

Coming of age

by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [May 8, 2002](#) issue

The lyrical road comedy *Y Tu Mamá También* ("And Your Mother Too") suggests what one of those fraudulent the-summer-I-became-a-man movies might be like if it were made by someone with imagination and sensitivity. The director is Alfonso Cuarón, returning to his native Mexico after a too-brief stint in Hollywood, where neither of his terrific literary adaptations, *A Little Princess* and a version of *Great Expectations* set in contemporary Florida and Manhattan, garnered the attention it deserved. *Y Tu Mamá También* is an original, written by Cuarón and his brother Carlos, and it appears to have brought this gifted young director finally into the limelight.

To compare this picture to something like *Summer of '42* is misleading but instructive, and not only because the sexual content is graphic and gritty rather than muted and romanticized. The two teenage protagonists, Tenoch (Diego Luna) and Julio (Gael García Bernal, of last year's *Amores Perros*), best buddies who take to the road with Luisa (Maribel Verdú), the runaway wife of Tenoch's cousin, are not, strictly speaking, innocents. Their virginity was lost long ago--perhaps to their steady girl friends (who are off on their own summer vacations), perhaps to other girls. But sexual familiarity hasn't made them men. When they set off with Luisa for a beach paradise that may or may not exist, they identify themselves as members of a juvenile club whose rules they claim to hold sacred. They see this vacation as an adolescent adventure, spiced with beer and marijuana, and with the heady possibility of exotic sex with a married woman on the lam from her unfaithful husband.

What they don't expect is the swirl of darker emotions that boils up when Luisa takes each of them to bed--jealousy, betrayal, and the sudden, bitter taste of mortality. However we choose to characterize their initial condition--in a world where sexual knowledge comes so early, the term "innocence" is at least debatable--it's certain that in the course of Cuarón's movie Julio and Tenoch fall into the Blakean state of experience.

When Julio sees Luisa coming on to Tenoch, he feels angry and isolated, so he reveals that he's slept with Tenoch's girlfriend. It's an impulsive action, an attempt at payback, but it hurts Tenoch far worse than Julio could have anticipated and throws their friendship, which is strung delicately across tensions of class (Tenoch is a rich kid, Julio isn't), out of kilter. Even Luisa's insistence on distributing her sexual favors equally can't reverse the damage.

When they finally make up (because she is so fed up with their feuding that she threatens to leave), an unfamiliar intensity comes into their relationship--the consequence not only of duplicity brought to light (we learn that Tenoch has been no less treacherous than Julio) but also of the way Luisa's sexual radar identifies their own unacknowledged feelings about each other.

And there's another element that helps to transform them: Luisa herself. She carries the weight of a melancholy that's only partly explained by her husband's confession of infidelity, and that melancholy infects them. It's important that Cuarón doesn't justify Luisa's sexual behavior by her husband's treachery--or, for that matter, by anything else; Cuarón has no interest in making moral judgments about her.

The moral dimension of the movie is where it normally is in the work of authentic artists--in its investigation of human feelings, and in how the characters answer for their own conduct under emotional duress. It's Tenoch and Julio, not Luisa, whose behavior comes under moral scrutiny. How they deal with the realization that they've inflicted pain on each other is part of their growing up.

Luisa's melancholy infects the movie too. *Y Tu Mamá También* is the story of an idyll that carries within it the sense of its own evanescence. The film is raucous and sexy and hilarious, but it's also very affecting. The trio finds their paradise, where they're hosted by a fisherman and his family. Their sexual explorations attain a new height of freedom and daring. At the moment when the boys realize it's time to pick up and turn back for home, and Luisa opts to stay on with their new friends, the thread that held the idyll together seems to snap, and sorrow floods the movie. Further revelations ensue, but none of them comes as a surprise. As for the boys, they've landed--hard--on the uncharted territory of adulthood. *Y Tu Mamá También* turns out to be a touching farewell to childish things.