

Observer and Observed: The Role of Voyeurism in *Y Tu Mamá También*

In existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's 1943 essay *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre analyzes subjectivity and self-consciousness using voyeurism as a case study. He concludes that the voyeur is unaware of himself until he is discovered; it is not until he is subject to the Look of the Other that he feels the shame of his action and thus becomes self-aware (Dolazel). Alfonso Cuarón's 2002 film *Y Tu Mamá También* is not only an exploration of voyeurism, but also the product of it. Throughout the film, the viewer is made an unwitting voyeur, watching—often from a distance—the most intimate and private moments in the subjects' lives. Throughout the film we are blameless bystanders—until we're not. Alfonso Cuarón's directorial vision and Emmanuel Lubezki's cinematography render the viewer a voyeur, exposing us to the moments that are almost always concealed—by our government, by our elite, by ourselves—to challenge our conceptions of decency and distraction and to push the boundaries of spectatorship and objectivity. As passengers in their cars, guests at their weddings, and voyeurs in their bedrooms, we exist comfortably as passive interlopers until we are ultimately discovered.

The cinematography of *Y Tu Mamá También* is designed to emulate the idiosyncrasies of human perception, creating an immersive, first-person viewing experience that, especially during the film's most emotional and sexual moments, is positively voyeuristic. We peek through a broken window as Luisa sobs; we watch from the corner of the room as Julio and Tenoch's friendship implodes; and we sit in the backseat of the car as Luisa, Julio, and Tenoch traverse Mexico, sharing intimate stories and secrets. In these moments, we observe without consequence, like the undiscovered voyeur in Sartre's case study. With the camera as our keyhole, we lose our sense of self-awareness, becoming so engrossed in the act of watching that we are unable to consider our own role as spectators and its larger significance within the movie. Three sequences

in the film particularly emphasize and challenge our function as voyeurs: Tenoch and Luisa's hotel room encounter, the following of service workers at the wedding and restaurant, and Luisa's final dance. Throughout the first two sequences, we are spectators; in the third, we unwillingly become the spectacle ourselves.

In the moments before, during, and after Tenoch and Luisa's awkward sexual encounter at the hotel, the camera makes the viewer into a voyeur, not only by exposing us to private moments, but by simulating human perception, thus creating the sensation that we are first-person observers directly adjacent to the action. Immediately Luisa and Tenoch's encounter, Luisa leaves a message on her answering machine for her estranged fiancé, Jano. However, the camera doesn't focus on Luisa. Instead, as her message fills her empty apartment, the camera, instead of focusing in on the machine from which the sound is emanating, wanders nosily from the living room to the bedroom, looking at her wall dressings and out her window. We are, without question, intruders; yet our sense of curiosity (fueled by Luisa's rather guarded and mysterious persona) justifies the act.

We then arrive in Luisa's hotel room where we hover like a ghost over her as she cries on her bed. Slowly and with palpable steps, the camera (i.e. we) back away from her. A sound at the door turns our attention away, and we catch Tenoch hastily entering the room, asking for shampoo; we follow him as he does. As Luisa insists that he stays, the camera slowly retreats to the corner of the room, as if trying to be as undetectable as possible during the sexual encounter that is clearly about to transpire. As the exchange intensifies (Luisa asks Tenoch to take off his towel), the handheld camera work becomes shakier, as if reacting with nervous excitement. From our vantage point, we observe the exchange at a distance and from behind, so that when Luisa asks Tenoch to expose himself to her, we are barred from her perspective (Bonner). After all, voyeurs are not omniscient observers, but merely observing from our own limited outside perspective as captured

by the camera—our keyhole, as Sartre would put it.

Again with tangible steps, we lurk toward Tenoch and Luisa as they become intimate. The realistic portrayal of sex that follows is a crucial factor to the film's voyeuristic feel; to be a voyeur is to observe real life—raw, unfiltered, and unstaged. Tenoch and Luisa's encounter is "clumsy, and over in seconds," free of cinematic romantic conventions like candles, rose petals, and "power ballads" (Murray). The realism of the scene also makes our experience as unwitting voyeurs all the more unsettling, as we likely feel "a shock of recognition" at the highly realistic portrayal of sexuality (Ebert). When Luisa and Tenoch have finished, our attention drifts with a slow pan to the door left ajar, and we see Julio, now an unwitting voyeur himself. The entire sequence—from Luisa's crying to Julio's discovery—is shot in one single take, simulating real-life observation.

Just as we are voyeurs in these characters' hotel rooms, we are also guests at their events and on their travels. However, as voyeurs, we often see phenomena we are not *supposed* to see. For Cuarón, this is not limited to sex. With voyeuristic curiosity, he exposes us to the oft-hidden underside of Mexican society. At the roadside restaurant and at the glitzy wedding, the camera not only captures our protagonists, but also follows the lower-class people often dismissed as "the help," often abandoning our affluent leads in the process. At the restaurant, the camera's attention drifts away from the conversing trio when their waitress arrives. The contrast between the waitress and protagonists is stark; it's difficult to ignore the contrast of Luisa's whiteness and the boys' American clothing next to the waitress's darker complexion and traditional dress. Here, Cuarón depicts two Mexicos—one affluent and *mestizaje*, the other working class and indigenous.

Then our focus drifts to a peasant woman with a shawl around her shoulders, and we follow her into the back room of the restaurant where several other women are gathered, dancing and doing dishes. They are hidden in the back room of the restaurant, forgotten and ignored. But as

voyeurs, we creep around these unseen quarters and representation of acute poverty—a sight that, within polite society, is practically as taboo as sex. This is one of many times the camera is used “to reveal [Mexico] in ways that the characters choose to avoid,” creating dramatic irony and solidifying the divide between the observer and the oblivious observed (Paul).

Another example of this wandering camera is at the wedding where Tenoch, Julio, and Luisa first meet. While the three of them converse, the camera abruptly begins to follow a server, who is clearly invisible within the context of the gathering. With a tray of pastries, she leaves the wedding to serve the chauffeurs lounging in the parking lot, languidly listening to a soccer game on the radio. With steps as tangible as ever, the camera follows her as she passes by the guests, through the kitchen, and into the parking lot. Here, in a choice that lends the sequence a documentary-like tone, Cuarón employs voiceover narration detailing the President’s corruption and hypocrisy (Maine). This is one of several times this omniscient, anonymous narrator interjects seemingly irrelevant information into the story. The frequent narration reinforces and serves as an aural companion to the camera’s frequent detours in pursuit of the marginalized members of Mexican society (Bailey). Only *we*, the observers, can hear the narrator’s pointed commentary, adding another layer of separation between us and our objects of observation.

These interjections often point out the inequalities, hypocrisies, and social injustices that plague Mexico, offering a stark contrast to the superficial concerns of our protagonists. They also note revelatory details about the protagonists to convey larger points about class relations in Mexico: that Tenoch lifts the toilet seat with his foot at Julio’s house, and Julio lights candles after using the restroom at Tenoch’s mansion, for example. These kinds of revelations imbue us with a sense of moral superiority over our objects of observation; the diametric opposition between the sociopolitical realities happening just outside the trio’s sexually charged bubble let us comfortably

judge Julio, Tenoch, and Luisa, writing them off as privileged, ignorant, shallow. Thus, the voyeuristic pleasure we derive from observing their lives also stems from our imbued sense of superiority and the position of judgement we are afforded from afar.

But our relentless and consequence-free voyeurism ultimately comes to a head when, just when we think we've gotten away with it, we are discovered. Near the film's end, the trio has actually made it to the initially fictitious Boca del Cielo. Luisa, Tenoch, and Julio amiably enjoy drinks at a dinky outdoor restaurant. With ample laughs, they acknowledge their social prejudices, air their dirty sexual laundry, and toast to Mexico, the clitoris, and blowjobs. They speak so casually and comfortably, we are also lulled into a sense of ease. As they conclude their final toast, Luisa walks over to the jukebox. Just as she does, Julio delivers the film's titular line, and tells Tenoch that, on top of having slept with Tenoch's girlfriend, he's slept with his mother, too. It is unclear whether or not Julio is serious, and it is up to us as observers to interpret for ourselves.

Luisa asks the boys for a random letter-number combination and enters it into the jukebox; just as she went into this trip blind—relying on the boys' falsified knowledge—she goes into this blind as well, relying on the boys' equally blind song selection. The song it yields, Marco Antonio Solís' iconic "Si No Te Hubieras Ido," is at once sensual and forlorn, a beautiful ode to heartache. As it emanates from the jukebox, Luisa takes another shot and begins to dance to herself. But then she does something astounding—she turns around and looks directly into the camera, shattering the fourth wall that has so comfortably enabled our voyeuristic observation for the duration of the film. The comfort the previous conversation lulled us into is abruptly replaced with shocking discomfort. To say that in this moment we are simply *seen* would misrepresent the action, as it implies passive neutral perception; Luisa not only sees us, but—with just her protracted stare—judges us, challenges us, and seduces us all at once.

When Luisa first begins to play the song on the jukebox, we slowly creep up behind her, drawn in by her care-free attitude, her confidence, and her charisma. Even from behind, we watch her in awe. However, once she turns, looks into the camera, and begins to advance towards us, we begin to retreat. With her every step forward, we pull back. This shows that as unsettled as we are to be discovered (hence, pulling back), we are too captivated by her to look away. Here, we experience Luisa's irresistible allure firsthand, now in the role of the seduced (just like Tenoch and Julio) and losing all the power we once held that comes with anonymous spectatorship. As she looks directly into the shaking camera, the audience feels exposed, found-out, and vulnerable—perhaps even embarrassed to have seen what we have over the course of the film. When she reaches her destination and begins to dance with Tenoch and Julio, Luisa completely ignores us and gives us a cold shoulder, as if our moment of mutual acknowledgement—this moment of understanding between the observed and the observer—never happened. The camera doesn't linger on the three of them for very long, perhaps hurt but her rejection.

This sequence embodies Sartre's theory of self-awareness in relation to being seen by the Other. As Luisa looks into the camera, we become Sartre's discovered voyeur, whose self-awareness only springs from knowing that others are aware of him. It is only from this Look of another person and the presumed judgements that come with it that we can truly feel the emotions associated with the act; until that point, we simply *are* the act and cease to exist outside of it (Dolzal). Throughout the course of the film, we have been voyeurs, kneeling by a door and looking through a keyhole. In this case, our keyhole is the lens of Lubezki's camera. As voyeurs, we've seen (and heard, via narration) things polite society or common decency tell us we shouldn't from poverty to personal secrets. Most explicitly in the vein of voyeurism, we have literally watched characters have sex several times over the course of the film. And we haven't seen this

sex through romantic cinematic filters; we have seen two sexually inept teenage boys try and fail to satisfy a more experienced woman.

By the film's end, *we* know what we saw, and, as is the case with instances of voyeurism, we expect that our objects of observation do not. Thus, Sartre would argue, until this moment of confrontational discovery, we as viewers did not “exist” outside of ourselves, as we did not yet possess a “seen body;” having our body “dominated by sight” exposes to us how others “see and judge” our behavior (Dolezal). Because Luisa begins to objectify us (just as we have objectified her throughout the film), we are now aware that *she* is aware of our actions; thus, we begin to feel the emotions associated with these actions. Only now that we have been exposed can we self-assess and self-reflect upon our role in the film because only now are we aware of our existence.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre writes, “I see myself because somebody sees me.” Luisa not only sees us, but *knowingly* sees us; just her glance seems to tell us winkingly that she knows exactly what we've been up to this whole time. We may, then, project some of the judgements we assume she holds towards us upon ourselves. When the voyeur in Sartre's example hears footsteps approaching (i.e. the impending arrival of the Other), he suddenly feels emotions like shame, embarrassment, and disgust would be assigned by spectators to his perceived action.

We as viewers may experience similar feelings, having just witnessed these characters' most intimate moments. We may also feel our sense of moral superiority (the one imbued by the insights of the voiceover narration) crumble: while these injustices are happening in Mexico, what have *we* been doing—watching beautiful people have sex on screen? Could we even recall any of the pieces of insightful information the narrator shared with us if we tried to? While we watched these sexually explicit scenes, were we reflecting on their symbolic purpose and narrative value, or were we deriving sexual pleasure from them, like *actual* voyeurs? And if Luisa knew of our

presence all along, how does that retroactively change our actions? If we knew she was aware of us, would we have felt as comfortable observing? All of these and more are emotions and questions that come with our sudden awareness of self, as brought upon by Luisa's Look.

Y Tu Mamá También makes us into unwitting voyeurs then abruptly confronts us for it. Lulled into a comfortable position of anonymous spectatorship, we objectify the film's characters, as would any moviegoer in any film. But once those characters objectify us *back*, we are forced to acknowledge our own shortcomings and hypocrisies—in a movie all about people's shortcomings and hypocrisies. With his example of the voyeur, Sartre theorizes that self-awareness is only made possible when *others* are aware of *us*; only then do we exist outside of our actions and as embodied selves capable of self-awareness (Dolazel). Director Alfonso Cuarón turns us into this voyeur, watching Julio, Tenoch, and Luisa's most intimate moments and having a firsthand visual experience through the use of handheld camera and other human-like camera techniques. Once we are yanked out of this safe, comfortable, and blameless position, we must confront our own role within the movie.

It is fitting that Luisa is the one to yank us out; her enigmatic persona lends itself to a heightened sense of awareness and fourth-wall-breaking capabilities. But it is also a testament to her sheer power. The power she holds over the boys surely extends to us as viewers. Despite appearances and the assumed dynamics of a voyeuristic situation, Luisa—aware of our presence and unfazed by it—was really the one in control the whole time.

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