

## Regimes of Affect: Love and Class in Mexican Neoliberal Cinema

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**Abstract:** Departing from the idea of studying affects and emotions in their relationship to contemporary capitalism, this article explores the way in which love stories have evolved in Mexican cinema of the past 20 years to accommodate the social divisions produced by neoliberal social and economic reform. The article argues that Mexican commercial cinema, led by a boom in the romantic comedy, caters a narrative that idealizes what Richard Florida calls “the creative class” and thus constructs a regime of affect that proactively segregates audiences by class. This thesis is developed through the study of works by filmmakers such as Alfonso Cuarón (*Sólo con tu pareja*), Antonio Serrano (*Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*) and Fernando Sariñana (*Amar te duele*).

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The recent rise in the study of affect and emotions within different paradigms of cultural studies opens many questions relevant to the study of Mexican and Latin American cinema.<sup>[1]</sup> It has led to the reconsideration of a series of cultural paradigms, most notably

melodrama,[2] as part of networks of aesthetic configuration, audience engagement and political agency. However, the enthusiasm that naturally accompanies an emerging critical paradigm has led to a consistently optimistic understanding of affect and emotion either as a category with strong hermeneutic potential or as a practice that in itself functions as a tool of emancipation or, at least, as a way of reading and thus resisting the tyrannies of the political. In this study, I want to use the case of Mexican cinema to suggest a critique of that optimism, one that raises the question of the historicity of emotion and its relationship to the complex social networks of the contemporary. My primary suggestion is that, while emotions may seem a zero-degree approach to culture, insofar as all humans experience and perform them, the unequal access to the structures of representation and consumption of feelings create distinct regimes of affect that replicate rather than question existing ideological, racial, and class separations. This point echoes the warning raised by Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg in their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, where they state that “this promise of affect and its generative relay into affect theory must also acknowledge, in the not yet of the never-quite-knowing, that there are no ultimate or final guarantees– political, ethical, aesthetic, pedagogic, and otherwise– that capacities to affect and to be affected will yield an actualized next or new that is somehow better than ‘now’” (9-10). I would even push this point further and contend that a considerable part of the cultural infrastructure that manufactures and deploys structures of feeling is bound to ever more globalized and privatized cultural industries. Accordingly, affect and emotion in the contemporary world should be engaged by considering their irrevocable relationship to capitalism in general and neoliberalism in particular.[3]

Mexican cinema provides a good vantage point to explore this idea because of the way in which the neoliberal process led the country’s mediascape to transition from hegemonic post-revolutionary national culture– which successfully appealed citizens and consumers across class lines– to a cultural industry clearly demarcated by class lines.[4] Up to the late 1980s, Mexican media consumers in urban areas were exposed to more or less the same cultural offerings. The primary medium was television, which was fundamentally controlled by Televisa. Its *telenovelas* ruled the ratings in primetime hours to the tune of 50 to 70 percent of the audience, mostly because of their ability to successfully construct narratives that appealed to the national identity and the cultural specificity of spectators across the social board (Mazziotti 47-51). The consumption of cinema was mostly in decay as a result of disastrous interventionist policies from the State in the 1970s (Mora 150-88), but cinema attendance remained considerable thanks to a government-regulated fixed ticket price. One may add other policies, such as the ban on rock concerts established in the wake of the Avándaro festival in the 1970s and the strict control that Televisa and a group of radio stations exercised in the distribution of popular and pop music (exposure in the Televisa show *Siempre en domingo* was a prerequisite to commercial success). Because of the dominance of Televisa on the one hand, and of the overwhelming presence of the State in the distribution and exhibition of cinema in the other, Mexican media products had secure control of the tastes and consumption of a wide-ranging national spectatorship.

During the 1990s, this longstanding mediascape was subject to wide transformations due to the implementation of neoliberal economic policies in the cultural realm and the expansion in the commercial offerings of television and cinema. On the one hand, the monopoly of the State in the distribution of cinema came to an end with the gradual privatization of COTSA, the government-owned distribution agency, as well as of

many of the production funds created in the 1970s (Saavedra Luna). This favored the emergence of three private exhibition companies that dominate the Mexican market to this date –Cinemex, Cinemark and Cinépolis– and the creation of a Mexican private production sector favored by tax credits and subsidies provided by the State. On the other, audiovisual offerings were diversified by the growth of cable and pay television in the 1990s, which, in turn, broke Televisa’s stronghold in the production of content. This allowed for Mexican audiences to access US media products such as situational comedies and serialized dramas, which became very popular with the middle and upper classes. Taken together, these phenomena resulted in the creation of two distinct media audiences separated by a paywall. The middle and upper classes, able to pay cable subscriptions and movie tickets priced at three times the rate of the Mexican minimum wage,[5] developed a cultural taste focused on romantic comedies, sitcoms, alternative music, and other products resulting from the importation of US cultural products, while the working classes unable to afford such products remained tied to *telenovelas*, popular music genres such as norteño and cumbia, and other genres available to them at no extra cost. Film sociologists like Ana Rosas Mantecón have spoken of “new processes of urban segregation” and of the undermining of cultural diversity to represent the way in which film exhibition reorganized itself in the wake of these processes, highlighting the correlation between cinema consumption and the urban middle and upper classes. In *Consumers and Citizens*, his well-known analysis of the impact of neoliberalism in Latin American culture, Néstor García Canclini showed that “the most salient feature of the restructure of markets is the segmentation of publics” (119), which, at the time, he identified with the possible “cultural formation of a democratic citizenship” (122).

In hindsight, it seems that Rosas Mantecón’s diagnosis is more accurate than García Canclini’s. The diversification of audiences in Mexico created separate spheres of cultural consumption drastically segregated by class. For the purposes of my argument here, this economic segregation resulted in the formation of differentiated “structures of feelings,” to use Raymond Williams’ celebrated notion. Williams himself warned of “the complex relation of differentiated structures of feeling to differentiated classes,” which could only be read by recognizing the fact that they are not “reducible to ideologies of these groups or to their formal (in fact complex) class relations” (134). Williams resolves this conundrum by suggesting a methodology aimed at “defining forms and conventions in art and literature as inalienable elements of a social material process” (133). Echoing these ideas, the study of affect and emotion in contemporary Mexican cinema needs to account for the way in which certain films embody the transformations of lived experience and social aspirations brought about by neoliberalism. Historically, melodrama was a cultural form, which allowed Mexican audiences the negotiation of social inequality through narratives that tied emotion and love to social redemption. This is the case, for example, of the *Pepe el Toro* trilogy (1948-1953), which used melodrama (in films entitled *Nosotros los pobres* and *Ustedes los ricos*, emphasizing the issue of class) to narrate the way in which its protagonist painfully overcomes poverty and tragedy in the path to a final redemption. *Telenovela* became in Mexico another vehicle in which affect and emotion allowed audiences the embodied experience of class overcoming. One can remember here another trilogy, the *María* series (1992-1994), in which actress Thalía performs three different characters (María Mercedes, María la del Barrio and Marimar, with each name being the title of a respective *telenovela*) from different varieties of the lower class (a homeless girl, a girl

from the slums, and a girl from a coastal town in the interior) who end up marrying a man from the upper class and thus attaining a social status that was consistently denied to them by other characters. Narratives like this helped Mexican culture use love stories to negotiate the fundamental tension between a national culture based on the horizontal camaraderie famously theorized by Benedict Anderson and a visible class divide that represented the failure of the promises of Mexican modernization. The wide appeal that both Pedro Infante vehicles and *telenovelas* such as Thalía's *María* series had resulted not only from the lack of diversity in cultural offerings, but also from the way in which narratives of love and affect galvanized social identities in a way that trumped class difference through melodramatic allegories focused on the formation of the couple (for example, love stories between rich and poor characters).

While this "structure of feeling" remained central to the cultural experience of the Mexican working classes, as attested by the enduring success of *telenovelas* in the contemporary media landscape, the cultural products made available by neoliberalism generated an alternative narrative of class, one which provided middle and upper class audiences with the fiction of a central role in a new, modern Mexico and which systematically excludes lower classes from its imagination of the social. As I have described elsewhere,[6] I believe that the emergence of the romantic comedy in Mexico is a central example of the consolidation of this new structure of feeling. The earliest representative of the genre in post-1988 cinema, Alfonso Cuarón's *Sólo con tu pareja* (1991), already showed elements that radically departed from the hegemonic structure of feeling that ruled Mexican culture in the 1980s. The film depicts the emergence of a love relationship between Tomás Tomás (Daniel Giménez Cacho), a jingle writer and serial womanizer, and Clarisa (Claudia Ramírez), a flight attendant in the process of learning about her fiancé's infidelity. The film's central conceit is constructed upon a prank played on Tomás by a nurse with whom he slept. The nurse switches his blood tests at the hospital and makes him believe he has AIDS. It is until the very end of the film, when he and Clarisa decide to commit suicide together because of their respective problems (the disease and the fiancé's infidelities) that the nurse comes clean and Tomás and Clarisa decide to be together. The remarkable aspect of this film for my argument is not so much the plot, but its formal decisions: most of the film takes place in indoor spaces, which, in turn, allows the plot to develop in a decidedly middle-class space that puts under erasure the social diversity of the city. A similar choice is exercised a few years later by the most successful Mexican movie of the late 1990s, *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* (Antonio Serrano, 1998), a comedy of errors involving two couples and two characters that destabilize them, fully staged in two apartments of the upscale neighborhood of Polanco.[7] David William Foster has commented, apropos of this setting, that the luxury apartments give "access to a panoramic view of the city, with the effect of 'owning' or 'controlling' the city as an important correlative to the financial status of the apartment's residents" (40). Both *Sólo con tu pareja* and *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*, like many Mexican movies that will follow their model through the 2000s, construct their love stories upon the erasure of the social conflict and class diversity that defines contemporary Mexico City.

This type of movie exists and produces a language of affect that pertains exclusively to the middle and upper classes because the class segregation in media consumption practices became formally articulated by the adoption of aesthetic and ideological elements proper to the myth of the middle class in neoliberal Mexico. As MacLaird puts it, "[t]hese

films can be as transition films, grounded in PRI-era production practices while also breaking into new thematic territory by looking at sexuality among upper-middle-class couples in the context of Mexico's changing consumer culture, in contrast to the economic plights of the working class and more traditional representations of Mexican culture" (48). Following this argument, one should note that in the two aforementioned movies, the main characters portray the social ideal that sociologist Richard Florida famously termed the "creative class," that is, people who attain social status and centrality through "a common creative ethos that values creativity, individuality, difference, and merit" (8). Florida's argument when he defined the notion—he has since redesigned the concept in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis—[8] was that these highly educated professionals were at the center of a new structure of economic development. Reading this notion against the grain, one could argue that, in the middle of the neoliberal process, it represented a social ideal that allowed late capitalism's turn to immaterial labor to be allegorized as a social virtue and it did the same for late capitalism's erosion of both labor-based forms of the middle class (i.e. unionized labor) and the old professional-managerial class (doctors, lawyers, and the like). This is why the protagonists of *Sólo con tu pareja* are a publicist and a flight attendant, while the six characters in *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* are a writer, a photographer, an advertising executive, a model, a zoologist, and a "free spirit." The structure of feeling that they construct is based on the aspirations of the middle and upper classes to achieve the promise of individual success brought forward by neoliberalism. It is the type of cultural product that appeals to people educated in Mexican private universities—where being a major in communications and international relations was in vogue in the 1990s.

Movies like *Sólo con tu pareja* and *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* belong to a heyday period of the global romantic comedy, where love stories provided narratives of isolation that deflected the anxieties of middle classes threatened by the uncertainties of neoliberalism. One can remember here two parallel films produced at more or less the same time in the United States and Great Britain, respectively. The first one is *You've Got Mail* (Nora Ephron, 1999), where Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan), a bookshop owner, falls in love with Joe Fox (Tom Hanks), the owner of a corporate bookstore chain that mirrored the rise of Barnes and Noble at the time. The movie functions on the basis of the tension between the old-fashioned romantic coupling embodied by Kathleen and Joe (through which Ryan and Hanks revisit their celebrated screen coupling in Ephron's *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993)) and the at times astonishing acceptance of the advance of corporate capitalism upon the ways of lives of the middle class. As Aimée Morrison convincingly argues, "[a]cknowledging the seemingly inexorable advance of global brand capitalism at the expense of local enterprise, *You've Got Mail* aims to carve out a new and compelling arena of personal agency, to foster connection, understanding, compromise, and romantic love in times that do not seem to provide for these fundamental pleasures" (55-56). The other film is *Notting Hill* (Roger Michell, 1999), where William Thacker (Hugh Grant), the owner of a small travel bookshop, and Anna Scott (Julia Roberts), a movie star, fall in love. We see in this film a similar conundrum to that of *You've Got Mail*: the representative of a pre-neoliberal "authentic" way of life (bookshop ownership in both cases) ultimately accepts the advancement of US-centered global capitalism, respectively embodied in a CEO and a movie star.[9] One could say that the way in which these two movies normalize the advancement of neoliberalism through the love story is parallel to the way in which romantic comedy operates in Mexico (it is not coincidental that both movies were released months after *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*).

The difference in Mexico, which makes its romantic comedies even more striking, is that the reflexive work on the problematic elements of global capitalism is not even there. In both Cuarón and Serrano's movies, neoliberalism is not a problem but a given and accepted fact.

The ability of the Mexican romantic comedy to create a structure of feeling adequate to a middle class that isolates itself from the remainder of society lies in one of its central structural elements. In *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*, Celestino Deleyto points out that the genre "proposes an artistic transformation of the everyday reality of human relationships by constructing a special space outside history (but very close to it)" (30). Deleyto's analysis consists of affirming that this space allows romantic comedy to isolate its ideologies of love and gender from certain immediate social pressures. However, one could go beyond Deleyto's analysis and suggest that it is this very ability to semi-isolate its characters from the historical that makes the romantic comedy such an apt genre for the expression of creative class ideologies in neoliberal Mexico. We can take as an example *Cansada de besar sapos* (Jorge Colón, 2006). In this romantic comedy, protagonist Martha (Ana Serradilla) is a graphic designer who decides to "shop" for a new relationship on dating websites after she learns that her boyfriend is a cheater. While this plot is in itself unremarkable, the movie is quite symptomatic of the close relationship between love and neoliberalism due to key formal choices. First, by making the protagonist a graphic designer, it falls squarely in line with *Sólo con tu pareja* and *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* in the elevation of the creative class to the status of object of desire. One can note, for instance, that the "wrong" person for Martha is a businessman, while the man that will ultimately become her object of affection is an actor. But the point is that Martha and her lifestyle are a clear example of Deleyto's formula of the "space outside history (but very close to it)." The possibility of using a graphic designer as a central character comes from the rise of professions related to flexible and immaterial labor in narratives of social ascendancy and in emerging corners of the neoliberal Mexican economy. The very existence of a publicity industry to accommodate characters like Martha or *Sólo con tu pareja*'s Tomás, just to mention the ones relevant to the movies discussed here,<sup>[10]</sup> results from the same expansion of media that allowed the emergence of neoliberal Mexican cinema in the first place. However, it is as important to note how inaccessible that social ideal is, even to people in the traditional middle classes. As economist Enrique Hernández Laos shows, people with degrees in communication sciences and other fields identified with the creative class faced daunting realities of unemployment in the 1990s (and one could safely suspect that it is still the case today), given the fact that the production of professionals in those fields did not match the creation of work opportunities (106). In Deleyto's language, Martha as a character exists in a place very close to history, insofar as her lifestyle reflects historical transformations of the middle class, but her ability to focus on her love life is made possible by her being in a "space outside of history" that isolates her from the economic insecurity that accompanies the ideal of the creative class in the real world.

The "space outside history" thesis also explains the way in which these movies create middle-class fictions that effectively render the working classes invisible. In *Sólo con tu pareja* and *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*, this was achieved by locating most of the action in apartment buildings and indoor spaces. Cuarón's film goes from Tomás' apartment building to a *cantina* to the Latin American tower at the end of the film, and the only time when we actually see the city, it is at night, when the population of the city is not present in the

streets. *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*, as I mentioned before, takes place mostly in an apartment in one of Mexico City's most expensive neighborhoods. In *Cansada de besar sapos*, the procedure is developed further. Early in the movie, we can see that Martha's apartment is located in Mexico City's historic center, thanks to a shot that points to a colonial church tower. Her building has a colonial façade, but her apartment is a postmodern loft with designer furniture: the type of creative-class arrangement one might expect from an idealized publicist. The point is that the urban space where the movie takes place (old colonial streets, bohemian cafes) does not correspond with the reality of Mexico City, a place ruled by chaos and with considerable class diversity. As Frederick Aldama puts it when pointing to this startling representational choice, the location "is packed near suffocation with folks from all walks of life, as well as street vendors hawking their wares [...] Colón's camera cleans and Europeanizes the place in its fairy tale depiction of Mexican Yuppie life" (91). Rather than just sidelining social diversity, the "space outside history" fully erases it. The aspirational world of the Mexican romantic comedy is not only one that identifies love with the near impossibility of economic success via the access to the creative class, which is allegorized by the ideal couple formed by a publicist and an actor or by a publicist and a flight attendant. It also frames that ideal in a representational economy of Mexico where the lower classes have no significant role.<sup>[11]</sup>

The three movies mentioned so far are part of a paradigm of filmmaking that structurally incorporates neoliberal ideologies of success and social advancement, where romantic and economic success result from individual achievement and/or pre-existing privilege. These movies had considerable success, too: *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* was, at the time, the highest grossing Mexican film in the national box office, and *Cansada de besar sapos* had a very successful run in the 2006 Christmas season. This success shows that the core audience of Mexican film (those who are wealthy enough to pay for box office prices, and susceptible to the appropriate genres available in pay TV and the like) identifies at least partly with the regime of affect constructed by such movies. This is not to say that the segregation of structures of feeling is neat, or that the audience is unaware of it. In fact, as the neoliberal economic promise eroded from the weak recovery after the 1994 crisis, commercial Mexican cinema began to question the representational economy of its own regime of affect. Thus, Mexican filmmakers gradually questioned this narrative by producing romantic films addressed at the middle classes, but where social inequality is central to the plot. The most iconic example of this type of work is *Amar te duele* (Fernando Sariñana, 2002), a "class-clash film"<sup>[12]</sup> to which I will devote the remainder of this article.

*Amar te duele* tells the story of Renata (Martha Higareda), a wealthy high-school student, and Ulises (Luis Fernando Peña), an urban popular-class youth with aspirations to become a visual artist, as they fall in love and face the social challenges produced by class divisions in Mexico City. As expected, Renata's friends and parents strongly oppose the relationship, while Ulises faces his social group's increasing resentment, as well as accusations of forgetting who he "really" is. The movie's tension builds around the insurmountable obstacle of social class, leading to a final scene where Renata's wealthy ex-boyfriend (Alfonso Herrera) accidentally kills her when she tries to leave Mexico City with Ulises. The movie takes place in the neighborhood of Santa Fe, on the western edge of Mexico City, a prime example of the social dynamics of neoliberalism in Mexico. Santa Fe is currently the location of Mexico's corporate expansion, an area that headquarters the offices of a large array of national and transnational businesses. But it is not only a place of

economic expansion: the neighborhoods surrounding Santa Fe constitute some of the poorest zones in Mexico City, which were built there because parts of these areas were in fact landfills. This contrast is an essential part of life in this area of Mexico City: to reach the corporate areas of Santa Fe, one must drive through some of the poor ones, while the sudden emergence of such a concentration of wealth is, for the inhabitants of the old neighborhoods, a stark reminder of their marginalization. Furthermore, Renata and Ulises meet in Santa Fe's mall, Mexico City's largest, where working-class youths sometimes spend time regardless of the harassment of private security officers. Framed by this social contrast, *Amar te duele* is unique within Mexican commercial cinema, a film that successfully appeals to the logic and aesthetics of the romantic comedy while attempting a commentary on the social inequalities brought about by neoliberalism.

The movie's success follows the blueprint established by *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*, right down to its soundtrack in which Natalia Lafourcade, a successful singer-songwriter, performs the title song.<sup>[13]</sup> The twist here is that, rather than looking for the young professional audience summoned by singer Aleks Syntek in the soundtrack of *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*, *Amar te duele* makes use of Lafourcade's success with high school and college students by populating the movie with all her hit singles, including *Busca un problema* and *En el 2000* from her 2000 eponymous debut album. In this, *Amar te duele* is one of the first major manifestations of middle-class youth as a clear marketing target for Mexican cinema.<sup>[14]</sup> This audience was, in 2001-2002, a clear target for many media enterprises: besides musical acts like Lafourcade, young middle-class people were the subject of *telenovelas* such as *Clase 406*, a high school soap running at the time of *Amar te duele's* release. The emergence of a high school and college-aged audience is not surprising, given that multiplexes, particularly those located in malls, are a significant component of young people's social geographies. Timothy Shary has shown that Hollywood's interest in teenagers is related to the "disposable incomes that they enjoy spending on entertainment" and to the fact that "today's children become the consumptive parents of tomorrow" (1). Perhaps more importantly, Shary argues that the multiplex was directly responsible for the emergence of landmark youth films, including *Grease* (1977) and *Sixteen Candles* (1984), allowing teenagers to become a sought-after demographic insofar as they are important denizens of the social spaces that include multiplexes.

This social phenomenon is equally true in Mexico, where high school students vastly populate malls on weekday afternoons and college students do the same on the weekends. However, it took nearly a decade to translate this social phenomenon into film production, perhaps owing to the filmmakers' unwillingness to compete with Hollywood action movies. Mexican romantic comedies did not quite appeal to these audiences, given that, from *Sólo con tu pareja* onwards, their subjects were largely urban professionals in their late twenties and thirties. *Amar te duele* is amongst the first major attempts to lure this audience, whose profitability had already been demonstrated by Televisa productions like *Clase 406* and *El juego de la vida*, a 2001 soap opera based on the soccer team of a private high school.<sup>[15]</sup> Interestingly, both of these *telenovelas* are centered on the life of private school kids, not unlike Renata and her friends, helping them resonate with audiences located in parts of the social scale higher than their core audience, which replicates the segregational logic of structures of feeling outlined above. By luring audiences through Lafourcade's music and its protagonists' youthful looks, *Amar te duele* clearly sought a segment of an audience made visible by those Televisa productions and previously unexploited by film. The main



indication of this technique's success came a few months later, when the movie was selected as "audience favorite" in Mexico's MTV Movie Awards, a show that grants awards, mostly, through high school and college-age viewers' votes.

The languages developed by the Mexican romantic comedy clearly frame the film's aim for the youth market. Ulises' artistic aspirations are one of the significant elements of *Amar te duele* in light of my discussion, given that his class location is underscored by his incapacity to become part of the creative class. The film presents Ulises as a talented graffiti artist, an activity that, in Mexico City, is usually criminalized and identified with gang activity. In one of the scenes in which Renata becomes attracted to him, we see Ulises narrating a comic book story he conceived, set in a world where "all men are equal." In another scene, Ulises and Renata tour an art school where he shadows the instructors. Here, Ulises tells Renata that he has tried to enroll in the school, but cannot afford it. At first sight, this is one of the film's most important social commentaries: the absolute lack of mobility of a popular class whose labor situation is precarious, as illustrated by the fact that Ulises' family income comes from a street market stand with unpredictable sales. However, it is also quite telling that Ulises shares the same ideals presented in the romantic comedy's portrayal of the Mexican middle class. While Ulises wants to go to art school, his ultimate goal is to write comic books, a trade as closely related to the culture of the creative class as advertising (we can remember here that Alicia, the main character of *Ladies' Night*, a film mentioned in a prior note, is a comic book artist). He does not lack the technical talent: the graffiti work the film attributes to him is first-class. As Ana León-Távora and Itza Zavala Garrett underscore, one of the tensions in the movie, represented through the trope of adolescence, is the one established between belonging to a social group versus individuality (85). The ultimate failure of the couple's formation in this film is directly connected to the failure of both of them to assert their individual values *vis-á-vis* their social class. What is telling is that Ulises' redemption is considered impossible because he has no access to a realm in which he can use those talents in the context of a profitable economic activity. His incapacity to access art school is as much a sign of the exclusionary nature of the creative class as of its portrayal as a desirable social space.

Ulises and Renata's relationship works insofar as they are exceptional representatives of their respective social classes. Everybody else in their social worlds expresses a clear conformity with the existing social divisions. Renata's sister Mariana (Ximena Sariñana) consistently asserts her class position by speaking in English in front of servants so that they don't understand what she is saying, or by dismissively rejecting Renata's love for Ulises. Interestingly, Renata's driver echoes this view: after he picks her up from her first date with Ulises, he tells her that the "young man is not good for her." Ulises' social circle is hardly better. The film presents his best friend Genaro (Armando Hernández) as having criminal tendencies, ranging from his dealings with a shady group of people in the neighborhood to his organizing an attack on Renata's school to get back at her former boyfriend, who had attacked Ulises in a previous scene. In the only encounter between the two groups, Ulises' friends organize an excursion to Renata's school to beat up her former boyfriend and her friends in retaliation for their previous attack on Ulises. The fact that this excursion is disproportionately vicious shows that interclass dialogue is not possible in contemporary Mexico: the scene validates stereotypes of poor people as violent, which are held both by the wealthy characters and by members of the intended audience. By constantly asserting the insurmountable nature of class in Mexico, *Amar te*

*duele* operates both as social commentary (by allegorizing the social inequality brought about by the social order behind Santa Fe) and as contradiction to the traditional narratives of melodrama and *telenovela*, in which people from different classes are allowed a happy ending, both romantically and economically. Sariñana's film allows no space for a redemptive narrative based on the idea of romance overcoming social odds. Even though Renata's death is dissonant in terms of genre convention, it is quite consistent with the film's critique of the new social structure. The point to highlight is the way in which Sariñana translates the aims of his social cinema as represented, for instance, in his preceding movies, *Hasta morir* (1994) and *Ciudades oscuras* (2002),<sup>[16]</sup> into a language more attuned to the new commercial realities of cinema. Still, in doing so, a problematic concession becomes apparent: while the film presents Ulises in a sympathetic light, it shows other urban popular youths in a less favorable way. The movie consistently criminalizes Genaro and, in contrast with Ulises' soft-spoken, sensitive personality, his demeanor is strident. Similarly, the story presents La China (Daniela Torres), Ulises' former girlfriend, as violent and intolerant to Ulises' middle-class friends, a mirror of the attitudes shown by Renata's former boyfriend. Perhaps more tellingly, Ulises' brother, Borrego (who, like La China, is only identified by a nickname), has Down Syndrome, a plot element that showcases Ulises' good heart when he takes care of him, while questionably using a genetic disorder as part of the representation of the lower class (a false notion, of course, because Down Syndrome manifests itself across economic and ethnic lines). By framing his drama within the conventions of the neoliberal romantic comedy, Sariñana's social commentary must reconfigure itself in representations of the working class addressed to the middle classes who have a view of the poor as diseased, criminal, or morally bankrupt.

In the meantime, a final point regarding the film's work within the conventions of romantic cinema must be made: the importance of space as a site of affect. Renata and Ulises create a bridge between social classes that proves impossible to sustain, and their relationship unfolds in social spaces redefined by their relationship, reminding us of Deleyto's arguments on romantic comedy spaces. The scene in which Ulises narrates his comic book to Renata takes place under a highway bridge, a space ridden with graffiti and removed from the safeties and comfort of middle-class spaces. This space becomes meaningful when Ulises invests it with his story, which the director represents by splitting the screen in different squares, occupied by Renata, Ulises, and the comic book characters he imagines. The original space is thus erased, allowing for the emergence of a new space fully constructed by Ulises' dreams and ideas and by his emerging love for Renata.<sup>[17]</sup> Another use of space stems from Ulises and Renata's appropriation of class-specific locales. One of their first dates takes place in the Chapultepec Forest, a site typically identified with Mexico City's working class, while their first interactions occur in the Santa Fe mall, an upper-class commercial venue. The use of photography in the mall scenes is revealing. Whenever Renata and Ulises interact in this space, the image turns black and white and the narrative pace slows down, adding a contemplative and peaceful feeling to those scenes. The sound replicates this sensation by suspending the buzz of daily mall activity with a piece of music that overtakes the action's background. From the outset of their relationship, Ulises and Renata develop the ability to confer new meanings on city spaces in different ways by projecting their subjective interaction onto the visual aesthetics of certain crucial class-specific scenes. This interaction with space fades towards the end at

the bus station where the final scene develops. The violence that would ultimately and irreversibly end their relationship ultimately overtakes this particular site.

In its many uses of space, *Amar te duele* deploys a crucial convention of romantic comedy, its subjectification through the affective interactions of the protagonists with a different effect. Unlike *Sólo con tu pareja* or *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*, in which the characters' perspective effaces Mexico City's social interaction, Ulises and Renata never fully erase the social meanings invested in the spaces of their relationship. In a great analysis of the film's space, Joanne Hershfield contends that one can analyze what I have called "the space outside history" through Foucault's notion of heterotopia to understand youth culture in a way that "rejects the fixity of geographic location" (154). I would expand this point by arguing that the heterotopic gesture of youth culture in *Amar te duele* (which Hershfield identifies with the comic book scene mentioned above) ultimately fails, because there is always in the film a reminder not of geographic, but of social fixity. In a particular scene at the mall, after a date, Renata decides to purchase a t-shirt for Ulises to replace the one that she ruined during the date. The fact that Renata nonchalantly purchases an item of clothing clearly beyond Ulises' economic reach brings back to the story the class difference between them, after an interaction that seemed, for a moment, to have erased it. Therefore, even though Ulises and Renata construct their own spaces and move between urban geographies, that heterotopic gesture does not suffice to truly overcome the class difference.[18]

Beyond its appropriation of the urban, youth culture in *Amar te duele* may be read as a site of critique of the inequalities of neoliberal modernity and as the portrayal of a generational stance against the notions of development advocated in the 1990s.[19] Renata's family, a clear beneficiary of the neoliberal model of development, represents the lifestyle pursued by the professional upper classes. They live in a mansion clearly isolated from any sense of neighborhood, protected by 24-hour security, designed, like many of Mexico's upper-class houses, as a bunker against any outside intrusion. When Renata's father learns of her relationship with Ulises, he plots to send her to Canada, hoping that a trip to a "more developed" nation will help her avoid the "folly" of crossing class lines.[20] While romantic comedies tend to idealize the self-referential cultural space of the middle and upper classes, *Amar te duele's* appeal to youth issues provides it with a language to weave a more critical fiction by allowing urban popular classes a space of cinematic representation alongside the wealthier sectors of society. In other words, while most commercial movies engage either the working classes or the upper sectors, *Amar te duele* stands apart in its representation of both social groups.

The parallel careers of the two main actors are telling in this sense: Higuera, a light-skinned young actress with large appeal to the middle classes, goes on to play wealthy characters in movies such as *Niñas mal* (Fernando Sariñana, 2007), in the role of the unruly daughter of a powerful conservative politician, and *7 días* (Fernando Kalife, 2005), in which she plays a girl that becomes part of a scheme to bring the band U2 to play in Mexico. Most recently, she was the protagonist of *Te presento a Laura* (Fez Noriega, 2010), yet another romantic comedy which she co-produced. On the other hand, Peña's most significant roles have mostly been portrayals of urban popular youths, in films such as *De la calle* (Gerardo Tort, 2001), where he plays a street kid who gets involved in cocaine trade to feed other homeless children.[21] Most recently, Peña has moved out of the middle-class cinema circle from Mexico City and into US-Mexico border trends of social cinema, playing a struggling

working-class kid in Mexican-American director Alex Rivera's sci-fi immigration allegory *Sleep Dealer* (2008), and a violent Mara gang member seeking redemption in *Victorio* (Alex Noppel, 2008). As one could expect from these trajectories, Higuera's films have enjoyed considerably larger box office success than Peña's. Their parallel careers are emblematic of the ways in which the need to appeal to middle-class audiences has led to a class compartmentalization of cinema that replicates urban social structures of exclusion. It also shows the ways in which commercial cinema, which mostly focuses on middle and upper-class subjects, and so-called social cinema, which tends to represent issues of the urban popular classes, occupy altogether separate paradigms in the new cinema's economy.

*Amar te duele* is iconic for being perhaps the only commercially successful movie to cross this divide in formal and narrative terms, and for doing so in a cultural register that, unlike *telenovela* or the old-regime film melodramas, seeks no appeal whatsoever to working-class audiences. It is decidedly a film marketed to middle and upper classes, although it replicates some conventions (such as the rich-poor relationships) with distinguished histories, but also a film in which self-awareness of the enclosed culture of the upper classes is used as a critique of the new privileged subjectivities of post-1990 romantic comedy, rather than a celebration. Thus, in focusing his film not on the urban professional class benefitted by neoliberalism, but on youths born and raised within the Mexico constructed by it, Sariñana finds a site to critique Mexico's paradigms of modernity. Still, this critique has limits, and Sariñana himself has been unable to replicate his stance on class issues: *Niñas mal* and *Enemigos íntimos*, his following movies, take place fully within the social spaces of the middle and upper classes and ignore the working class altogether.

To conclude this essay, I would like to return to the questions I raised in the first pages in light of my discussion of *Amar te duele*. The dilemma that this film posits is that, even though it shows considerable self-awareness of neoliberalism's class divide, it remains a film closely invested in a regime of affect dissociated from working-class audiences. The film's very title (a wordplay between the title's literal meaning, "Love Hurts You," and "Loving you hurts," which in Spanish would read "Amarte duele") connects it to recent scholarship on the importance of love for the reading of the contemporary. As sociologist Eva Illouz points out in her recent book *Why Love Hurts*, "[h]eterosexual romantic love contains the two most important cultural revolutions of the twentieth century: the individualization of lifestyles and the intensification of emotional life projects; and the economization of social relationships, the pervasiveness of economic models to shape the self and its very emotions" (9).<sup>[22]</sup> While Illouz's main aim in this particular book is to discuss the creation of new structures of domination of women by men, her insight on heterosexual romantic love is also a powerful tool to understand the way in which love as a cultural discourse reproduces class divides. Her two "cultural revolutions" are indeed relevant to a film like *Amar te duele*: Ulises' love for Renata runs parallel to his attempt to "individualize" his lifestyle through comic books, resisting the injunction to work in the family's small business, a small and precarious clothing shop in a street market; and its main obstacle is precisely the "economization of social relationships," which is why Renata is punished with a murder inflicted by none other than the class-appropriate boy she was supposed to date in the first place. If, as Illouz argues, social suffering is "mediated by cultural definitions of selfhood" (15), the "hurting" in the film's title unfolds in Ulises' case not so much in connection to his love of Renata, but in his inability to achieve the notion of selfhood that would allow him to establish a definitive relationship with her. If

anything, *Amar te duele* is not only a romantic dramedy focused on the impossibility of loving across class lines, it is also a *mise-en-scène* of the lower class's inability to conform to the social idea of the creative class as developed by Mexican neoliberalism's culture.

[1] For a sampling of this rise in the context of Latin American studies, see Moraña and Sánchez Prado. In the specific context of cinema, the most notable contribution to this date is Podalsky, *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema*.

[2] See particularly Sadler, which offers an important reconsideration of melodrama in various quadrants of the region's cinema.

[3] I should acknowledge here that the definition of affect and emotion in cultural theory are by no means consensual. Some critics use both interchangeably, while others, like Sieworth and Gregg, articulate a wider notion of affect that embodies not only emotions and feelings, but also a Spinozist idea of the body as an entity that affects and is affected. For the purpose of this essay, I will stay on a notion of emotion and affect more narrowly bound to the question of feelings such as love, but it is important to note that this limitation is merely heuristic and not conceptual.

[4] I have developed this argument extensively in my book *Screening Neoliberalism: Mexican Cinema 1988-2012*. For the sake of space, I will restrict myself in the article to describe the relevant processes of change in Mexican cinema, but interested readers may find in my book more substantial data and analysis regarding these processes. Readers may also consult Misha MacLaird's excellent book *Aesthetics and Politics in the Mexican Film Industry*, particularly chapters 1 and 2.

[5] When the first Cinemark complexes opened in Mexico in 1994 and 1995, tickets were priced between 36 and 45 pesos, while the daily minimum wage ranged between 14 and 16 pesos. In 2013, that gap is not as dramatic, but attending the theater remains a very expensive proposition: a ticket costs somewhere between 50 and 70 pesos, while the minimum wage stands at 64 pesos a day.

[6] See Sánchez Prado, *Screening Neoliberalism*, Chapter 2.

[7] As MacLaird documents, the producer of *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* was inspired by *Sólo con tu pareja* and by *Cilantro y perejil* (Rafael Montero, 1997) when deciding to shoot a romantic comedy (48). It is also useful to remember that *Cilantro y perejil*, a romantic comedy about a middle-class couple facing potential separation, was the first co-production between the State and Televisa's film arm, Televisine. The fact that the first collaboration between the two historically dominant entities in film production is a romantic comedy provides telling evidence of the centrality of the genre in the new mediascape.

[8] The updated version of the "creative class argument" is found in the revised and expanded 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of Florida's book *The Rise of the Creative Class*. I opt instead to cite the original argument because it better frames the ideals set forward by Mexican cinema. I must clarify here that, for me, the creative class is not necessarily an existing entity –particularly in Mexico, where neoliberal capitalism and immaterial labor have manifested themselves in uneven forms, compared with the United States. Rather, the "creative class" in Mexican cinema is a social ideal that allows the middle class to embrace the narrative of individual achievement as neoliberalism undid the collective protections created by the post-Revolutionary regime. To read about the actual middle class in Mexico during the neoliberal period, see Gilbert, *Mexico's Middle Class in the Neoliberal Era*.

[9] For a good reading of *Notting Hill* in similar terms, see Wegner, who argues that the film allegorizes in the relationship the tension between the global and the local embedded in the advancement of capitalism in a way similar to the theorizations of global capitalism gurus like Thomas Friedman (322-23).

[10] Other examples in mainstream Mexican movies with considerable box office success include the protagonist of Fernando Sariñana's *Todo el poder* (2000), a documentary filmmaker, the upper-middle-class protagonist of the second story in *Amores perros* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2000), and the protagonists of the very successful comedy *Ladies' Night* (Gabriela Tagliavini, 2003), who are all employees in an advertising firm. The examples are very extensive, and part of my claim here is that this creative class is in fact the protagonist of the affect regime constructed by the type of commercial Mexican cinema addressed to middle and upper classes.

[11] This pattern also exists in drama movies. I have discussed in a different article something that I call the "neoliberal sublime," present in highly aestheticized films that use temporal disruption to represent failed love relationships. For the purpose of the present discussion, the films I study in that article— *Sobreviviente* (Jesús Magaña Vázquez, 2003), *Eros una vez María* (Jesús Magaña Vázquez, 2007) and *Amor, dolor y viceversa* (Alfonso Pineda Ulloa, 2008)— all construct "spaces outside history" that allow all characters to be middle and upper class and that fully erase the visibility of the lower class. See Sánchez Prado, "El sublime neoliberal."

[12] I take this term from Timothy Shary, who identifies the genre in American cinema of the 1980s. The contentions that Shary develops about youth cinema in the US in the 1980s foreshadow my analysis here. Shary identifies both youth romance and class-clash romances as central to 1980s film culture. This coincides with post-2000 Mexican cinema because there are parallels in the way in which class difference becomes crucial due to the pitfalls of neoliberalism in both settings, and due to the rise of the multiplex as a central space for film viewing both in 1980s America and in 1990s Mexico. See Shary, *Generation Multiplex* for the latter point.

[13] *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* is the first post-1988 Mexican movie to use the movie soundtrack proactively as a marketing tool. In that case, the eponymous song, written by Aleks Syntek, allowed the film unprecedented exposure on media such as MTV and radio. In *Amarte duele*, music is also an important device to demarcate class difference. As Frederick Aldama shows, "In *Amarte duele* Sariñana and his sound designer use music to distinguish the presence of *nacos* (a pejorative term used to describe working-class Mexicans), such as Ulises, and the *fresas* (the wealthy elite), such as Mariana (Ximena Sariñana) and Renata (Martha Higareda). Music here works to emphasize what the film already achieves: dividing different groups of people in artificial and destructive ways" (40-41).

[14] Perhaps the only other major precedent is *La primera noche* (Alejandro Gamboa, 1998), a Televisine production that sought to capitalize on cinema the success it had attained with *telenovelas* aimed at the youth market. The film follows Mariana (Mariana Ávila) in her sexual and emotional awakening. While following some of the conventions of the romantic comedy, the movie is not as strongly linked to neoliberal aesthetic as *Amarte duele*, mostly because it remained tied to the languages developed by the *telenovela*. The movie, however, was successful enough that two sequels (with similar names but different plots and characters) were released in 2002 and 2006, respectively.

[15] One can remember here that female soccer leagues are hardly a pursuit in Mexico's private school circuit, and that the appropriation of female soccer is not related to an actual reality (in Mexico, soccer is mostly regarded as a male sport, although some strides have been made to allow women more spaces to play), but to the popularity that female soccer has in US schools.

[16] *Hasta morir* is focused on a young man trying to escape criminal networks in Tijuana, while *Ciudades oscuras* is a film about members of Mexico City's social underground and their chance encounters. Both of these films stand in stark contrast, both representationally and ideologically, with the predominantly middle- and upper-class universe of Sariñana's more commercially successful works.

[17] For a detailed and very suggestive analysis of the comic book scene, see Hershfield 153-54.

[18] If one brackets the youth topic for a moment, a good contrasting film is *Maid in Manhattan* (Wayne Wang, 2002), a romantic comedy that narrates the love relationship between Marisa (Jennifer López), a hotel maid, and Christopher (Ralph Fiennes). This relationship is rendered possible because of the initial invisibility of their class difference, given that Christopher mistakes Marisa for a socialite when she is trying on a dress. The initial separation takes place when the misunderstanding is cleared and the final reunion is achieved when her son pleads with Christopher, convincing him (using the telling example of Richard Nixon) that you can lie for a higher purpose. Beyond the film's political revisionism, it is worth noting that Marisa, like Ulises, is defined by her individual exceptionality, which is shown by presenting her as more professional and enterprising than her fellow maids. The final closure of the relationship is connected to the presumed social climbing of Marisa, via a major promotion to management. Thus, the film shows neoliberalism as a viable path upwards, providing the exact opposite allegory as *Amar te duele*.

[19] Of course, I am not claiming here that all youth cinema is critical. As Jorge Ramírez Suárez's (*¿Ya lo hiciste sin?*) *Amar* (2009) shows, the topic of youth has recently been domesticated into relatively critical presentations of sexual initiation within the context of the middle class. In other cases, youth has been taken even further than the class critique of *Amar te duele*. Gerardo Naranjo's *Drama/Mex*, for instance, presents a very critical stance on the superficiality of affective engagement in the realm of the privileged upper-class adolescents, while *Voy a explotar* also represents a teenager whose decision to date an unruly young man is a way to rebel against her powerful politician father. Another example is Horacio Rivera's *Limbo* (2009), in which a young boy's accident gives him a more critical perspective on his middle-class life, which he observes from limbo. Through this conceit, the protagonist, Isao (Fátima Díaz), encounters characters victimized by life in contemporary Mexico. A meaningful issue in this movie is the fact that Isao is gay and that he is played by a young female actress, subverting the coming-of-age masculine discourse of youth cinema. A final relevant example is Fernando Eimbcke's *Temporada de patos* (2004), a successful, minimalistic feature that focuses on the tedium and absurdity of middle-class life, as experienced by three youths during a power outage. The film's black-and-white photography distills the characters' empty lives and explores the minutiae of their subjectivity, resulting in a subtle critique of over-mediatized youth.

[20] It may be noted here that family crisis is becoming a common topic in more recent cinema. For instance, Rodrigo Ortúzar's *Todo incluido* (2009), which, incidentally,

features both Ana Serradilla and Martha Higareda, centers on the family of a professional man, played by Jesús Ochoa, as it goes on vacation to an exclusive resort in order to reconstruct its family dynamics. Also, Sariñana's latest movie, *Enemigos íntimos* (2008), tells the story of two middle-class people, played by Demián Bichir and his daughter Ximena, whose battle against cancer highlights the decaying structure of their family.

[21] It should be noted here that Joanne Hershfield uses both *Amar te duele* and *De la calle* as paradigmatic examples of youth cultures creating heterotopias in the urban space. In both cases, she privileges Peña's character as the agent of this creation. In the light of my argument here, one could supplement her argument by pointing out that the lower-class individual's ability to do this is imagined in a way thoroughly consistent with the creative class ideology, in that the characters' exceptionality is what allows them to achieve something that no one else in their social position can.

[22] Illouz's previous work, represented in her books *Consuming the Romantic Utopia* and *Cold Intimacies*, have been of great influence to my understanding of romance in contemporary Mexican cinema. I find that her work on what she calls "emotional capitalism" is one of the best critical and theoretical tools to study the relation between love and capitalism.



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