and reactionary because it deals with bourgeois characters. Yet his attack on what he calls ‘ideology’ could itself be read as ideological. Julio’s sister, a leftist student who supports the Zapatista rebels, is given short shrift: she exists only to loan the boys the battered car in which they make their trip. The opening sequences in Mexico City include such high-end locations as Tenoch’s palatial home and a plush country club, and the official website unashamedly plays for pleasure: surfers are invited to tour the characters’ station wagon, dress the boys in their favoured grungy garments and shoot down flying phalluses that flit across the screen.

Nevertheless, there’s no doubt that, like Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *Amores perros* (2000), which also starred the charismatic García Bernal, *Y tu mamá también* marks a new cinematic moment that coincides with a new political order. Indeed, its sober closing sequence refers explicitly to the defeat in July 2000 of the oddly named Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) which had ruled Mexico with the dead hand of corruption for seventy-one years. With the election of new president Vicente Fox of the rightist National Action Party (PAN), Mexicans were more than ready for political and cultural change. The first film to herald the end of the ancien régime
was Luis Estrada’s political satire *Herod’s Law* (*La ley de Herodes* [1999]), a cause célèbre after the PRI-controlled IMCINE tried in vain to prevent its distribution. But while *La ley de Herodes* is too local to appeal to foreigners, *Y tu mamá también*’s coming-of-age story has hit a universal nerve, winning film awards for Best Screenplay and Best Newcomer at 2001’s Venice festival.

Rejecting the glossy professionalism of his Hollywood features *A Little Princess* (1995) and *Great Expectations* (1997), Cuarón employs a loose and supple technique. The plot develops, in true road-movie fashion, with apparent spontaneity, helped by the fact that the film was shot in sequence with the actors seeming to change and mature over the 105 minutes of its running time. The camera work is seemingly artless: Cuarón’s account of his collaboration with director of photography Emmanuel Lubezki recalls Buñuel’s relationship with Gabriel Figueroa in that both seek to avoid prettiness, refusing to film if the light or landscape is too beautiful. Cuarón and Lubezki also favour sequence shots – when Luisa goes off with the boys, the camera watches her linger in her apartment and go out of the door before simply wandering to the window to see her exit into the street below. Performances appear improvised. García Bernal and Luna are real-life long-time friends, first having worked together at the age of twelve. Their intimacy and awkwardness in the sex scenes seem quite unforced, while their expert *chilango* (Mexico City dialect) will prove as opaque to outsiders as it is to the Spanish Luisa.

But just as the seeming absence of ideology is itself ideological, so the apparently artless form relies on artistry. Though the actors contributed to the script during the rehearsal process, the screenplay (by Cuarón and his brother Carlos) is deceptively well made. When they set out on their journey, the two boys recite a Rabelaisian manifesto to Luisa – it comes down to ‘do what you want’ (but don’t screw another guy’s girlfriend). Towards the end of what is now an exhausting trek, Luisa lays down the law herself, improvising an alternative, woman-centred manifesto. Dramatic irony ensures the audience knows more than the characters: we have seen Luisa split up with her philandering husband, but the boys have not.

The casual-looking cinematography is also smarter than it appears. When the camera strays from the table where the main characters are enjoying a meal, it is to enter the kitchen where Indian women cook. As the trio crudely discusses sexual techniques in the car, they pass roadblocks where we glimpse soldiers interrogating peasants. In long shot, the car, suddenly diminished, vanishes in the vast landscape or appears behind women washing clothes in a river. If framing unobtrusively makes a political point, then so does editing. Cuarón
cuts for contrast: from the sunny swimming pool where the boys jerk off together to the fantasized image of ‘Salmita’ Hayek to the dark bedroom where a solitary Luisa confronts her husband’s infidelity on the phone. A student demonstration in the city is juxtaposed with the teenagers’ trip to a vast supermarket in the suburbs – a temple to consumerism.

Favoured long shots and lengthy takes as the film does, its principals need all their professional technique to keep control. Cuarón has said that initially he intended to cast amateurs, but they couldn’t give the performances he required. The experience of Maribel Verdú, veteran of some thirty films in Spain, anchors the relative newcomers García Bernal and Luna. From a prim, melancholy wife (dressed in ivory satin), she is transformed into a denim-clad sexual predator who takes on the boys in a seedy motel and on the back seat of a car. Her voyage of discovery thus complements the teenagers’ more familiar quest for identity. All three are at their best in a final drunken dinner scene, a tour de force that lasts for an unbroken take of seven minutes.

But the strongest indication of the unforced seriousness of this sexy, funny film lies in its use of voice-over. Throughout, dead-pan, third-person narration informs us of what the characters can never know or choose not to reveal. Speeding heedlessly through the city, the young lovers are ignorant of the fact that a migrant worker has been killed on the same road. Later Tenoch doesn’t tell his companions they are passing the village of his Indian nanny, whom he called ‘mother’ until he was four. The fisherman the characters meet on the magical beach will, we are told, be displaced by a luxury hotel. Cuarón cites Godard as an inspiration for the voice-over and Y tu mamá también can be re-read as a Mexican nouvelle vague, deftly skewering the Latin American cinéma de papa even as it shares aspects of its predecessors’ social critique.

The notorious Oedipal Mexican profanity to which the title refers is also incorporated and ironized. Luisa may be a mother-whore or Penthouse fantasy, but she has hidden motives for her sexual abandon. Moreover, she loudly exposes the homoeroticism underlying Mexican machismo, claiming the boys only fight like dogs because they want to fuck each other. Gender stereotypes are revised, culminating in a final twist that has disconcerted some fans, just as national identity is re-evaluated. The only sign of fetishistic folklore is at a glamorous wedding where charros (cowboys) and mariachis perform in a muddy arena. But Cuarón’s camera pointedly abandons the wealthy masters to follow a maid taking food to the chauffeurs outside. Or again the camera tracks after Tenoch’s nanny as she treks through the huge
family house to deliver a sandwich and answer the phone ringing unheeded at his side. The ‘cinema of denunciation’ Cuarón critiques is not so much abandoned in *Y tu mamá también* as fully and unself-consciously integrated into the film’s narrative and form.

Important here is a new aspect of cultural nationalism: Mexican-ness need no longer be defined in opposition to the US. Cultural commentator Carlos Monsiváis has recently noted Mexico’s naturalization of Hallowe’en, a holiday hitherto unknown. Likewise, Cuarón Mexicanizes the US genre of the road movie and is confident enough to employ a gloriously hybrid soundtrack. While the script was written to the sound of Frank Zappa’s melancholy instrumental ‘Watermelon in Easter Hay’, the songs booming from the boys’ cassette player stray from Eno and Natalie Imbruglia to Latin dance numbers. Most telling is the fact that the term *charolastra*, which the boys use to describe themselves (an invented word said to mean ‘space cowboy’), is derived from misunderstood English-language lyrics overheard on the radio. This is significant because the idiosyncratic speech is the most local element in the film: the Castilian-speaking Luisa repeatedly asks the boys to translate their *chilango*, and while *Y tu mamá también* has been shown around the world, most Spanish speakers are partly excluded from its dialogue. As sociologist Manuel Castells has written, globalization is combined with a resurgence of intense localism. The website is intriguing here – surfers from Montevideo to Madrid lament their failure to understand *chilango* but an equal number post their fan mail in versions of that same idiolect. Like a Mexican *A Clockwork Orange*, *Y tu mamá también* schools its consumers in a rich and strange idiom.

If the language remains irredeemably local, the same goes for the landscape. Heading south and east of the capital through the impoverished states of Puebla and Oaxaca to the Pacific coast, *Y tu mamá también* reveals unselfconsciously and unobtrusively a Mexico rarely seen on screen. The travellers chance on popular traditions: a local carnival queen being used to extract money from cars stopped on the highway; an ancient woman standing guard over an indigenous altar where saints and candles mingle with fluffy toys. And when we finally, miraculously, reach the longed-for beach, we are not allowed to forget the ravages of tourism on this unspoilt environment as the voice-over informs us that the fisherman the friends encounter will end up as a hotel caretaker. The ‘magical, musical Mexico’ toasted by the drunken trio is both ironically celebrated and ruefully mourned.

In a final, downbeat sequence the two boys meet up by accident back in the city. This is the only time the voice-over is explicitly political – the PRI has, we are told, just lost the presidential elections.
Cuarón has described Mexico as an ‘adolescent’ country, struggling
to grow up and acknowledge aspects of itself for which it was not
prepared. The sombre dialogue here (filmed in shot/reverse shot as
opposed to the wide shots and long takes favoured in the rest of the
film) suggests the boys’ quest for identity is equally unsettling: there
are some things about ourselves we would prefer not to know.

While the decline of state funding for film is disturbing in a country
where the government was for so long a major participant in produc-
tion, *Y tu mamá también* (like *Amores perros* before it) is testimony
to a sector newly invigorated in part by private money. Like the
equally surprising Argentine renaissance, the revival of Mexican film
will lead to destinations that cannot be predicted. This is the final
moral of Cuarón’s artfully artless road movie.

*Sight & Sound* (April 2002)
Part I

Setting Scenes
Revising Mexican Cinema

Repeating and Renewing

In October 2008 a special issue of the cultural magazine *Letras Libres* put an evocative image on its cover, reworked from a nineteenth-century engraving of the Zócalo or main square of Mexico City: on the left is the Cathedral, looking as it always has, but to the right, perfectly preserved, is the long-destroyed Aztec temple, which had originally stood in that place, complete with Mexican flag hoisted proudly at its summit. Within this issue are collected essays offering alternative versions (or ‘revisions’) of Mexican history, imagining (as in the cover image) that the Spanish and Aztec cultures had reached an accommodation, or even that the indigenous civilizations had conquered the conquistadors and survived to our time. According to the editor of the magazine, ‘Mexico is, for better and for worse, what it is. But it could have been otherwise.’ (‘México es, para bien y para mal, lo que es. Pero pudo haber sido de otro modo.’) These ‘imagined pasts’ or ‘invisible Mexicos’ are ‘ghosts’ used to ‘combat historical determinism and intellectual resignation’ (‘combatir el determinismo histórico y la resignación intelectual’, 2008: 7).

This first chapter explores some recent revisions of the national narrative of Mexican cinema, which are perhaps similar to those suggested by *Letras Libres* in the case of the Mexican nation and which offer radically different perspectives on the development of this cinema. These revisions are: the special issue of *Artes de México* entitled precisely ‘Revisión del cine mexicano’, focused on the
so-called ‘Golden Age’; Julia Tuñón’s reinterpretation of that Golden Age from the perspective of gender and women’s studies (a feminist approach much less familiar in Mexico than in the USA or UK); and two recent case studies of Mexican cinema from the UK and Mexico, by Andrea Noble and Lucila Hinojosa Córdova respectively. The chapter concludes with a discussion of three feature films of the millennium that exemplify this process of revision (of repetition and re-creation) which I have proposed as central to current Mexican film and its relation to the past. It is no coincidence that all three address the theme of adolescence, emblematic of a cinema that, despite a long and rich history, still regards itself as somewhat immature and underdeveloped.

But first, a few comments on the concept of ‘revision’ that I am proposing. In a historiographical context, the term ‘revisionism’ has nuances in English that are contradictory and even disturbing. On the one hand, it is used in cases of transparent and ideologically motivated mendacity, as in the denial of the Holocaust; but it is also used, like its Spanish cognate, to name a continuous and necessary process under which canonical ideas are put to the test, citing new materials and new hypotheses.

Likewise, according to the dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy, ‘revisionismo’ is the ‘tendency to submit established doctrines, interpretations or practices to methodical revision with the aim of updating them’ (‘tendencia a someter a revisión metódica doctrinas, interpretaciones o prácticas establecidas con la pretensión de actualizarlas’, DRAE, 2012: s.v. revisionismo). This is how I understand ‘revision’ in the context of Mexican cinema, irrespective of how different the successive versions of this phenomenon may be. In the words of Letras Libres once more, such revisions are fighting against historical determinism and intellectual resignation. Secondly, if I may return to a theoretical model that is now somewhat outdated, revision as it is presented here is a ‘supplement’ in both senses of Jacques Derrida’s use of the term: it is both the insertion of an additional element that serves to fill a gap or absence and the replacement of an existing element with a new one (1998: 141). I suggest that the logic of the revision, then, as in the case of the supplement, is both cumulative and substitutive.

This process is seen even in the least ambitious of my materials, the special issue of Artes de México, which originated in an exhibition of photographs on the legends of Mexican cinema held in the capital’s Palace of Fine Arts (Palacio de Bellas Artes) in 1990 (the issue was re-published in 2001). The magazine, beautifully produced, is presented in general terms as an encyclopedia of cultures in Mexico,
resurrected (it was first founded in 1951) to give a new perspective on visual culture and using a method that ‘ranges between history of mentalities and cultural studies’ (‘oscila entre la historia de las mentalidades y los estudios culturales’, 2001: no page number).

The issue itself is presented in a wilfully paradoxical way as a ‘visual narrative’ and ‘an image essay’ (‘narrativa visual . . . ensayo de imágenes’, 2001: 25), both of which are carried out by means of the glamorous photos that occupy the vast majority of its pages. The texts, on the other hand, are rather brief and based on interviews with well-known figures in their respective fields (cultural commentator Carlos Monsiváis, historical scholar Emilio García Riera and director Arturo Ripstein). According to the editors, they constitute ‘images that are in a sense written’ (‘de alguna manera imágenes escritas’, 2001: 25), documenting the emotional and aesthetic relationships of the contributors with Mexican cinema, and based on ‘favourite moments’ or ‘elements . . . that could be taken up to develop a new aesthetic for the end of the century’ (‘momentos favoritos . . . elementos . . . que se podrían retomar para formular una nueva estética de final del siglo’, 2001: 25).

Although the editors are aware that the magazine, halfway between image and text, is only ‘one of many possible itineraries’ and ‘routes of memory’ for Mexican cinema (‘uno de los múltiples recorridos posibles . . . rutas de la memoria’, 2001: 22, 23), and claim that this issue is a tool against a falsely totalizing ‘overall account’ (‘recuento global’, 2001: 23), it is clear that this self-proclaimed revision includes some perspectives even as it excludes others.

For example, in historiographical terms, the emphasis on the Golden Age is overwhelming, beginning with the many faces on the cover: here we first see Dolores del Río and Pedro Armendáriz, luminous in María Candelaria (Emilio Fernández, 1943), and once the cover is unfolded, María Félix in a gorgeous gown in May God Forgive Me (Que Dios me perdone, Tito Davison, 1948) and Jorge Negrete as a handsome rancher in Rapture (El rapto, Emilio Fernández, 1954). Even a critic as wilfully iconoclastic as Jorge Ayala Blanco examines in his essay a Golden-Age film of love and deadly passions, Sensuality (Sensualidad, Alberto Gout, 1951) with Ninón Sevilla (albeit under the tendentious title ‘Necrophilia is Culture’ [‘La necrófilia es cultura’]). Only the young Guillermo del Toro dares to invoke another history of Mexican cinema. In an essay entitled ‘Retomar el cine de géneros’ (‘Retaking Genre Cinema’), the last of the collection, he deals, uniquely in the volume, with neglected or scorned genres such as wrestling movies, horror and popular comedy (2001: 79).
In a somewhat predictable way, then, the extravagant visuality of the Golden Age blends with the hegemony of the image in a magazine that here serves the function of a museum. But there is some irony nonetheless: the fetishistic scopophilia so gloriously displayed in *Artes de México* is based not on the films themselves but on still photos that were taken in studios for publicity purposes. Such promotional shots, ‘supplementary’ in nature, serve here as both substitutes for and additions to the movies of the Golden Age. It is perhaps with good reason that the editors write (2001: 22) that mental images of Mexican cinema fail to come together to make continuous sequences, such is the power of these stills, frozen as they are into immobility.

Just as the editors of *Artes de México* propose the hybrid terms ‘visual narrative’ and ‘image writing’ to address Mexican film heritage in a new way, so the distinguished historian Julia Tuñón incorporates within her minute study of the Golden Age her own terminology, which is at once visual and textual. *Mujeres de luz y sombra en el cine mexicano: la construcción de una imagen* (1939–1952) (Women of light and shade in Mexican cinema: the construction of an image, 1998) starts with what the author calls an ‘establishing shot’, and proceeds with a ‘travelling’, a ‘sequence-shot’, and even a ‘high angle’, all of them, of course, written and not filmed.

For Tuñón, in the introduction to her study (characteristically entitled ‘Trailers’), the films themselves are not enough, acquiring their full meaning only in the context that creates them and which they in turn address (1998: 13). According to the author, such movies are deeply involved in the construction of sex and, revealing as they do the dominant ideology of the period, serve as invaluable sources for the historian (1998: 13). However, this historiographical imperative is not limited by positivism. Tuñón develops a new mode of looking (in my terms, a ‘revision’) that incorporates its own subjectivity and affectivity: ‘My reading does not break down the images shot by shot, but appeals rather to a mode of attention, that is floating, careful, annotated by the movies’ (‘mi lectura no desarma las imágenes toma por toma, sino que acude más bien a la atención flotante, cuidadosa, anotada de las cintas’, 1998: 14). On the same page she proposes her intention of ‘working on the film as one browses a book . . . with the reflection, leisurely pace, and analysis that is elicited by the printed word’ (‘trabajar la película así como se hojea un libro . . . con esa reflexión, detención, análisis que provoca la letra impresa’). Tuñón even suggests that ‘working on a film when one has been touched or irritated . . . is important in order to penetrate its unique meaning’ (‘trabajar una película cuando una ha sido conmovida o irritada . . . es importante para penetrar en su sentido propio’, 1998: 15).