

AT THE MILLENNIUM

Boredom Theory and Middle-Class Desires

Among the discourses on which twentieth-century, turn-of-the-millennium society is articulated are those of liberation (from the tyranny of the state, from cultural and economic isolation, from nationalism and into globalism), those of progress or advancement toward a common set of goals, those of the entitlement of the private, individual subject to pursue a dream or “get ahead,” and those of the self-made entrepreneur whose spirit and drive are combined with a boundless energy for work into an equation for singular enrichment and success. Within what is by now the cliché of a globalization of social factors and economic systems, the visible images of such overarching ideologies are hard to miss in the media, and a sense of natural privilege frequently ensues from an identification with the processes of this global culture. Consumers are convinced that everyone wants into the banquet of what Jameson refers to as “that ‘inner’ frontier” (“Class and Allegory” 288) of the market that has replaced the real geographic frontiers of the historical past. All seek their avowedly guaranteed place at the table filled with inestimable quantities of goods and rewards. The spaces left to explore and conquer—especially for the wages of investment capital but also for the ardent consumer—belong to a daily life whose material expressions of social forces and interests surround us at every turn. While we may feel suspended somewhere between our desires and their fulfillment, entranced by the call of the sirens but not knowing

which way to look first, still other commodities are in production to keep us wanting even more.

Though we may propose to take possession of our world by buying it up in bits and pieces, or by freezing it in the frames of photographic stills or in digitized CD images, our investment in it merely effects an uneasy comfort with what remains beyond the scope of our consciousness. As Jameson reminds the citizen/consumer whose identity is no longer unlinked from the ability to acquire merchandise or services, “[c]ultural products are full of surprises” (“Class and Allegory” 289). Such commodities may not respond to its desires as the community imagines they will, and they indeed may even elicit feelings of uncanniness in the unwary consumer, reminding us of those unstated motivations or “forgotten” resources that have helped us acquire what the market has to offer or perhaps have influenced what is for sale from the outset. It might take lots of old-fashioned detective work to uncover the sources of wealth of today’s world-class consumers, as well as the cultural forces which mold the products available to them (us).

As pedestrians make their way down the broad sidewalks of the Avenida Reforma in downtown Mexico City or stroll along the Gran Vía in Madrid, the half-smiling face of Bill Gates dances in the wind on the covers of international magazines displayed in kiosks. It reminds all passersby that they too can, in theory, make a quantity of money so vast that there won’t even be anything left to buy unless new things come along in the meantime. In the public’s enthralled gaze, wealth accumulates faster than its expenditure. Besides becoming exhausted by trying to find ways to invest it or to discover new items to purchase, one is frustrated by the fact that the possible objects of consumption do not keep pace with purchasing power. We must mark time in anticipation of the new, and the now is where (and when) that marching-in-place occurs. We have all heard about the beginning of Microsoft in someone’s garage, or a start-up company taking its first steps into the market with a couple of hundred dollars invested by an uncle or a neighbor. The fantasies of wealth, endless consumption, and limitless leisure time are conjured up to fill our otherwise routine everyday lives with the tantalizing but vague images of something new and different somewhere down the road. Even making money is no longer sufficiently exciting but merely the tediously monotonous repetition of successful ventures in anticipation of more of the same; once the formula has been mastered it becomes a given in the course of everyday life and not a challenge.

At the end of the twentieth century and as we moved through the portal into the twenty-first, it is the trend toward privatization—of industry, of services, of education, of all thoughts and opinions previ-

ously shared in the agora of civic society—that most greatly inflects our perception of the tedium of daily life. If each and every one of us is told we have the chance to pursue our personal fantasies—which are driven, of course, by the economies of desire produced through and around us—we will be able to buy into both the dream and its concomitant unlimited leisure, beginning with early retirement and ending with luxury living in some comfortable clime where no one speaks of markets unless they have to do with some remote idea of the mythical sources of our comfort. Given the recent shift in the global workforce toward so-called voluntary overtime (we need just recall the year 2000 public transit workers' strike in Los Angeles in protest over the proposed cessation of such extra benefits for masses of bus drivers and rail conductors), the growing phenomenon of the workaholic, shorter lunch hours or the advent of the power lunch in which work takes precedence over food (or actually nourishes us more than traditional victuals), the abolition of the tradition of the siesta and the two-part workday, mandatory vacation time that accrues by year's end, and the virtual office which creates literally no division between the space of the home and the space of work (or for that matter between the hours of work and hours off the job), it goes without saying that there is a mythology about labor that intrudes on all aspects of modern life. A great part of that mythology is that if one does not toil, one would be hard-pressed to fill the empty space and endless hours in the days, weeks, months, and years of a lifetime. Idle hands are still considered in demonic terms, much as they were during Puritan times; as long as one fills the black hole of time with profitable activity, then any feelings of emptiness, nostalgia, or anxiety can be kept at bay. The terms of the equation are easily strung together: the opportunity for work, made easier and increasingly more lucrative by the technological advances of modernity, added to the accumulation of wealth, yields time off—both long-term and short-term. Then comes the time when we are left to decide what to do with the flip side of labor: leisure. We may turn to work to forget other aspects of our lives, but even leisure time is converted into a sort of work since we burn calories, strenuously exert ourselves to acquire flat abs, and create energy drinks that allow us to have more endurance so that we “produce” better workouts.

Both Patricia Meyer Spacks and Patrice Petro have recently explored the notion of boredom, the first from a historical perspective and the second with a focus on a specific period. Each addresses provocatively as well the cultural supposition that leisure (the time filled by boredom, one surmises) signals an absence of action, a void to be filled with something other than “work” or production. Such a hypothesis rests on the conviction that leisure could become a threat to the immediate psychological as

well as economic health of the individual, or to his or her future status in society, since it indicates an inadequate amount of significant activity or, in the extreme, none at all. As a measure of the current state of social values, boredom or tedium or routine is meaningfully and intimately linked to societal conceptions of work as well as to certain cultural perceptions of time and history. The element of the boring intrudes when one can almost feel the laborious passage of time, when the real struggle is not to earn enough to survive (what we might call a basic sense of remunerated labor), but to find something to do with the surplus of everything, from finances to time. Work, then, no longer fulfills a function other than occupying the spaces made available by the incessant passage of time. Not so much the actual loss of the exceptional or the remarkable but a horror of its devaluation into the mundane often produces the grounds for tedium. This is sometimes accompanied by a feeling of anguish over such a loss, while other times not even that intrudes on the familiar feeling of inertia. The naturalizing of the images of both extreme poverty and inordinate wealth—especially by global media resources—leaves the spaces between them to be haunted by a sense of continuity of the same to which neither pole seemingly falls victim: the win-all or lose-all excesses lie elsewhere. The mythical middle-of-the-road security of the middle classes removes, in their own eyes, the obstacles of either resounding failure or overwhelming achievement. It celebrates acquired certainty (risks disappear or are deemed minimal) and expectations for more of the same; having escaped the depths, one longs for the economic peaks but marks time in between. Boredom may be the indicator of a frozen moment when, as a collectivity, we look backward, or it may imply a momentary paralysis as a community faces the future. The year 2000 proved to be such a juncture.

While Spacks traces the origins of the term “boredom” from the eighteenth century through the cultural changes wrought on its interpretation by nineteenth-century industrialization and modernization into the reign of the twentieth-century European subject, Petro centers her discussion on the writings of Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin, who inhabit the spaces already affected by the arrival of modernity. In particular Petro examines the primacy of the visual media—film and photography—as they became the primary instruments for recording how innovative or extraordinary events and inventions were domesticated and naturalized into the mundane. We might think of the rise of modern photography and its oppositional stance to the painterly vision of the world as an indicator of this historical moment when society acquired a new window on the world through the lens of the camera. Or we might recall how British actor and director Charlie Chaplin parodied the bore-

dom of the factory workplace in his early silent films set in modernizing and alienating cityscapes, making the little tramp both recognizable and filled with pathos for the viewer. It is the representation of this liminality at another historical juncture, the concurrence of both “before” and “after” in a post-twentieth-century expanse filled with singular expectation and terror, that interests me for trying to historically and aesthetically locate the genres and codes of contemporary Hispanic cinema. How boredom is put on display as a relic of daily life as one century closes and another looms large on the horizon, and how the audience might be seized by the moment, despite its own professed lethargy, and thrust into an energized and awakened consciousness, are two of the areas on which I would like to focus in contemporary Mexico and Spain. I recognize that some might find here a less-than-joyous celebration of popular culture as the liberator of us all, along the lines of what critic John Fiske has touted as the vehicle of expression for the subordinate masses in which pleasure and social resistance unite in jubilant subversion (54). Yet despite some fundamental differences between an absolute vision of present opportunity (Fiske) and a more limited one of future potentiality (Benjamin), Fiske and Benjamin coincide in discerning that the sites of popular culture—all of the aspects that constitute the life of the everyday—are filled with power. Benjamin never fails to envision boredom not as the source of a lamentation over closure but as fuel for possibility, a time from which to dig out. From its lethargic depths one might be roused to a clearer vision of society’s contradictions. As Highmore asserts, “Benjamin doesn’t remain within the melancholy realm often ascribed to him. His project is an attempt to redeem the everyday experience of modernity from silence” (65). I propose that through the end-of-the-century cinema of excess such silence is broken.

The time sensed as a filler between events is the vast, lumbering domain of social boredom. Qualified as a subjective experience of material reality, as Petro notes, the feeling of banality inhabits a “time without event, when nothing happens” (265). At least this is what the individual subject discerns: it is the experience of nonexperience, the realm of before-and-after described previously. When we sift back through the dusty documents of recorded history—to excavate things that did happen, one assumes, as opposed to limitless waiting and expectation for something, anything, to break the monotony extending across the daily horizon—we encounter only those distant, staccato echoes of beginnings and endings. What we hear in the endlessness of unmeasured flow is the sound of tedium; what we see is a fog of nonevents, a haze that leaves us bewildered as to their interconnectedness or even their association with some sense of historical “reality.” Before and after those moments when

we decide that we are witnessing history-in-the-making, we have time to spend, time to kill, time on our hands, spare time, free time, and time to pass, finding in routine both a strange yet simultaneously uncanny security of endless repetitions and a reminder of the inescapable drudgery of these undifferentiated moments. Seen as a pathology, one could find that boredom is a symptom of something gone awry in society; its physical manifestation “masks another condition” (Spacks x) which is generally then culturally encoded, normally within the realm of discontent, dullness, and disinterest. We do not desperately seek boredom, but it comes to us along with the territories of capital, wealth, and consumer desire. It is the ghost that haunts excess; it is the shadow cast by desire.

But even the production of desires can acquire a distinct sense of monotony, for we can predict, or have the feeling that we can, that many other desires will inevitably come along. That is the way of the market. What we want today is merely one step on the road of a greater critical mass. The accumulation of fantasies does not predicate their fulfillment as an end but rather their irremediable and inescapable challenge to us to engage with them. Like the hoarding of economic capital, accumulated desire(s) must be dealt with either through expenditure or sublimation, through excessive consumption or internalized longing. And it is in the interlude of solicited and then sublimated desire that we might come to frame our vision of boredom as a type of paralysis or “incapacity” (Spacks 165) to take action on either external or internal challenges. This leads Spacks to conclude that the psyche is wounded by such an impasse and she proposes that in literary texts “psychosis and boredom are tropes for one another” (165) as visible signs of the frustration of a desire once aroused and then repressed. This moment would then, in some general sense, belong to the stilled fraction of time perceived by Foucault when that inseparable conjunction of prohibition and resistance reaches some instant of stalemate. Things grind to a halt and we do not appear capable of moving on; time stands still as it were and appears to deny the existence of desire. Yet all the while the existence of a sense of impasse implies desire’s role in the emotional blockage. In other words, there must be something to block in order for an impediment to exist. The forms of psychosis and the violence they do to the subject and to the nation are two of the aspects of the films I shall examine, from Almodóvar’s recovery of Buñuel’s vision of the bourgeoisie’s repressions to González Iñárritu’s transference of political violence to the bloodlines of the family.

In his incisive study of the everyday life and social vision of the Mexican middle classes, Gabriel Careaga concludes his discussion of similar aspects of society with a proposal for an aesthetics. In his view,

middle-class woes exaggerate the sense of impediment or blockage into the spectacular theater of melodrama as a substitute for yet another absence: history. The desire for goods, coupled with a lack of historical vision (as to social origins or a pre-text for existence), projects one lack atop another. The result is a lament carried over the top as the only source of social presence for classes who feel left out of a greater national vision. Rather than seek a true prehistory of the present, however, which might lead to contested terrains of legitimacy, the middle classes wallow in excessive expenditure, as witnessed in the conventions of the genre of melodrama. To counteract absence, they exhibit overwhelming presence. Careaga sums up his argument in this manner:

Son los hombres y las mujeres de la clase media que suben y bajan, luchando desesperadamente por tener mayor movilidad social, que aspiran a más cosas, que se irritan, que se enojan, dentro de una tradición melodramática porque cuando se carece de conciencia trágica, ha dicho alguna vez Carlos Fuentes, de razón histórica o de afirmación personal, el melodrama la suple, es un sustituto, una imitación, una ilusión de ser. Esta clase media vive la mayor parte del tiempo . . . [s]oñando en querer ser otra cosa, siempre envidiando al otro que no es como él . . . , siempre deseando y frustrándose. (It is the men and women of the middle classes that rise and fall, desperately fighting for greater social mobility, that aspire to more things, that get incensed, that become angry, [all] within a tradition of the melodramatic because when there is no conscience of tragedy, as Carlos Fuentes once said, melodrama steps in to take its place, it becomes a substitute, an imitation, the illusion of being. This middle class lives the majority of the time . . . dreaming about wanting to be something else . . . , always envious of those who are different, . . . always desiring and being frustrated; 61).

Dreams of riches, fame, and social recognition are blocked by the knowledge (even if repressed for the time being) of being caught in the middle, constantly disappointed and frustrated by lost opportunities and deferred gratification but ever impelled by social pressures to dream on. Want and lack go hand-in-hand; they play off one another on a daily basis much as desire and the law are codependent. The more one finds to desire, the more the lack is manifested and compensated for with excessive detail. If one is forced to wait for that elusive something down the road, then at least this can be done with the greatest sense of exaggeration one can muster. So the codes of melodrama step in to attempt to fill the void of both past (lack) and future (desire). It makes social classes between two extremes more visible.

Of course, routine may be envisioned as all the more overwhelming if represented in the hyper-mode of melodrama, which forces and twists

it into condensed images of affect at every turn in order to invest each passing minute with visible signs of meaning. When we feel that there is no longer any sense to the passage of time we endure, no action worth the effort, then it must be imbued with not just signifiers, but accumulated signifiers whose meanings pile up like so much rubbish on a refuse heap. Contrary to Walter Benjamin's Angel of History "who would like to stand still" to take stock of such remains, the stasis of boredom seems to make one oblivious to the need for a "leap out of this movement [of evolutionary progress]" (Bolz and Van Reijen 42). Even as Benjamin retains his faith in a (divine) revelation amidst the debris, the steady if lethargic momentum of the banal folds back on the gaze of the onlooker and impedes either clarity of vision or messianic hope. But the mundane may also be all the more evocative of a latent panic—of which we may be only dully aware—if it is removed from our line of sight altogether but continues to stalk us from among the shadows. When routine is the anchor we search for in a sea of extraordinarily violent and traumatic images, it becomes all the more discernible for its absence. In a crisis, banality is reassurance. Tossed about on the sea of blood and mayhem, the spectator is cast adrift from any moorings of certainty about self or surroundings. The cinema of excess, therefore, gives us one extreme or the other, taking away the artificial reassurance of the middle ground: either boredom on screen is even more crushing than our ordinary feeling of everyday life or it has disappeared totally and in its place is something that makes us long for the absent solace of the tedious. Or just maybe we are shown that this is not the only scenario; perhaps we can be shocked into the realization that there is a need to find a way out of a numbing boredom of which we have been finally made aware. Given its ability to take on so many guises and disguises, the notion of boredom functions as a marker of a wide variety of social and psychological intricacies. These obstruct one another in the psyche of the modern consumer who has replaced the subject of history at the end of the twentieth century.¹

So along with Foucault and Benjamin (an unlikely pair at that), we might also consider boredom as a positive force, as the opportunity to produce images, fictions, and discourses about this very state of affairs in which one feels entangled. It not only prevents and blocks a response, but also has the power to provoke one; anxiety is not the only product of an overwhelming sense of inertia. On the one hand, there is the fear that nothing could jolt us out of such an intensified feeling of timelessness—we are confounded by the impression that all extraordinary highs and lows are things of the past which have become subsumed under the bland, flattened routine of the everyday. Like an addict at the limit, we have reached an intoxicated saturation from which we no longer distin-

guish much variation—everything is reduced to a predictable state of presence vs. absence. Yet on the other hand, an anticipation of even the remotest possibility of something out of the ordinary or unfamiliar occurring at any moment in what now seems a continuum of uninterrupted waiting signals, for Benjamin, that in the very midst of the toxic routine of the everyday there lies that messianic hope for rupture and revelation. Among his notations for the monumental *Arcades Project*, Benjamin constantly and pointedly emphasizes this potential: “We are bored when we don’t know what we are waiting for. . . . Boredom is the threshold to great deeds” (Buck-Morss 105). One must only conjure up the predicament underlying our tedium to have the passage of time become more than that. Thus the ceremonial aspects of repetitive routine may acquire a premonitory glow of expectation.

For Benjamin, the metaphors of dream and waking best capture the potential of this moment, especially in the realm of the cinema. The power to awaken the collective masses sleepwalking through history is tapped by means of the visual evocation of “the traumatic energy of everyday life through images” (Bolz and Van Reijen 46). It is through the shock value of the visual—first in Baudelaire’s poetic evocations but subsequently flickering before our eyes on the silver screen—that technology intervenes in the intensified routine of daily life to pry open the eyes of the willing (or jolted) somnambulist to the hidden vitality of the now. This experience pierces the remoteness, the distance stretching between vision and object, “disintegra[ting] . . . the aura” (Benjamin, 1968 194) cast in the “protective eye” (191) to end the paralysis of a distracted gaze. Awakened from its enthrallment with the static moment that seems to go on without end, the eye witnesses the trauma of difference. Not unlike the tremendous visual impact of the opening scene of Spanish director Luis Buñuel’s 1928 film *Un chien andalou*, Benjamin focuses on this orb as the site where the distraction of the subject may be broken with maximum force and intensity. A pierced eye brings into consciousness the act of looking and, one supposes, what is seen as well. If we symbolically cut through the organ of sight as we witness the razor blade slice through thick vitreous gel on screen, then we come to realize that we have been observing unreflexively along the lines of what Chris Jenks refers to as the false assumption of objectivity, an “immaculate perception” (5). As Petro concludes, along Benjamin’s own lines of argumentation, boredom is fundamentally concerned with the sense of sight, and any resulting distraction or detachment (the visible sign of boredom) resides in a “fatigue of the eye” (272). Visual fixity constrains the observer to partial vision, perhaps as a refuge from the crush of satiation. Whether by absence (lack, invisibility) or by overload, distraction is the

result of excess—we see too much or too little; we are exhausted by straining to see what may or may not be immediately accessible to us, or we withdraw altogether from the pervasiveness of visual stimuli. Either extreme yields the same result: given the difficulty of access to all or to nothing, we give ourselves up to the soothing forces of indifference. It is only in some tremendously optimistic, forward-looking scheme of things that the enthrallment of such a distracted subject could be held out as a potentiality for future revelation. And it is only in the consideration of time as both spent (meaningless, redundant, undifferentiated) and full of possibilities that waiting might be conceived as hopeful expectation and affirmation.

The temporal battleground on which we thus stand is the now, the present, which must be seized in order to “claim the territory between the future and the past, but [which] manages only to be devoured by them” (Lyotard 37). But rather than assign this present anticipation a negative value, it can be permeated with an ecstasy of insecurity—a veritable passion of waiting and indeterminacy. The eventual outcome, then, would not be relief but a state similar to Benjamin’s image of awakening, of emerging from a foggy stupor with clearer, if more challenging, vision. As Lyotard confirms, “[s]hock is, *par excellence*, the evidence of (something) happening, rather than nothing at all” (40). When the apparatus of the cinema places our eyes on the line, as it were, to enable us to see that the real shock is that the secret behind the banal is our own state of being hypnotized by banality itself, then the power of boredom lies in its own narrative of implied escapability. Boredom is neither natural nor inevitable. The real revelation is the extraordinariness of distraction when it is brought to the level of consciousness. This is best accomplished for Benjamin in the flickering light of the darkened movie theater. As we move into a time of the unknown, looking back at the stunning achievements and dismal failures of the past century, I suggest that we may wish to once again look at films that address the “tedium and irritation of perceptual boredom, in other words, [ones that] enable an awareness of looking as a temporal process” (Petro 276). When we are confronted by our own anesthetized looking, when we confront ourselves on screen in forms we scarcely recognize at first, we can be jarred out of taking “the fatigue of the eye” for granted as a natural phenomenon. So the monotony of the sleepwalking subject—a dormant spectator moving through space, oblivious to his or her surroundings but set in motion—whose gaze is trained everywhere and nowhere at once, is assaulted by other ways of seeing when the film director finds in the camera lens a weapon for disturbance and intrusion. Even when focused on the same objects we pass by every day, and perhaps even more irritat-

ingly so when aimed at them in particular, it renders materially present what we have become accustomed to viewing as nothing at all. Absence becomes presence. The camera, then, can fire up the desiring eye, which has until now for all intents and purposes become blind. Such blindness is the state of distraction we have been describing, when the push and pull of longing and its repression leave the gaze disconnected and distanced. No matter how close the object might intrude on our field of vision, we cannot seem to perceive it in any attentive way; we look but we do not see, for we have become accustomed to this static relationship with our surroundings.

But rather than take boredom as a phenomenon with some universal set of characteristics, we must set our sights on the specifics of history and culture. During the decade of the 1990s, in Europe and the Americas alike, a sense of waiting and anticipation intensified, both as one century drew to a close and as a new millennium was about to open before our very eyes. Anxiety was most certainly shaded by both melancholy and excruciating delight: we sat at the crossroads of a clean beginning and a sense of closure, a farewell to evils and horrors with new hopes for universal peace, a chance to use our knowledge of the past for the construction of a future, burying dead ideologies and liberating new ones. In both Mexico and Spain this decade embodied an intensification of the tediousness of the seemingly immeasurable time between historical events. In Mexico, the utopian visions of the 1910 revolution had waxed and waned over the events of succeeding decades, always accompanied by that seemingly eternal companion, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI or Institutional Revolutionary Party.) The congealed political institutionalization of a purportedly collective agenda froze historical images on the retina of the nation, keeping its citizens from registering the discrepancies between fact and fiction or, for that matter, distinguishing the ideological gap widening between them. These inconsistencies were out there, of course, but they were made invisible by official public discourse which promoted and maintained a thick interpretive veil between spectator and event. From 1929 to 2000, the cultural and political economies of the Mexican people revolved around the recognizable rhetoric of an official party whose promises turned into a litany of absences and whose end no one really believed they would witness in their lifetime. The narratives appealed to a mythic time, an undercurrent of continuity in which their own representation of events seemed to be imbedded quite effortlessly and “naturally.” In point of fact, the majority of Mexico’s twentieth century can be read as a “time without event” of frustrated collective distraction, punctuated only intermittently by uncanny moments of extraordinary violence. But this

is the case when it is the middle class that does the reading of events. For those such as Subcomandante Marcos and the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN or Zapatista Army of National Liberation) or other political groups and alliances dedicated to the task of pointing out the gaps between official rhetoric and actual social practice, the twentieth century has been one of constant violence by the government interrupted only by an intensification of its repression of alternative visions of history. Violence has only been officially visible when it is judged to be an enemy of the perception of “time without event.”

Even those momentary horrors noted in public quickly ebbed back into the realm of the unseen: student revolts, massive earthquakes, peasant uprisings, natural disasters, political assassinations, and presidential frauds all were absorbed into the emptied signifiers of the ruling party’s public discourses. The institutionalizing of the concept of revolution itself into official political structures has slowed down the perception of any event as significantly equal to the “original.” The aura of that primal moment was unique and unrepeatable; everything else became part of the blur of post-revolutionary time. After the initial moment of rupture, things returned to what is conceived of as normal, a normalcy guaranteed by the numbing rhetoric of routine. From celebration (over international soccer victories, for instance, or finalists in the Miss Universe contest) to extreme suffering and violence, peaks and valleys are flattened into deserts of equal tediousness. Much has been made of those disturbances, especially by those observing them from a distance, but little has been said of the time in-between. PRI-time was forever, infinite, or so it seemed until Vicente Fox and the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN or National Action Party) arrived on the scene to shake things up for real in the July 2000 presidential election. For the young in particular, this was the first time that the collective imaginary could conceive an image of change, of “event.” And that image was focused on the tall, moustached man in the cowboy hat who used the media effectively to reach the distracted masses and seemingly spoke to them in their own vernacular language. Taunting them out of their boredom with politics, Fox publicly flouted some of the greatest cultural and political taboos which had been upheld over the years by the federal government: a promise to reveal the “truth” about his political and ideological adversaries in the PRI, the use of vulgar language as a sign of cutting through rhetorical stances, bullying the PRI to reveal its secret economic pacts and past repressive tactics, conjuring up the political power and fiscal rights of the Catholic Church, promoting the use of English in place of a traditional defense of Spanish as the only language for national representation, even threatening to flood the states along the United States-



Figure 1.1. The look of the new: Mexican multiplexes are the cornerstones of suburban shopping malls in the 1990s. (Photo collection of the author.)



Figure 1.2. The demise of the old: A popular downtown Mexico City movie theater from the 1950s. Now closed, it is a site for sorting garbage. (Photo collection of the author.)

Mexico border with faceless hordes of well-trained gardeners. On television and interspersed with movie trailers in commercial theaters, his face and party logo never left the public eye for long. Rather than merely operating a campaign of visual saturation, however, Fox's advisors shocked the public out of stupor and into believing a new time could be at hand by promoting the myth of change. The false security of an appeal to mythic origins evaporated into thin air; time itself became the trope of awakening rather than lethargy as Fox urged voters to look at the hands of the clock as they moved into the next century and the new millennium.

In Carlos Fuentes's book of essays entitled *A New Time for Mexico*, published in Spanish in 1994, this need for a sense of awakening is already encapsulated. Six years before the changing of the old guard begins to occur in "real time," Fuentes closes his discussion with a chapter entitled "Conclusion and Coda: Mexican Tempí." Not one but two threads of time are woven into his vision of end-of-the-century Mexico, permitting the dissolution of the trance of eternity and reconnecting time and event, the "chronotope" pegged by Bakhtin as the locus of the study of modern narrative and the axis of its generic conventions.² About this notion of "Mexican time" Fuentes writes: "Between the ruins of the past and the garbage of the future, Mexico tries to create a livable space in the present" (203). He seems to locate social space between the material vestiges of time—the decaying shards left over from days past and the accumulated detritus of today's consumption that will decompose in the dustbin of tomorrow. Time leaves behind the proof of its passage by filling the material spaces that surround us with traces of events; we are literally walking on layers of time as we move toward the "new times" of the title. In Bakhtin's words to describe a similar sense, albeit at a much earlier historical moment, "[t]ime, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible" (84) through the narrative evocation of these ruins and waste products. Time moves forward at the pace of the production and consumption of such artifacts, or it is bogged down by their filling all the spaces that we inhabit and slowing our movements amid them.

It is the image of a hypnotic, dreamlike state of in-betweenness which has persisted across official discourses of power that has to be fractured before the events of the present can be perceived and critiqued with clarity. Until the Mexican elections of 2000, the appeal to a timeless national continuum by many politicians and intellectuals alike only served as a compensatory, "eventless" counterpoint to the realities of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), drug cartels, and the relentless forces of globalization. Recognizable phrases and slogans used

to pacify the populace into a state of tedious resignation just dull the senses until their empty words become “facts” that nothing can be done to change; all efforts against them are useless. But events do take place where and when we are made to think they don’t; as in the urban shell game by the street-smart huckster, our eyes, confident of their ability to perceive where the moving object is hidden, are tricked into looking elsewhere and we are entrapped. Our response to such deception is first accusation and then resignation. One does not fall for the same scam twice; desperation, then boredom, set in, and one eventually learns to avoid the situation entirely. Our gaze is diverted elsewhere, distracted from the hypocrisy of an honest playing field gone awry; a lack of interest quickly turns into dispassionate distance. The spaces of individual distraction proposed and promoted by the forces of social stability bombard us with an alternative to “event”: family, work, and home form the sacred triangle whose angles, in rotation and conjunction, mask the tedium of eventless time with the substitutes of leisure and prosperity.

A similar situation was taking place in Spain over roughly the same period of time, albeit long after the attempt for revolutionary change took place (during the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939). Before the death of the dictator Francisco Franco on November 20, 1975, Spaniards anxiously awaited what would follow the demise of the recognizable leader (or enemy) whose countenance had stood in for so long as the public image of the nation and its politics. While the dictatorship per se had dragged on for close to forty years, changes within the structure of the government or the staff of its ministries had remained internal; the visible figurehead had stayed in place, uninterrupted and untouched by any event. While novelist Juan Goytisolo anticipated “el Día por antonomasia” (“that Day par excellence”; 11) that would divide time into Franco/post-Franco units, he counted on the comforting rhythm of obsessive repetition and methodically conjured-up hatred to carry him through. The pain of his everyday existence was so numbing for him that he no longer registered the hurt. It had become part of him, it was a dream-state to be counted on as being there each and every waking moment, like the invisible but omnipresent inspector of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon.³ In a paradoxical equation of affect, numbness meant life (or at least survival by means of a lifesaving emotional anesthesia).

Yet even Goytisolo notes the figure of the sleepwalker as the perfect image for these generations of the so-called children of Franco. Having been forced to relinquish their innocence to the overwhelming and demanding patriarch, once they became adults they were unable to function as anything other than psychologically damaged and arrested children who had been ordered to close their eyes to the world. This

situation had persisted for so long that they were no longer aware of their real surroundings; a state of what appeared to be permanent sleep had taken the place of being awake. Situating himself in an in-between state of psychological impairment that parallels his physical exile from Spain, Goytisolo claims a life “sin rencor ni nostalgia” (“with neither rancor nor nostalgia”; 18), an eventless time spent waiting for the impending shock of Franco’s demise. But even this anticipated pleasure, this rousing jolt of reckoning, is stolen from him: the brain-dead Franco is kept alive artificially by technology so that the moment of his death can coincide with the Nationalist day of mourning for one of their fallen and martyred heroes. Rather than a “natural” occurrence, history passes into the realm of artifice. So instead of an “event,” the dictator’s death is reduced to a formulaic moment emptied of much of its significance by its constant postponement. By the time death is declared, it seems for many less a milestone than just another part of the continuation of “time without event.” Franco was no more dead in death than he had been in life, when his image was mythified and sustained above and beyond a mere physical body. Of the agony of the wait Goytisolo writes: “Hay hechos que a fuerza de ser esperados, cuando ocurren al fin, pierden toda impresión de realidad” (“There are events anticipated for so long that, when they finally come about, they lose all impression of being real”; 11). The last registered event of the Spanish chronotope, that conjunction of time and space, that the nation had witnessed had been Franco’s ascent to power; “nothing” had happened since. And for exiles such as Goytisolo, time and space shared a fundamental element of absence: both Spain and history were perceived as existing elsewhere in space, or not at all “real” in temporality. The characters in his novels can peer across the Strait of Gibraltar, but there is more than just a geographical distance at work. The *neblina* (“morning fog”) that they see is accompanied by an empty haze of nonevents happening somewhere off on the horizon. As Baudrillard sums up the decay of both reality and simulation,

in contrast to the primitive rite, which foresees the official and sacrificial death of the king . . . , the modern political imaginary goes increasingly in the direction of delaying, of concealing for as long as possible, the death of the head of state. This obsession has accumulated since the era of revolutions and of charismatic leaders: Hitler, Franco, Mao . . . see themselves forced to perpetuate themselves indefinitely. . . . (25)

Time, which has become elastic and leaves no gaps in a never-ending cultural and political horizon, precludes the interruption of event: death cannot and therefore does not occur in the representation of

the collective imaginary. Death itself is merely imagined. Franco appears on the walls of post offices and government buildings, on all denominations of postage stamps, coins, and tax receipts. As Goytisolo puts it, the dictator is another Dorian Gray (15), never aging despite the passing of time in the outside world; the thirty-eight years of his dictatorship move without haste and weigh heavily on the material world as an eventless time patrolled by the infamous, gray-uniformed soldiers of the *guardia civil*. Such a temporal limbo leaves psychological scars.

In the twenty-five intervening years since the self-proclaimed Generalísimo's death, the enchantment with Felipismo (the government of charismatic leftist leader Felipe González) came and went, the Socialists rose to power and fell from it precipitously, the 1992 Barcelona Olympics sparked for an instant in the eye of the international media, pacts here and there assured the monotony of less social and political disruption, and the advent of the millennium provided little for those distracted by the overwhelming consumer panorama of daily life. Isolation from the rest of the continent was replaced in short order by a nascent "Europhilia" (Ross 158) without so much as a missed step. After "la movida madrileña" ("the Madrid Movement"), an ephemeral social phenomenon whose celebratory intensity during the late 1970s and early 1980s flamed out in a blaze of visual glory, the tenor of historical time ebbed and slowed once again. Things "moved" no longer. As an emblem of youth and rebellion, of energy and tolerance, of the boundless spirit of creativity, "la movida" became just another blip in the whirling kaleidoscope of democracy on Spain's vast new cultural horizon. Emma Dent Coad summarizes this phenomenon in terms of the liberating power of economic capital and what it promised to provide the individual consumer:

A combination of political and cultural freedom, increased personal income, and the desire to break with the past. . . . [This] created a market for new aesthetic ideas. . . . Painting, sculpture, fashion, jewellery, film, music, theatre, and dance blossomed overnight and were quickly hailed as the new hope of a new Spain. . . . Journalists and artists fed off each other in a mutual admiration society that had its own magazines, its own clubs, and its own galleries and shops. (376–77)

Having turned the mirror on itself and exhausted the eyes of the nation, what next for Spain? Once the newness of everything being new faded, where did one look next? The nation's eyes had been saturated and could no longer absorb more. Both the imaginary and the wallets of the nation had been assaulted and drained. When the intensity of the wait for liberation fizzled into the limbo of boring innovation—so much

excess and spectacle after the endless years of dull grayness and drab routine—time again stretched out toward the infinite. The splendor of the present among the ruins of the past was overpowering only until the ever-new began to look like more-of-the-same. Nostalgia was out, it didn't sell; consumption was definitely in, but the tedium of choosing set in quickly (as did the unremarkable onset of economic overextension). Then the economic boom of the 1980s faded into the dark shadows of recession and high unemployment of the 1990s, part of the larger discourse of global disillusionment by those relegated to the far end of the banquet table. While Spain's conservative political ideologues had touted its "difference" for over thirty years, when Europe came courting at long last it brought with it the narratives of boredom and distraction. Spaniards were welcomed to the discourses of empty desire. Spain was no longer "different" in its eventual indifference to too much.

While movie theaters had been for so long the spaces in which leisure time could be filled, where one could escape from the routine of the workday into the promissory fantasies of the matinee, the double feature, or the midnight show, the 1990s came to challenge this venue. Home video, VCRs, and the demise of the commercial theater coincided with a retreat into that pre-eminent space of boredom: the home. Earlier in the century Franco had sent women back into the home to care for the family, from which future model citizens would emerge. This retreat later became evidence of economic success and the home a haven from the metropolis. Whereas the act of going out had always marked a separation between routine (domestic or workday) and a change of scene, late capitalism's striving for privatization and privileging its spaces turned this concept of time and space around. While the audience may claim valid economic and social reasons for such a withdrawal—ranging from the prohibitive cost of theater tickets for an entire family to a fear of the lower classes or immigrants invading the reclusive spaces of urban theaters—the factor of time itself enters into prime consideration. Rather than taking the time to reach the places where diversion and distraction from routine might be provided, one now prefers to arrange for the retrieval of videos and refreshments from the closest and easiest possible source. Routine absorbs both work *and* leisure, blending them together in a twenty-four hour schedule which is only truly measured by the limits placed on the return of the video rental and the economic penalty for ignoring them. Physically going to the cinema has been replaced by bringing the videocassette into the home, thereby extending the thickness of work time into the fanciful spaces of leisure.⁴

Contemporary films themselves frequently and insistently speak from within the mundane spaces which used to be the targets of escape.



Figure 1.3. Recovering audiences: Art theaters inaugurated by the Mexican government in the 1990s strive to lure spectators out of their homes and away from more commercial venues. (Photo collection of the author.)

Those discursive spaces of boredom and distraction—typically the workplace, home, neighborhood, bar or club, even an entire city—are displayed on living room screens for the members of the middle classes who fill their few empty hours with the images of characters longing to fill the time they have on their own hands. If the home viewers were to turn on the lights they would find themselves inhabiting a variant of what they gaze at through the filter of the lens. Yet so much of this activity to pass the time does just that—time passes indistinguishably as the viewer focuses without consciousness on the objects and stories of the marketplace brought into his or her own den or family room. Increasingly passive, the eye of the spectator looks unblinking at the flickering screen, fingers mechanically picking up snacks or raising a glass to the lips. What some have called “quality time,” that is to say filling the fewer and fewer moments outside the workplace with intense schedules of endless diversions for family members to share, begins to take on the look of structured boredom at every turn. More space has to be covered in less time; overvalued activities must be crowded into a set number of hours set aside artificially by the individuals in the household in the fear that if these were to disappear the family unit would do so too. The chronotope of such life is a condensation of “event” or

activity into the ongoing uneventful continuum of time which stretches into a lifetime.

How have film directors in Spain and Mexico in particular responded to or attempted to provoke such audiences whose remote, mechanical gaze does not appear to pierce through their own immediate surroundings? What are the figures, images, and techniques that stand in for those who wait for “something else,” transfixed in some remote “time space” by the smorgasboard of media images that stretches out before their eyes? How might one invade the home or repackage the glut of objects that has overtaken our vision? Parent and child, neighbor and neighbor, old and young are held in rapture by the sublime moments of forgetfulness—what we sometimes refer to as “spacing out”—in front of the glare of the television set with remote control in hand. How might directors choose to provide an antidote to the prosaic dullness of events and consequent collective dulling of the senses? I propose that it is the cinematic genres of excess that some have mined which hold the potential to break through the distracted eye of the spectator and to disrupt the unbroken visual harmony of uninterrupted consumption.

In his discussion of postwar Spanish cinema, González Requena establishes an important distinction between two popular genres: the cinema of action and that of melodrama. He takes stock of the omnipotent presence of the forceful phallic hero in the first while remarking on a slippage into an overwhelming domestic “time space” of the feminine in the second. What he terms “the absolute kingdom of melodrama” is juxtaposed to the glorification of virility: “In a certain sense, melodrama can be understood as opposed to action narratives. If the latter is sustained by the virile gesture, by the test of the hero’s power and audacity, the former is based on the lack, the loss, the suffering generated by the absence of the beloved” (91). By extension, rather than situating the generic codes of melodrama only within the realm of the family as their prime space, or in the “lens of misfortune” as Monsiváis sees them (117), I shall relocate them instead in the perceived “time without event” of boredom. The affect of “lack” and “loss,” as González Requena summarizes these conventions, is visually condensed into the spaces of “self-renouncement and sacrifice” (91) inhabited by generations of women on screen. Within the walls of the domestic compound, passion has intruded and then withdrawn, leaving behind neither “virile gesture” nor paternal figure (except in the “traces” of previous action embodied in the children who are left behind, often nameless and unrecognized but material proof nevertheless of a time “with event”—or they would not be there). The Bakhtinian chronotope of melodrama, then, is found in “an ellipsis inscribed at the center of the film” (González Requena 94) which