

Introduction

I. Rethinking Mexican Cinema, the Crisis of Masculinity, and the Patriarchal Contract

From the formative period of postrevolutionary nationalism through to the present era of neoliberal cultural politics, Mexican cinema has retained a paradigmatic preoccupation with representing defective masculinities. The codified regularities and symbolic symmetries that have endured in filmic imagery of deficient male gender performance reflect the underlying stability of certain currents of cultural mythology sustained through more than a century of transitions between various permutations of the modern capitalist nation-state in Mexico. The transhistorical continuity of these connective threads has been secured via the consistent reproduction of an array of archetypal masculine personae integrated with intellectually and politically authoritative categories and metanarratives constitutive of national projects of modernization and westernization. The colonial rationale that subsists beneath the modern rhetoric of equal citizenship, state sovereignty, progressive development, and economic emancipation manifests itself in sociopolitical practices of domination structured in long-standing fictions of racialized gender difference. Beginning in the sixteenth century, modern/colonial discourse represented indigenous and African people in Mexico and elsewhere as genderless beings approximate to children or animals, externalizing them from the purview of rational intersubjectivity and legitimating brutal forms of imperial conquest, subjugation, enslavement, and territorial expulsion.¹ Throughout much of Mexico's postindependence history, the invented premise of racial inferiority served to justify oppressive impositions of hierarchical gendering arrangements in the illusory guise of assimilative integration and

mestizaje. This historical process, often understood to have culminated in the establishment of the postrevolutionary nation-state's patriarchal social order with the Mexican mestizo as its presumptive protagonist, in fact preserved racialized distinctions within the hegemonic gender system that cannot be accounted for solely in terms of masculinism and heterosexuality. As philosopher María Lugones asserts, much current gender analysis centers "a binary, hierarchical, oppressive gender formation that rests on male supremacy without any clear understanding of the mechanisms by which heterosexuality, capitalism, and racial classification are impossible to understand apart from each other" ("Heterosexuality" 187). In the absence of intersectional and decolonial approaches to thinking about racialized gender categories and class relations produced by modern/colonial power, "heterosexualist patriarchy has been an ahistorical framework of analysis" ("Heterosexuality" 187). In the case of Mexico, I suggest that historicizing the patriarchal gender system entails analyzing culturally prevalent myths regarding the mestizo's flawed masculine development, which remain discursively embedded in the national imaginary as internal threats undermining Mexican modernity. Cinema has been among the most potent cultural mediums for articulating these mythologized metanarratives and disseminating them throughout significant parts of society, thereby reinscribing the violent, disciplinary logic that enforces a class-regimented, racially hierarchized, heteronormative order. At the same time, Mexican film has also been a site for contesting and disassembling pejorative constructions of racialized, lower-class, male gender identity. This book examines cinematic resignifications of malformed maleness in the context of Mexican neoliberalism, turning critical attention toward specific films that appear to offer meaningful challenges to the well-established paradigm of transposing the frustrated promises of the modern state onto stereotyped figures of masculine deficiency.

Cultural myths of dominant Mexican masculinity are generally understood to have shared a lengthy, intricate, downward trajectory with national cinema. Formerly venerated symbols of Mexican manhood—*charros*, charmers, champs, and chums—canonized in popular classic films are thought to have followed a descending pathway marked by inertia, recurring crises, and protracted decay, paralleling the torturous spiraling decline of cinema itself as a viable sphere of national culture during much of the latter half of the twentieth century. This history has been ably told by Charles Ramírez Berg in *Cinema of Solitude* (1992), a study of Mexican films produced between 1967 and 1983.² In addition to

addressing a confluence of material and political factors that fueled the slow self-immolation of the state-sponsored national film industry, Ramírez Berg recounts dozens of examples of movies whose stagnant portrayals of men are marked by stubborn adherence to moribund cultural codes of Mexican masculinity. In his view, cinema's failure to imagine new cultural models of male identity capable of withstanding economic uncertainty and accommodating changes demanded by feminism foretold the inevitable collapse of patriarchal national ideology and the sense of social coherence it once offered. Apart from rare exceptions, including several works by auteur director Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, who often struggled to find a domestic audience, the predominant trends of filmmaking during these decades of decline "reveal the desperate state of patriarchy in crisis" (Ramírez Berg 125). A running theme throughout Ramírez Berg's book is that national cinema no longer provided the "myth-making machinery" to counteract social tendencies toward alienation and estrangement (213).

Picking up more or less where Ramírez Berg leaves off, Ignacio Sánchez Prado's *Screening Neoliberalism* (2014) traces Mexican filmmaking's complex route from decrepitude in the late 1980s toward transformative revival by the turn of the new millennium. Although he finds fault with the discursive reproduction of the nationalist framework of cultural identity in Ramírez Berg's analysis (10–11), Sánchez Prado's continuation of the narrative of national cinema's demise reiterates the same basic point, attributing its failures not merely to political interference and economic malfeasance in the state institutions supporting and regulating the industry but also to the irrelevance of the repository of cultural myths of nationhood that continued to organize filmmaking long after they had exhausted their social meanings (5). To reinvent itself, Mexican cinema had to begin by "freeing its production from the nationalist imperatives that had defined the industry since its inception in the post-revolutionary period, in order to reflect the experiences of new social groups that were emerging along with the process of cultural remodernization brought about by the neo-liberal economic and political model" (5). In Sánchez Prado's approach to this emancipated market-driven cultural economy, articulations of specifically Mexican masculine identity retain little significance, as he adopts a perspective that "steps outside both cultural concepts of the Mexican self and, more crucially, the idea that film is a 'representation' of any kind of 'Mexican culture'" (11). This reading strategy reflects his overall argument that appealing to "new social groups" involved adopting transnational aesthetic languages, setting Mexican filmmakers on a course toward a

“properly post-national cinema—one that, beyond the acknowledgment of the limits of the nation, fully deterritorializes and undermines the codes of the national” (195). This process, as described in great detail by Sánchez Prado throughout his comprehensive study, was not at all straightforward, as it introduced new contradictions without even pretending to resolve the old ones, but it eventually constituted what many recognize as the full-fledged rebirth of Mexican filmmaking in the 2000s and 2010s.

Mexico Unmanned reexamines this transition to a new paradigm of filmmaking linked to neoliberal cultural politics in Mexico, specifically by questioning whether ties to nationalism’s outmoded representational regime have truly been cut, particularly those ties binding images of Mexican men to a fixed set of predefined meanings of masculinity. This involves rethinking some deeply ingrained assumptions about the social and political purpose of Mexico’s prevailing cultural fictions of manhood. For example, it is easily taken for granted that national cinema’s rigid attachment to normative models and codes of masculinity merely reflected the ideological entrenchment of old-fashioned Mexican patriarchy. Filmic portrayals of strong, proud, virile men are understood to have reinforced dominant social narratives about Mexico as a male-centered nation, entitling all men—or at least those deemed sufficiently manly—to enjoy unquestionable privilege, an arrangement that neither the Mexican state nor Mexican men were willing to abandon. This overdetermining presupposition obscures the racializing dimensions of heteropatriarchal state ideology in Mexico and fails to recognize how masculine symbols have been consistently wielded for authoritarian purposes to disempower the majority of ordinary Mexicans, men and women alike. Without denying the reality of racialized men’s co-option into systemic practices of gendered violence, homophobia, and sexual oppression in Mexico, this book offers an analysis of prejudicial myths of masculinity circulated in cinema as a contribution to the critical understanding of unjust power relations reproduced at the level of cultural politics and representation.

This work seems especially relevant at a time when both the nation-state and its hegemonic fictions of national culture are often presumed to have already been displaced and superseded—or are well on their way to being so—by entirely new structures of authority and symbolic registers. Globalization is commonly understood to imply the dissolution of conventional gendered social paradigms and labor regimes formerly organized around patriarchal cultural values that grant undeniable privilege to the autonomous male family-provider. For this reason, one finds countless

references to a so-called “crisis” of masculinity that accompanies the transition to the neoliberal phase of capitalism, especially in societies like Mexico where the masculine has been so closely identified with nationalist political ideology and where the rise of new decentralized economic structures has been especially rapid and acute. From this perspective, evidence of a weakening state, including the collapse of one-party rule, may be interpreted as signifying that the nation’s traditional model of manhood is swiftly going (or has already gone) extinct. Corresponding images of Mexican men supposedly threatened by this change have become commonplace in cultural representations as well as critical theorizing about the rise of criminal violence, the drug trade, and the impunity surrounding the mass murders of women in Ciudad Juárez and other parts of the republic.³ Foundering in the destabilized labor market and having lost their exalted cultural status, social prestige, and the shelter of the patriarchal state, ordinary Mexican men supposedly respond with frustration, lawlessness, and chaotic violence. At the same time, it is often presumed that the demise of national masculinity liberates cultural space for new cosmopolitan embodiments of maleness, feminist political expression, and greater challenges to heteronormative binary codes of gender and sexuality. In this view, the originary constructions of Mexican masculinity may persist in fragmented or residual form as obstacles to be overcome by emancipatory politics and progressive values, but they are generally absent from the prevailing frameworks of subject-formation reflected in and cultivated by spheres of cultural production such as cinema. *Mexico Unmanned* attempts to put some pressure on these claims, not because I think conventional Mexican masculinity is alive and well as a viable and desirable framework for identity, but because its relationship to power has been thoroughly occluded by pervasive cultural mythologies. One can only posit the obsolescence of Mexican masculinity by reducing it to a set of state-sanctioned practices that empowered ordinary machos to dominate women and effeminate men. Such a move not only reproduces the cultural myths generated by nationalism but also obscures how contemporary rearticulations of these myths continue to be invoked in discursive rationalizations of violence affecting lower-class racialized Mexicans across all sexes, genders, and sexual practices. Part of my purpose in situating this discussion in relation to the national filmmaking archive is to demystify the persistent association between machismo and a supposed patriarchal contract between the nation-state and ordinary men. My book uses masculinity in the sphere of cinema as a critical vantage point for exploring

how the Mexican state's approaches to authorizing exploitative violence against its own population have been reconfigured amid the transition from national to postnational cultural politics and the installation of a neoliberal economic regime.

As a point of departure, I contend that, at its inception, the socio-cultural gaze constructed around masculine imagery in Mexico's national filmmaking tradition was designed to legitimate the oppressive subordination not only of women and sexual minorities but also of presumptively heterosexual men regarded as brown mestizos. Far more than encouraging these men's straightforward identification with appealing models of Mexican maleness, national cinema's originary macho images concretized a representational logic intended to symbolically unman most of the male population of Mexico by ensuring that brown bodies were socially perceptible as dangerously deficient in relation to a whitened masculine gender norm. Mexican cinema's myths of national masculinity have always functioned to naturalize the submasculine, racially inferiorized category of the malformed male.⁴ The questions I pose in my critical dialogues with contemporary Mexican films and film studies concern the aesthetic and discursive mechanisms that enable this category, originally formulated within the nationalist imaginary, to be inherited and rearticulated by neoliberal cultural politics and incorporated into current postnational cinematic signifying practices. By masculine malformations, I mean gendered signs of human deficiency, intersected with categorial constructions of racial difference and meaningful indicators of distinct geographic origins and socioeconomic disparities, forming representational assemblages affixed to certain bodies marked as biologically male in order to make them intelligible as being less than men. Because masculine subjectivity has been conceived as indispensable to Mexico's variously defined projects of modernization and westernization throughout every stage of its history as a nation, being classified as a malformed male directly impinges on one's relationship to modernity, predetermining whether one can properly embody modern values and Western ideals. Although this sociocultural designation implies perceptions of unmanliness, it does not necessarily call into question the presumed heterosexuality of the designee, as I explain later. The work of other scholars shows that there undoubtedly exist related categories of malformed femininity articulated in Mexican cinema and other spheres of cultural production and social practice.⁵ My study aims to complement scholarship dealing critically with the logic of power that problematically situates racialized women within the modern/

colonial gender system.⁶ What I claim at the outset is that national cinema's paradigmatic codifications of Mexican masculinities have contributed to the naturalization of distorted ontological conceptions of Mexican men in ways that have only rarely been acknowledged. My readings of contemporary cinema show that if filmmakers, film critics, and cultural theorists do not critically confront the received meanings of Mexican masculinity, they risk reproducing these distortions.

The broader implications of this book's arguments extend across the history of filmmaking in Mexico, but by focusing my analysis on films produced during the past two decades, I show how the recodification of myths of masculinity within a neoliberal framework of cultural politics problematizes the narrative of cinema's definitive break with the national.⁷ To be sure, the reforms that began to dismantle the state-sponsored film industry in the 1980s clearly reshaped the existing systems of production, distribution, and exhibition, particularly by introducing the necessity for private investment at every point of the process. Institutional reorganization and privatization in combination with new media technologies, redesigned infrastructure, demographic displacement, strategic marketing, expanded festival circuits, complex funding mechanisms and tax schemes, endemic piracy, as well as other factors, have generated substantively different patterns of filmmaking and spectatorship in Mexico today as compared with the early 1990s. Simultaneously, major restructuring of Mexico's systemic links to globalized flows of capital has significantly altered material conditions throughout most of the country, especially since the implementation of the original North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. These economic changes have occurred without bringing about the promised prosperity for a majority of Mexicans and without meaningful dissent from any faction of Mexico's political leadership. They have, however, undoubtedly modified the terms in which unequal power relations and capitalist exploitation are legitimated. Understanding the ongoing cultural consequences of these interfacing processes of neoliberal transformation is one of the major challenges for Mexican film studies today. It is my contention that examining representations of masculinity in recent Mexican cinema can illuminate the cultural logic that reproduces codes and discourses authorizing violent practices of social control in the neoliberal state. While acknowledging the evident ruptures separating current postnational filmmaking practice from the expired paradigm of national cinema, I trace lines of continuity, showing the parallels between shifting contours of malformed masculinity and evolving networks of power in Mexico.

II. Neoliberal Cultural Politics

Critical discourses examining Mexico's changing patterns of cultural politics in relation to the development of the neoliberal order have established some parameters for mapping out new arrangements at the level of symbol and praxis. Thorough treatment of the range of analytic frameworks formulated in response to Mexico's neoliberal experience exceeds the scope of my purposes in this introduction, but engaging briefly with certain critical tendencies to show where they intersect with my thematization of masculinity in recent cinema will open the way for the discussions contained in my chapters.

Accounts of neoliberalism often begin from an understanding of the meanings it holds as a theoretical doctrine of political economy. In this context, as defined by geographer David Harvey, the term encompasses the ideological proposal that "human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (2). In certain respects, these ideas do not necessarily represent a significant departure from orthodox conceptualizations of capitalism as the ideal economic model for modern liberal-democratic societies at whatever stage of development. However, during the past several decades, the distinctive impact of neoliberal theory has been borne out globally (albeit unevenly) in the practical application of state strategies that ostensibly seek to optimize human liberty by maximizing market-based freedoms. While there is no single paradigm that has been universally followed by national governments implementing neoliberal reforms, some particularly illustrative policies favored by these regimes include limiting state spending on social welfare programs; privatizing formerly public sectors of the economy (e.g., health and education); designating special economic zones exempt from wider regulatory frameworks; deregulating financial markets and lending institutions; limiting the power of labor unions; reducing or removing environmental protections and controls on natural resources; dismantling state-owned enterprises; shifting to export-based models of industrial and agricultural development; imposing regressive systems of taxation; and eliminating barriers to transnational commerce (Harvey 6–9). While such policies may be designed to prevent governments from actively intervening in their own national economies in ways advocated by Keynesian theory, or from enacting protectionist measures that could constrain the movement of capital and commodities

in and out of the country, this does not mean that neoliberal restructuring results in an overall reduction of state power. Instead, what these changes amount to, according to Harvey, is the creation of a new kind of “state apparatus whose fundamental mission [is] to facilitate conditions for profitable capital accumulation on the part of both domestic and foreign capital. I call this kind of state apparatus a *neoliberal state*. The freedoms it embodies reflect the interests of private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations, and financial capital” (7; original emphasis). Making a similar point from a Latin American perspective, Verónica Gago writes that “neoliberalism is not the reign of the economy, subordinating the political, but the creation of a political world (the regime of *governmentality*) that arises as the projection of the rules and requirements of market competition” (153; original emphasis). As institutionalized state policy, neoliberalism came into practice in Mexico in the early 1980s when the bankrupt federal government under the presidential administration of Miguel de la Madrid (1982–88) enacted austerity measures and deregulatory reforms designed by the International Monetary Fund, Wall Street banks, and the U.S. Treasury in return for massive financial bailouts (Harvey 99–100). These changes, originally justified by an immediate debt crisis, laid the groundwork for the state’s definitive embrace of neoliberalism during the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gotari (1988–94), who oversaw the process of drafting, promoting, and signing the free trade accord between the United States, Mexico, and Canada (Harvey 101–104). As of 2019, despite newly elected president Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s declaration that “ya se terminó con esa pesadilla que fue la política neoliberal” (the nightmare that was neoliberal politics is now over), Mexico continues along the same politico-economic trajectory that has defined the current stage of global capitalism.⁸

The cultural consequences of neoliberalism in Mexico have been profound and pervasive across the spectrum of creative activity, but transformations in the sphere of cinema are of particular interest here.⁹ Scholars such as Sánchez Prado and Misha MacLaird have given detailed accounts of the complex restructuring of state cultural institutions involved in the film industry during the early phases of the neoliberal transition. In the mid-1980s, the state-organized systems of subsidizing, promoting, and regulating film production and exhibition that had been assembled over several decades were targeted for reform. While certain institutional structures remained formally in place, access to state funding was ever more limited and Mexican filmmaking’s survival would increasingly be

determined by its ability to compete on the open market. As a result, the aesthetic languages that national cinema had long relied upon to communicate with Mexican audiences entered a transformative phase. Both MacLaird and Sánchez Prado underscore how the new imperative to attract private investment by producing marketable content was often in tension with institutional policies supposedly intended to support and protect Mexican cinema's status as cultural patrimony. The work of both scholars demonstrates that after some initial ambivalence toward the displacement of the nationalist representational regime, audiences and filmmakers gradually coalesced around a new set of signifying practices closely aligned with neoliberal values, making cinema "a particularly apt genre for studying cultural transformation in Mexico precisely because it follows the transformation of hegemonic political and social ideologies in a very organic way" (Sánchez Prado *Screening* 12). As MacLaird puts it, "the films, filmmakers, stories, and production methods embody this ideological grey area [of the transitional period]; that is to say, they *are* the transition" (4; original emphasis).

More than simply a set of policies producing a material shift from state-sponsored to consumer-driven models of cultural production, neoliberalism has become an analytic category that opens critical perspectives on restructured formations of citizenship, collectivity, and subjecthood mediated by consumption practices in the transnational marketplace of culture. By the mid-1990s, cultural criticism in Mexico had already begun to consider the complex consequences of neoliberal processes using new theoretical tools and frameworks, such as Néstor García Canclini's notion of the "consumer-citizen"—a way of moving beyond national cultural imaginaries to rethink the exercise of citizenship "without dissociating it from those activities through which we establish our social belonging, our social networks, which in this globalized era are steeped in consumption" (*Consumers and Citizens* 20). Influencing both Sánchez Prado and MacLaird, this approach facilitates analysis of the correlation between the dissolution of concepts of collective national identity and the reconstitution of social ties within heterogeneous, transnational cultural formations organized by shared consumption habits and preferences. Globalized media industries offer cultural commodities that foster a sense of belonging to deterritorialized communities of consumers, transcending local, regional, and national modes of identification. García Canclini defines several corollary processes that contribute to configuring neoliberal consumer-citizenship, including "the reformulation of patterns of urban settlement and coexistence" in

large cities and the “rearrangement of the institutions and circuits for the exercise of public life” (*Consumers and Citizens* 24).

Interrelated changes in the infrastructural circuitry of citizenship, cultural consumption habits, socio-spatial organization, and concepts of collective belonging converge closely in the analysis of Mexican cinema’s neoliberal transformations. At the same time as the state was withdrawing institutionalized support for film production, ticket prices were being deregulated, screen quotas for Mexican films were being removed, and state-operated cinemas were being sold off and gradually replaced by corporate multiplexes often located in shopping malls outside of city centers (MacLaird 21–44; Sánchez Prado *Screening* 75–88). In other words, moviegoing was becoming an activity restricted to affluent urban consumers who were more likely to own cars, to live in certain neighborhoods, and to be accustomed to consuming non-Mexican media and other cultural goods. Mexican film producers participated in this “class displacement of audiences” by introducing formal strategies and aesthetic codes derived from Hollywood genres, U.S. independent cinema (e.g., Sundance festival films), and television sitcoms, tailoring the narratives, characters, and representational spaces to the tastes and aspirations of Mexico’s privileged classes (Sánchez Prado *Screening* 6). In this way, cinema in the neoliberal era increasingly comes to reflect a “separation between the cultural languages of different social classes and social geographies” (Sánchez Prado *Screening* 63). An important consequence of these patterns of partition is the emergence of discrete spheres of affective identification, as cinema’s dominant genres and idioms of romance and empathy become the exclusive province of privileged consumers. By identifying specific correspondences between the aesthetic and narrative choices of filmmakers and the social and affective sensibilities connecting film audiences to shared networks of belonging, it becomes possible to analyze cinema in terms of a distinct neoliberal “structure of feeling” (Sánchez Prado “Regimes of Affect” 4).¹⁰

While recent Mexican film scholarship has concentrated on the predominance of cultural sensibilities associated with a small affluent class of neoliberal consumers, another set of related critical theorizations of neoliberalism in Mexico lays emphasis on political and cultural responses to the structural transformations of authority, practices of violence, and control over land, labor, and resources.¹¹ The fact that the advent of neoliberalism in Mexico historically coincides with the last phase of the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) regime’s seven consecutive decades in political control of the state can lend false credence to the ludicrous

claim that economic liberalization was a precursor to democratization. This deceptive fantasy is dissolved by the oppositional thinking and praxis embodied by the EZLN's (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional) mobilization of an armed uprising among indigenous communities in the state of Chiapas on New Year's Day 1994, followed by its nationwide campaigns of nonviolent resistance articulating the struggle against the neoliberal state as a continuation of five centuries of indigenous defiance of colonialism, genocide, cultural destruction, and capitalist exploitation. The critical writings and communiqués issued by members of the EZLN's Revolutionary Indigenous Clandestine Committee thoroughly refuted the state-corporate media's propagandistic political and cultural discourses about the social benefits of opening the economy to transnational trade and investment, contending that subalternized indigenous people and their territories would be ever more violently pillaged to fuel the export market and tourism economy: "En pleno auge del neoliberalismo . . . el sureste sigue exportando materias primas y mano de obra y, como desde hace 500 años, sigue importando lo principal de la producción capitalista: muerte y miseria" (At the height of neoliberalism . . . the southeast [region of Mexico] continues exporting raw materials and labor power, and, just as for the past 500 years, continues importing capitalism's chief products: death and misery) (EZLN *Documentos* 54).¹² These texts provide richly theorized and prescient accounts of neoliberalism's ruinous effects on Mexico's most oppressed communities, but always with a view toward the transformative possibilities of countering capitalist modernity's epistemic monologue by invoking the radically pluriversal cosmivision of "a world where many worlds can fit" (EZLN "The People the Color of the Earth" 106).¹³

The activist spirit of *zapatismo* partly informs the more recent work of Mexican cultural theorists such as Sayak Valencia and Irmgard Emmelhainz who examine neoliberal transformations. While they tend to develop their insights in dialogue with mostly European interlocutors, both of these thinkers acknowledge continuities with the earlier efforts of the EZLN to disentangle the rhetoric of progress, democracy, and economic salvation articulated by neoliberal cultural politics from the systemic violence and exploitation it serves to legitimate. In *Gore Capitalism* (2010), Valencia begins her theorizing from the Tijuana border zone, a locus she describes in terms of extreme crosscurrents between hyperconsumption and commercialized violence, that is, organized crime, kidnappings, contract killings, and the privatization and outsourcing of

public security. The increasingly evident coexistence of these phenomena across Mexico comprises what Valencia calls “gore capitalism . . . the undisguised and unjustified bloodshed that is the price the Third World pays for adhering to the increasingly demanding logic of capitalism” (19). Gore is what happens when the neoliberal rationale of unrestricted commerce and limitless pursuit of entrepreneurial opportunity is followed through to its ultimate conclusions. It occurs globally, but most intensively in geographic locales where the imbalance of economic power is greatest, hence Mexico’s northern border with the U.S. provides particularly fertile ground for its proliferation. For Valencia, the dystopian neoliberal transformation of Mexico has constituted a “breakdown of the State,” as the government gradually ceded its power to the globalized marketplace, the underside of which is gore capitalism (40). By contrast, Emmelhainz, in *La tiranía del sentido común* (2016), starts not from the premise of a failed state but rather the exercise of “calculated sovereignty,”¹⁴ the Mexican government’s flexible strategy of using controlled violence to regulate zones of legitimate investment and commerce while selectively allowing other territories to be ruled by the vicissitudes of corrupt local authorities and criminal organizations, no doubt in coordination with Mexican oligarchs and distant agents of global capital (62). The coalescence of state structures of authority, including the military and police, with transnational systems of profiteering embodies the fundamental logic of neoliberalism, complemented and reinforced by the mass media and major spheres of cultural production (Emmelhainz 15–16). Emmelhainz’s primary critical concern lies with the insidious colonizing mechanisms by which this logic becomes normalized in discourses and symbols that disguise state-organized violence and corporate exploitation as development and economic growth (17). She argues that the pervasiveness of the neoliberal rationale in everyday life, language, culture, social practices, spatial inhabitations, aesthetic regimes, and so forth, may be understood as a tyrannous “sensibilidad y un sentido común” (sensitivity and common sense) (19).

Critiques of neoliberalism’s oppressive colonial dimensions have not figured prominently in Mexican film studies. *Mexico Unmanned* seeks to open a space for these conversations by showing how representations of defective Mexican men function as transhistorical symbolic mechanisms for justifying state practices of violence and exploitation. This also implies that film studies can make significant contributions to the critique of neoliberal structures of power and capital acquisition by introducing nuanced, politicized analyses of specific aesthetic strategies and larger

systemic patterns of cultural representation. Knowledge of cinema's role in the construction and circulation of pernicious stereotypes of Mexican masculinity can unsettle certain "common sense" assumptions that sometimes infiltrate even the most sophisticated theoretical accounts of neoliberal transformations. For example, while Valencia's treatise has been widely praised for its cogent analysis of the political and economic processes reshaping Mexico's relationship to global capitalism, her work is in fact suffused with unthoughtful essentializations, particularly related to her descriptions of monstrous "endriago subjects," impoverished men whose frustrated, emasculated condition makes them predisposed to use violence and criminality as a means of pursuing perverse kinds of social mobility (26, 106, 118).¹⁵ These figures are central to Valencia's effort to theorize the epidemic of brutal cruelty associated with the drug trade that overshadows Mexico's experience of neoliberalism, yet her account of these men's overdetermined tendencies to engage in gore practices dovetails closely with official discourses and prevailing cultural narratives of the drug war. As Dawn Paley writes in a review article, "[Valencia] reproduces many of the same myths about the violence that are propagated by Mexican state forces and the judiciary and repeated *ad nauseam* by mainstream media" ("Countering"). I would add that these present-day myths have clear genealogical links to the originary formulations of Mexican machismo in national cinema and the logically corresponding construction of malformed masculinities that I am tracing in this book.

The current predominance of mass media depictions of violent criminals who have supposedly transformed Mexico's rural regions and provincial cities into war zones merits special attention as it illustrates how neoliberalism activates preexisting cultural fictions to advance a new political and economic agenda. Paley's recent work (with Simon Granovsky-Larsen) attempts to reframe the dominant depoliticized narratives on the criminal drug trade in Mexico and other parts of Latin America by showing how the phenomenon of organized violence has "more to do with extraction, production, finance, or social control than it does with cocaine or gangs" (3). She elaborates on this thesis in her monograph book *Guerra Neoliberal* (Neoliberal War) (2019), where she directly challenges the ruling discourses that represent the ongoing situation of widespread violence in Mexico in terms of overlapping conflicts between the state and drug cartels, and between rival cartels competing for control over "plazas" in bloody regional wars whose victims are either themselves involved in narco activity or are simply caught in the crossfire of frequent gun battles

occurring in public. According to Paley, these accounts, reiterated time and again in official documents, news reports, intellectual analyses, and cultural representations, serve to confuse and distort the reality of the systemic violence that has taken shape under the dominion of the neoliberal state in Mexico (*Guerra* 12). She puts forward the compelling argument that “la llamada guerra contra el narcotráfico en México representa un cambio en la forma de gobernar en paralelo con la profundización del proceso neoliberal, a través de la aplicación de técnicas ampliadas de guerra contrainsurgente” (the so-called war against drug trafficking in Mexico represents a change to the form of governing in parallel with the deepening of the neoliberal process via the application of expanded counterinsurgency techniques) (*Guerra* 13). In a similar vein, Oswaldo Zavala makes the case for the seemingly provocative position expressed in the title of his book: *Los cárteles no existen* (Cartels Do Not Exist) (2018). To be clear, neither Paley nor Zavala suggests that illicit substances are not being clandestinely trafficked across Mexico’s northern border to be sold in the U.S. and elsewhere, but rather they contend that the myths surrounding this lucrative trade provide convincing discursive cover for the brutal exercise of state power on people and territories unrelated to drugs and organized crime. As Zavala explains, “La violencia *atribuida* a los supuestos cárteles . . . obedece más a las estrategias disciplinarias de las propias estructuras del Estado que a la acción criminal de los supuestos ‘narcos’” (the violence *attributed* to the supposed cartels . . . arises from the State’s own disciplinary strategies more than from any criminal action of the supposed “narcos”) (8; original emphasis). Zavala’s work discusses how cultural representations, such as novels, television series, and films, contribute to reinforcing depoliticized distinctions between criminals and victims that cohere with government’s official rationale for waging an ongoing war against the narcos (21).

These authors offer important interventions in the analysis of the undeniable bloodshed that has transformed Mexico over the past decade and half, revealing patterns of correspondence between the interests of transnational capitalism and the expansion of the Mexican state’s security apparatus predicated on dubious accounts of large-scale criminal activity. They argue that Mexico’s mounting toll of deaths and disappearances, mass graves, and public displays of mutilated bodies are not at all consistent with claims of a war being waged between the state and organized groups of combatants of considerable strength, but instead with a one-sided campaign of repression being carried out against ordinary Mexicans by the

state itself or with its complicity. Paley and Zavala pay careful attention to the rhetorical strategies and discursive mechanisms that are employed to classify individuals and whole communities as criminals and narcos in order to legitimate their deaths or to deny them justice as victims, or both. More than mere bureaucratic doublespeak or linguistic chicanery, the specific cultural idiom that has arisen around narcotrafficking in Mexico comprises a highly compelling set of codes assembled into social fictions imbued with the persuasive force of official truth (Zavala 9; Paley *Guerra* 12). In my view, however, this phenomenon cannot be satisfactorily interrogated without a fuller critical understanding of how the invented image of the criminal drug trafficker embodies elements of racialized gender malformation, a mythology that has long been cultivated by Mexican cinema. When considering what makes the “reality” of the drug war so seemingly incontrovertible, one cannot ignore the way in which so many narco narratives rely on a naturalized dichotomy of positive and negative masculinities intertwined with categorical hierarchies of race.¹⁶ *Mexico Unmanned* seeks to contribute to the critique of the neoliberal state’s discursive justifications of violence by exploring how they follow patterns established by the representational language of cinema to situate subjects in a gender matrix that dehumanizes them in terms of malformed masculinity.

The chapters in this book traverse the field of cinema produced during the past two decades in order to illustrate and question the role of Mexican gender mythology in the reproduction of neoliberal arrangements of social exclusion/belonging, emotional connectivity, political violence, and economic reasoning. These arguments may be provisionally assembled under the overarching claim that representations of men in the films I study register how masculine gender codes are articulated in terms of Mexico’s contemporary cultural politics—that is, how masculinity is structurally and symbolically integrated with the current neoliberal configuration of the dominant system of power. The codified matrix of masculinities represented in recent cinema expresses the logic that designates gendered criteria of inclusion and exclusion, desirable and undesirable embodiments of male subjectivity. Rather than merely building a typology of differentiated masculinities, my interpretative method aims to link specific symbolic codifications to corresponding neoliberal processes of segregation, affective realignment, state violence, and systemic enforcement of social, material, and political inequalities reflected in the films. In other words, it shows how cultural meanings of neoliberal masculinities

are constituted in conjunction with the practices, discourses, and power relations that have given shape to Mexico's current hegemonic order. My specific interest lies with examining the ways in which the films construct and contest malformed masculinities within and against the dominant representational regime of neoliberal cinema. I consider how certain films naturalize inscriptions of male gender defects, treating them as though they were inherent properties attributable to differences of race, class, or regional geography. In other cases, I engage with filmmakers whose work discloses the representational logic that makes malformations perceptible and socially intelligible.

The selection of films to be analyzed concentrates on work by directors known in Mexico for their independent/auteurist practice: Alfonso Cuarón, Carlos Cuarón, Carlos Reygadas, Amat Escalante, and Julio Hernández Córdón. I acknowledge the ambivalence inherent in the term "independent" filmmaking and its applicability to the directors in my corpus of study, especially considering that chapter 1 examines two of Mexican cinema's biggest box office successes of all time. I am also aware that this label itself has likely contributed to the commercial marketability of the films and the heightened transnational and domestic visibility of certain of these directors. Furthermore, I recognize that their achievements as independent filmmakers are both cause and consequence of the neoliberal restructuring in the film industry.¹⁷ Taking into consideration the complex factors that have brought these individuals to relative prominence within their creative field, my goal is to use their films to engage an array of masculinity-related shifts in Mexican cultural politics rather than to assess their particular achievements as artists. Invoking auteurism often connotes a certain kind of critical practice that attempts to encompass the authorial vision of the individual director by privileging his or her stated or implied aesthetic intentions over the dialogic possibilities opened via critical engagement with the work, undermining supposed textual autonomy. The challenge, as I comprehend it, is to maintain a productive equilibrium between respect for the artist's distinctive purposes and the resultant multiplicity of meanings that emerge in the exercise of critical dialogue. My approach incorporates certain director-centric material gathered from interviews and commentaries, but without giving it undue weight in the balance of other input from scholars and critics as well as my own interpretative analysis. Each of the directors whose work I have selected make a unique contribution to cinema as a global art form and to filmmaking traditions located in Mexico, but by no means do I consider them to represent

the strongest talent or most interesting projects of the past two decades. Nonetheless, the individuality of their creative practice is a consideration I take seriously, which is why I elect to organize my chapters around specific directors and films, or, in some cases, around particular pairings. I am conscious that my selection of primary research materials encompasses the work of a relatively homogenous cast of male filmmakers who share common sociocultural backgrounds and aesthetic-cognitive orientations, which makes evident persistent patterns of exclusion in the Mexican film industry that are replicated at least to some extent by criticism and scholarship.¹⁸ My main objective in assembling the corpus for this book was to select representative work foregrounding questions of masculinity in the context of neoliberal cultural politics and changes in filmmaking practice. More specifically, my purpose involves addressing the historicity of the logic of power transmitted in the reproduction of cultural myths generative of malformed masculinities in the dominant representational regime of cinema. To elucidate this dimension of my argument more fully, I trace the lineage of this mechanism of control to its originary formulations in postrevolutionary nationalism.

III. Formations of Machismo

Much of the predominant mythology of modern Mexican masculinity is condensed by the ambiguous concept of “machismo.” Idiomatic usage of macho-related vocabulary in ordinary speech must be interpreted relative to the variable self-perceptions and communicative intentions of speakers located in complex sociohistorical, cultural, and rhetorical situations. However, as a term for discursive analysis, machismo retains special currency in reference to an idealized model of virility and male solidarity considered integral to the project of *mexicanidad*, a concerted effort by nationalist intellectuals, artists, and state institutions to redefine the spirit of Mexicanness following the political chaos of 1910–20 (commonly referred to as a revolution). Of particular concern in this discussion are the macho characteristics affixed to archetypes of manliness portrayed in popular cinema. In his landmark study *Cinemachismo*, Sergio de la Mora writes that reinventing Mexico as a “macho nation” involved the creation of the “cult of a particular form of masculinity—and therefore also femininity and womanliness—that was aggressively promoted by the cultural nationalist post-revolutionary establishment” (2). In hundreds

of films produced during what is known as the Golden Age of Mexican cinema—roughly the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s—filmmakers repeatedly returned to a shared set of visual, aural, and narrative strategies to naturalize the correlation between machismo and Mexicanness. Yet even in this context of vehement nationalism, the meanings of *lo macho* are not as straightforward or homogenous as they might initially appear. The fact that machismo needed to be “aggressively promoted” and “officially decreed” as the *sine qua non* of Mexican national identity already indicates not only its dubious status as a shared cultural value but also its contested significance as a categorial concept (de la Mora 2). Indeed, as de la Mora’s work illustrates, national cinema’s celebrations of an ostensibly settled definition of Mexican machismo consistently reflected “social anxieties and tensions over changing representations of masculinity and manhood as well as femininity and womanhood” (3). The dissonance surrounding gender and nationhood was not limited to postrevolutionary cinema, but pervaded literature, the arts, and intellectual discourse throughout other periods of Mexico’s cultural history, as has been shown by scholars such as Robert McKee Irwin and Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba.¹⁹ In the decades following the revolution, however, the reconstituted state’s emphasis on machismo as the cornerstone of national unity gradually transformed the male body into an overburdened locus for the exercise of patriarchal power.

Differing accounts of the ideological construct of Mexican machismo that emerge as the contingent and contested norm in cinema and other spheres of postrevolutionary cultural production have been given by the scholars mentioned above, but general agreement exists on two main constituent elements: phallic virility and strong homosocial affinity. These form a mutually reinforcing arrangement of codified male conduct while simultaneously generating a plethora of contradictions with potentially destabilizing effects that must be controlled and mitigated by compulsory misogyny and homophobia. The most obvious ideological appeal of correlating masculinity to the solidity of men’s homosocial bonds lies with the allegorical correspondence between *compadrismo* and patriarchal nationhood. Heterosexual romance narratives continued to carry symbolic weight as metaphors for national unity,²⁰ but Mexican filmmakers, artists, and intellectuals placed extraordinary value on male-to-male intimacy as both a sign of patriotic camaraderie and “a structure of masculine formation” (Domínguez-Ruvalcaba 75). It is only in relationships between men that virile masculinity acquires its truest and fullest expression, thus “virility is grounded in homosociety” (Domínguez-Ruvalcaba 77). This

potentially poses a paradox since, in theory, all men are already naturally endowed with virility, but because it is configured as relative rather than absolute, individuals are compelled to constantly compare themselves and compete with one another to establish and confirm their masculine prowess in public and private settings (Irwin xviii–xx; Domínguez-Ruvalcaba 83). These relational comparisons and rivalries among men most often play out within the heterosexual economy, entailing “traffic in women.”²¹ In the typical triangular erotic scenario, women are reduced to objects of possession and exchange that “both facilitate and block the physical and affective ties between men” (de la Mora 70). Homosocial behaviors inherently introduce the possibility of transgressing into homoerotics, hence prescribed contests based on heterosexual conquest serve as an ideological constraint on male-male desire. But since relations between men hold primary importance, substantial romantic ties to women may be misogynistically represented as “threatening and disruptive to the male bond” (de la Mora 88).

Homophobia imposes a regulatory limit on masculine intimacies, but also has a curiously ambivalent role in constituting virile machismo. Homosexuality in Mexico, like elsewhere, had been mostly unnamed and unrecognized throughout the nineteenth century, but it entered into the public consciousness in a profound way after the notorious scandal of the “famous 41,” when Mexico City police arrested a group of presumed homosexual men attending a transvestite ball in 1901 (Irwin xi–xii, xxii). With this highly publicized incident, fear mongering about savage criminal sodomites and urbane pederasts became pervasive in the press, and male sexuality was increasingly a question for debate in many spheres of intellectual and creative activity (Irwin 115). In the postrevolutionary period, “effeminate” writers were condemned for the perceived lack of virility in their aesthetic practice, and some were personally denounced and attacked as homosexuals (Irwin 152; de la Mora 2). Yet the ideological framework of masculinity in postrevolutionary Mexico does not flatly disallow homoeroticism and male effeminacy, but rather accommodates them in conflictive ways, and even depends on them to establish and enforce normative heterosexual virility. The Mexican macho’s obligatory revulsion toward the homosexual corresponds conversely to his homosocial affection toward his male companions/competitors, reflecting two sides of the same compulsion to establish virile supremacy. As Domínguez-Ruvalcaba writes, “The relationship between desire and hate is dialectic, never a definite opposition. Homophobia and male-to-male attraction