

Bored to Distraction

Cinema of Excess in End-of-the-Century Mexico and Spain



Claudia Schaefer

**BORED
TO
DISTRACTION**

SUNY series in Latin American
and Iberian Thought and Culture

Jorge J. E. Gracia and Rosemary Geisdorfer Feal, editors

BORED TO DISTRACTION

Cinema of Excess in End-of-the-Century
Mexico and Spain



Claudia Schaefer

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

© 2003 State University of New York

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. No part of this book may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means including electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission in writing of the publisher.

For information, address State University of New York Press,
90 State Street, Suite 700, Albany, NY 12207

Production by Marilyn P. Semerad
Marketing by Michael Campochiaro

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Schaefer, Claudia, 1949–

Bored to distraction : cinema of excess in end-of-the-century Mexico
and Spain / Claudia Schaefer.

p. cm — (SUNY series in Latin American and Iberian thought and culture)
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7914-5887-3 (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-7914-5888-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Motion pictures—Mexico—History. 2. Motion pictures—Spain—History.
I. Title. II. Series

PN1993.5.M4S32 2003
791.43'0972—dc21

2002045253

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Acknowledgments	ix
1 At the Millennium: Boredom Theory and Middle-Class Desires	1
2 Jaime Humberto Hermosillo's <i>La tarea</i> : Not Your Average Afterschool Special	27
3 How I Spent My Summer Vacation: <i>Danzón</i> and the Myth of Getting Away from It All	55
4 <i>Amores perros</i> : Throwing Politics to the Dogs	83
5 Still Just a Dress Rehearsal?: From Archibaldo de la Cruz to Penélope Cruz	109
6 The Demonic Side of Modernity: Waiting for Satan at the Movies	135
7 A Few Last Words: Waiting in the Anteroom of the Twenty-First Century	163
Notes	175
Works Cited	185
Index	195

This page intentionally left blank.

Illustrations

Figure 1.1. The look of the new	13
Figure 1.2. The demise of the old	13
Figure 1.3. Recovering audiences	19
Figure 3.1. María Rojo (Julia, left) and Daniel Rergis (Carmelo, right)	61
Figure 3.2. Víctor Carpinteiro (Rubén, left) and María Rojo (Julia, right)	68
Figure 3.3. María Rojo (Julia)	69
Figure 3.4. Tito Vasconcelos (Susy)	71
Figure 4.1. Vanessa Bauche and Gael García Bernal	94
Figure 4.2. Gael García Bernal	95
Figure 4.3. Goya Toledo and Alvaro Guerrero	97
Figure 4.4. Emilio Echevarría	100
Figure 5.1. Víctor (Liberto Rabal) visits his mother's grave	121
Figure 5.2. Head shot of Elena (Francesca Neri)	124
Figure 5.3. Partners David (Javier Bardem) and Sancho (José Sancho)	126
Figure 6.1. Father Angel Berriartúa (Alex Angulo)	147
Figure 6.2. Classmates Angela (Ana Torrent) and Chema (Fele Martínez)	153
Figure 6.3. Director Bosco (Eduardo Noriega)	158
Figure 6.4. Angela (Ana Torrent)	160

This page intentionally left blank.

Acknowledgments

Films are two-edged swords. How one develops a fascination with the movies is so very far removed from the more technical and rigorous process of criticism. As far as the mysteries of darkened theaters are concerned, I have to thank my grandmother Helen Evanchik for letting me perch on her arthritic knees to watch John Wayne fight the Battle of Pork Chop Hill in an almost-empty suburban movie theater, escaping boredom during a summer heat wave. This is the first film I can remember ever seeing. More taken by the Duke and his escapades than I was at age five or so, I found her enthusiasm over the sights and sounds of battle infinitely more interesting and puzzling than what was on screen. She could imagine a war she had missed experiencing in the flesh, because she had left Russia long before, perhaps only through Hollywood's version of the events, complete with an American victory. Hours after the matinee session was over she could recall the details of the soldiers and the dialogue they had spoken. I myself can relive the event of accompanying her to the theater much more than the plot of the film (although I guess I certainly know the story's outcome).

Later on, I found another spirit whose dreams were fostered in movie theaters. During the same decades, almost a continent away and in a culture far removed from suburban Long Island, Raúl Rodríguez-Hernández found stories portrayed on screen that transported him both back in time and all the way across the ocean to distant realms. Mexico's openness to European films and cultures brought Italy, Poland, the Soviet Union, Spain, and other countries right to his doorstep. As a teenage theater employee, making popcorn and sandwiches for the daily crowds, carrying heavy cases to the post office to be transported to the next small-town theater, and helping change the title letters on the marquee, he had the rare opportunity (outside characters in the novels of Manuel Puig or in *Cinema Paradiso*) to see more movies than anyone else I know. So taken was he by those images that, almost miraculously and often monstrously, he still retains plots and

faces from the features that changed several times a week in those days. Obviously, an inquiry today about a film elicits more than a few perfunctory words and our conversations about the movies have been enlightening in so many senses. Raúl has been the bridge between watching and analyzing; without his input I would still be sitting in the dark.

Now for my debt to others who have contributed to my critical interest in films and to this project in particular. I am grateful to my University of Rochester film classes over the past several years for their sometimes vexing, but more frequently enticing, comments regarding the Mexican and Spanish directors and productions we have studied. I have learned from them that fresh eyes see such very different things in a film, things that are easily dismissed but which in more than one instance have led me to think again about what had appeared to be familiar images. I appreciate their difficulties with talking about movies and the efforts many of them have made to find the language to do so. Maybe what one of them has called making her think “in the fifth dimension” was the best way of describing this complex process.

Without the help of Kathleen Vernon I would probably still be looking for photos to illustrate this book, and without her technical suggestions and production information it would have taken me twice as long to get all the legalities taken care of. For this, and for her loyal support over quite a number of years, I thank her from the bottom of my heart. Aside from being a pioneer in Almodóvar studies, she is a true colleague.

I gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the Program for Cultural Cooperation Between Spain’s Ministry of Culture and North American Universities for a grant to begin the research for this book. I also thank Dean Thomas LeBlanc of The College of Arts and Sciences for allowing me time off from teaching to pursue this and other projects, and for his understanding of the need to upgrade my computer every once in a while.

Thanks to Ron Mandelbaum (and researchers Buddy Weiss and Pierre Montiel) at Photofest who found me perfect photo illustrations for chapter 4. I am especially grateful to El Deseo, Altavista Films and Zeta Films, Lola Films, Cinematográfica Macondo, and Las Producciones del Escorpión for their kind permission to reprint film stills and for their incredibly rapid response to my requests.

Last but not least, I am forced to admit that the term “boredom” has been ringing in my ears since childhood, when my siblings and I were frequently accused of complaining that there was nothing to do after the school year ended. So in some subconscious way, I guess I have been brought full circle to a maternal admonition to find some way to fill those empty hours. Of course, the suggestion always was to read a book. From the depths of academia today I can only remark that you should be careful what you wish for. . . .



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