



NARCO CINEMA

SEX, DRUGS, AND BANDA MUSIC IN MEXICO'S B-FILMOGRAPHY



RYAN RASHOTTE



Narco Cinema

Latino Pop Culture

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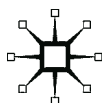
Narco Cinema: Sex, Drugs, and Banda Music in Mexico's B-Filmography
by Ryan Rashotte

Narco Cinema

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Mexico's B-Filmography

Ryan Rashotte

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for Joanne Gagnon and Michael Rashotte

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Ayumi, Ena, and Matt: _____
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mawkish and copyright)

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Figure I.1 *Unbelievable, unbelievable.*

Let's begin in an unlikely place: the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada.

In its atrial lobby, to be exact. An elegant soft-lit wonder hall where, on this frosty evening in November 2011, Mexico's premier novelist Carlos Fuentes will be discussing contemporary Mexican culture (this being opening night of the Mayan exhibition, *Secrets of their Ancient World*).

At 25 dollars a seat—50 for orchestra pit, which guarantees some catered schmooze time with the distinguished visitor—the hall is surprisingly packed. Row after row of grad students, professors, artists, expats, and all-around cognizant-looking people is thawing raptly next to nimble Crustaceous bones, a bronze Buddha Viarocana, and two faux-Renaissance murals of jousting knights, which frame Fuentes in twinned lance tips as he takes the stage to warm applause and begins to lecture on the past and future of his country.

To call this evening my delight would be underselling it. Major neural pathways in my noggin are blocked off for a semi-annual love parade is more like it. For the better part of my post-*Hardy Boys* readerly life, Fuentes has been a hero of mine and, because he's 83 years old and a rare visitor to the north country, I'm sure that tonight will be my only chance to collect his signature, maybe swap some oxygen.

Given my state of reverence, it will come as no surprise that I remember little of the lecture today: a word or two about the Revolution; something stern and excursive for the millennial crowd; maybe there was a bit in there on Diego and Frida, or maybe that was just the happiness talking—anyway, it's not important. What matters, for our purpose here, is an incident about to happen at the end of the Q&A, and this incident I do remember more clearly:

It's time for the final question of the night. A trembling hand is chosen from the audience. The microphone makes an eastern relay through the VIP. The crowd hushes itself, re-focuses. Fuentes winces at the thundercrack of a young man clearing his throat into the mike. A young man whose tweed jacket and baroquely ruffled scarf smack noisily of junior faculty. A young man who, with the full attention of one of the world's greatest living authors and his 400-strong crowd, wonders if Fuentes "could perhaps say something about Mexican archetypes as they relate to the drug war today.

“What is it that persists in the idea of *lo mexicano* as a kind of dangerous, macho, passionate character; a self-destructive, hyper-violent sensibility; a distinctly Mexican coolness, or what you might call . . .” This adjectival troop carries on, and is paraphrased here to the best of a dubious memory,¹ but doubtless you’ll gather its implications for a book intro such as this one: this scarf guy is a dickhead. A grade-A bigot. I’ve summoned him only so that we might recoil cleverly into a thesis on the politics of his bigotry. One doesn’t generalize about racial or national “character”—*especially in negative terms*—in 2011, and if this fellow has undergone a period of self-flagellation and banishment for his smarter circles then maybe there is something like justice among the more lustrous ideals lighting the tenure track.

Now I’ll stop you right there. I know what you’re thinking, that old conceit: this dapper claudé happens to be none other than yours truly, moments before some sort of rhetorical Zen slap from Fuentes corrects my pompousness in a necessarily public way. In that case, I’ll be happy to disabuse you: *le claudé ce n’est pas moi* (and Fuentes, incidentally, proves far too nice a guy to take his questioner to task. I don’t remember his entire response, something about Al Capone, and Mexico, past or present, holding no monopoly on gangsterism). To find me you’ll have to scan the seats in the adjunct-faculty price range. Thirty rows behind the velvet rope (as the scarf flutters), five seats left of the resident hadrosaur—there I am: tweedless, in less pretentious academic fatigues (khaki sport coat, Franzen glasses); alternating looks of disbelief and outrage seemingly slapped across my face by the force of each new modifier—“dangerous,” “criminal”; mouth frozen in a Munch scream, maybe doing a little puling so as not-so discreetly to reveal the moral distortion the question continues to cause me as it crackles along. *Unbelievable, unbelievable.*

More than unbelievable, it’s uncanny. Weeks before this gala, I’d defended a graduate dissertation about these

stereotypes to a word—about how North American representations of a “lawless,” “violent” Mexico influence everything from maquila-workers’ rights to migration laws to cultures of tourist licentiousness. I am, at this moment, a mental repository for decades of Chicana/o and Latina/o scholarship (to which own my contribution is best considered an endnote to a footnote). And so to hear my fellow Canuck, and clearly a smart and articulate one, present these stereotypes as objective facts—and to Carlos Frickin Fuentes no less—of course you’ll understand my angry hands, this Munch and pule business of my face.

The moment at which a leather man-purse, incontinent of several hardcover throwable items, can be heard purring open from the cheap seats is probably a good time to draw curtains on this memory and admit something that would make my younger, more indignant self cringe: our bescarfed inquirer has a point.

It’s not a good point. It’s not a fair point. What it is is . . . you see . . . four years later, after watching upward of a hundred Mexican narco films—films which on the surface (and it’s a wide and thick surface) showcase an orgy of ruthless *cholos* and brutalizing *federales* and gold-hearted *sicarios* and treacherous *patronas*; films stocked with real-life bazookas and ostrich-skin chaps and blood jewelry and cowboy autos-da-fé; films that have done substantial resistance training on my egad and zounds receptors—how could I not concede that this guy, like Octavio Paz (whom surely he got this from, either Paz or *Breaking Bad*), wasn’t onto some history-vetted truth about an abiding *violencia* in Mexican culture? Not something “essential” perhaps, but a certain *something* nonetheless that needs be teased out and argued for 200 pages or so, but that still might end up, I’ll admit upfront, supporting the stereotypes that had irked me not so long ago.

It’s true: watch any narco film and you’ll appreciate why the Mexican government and intelligentsia have roundly

dismissed this b-cinema as vulgar and corruptive and why, in this attempt to celebrate its virtues, I need to acknowledge a fraternal level of hypocrisy from the start. Because as much as I'll resist the temptation, in the pages ahead I already see myself retreating from the hellacious civics of today's humanities departments to the mid-century authority of someone like Paz, someone who pondered essences rather than "cultural constructs," who could say with a straight face things like, "The Mexican views life as combat" or "The Mexican succumbs very easily to sentimental effusions" or "One of the most notable traits of the Mexican's character is his willingness to contemplate horror" or "The Mexican tells lies because he delights in fantasy, or because he is desperate, or because he wants to rise above the sordid facts of his life."² There's a kind of gruff self-confirmation in generalizing like this that sounds tyrannical, if not derelict, today. These films have it in volumes. And, if I'm going to be honest, that's partly what makes them so satisfying to this junkie's taste.

So what's my point? Judge not lest ye be judged? No. Is "give Paz a chance" all that I'm saying? That would be a slim chance, though not so slim as I'd have thought in 2011. It's not even that I *want* to tell you grand definitive things about peoples and cultures in a manly voice, but that because, like any addict's, a defense of my degradation will naturally reflect the terms of my vice, I already see myself slipping into some very harsh octaves in the pages ahead and should be clear about this while you have a chance to back out.

Maybe my point is just this: If you read what follows and take umbrage and come to fantasize about strangling me with an elaborate scarf—and with equally elaborate relish, the strangling; or gashing, clawing, belting; really, just let the demons go to town—please know that I, too, used to be aghast by this sort of thing. And that I could grasp

deconstruction and track the hegemonic baggage of the dull-est aphorism and never in a decade of scholarly inquest had been so massively entertained. If you can forgive me, I would appreciate it. If you can spare some indulgence, I'll take that, too.

Now let's get a little atrocious.

What Is Narco Cinema?



Figure 1.1 *The blood- and coke-smeared mirror*

Narco cinema is a low-budget direct-to-video cinema produced by Mexican and Mexican-American studios, predominantly for US Latina¹ markets. It's a remarkably lucrative industry and in over 40 years of production has furnished

a catalogue of thousands of films about narco culture in Mexico and the borderlands.

Beyond these preliminaries is where explanation goes off by itself to die. This is difficult cinema to describe to viewers unfamiliar with Latin American melodrama. Try to picture what *The Young and the Restless* might look like with Steven Seagal as head writer and you may get something like the Anglo equivalent in mind: shootouts, explosions, French kisses, roundhouse kicks, more explosions, boobage, hysterical sobbing, punch-outs, and finally, explosions; at center, the steel-eyed hero violently resisting (or maximizing a stake in) the hematic vortex all has become. Imagine a Harlequin Romance sponsored by the NRA. Imagine a *décima* to the Lone Man crooned by a group of lonely men strumming their AK-47s under a corrugated yellow moon. Add to this (whatever the hell “this” is) the tortoise-and-hare narrative pace at which scenes of extended exposition rival quick shoot-’em-ups, and the Bollywoodesque regularity of musical interludes (in this case by celebrity corridistas) and it’s easy to appreciate why the first-time viewer may feel a bit disoriented.

Before I get to the films, some distinctions will be useful. Though they share subject matter and stereotypes, you wouldn’t consider American blockbusters like *Traffic* and *Savages* narco films. Nor would you those critically acclaimed *Nuevo Cine* offerings like *Miss Bala* and *El Infierno* (even if it’s these major-studio releases that journalists tend to cover in the few editorials our genre receives). And while other Latin American countries, Colombia in particular, produce correlative narco films and novelas (which tend to be better funded and more widely embraced by the mainstream); and while films about narcotics thrive in just about every modern culture for which drugs and cinema are both prevalent social diversions and climbable economies, those aren’t what I mean. For its fecundity and longevity, its superlative violence and kitsch, there is nothing quite like Mexican narco cinema.

Having said this, there's no cause to fret if this is your first encounter with the genre. Narco films don't often show up on Blockbuster shelves or in Netflix queues. They aren't playing in a theater near you unless you happen to live in a Mexican metropolis with a perennial schlock fest or campus "irony night," in which case you might find an old Almada brothers caper sandwiched between a sexy-comedy and a Santo flick in some late-night celebration of blecc. But root through the bargain bin in an El Paso Wal-Mart or a San Diego 7-11 and you'll find what I'm talking about. Look for the DVD six-pack with the bashful sex bomb on the cover, the ranchero bruisers charging alongside her in their military-fitted Range Rover. Make the five-dollar investment, go home, insert disc one, press play, and zing off to an entertainment landscape that will, I guarantee, trouble your understanding of the power of film.

Or, if it happens that you don't live in Aztlán, simply pay a visit to a flea market in any major city in the Americas where Latinas commune and you'll find pirated copies of the same films (five pesos in Tepito; five bucks in Toronto); or subscribe to Cine Latino where these movies loop day and night between the regular melodramas and the unfunny comedies like malicious needs in a recovery ward; or go online and find a narco-film blog that hasn't yet been taken down, or just head straight over to YouTube where you can stream some of the latest dec- and viginti-annual shoestring releases from Imperial or Raza Mex or JS Films, those studios that have come to perpetuate the trade and ensure the luminosity of a unique and decidedly anti-Hollywood star system in the popular Latina astronomy.

Two things you'll observe early: narco cinema is devotedly regional, with Baja, Michoacán, and, most frequently, Sinaloa providing the backdrops, even for films shot in Texas and California; and, while from picture to picture the cops and narcos rotate as heroes and villains and the endings shift from tragic to comic (sometimes leaving us with a smoky

question mark: a sequel looming on the horizon), there's a staunch moral lesson about being true to yourself and your roots.

You may appreciate the moral lesson. You may also find it hard to disagree with critics and even those filmmakers themselves who'll happily admit that this is not high art. But it's impossible to deny that in the past decade narco cinema has become one of the most successful b-movie cultures in the world, a truly populist cinema with a diverse fan base overwhelming regional and linguistic barriers.

Like a very finicky species of lice, outside word of the genre tends to travel on raised eyebrows. On controversial reports about clandestine sources of funding. Some journalists suspect that the industry is little more than a money-laundering vehicle for cartels,² while others see the films as PR campaigns designed to lionize questionable reputations with bio-prop. And for every ten industry names who hurriedly dismiss such rumors, there's one just as quick to substantiate them.³ José Luis Urquieta, director of such classics as *Tres veces mojado* (*Three Times a Wetback*, 1988) and *La camioneta gris* (*The Gray Truck*, 1989) estimates that at least half of all narco *videohomes* are financed by the cartels.⁴ And whether this is true, or was once true, there's an undeniable intimacy between the studios and the narcos whose stories they tell. Actor, director, and industry grandee Jorge Reynoso explains:

"The scripts are written in such a way that everybody can participate ... [The] strippers ... the security guards, the cops, the drunk guys, the hit men, and all the people who are in that kind of environment always work with us. What you see is what you get. The prostitute is a prostitute, the cop is a cop, and the drug dealer is a drug dealer."⁵

And here's another curious fact: narco cinema makes for a rare success story in the piratical age of film, generating annual revenues of up to 30 million dollars,⁶ a figure even

more remarkable for the fact that 89 percent of narco DVDs sold in Mexico are bootlegs.⁷ *El Bazukazo* (2010), a popular film, but by no means exceptionally so, sold 20 thousand DVDs on its first release,⁸ has, at the time of writing, received 1.5 million hits on YouTube, as well as spawned an unknowable amount of bootlegs up and down the Americas' black markets, and yet still stands, fiscally speaking, as a hit for its studio. The reason being? It was cheap to make. I mean, like, über cheap, and fast. An average narco film costs between 20 to 50 thousand dollars to produce, takes a month to film (including pre- and post-production; writers get a three- or four-day crack at a script), and a single director can put out ten films annually.⁹ (Jorge Reynoso claims to have made 26 in a single year.)¹⁰ The business model is trial-and-error economics. Studios write off the duds, recoup with modest sales and cash out on the few hits that push them each year from solvency to success.

To combat bootlegging, the films retail cheaply in US chain stores (producers say their target market is Mexicans in the United States),¹¹ and some studios have begun selling screening rights to TV stations in states with sizeable Latina populations (Texas, California, and Illinois).¹² Baja Films Internacional—one of the studio titans and, based out of Tijuana and San Diego, literally a *cine fronterizo* enterprise—licenses its 400+ film catalogue to Los Angeles's TV MEX, and MCM Studios (La Raza Mex Films in its latest iteration) now deals only in distribution.¹³ It's partly the industry's financial acumen that has allowed it to create more jobs and turn greater profits than Mexico's better-established, state-subsidized, internationally feted studios.¹⁴

All of which begs the question: given its financial success and mass appeal, why is information on the genre so scant? There are no complete archives for narco cinema that I've been able to find.¹⁵ IMDB is shot through with rankling lacunae (about a quarter of the films I've watched aren't listed).

And while you could speculate about a lack of blog interest or Internet access among its dependable fan base, I like to imagine that this absence has more to do with the cinema's aesthetic. There's something essentially anti-archival about narco cinema. If the task of the narco novelist is to create a "discourse of memory" that "restore[s] humanity to the dead people in the street" (as Gabriela Polit Dueñas argues in a recent study of Sinaloan literature),¹⁶ the job of the narco auteur is much more mundane, his discourse of memory hewing to the short-term. And unlike the narcocorridos, the ballads of drug trafficking that have lately garnered highbrow and academic attention (thanks in no small part to Elijah Wald's excellent book on the subject), narco cinema has no readily apparent authenticity to trade on. Its kitsch at times appears absolute that you wonder if it's a purposeful affront to authenticity-mongering audiences trying to look past the flash for deep meaning. Put it this way: if the narcocorrido has become a rare Robert Johnson 45, the narco film remains a George Thorogood music video: a folk art pumped and distorted into a combustible monster.

This is not meant to be an insult and I don't mean to imply that films are roundly...bad (there are some brilliant gems in the catalogue, as we shall see in the pages ahead). It's just to say that the filmmakers are aware of their product's shelf life. The films spill into the market in scads to be watched, discarded, but rarely celebrated. The nature of the business is such that the cinema persists over the films themselves and the stories and tropes are less flashes of inspiration than worn industrial machines with which to repurpose the latest song or headline from the drug war into a popular ephemera. Of course, for scholars and fans, this is a problem, and what prompted this study was partly the desire for a substantial survey of a cinema that seems aesthetically devoted to its own obsolescence.

But two years of research and thousands of death scenes later, at a point where my interest is no longer just that but seems more like a full-blown addiction, I have to be honest: I do question whether it's wise to promote anything that celebrates narco culture. Maybe it was just after I'd watched a squadron of cinematic Zetas brutalize a group of migrants (a *Narco News* report on the San Fernando Massacre fresh in my mind) that the ethics of this project began to worry me. Because even if the films aren't always glorifying narco violence, at least they're participating in what political scientists call the "banalization of atrocity," that is, normalizing a culture of large-scale and indiscriminate murder, feminicide, and torture.¹⁷ And when I consider that this project indirectly deals with an industry that employs child soldiers and directly with an industry that glamorizes a sexy, well-remunerative narco lifestyle in such a way that may seem attractive to impoverished youth, I admit that I am conflicted.

And I suspect that you will be too. Whether it's the schlock, the violence, or the machismo, there are elements of narco cinema that you won't enjoy. And so before reading any further, I ask that you take seriously a few discretionary points:

Warning: The Following Pages Contain Scenes with Coarse Language...

¡Órale, carnal, pásame la pinche merca!

Narco cinema is a Rosetta Stone of borderlands jargon, but I don't mean only slang when I say "coarse language." Slang is just part of the vernacular of narco culture at large, a system of signs that is regional in its expressions (its fashion and music) and motivations (its faith in codes of honor and local allegiance), but cosmopolitan in how it articulates the anxieties and occasional joys which its endangerment can inspire. It's the language of *campesinos* and migrant workers

and seasonal *gomer*os harvesting poppies for the cartels; of obscenely wealthy second-gen *narco juniors* debauching their weekends in Guadalajara and Las Vegas; of awkward Chicana teens battling suburban malaise in the great American mall. The language that passes borders unchecked and with which our cinema's diverse viewership may make claims, or defy fixed positions, on the torn and messy roadmap that globalization unfolds. But it's also a language that has powerful enemies and what particularly riles them is its coarseness.

In 2011, the heads of Mexico's media conglomerates signed the controversial "Agreement on Informative Coverage of Violence," an editorial manifesto on crime reporting that offered much-needed dentures to recent state and federal censorship policies. The Agreement calls for relentless dedication to facts in covering narco news, and, more ambiguously, mandates that artists and journalists be extra-sensitive to the potential appropriation of their work into cartel propaganda. Representations of the drug war are "to avoid the language and terminology employed by criminals" and should not depict narcos in ways that may be construed as "heroic."¹⁸ That old trick in the new-media playbook—bombard the idea with new representation and watch the zeitgeist regroup—has essentially prohibited narco cinema in Mexico under the aegis "free expression" (regardless of how effective the ban will prove).

It's not just Mexico's "media elite." In the later aughts, when narco violence began to evolve a Fallujahesque brutality, famous industry names came out against narco cinema, as well. Veteran director Mario Hernández called his a "terrible business" and pitched his retirement as an ethical decision: "Given the current situation, no responsible person would make films which encourage admiration for the narcos."¹⁹ He chastised fellow directors for continuing to produce sensationalist work and, anticipating the 2011 Agreement, called on his colleagues to "...make films that

reflect the reality. Films need to be objective and try to help eradicate the problem.”²⁰ Hernández’s retirement came a year after Agustín Bernal, cliff-faced antagonist in hundreds of narco films, returned to his hometown in Michoacán to run for mayor on an anti-poverty platform. In an interview with *El Universal*, Bernal (aka Romualdo Bulcio—who knew?), while not dismissing his legacy, somewhat cagily admitted to a connection between the media’s normalization of drug culture and a tendency for youth to glorify the cartels.²¹

On one hand this is an elitist argument. Narco cinema has always been dedicated to the hardscrabble majority, and apologists insistently remind us that *videohomes* came about in the first place because most Mexicans couldn’t afford a trip to the Cineplex (an argument that is a little belated for our culture of the bootleg). That Mexico’s politicians and media leaders would prohibit a 40-year-old popular entertainment is not only patronizing, it alienates those regions where narco culture is *the* dominant culture, the culture that has organically flourished around an industry that now keeps entire communities from (and not to be hyperbolic) Malthusian collapse.

Furthermore, prohibiting an artist from choosing how to portray a deeply rooted cultural problem (“problem,” or “institution”) without taking real steps to eradicate the problem itself (which steps would be flimsy and gargantuan—impossible to climb without bringing the whole building down) is obscenely hypocritical. And if this sounds vaguely like contemporary American literary debates about the supreme merit of fiction vs. nonfiction, realism vs. experimentalism, remember that what north of the border amounts to a battle of smirks and salutes over the satay platter is in Mexico a wartime proposition: abandon your craft or pursue it in exile.

On the other hand, a clear case of state repression this isn’t. Beyond the simple but compelling argument that narco

cinema desensitizes viewers to violence and attracts poor children to the cartels, consider that what's also put detractors on the offensive is narco culture's increasing popularity beyond its historical bases. The more diverse the fan club, the further narco cinema and narcocorridos are able to disseminate unseemly representations of Mexico, which, when you examine them closely, resemble those stereotypes about "crude," "criminal," "barbaric" Mexico that have been imposed, more often externally, on Mexico for over a century (and with consequences pretty involved, but obvious enough not to go into here.).

Complicating this even further is the fact that narco cinema is itself a heavily censored medium.²² Producers admit to shying away from certain topics for fear of cartel retribution; words like "dignity" "friendship" and "respect" repeat frequently when actors are asked how they feel about their subjects.²³ As Juan Manuel Romero, head of JC Films, admits, "We're not afraid that [the narcos are] going to come after us because we behave."²⁴

Who could blame him? For Mexican media workers, failing to behave can require fatal punishment. At least 30 journalists and dozens of narco corridistas have been murdered in Mexico since 1992.²⁵ The country ranks eighth for killer impunity, just behind Afghanistan and ahead of Russia.²⁶ If narco cinema's repertory players are allowed to live at the discretion of cartels²⁷ while journalists who expose the drug war's atrocities with a rigor and realism foreign to the narco-cinema aesthetic can be killed, and often without reprisal, it is heartening to consider the 2011 Agreement a defense of free speech. Not the "free speech" that permits artists to say whatever they want, of course, but the kind that defends solidarity and anonymity as criteria for free expression—all of which recalls that old freedom to vs. freedom from debate taking place right now in freshman dorms the world over

(and not in a few cases with the aid of some heady Mexican agriculture).

Finally, if this rigmarole about free expression and censorship weren't fraught enough with representational politics, I feel compelled to add one more level by throwing that whole nasty bit about authorial intention into the mix. What you're reading, in English, obviously, are the quasi-lucid musings of an Anglophone French Canadian whose reasonable claim to an American Latinidad expired sometime around the McKinley administration and who, never mind the violence, will probably spend more time than is generous making lofty pronouncements about the kitsch value of narco cinema, a source of endless delight and frustration for this north country rube. Not only may you reasonably wonder how valid or necessary is my outsider's interpretation, or why my "conflicted perspective" should matter at all, you're also right to question whether I'm trying to infuse something that doesn't belong to me with hipster (or worse, academic) cachet.²⁸ Fans of narco cinema have diverse reasons for watching. What for some appear to be the shallowest pop culture receptacles are rich sources of nostalgia for others, and because I haven't grown up with these films, my perspective will bear out a slack-jawed come-lately quality that may offend long-time viewers. No language, I hereby admit, will be coarser than my own.

In the pages ahead we'll have to dismantle this triptych I've been overdetermining with the title "coarse language," but for now let's move on to our second warning:

Scenes of Graphic Violence

I've never been a fan of the expression "no guff, " but this must be about as startling as the surgeon general's recent thoughts on tobacco. We're dealing with a cinema that's

inspired by the grisliest bulletins from the drug war. What would be unusual is if these films *weren't* depicting the torture, rape, beheadings, mutilations, and civilian massacres that have come more and more to constitute write-offable expenses in our thriving transnational economy of vice.

Granted, and especially if you're new to the genre, you may find a good deal of its violence mercifully kitschy: the gore-bespattered droppers and rollers; the constipated dead; the bullet-chewed bodies delivering long expository monologues in very articulate, very sincere quietus-dim rasps. For some fans, b-violence and the b-actors' response are part of the b-fun, the questionable mold that gives this cheese its tang. And I don't mean just those urban bloggers with enough kilometric distance and years of higher-ed to furnish their cynicism. Though its interest in the films is more emotionally involved, the target audience, I suspect, is laughing, too. Rare would be the Quixote unmoved to chuckle at the sight of a three-day-old corpse with restless leg syndrome.

Of course, reactions to the violence will be as diverse as the audiences who react. It's snide of me to begin with snideness. Especially when you consider that migrants are the primary (or at least target) audience and that it's working-class Latinas who make the films popular, it might have been fairer to start with other responses. Feelings of vicarious vindication, for instance. Surges of regional, national, ethnic pride when the hero (cop or narco) beats impossible odds to restore dignity to his community (or to upgrade his Chrysler, i.a.). Nostalgia for a clear code of *ranchera* justice in a world where officials discriminate against your family via faceless bureaucracy.

Furthermore, while I'd like to think the failure to suspend disbelief amidst such extreme fiction would be universally abnormal in contemporary spectatorship, the drug war has for a long time tested the relativity of "normal" perspective. (I

recall a passage in Ioan Grillo's *El Narco* in which the author asks a school psychologist in Ciudad Juárez about the traumatic origins of teenage gang-members who learn to murder and rape before starting high school. The psychologist, writes Grillo, "stares back... as if she hasn't thought about it before" and responds, "They don't feel anything that they have murdered people... They don't recognize rules or limits."²⁹ And then I remember an anecdote from actor Carlos Samperio about being approached by a six-year-old on a film set. The boy told Samperio that he wanted to grow up to be just like him. "An actor?" "No, stupid, I want to be a narco."³⁰

Imagine being a middle-class viewer in Ciudad Juárez, the border city now infamous for its murder rate, which ran as high as 9.9 corpses a day in 2010 (and this is only the official tally).³¹ Consider what it would be like to watch one narco film every night and compare the death toll on screen to that of your neighborhood and wind up with a very volatile point spread. (JC Films producer Juan Manuel Romero claims, "We are not even close to reflecting reality... You can actually call our movies 'soft' because we don't show as much blood and killings.")³² According to 2012 stats, 34 Mexicans are murdered every day and only a third of the victims are identified.³³ And so, bizarre as it sounds, there is a kind of documentary underlay to the schlock violence on screen. And what's disturbing is not really the violence itself (which can be mild compared to what you see in American blockbusters) but this rotten symmetry.

This is still fiction, of course; news reports may inspire but they rarely dictate plots. But even through escapism the films immerse you in the quotidian bloodshed of the actual drug war, and I think for outside fans something strange happens: the more narco films you watch, the more implicated in the spectacle you sense your viewership becoming. The more the kitsch wears off and you recognize its unnerving correlation to real tragedy. Or if the kitsch doesn't exactly wear off,

the elements switch places: the form becomes sincere and the subject matter ironic.

I don't know if there's something eerily synonymous in the studios' ability to grind out film after much the same film with the human disposability of narco and maquila culture. Or if it's imperatively therapeutic to fabulate *la violencia* over and over in similar tales—if the cinema helps make sense of the drug war's tragedies by compulsively revisiting them on familiar terms.

I think the films do comfort, and in a number of ways, but it's through the representation of violence specifically that catharsis is tested on the very edge of irony. Be forewarned: there will be blood, and your reaction to it may be a source of tremendous cynicism and horror.

May Contain Scenes with Nudity and Sexuality

I hedge with “may” because, uniquely among world cinema's contributions to T&A, narco films tend to be pretty chaste affairs. You'll likely surf a ten-film streak before glimpsing a woman's nipple, double that for one of those saxophonic montages of the Cinemax-abridged Kama Sutra. (If skin is what you're after—and surely your viewing prerogatives are utmost erudite and scholarly—stick with the 70s and 80s *ficheras*.)

I'm not denying the sexiness. Bombshell casting is industry standard and the wardrobes of female leads are stocked predominantly with halter tops, negligées, hot pants, jorts, bikinis, microskirts and other clothes cut stingily from fabrics meant to breathe. Such garden variety objectification, together with an almost biblical proliferation of virgin and whore archetypes (*why goest thou daughters of Salome if to quarrel us our Marias*) can wind up concentrating a heavy dose of machismo, which in my experience has proved fatal to a few progressive thinkers I happen to watch movies with.

Still, it's worth pointing out that sex scenes proper are usually relegated to the shadows, making our genre a prudish one on the shelves of exploitation cinema.

So with this in mind, let's diffuse a stereotype: for all its criminal heroics and grotesquerie, narco cinema is a conservative medium. A cinema for the good-old folk, suggests actor-director Jorge Reynoso, who dismisses mainstream Mexican films as "too risqué...for the majority" ("the themes they talk about are a bit off from where they should be, in terms of culture and values").³⁴ Mario Almada, the genre's most iconic actor, is blunter: "*Y Tu Mamá También*. That's pornography!" And moreover, for Almada, an "elitist" pornography: "People don't like those complicated themes...There need to be films that everybody can watch."³⁵

Putting sexy matters aside for a moment, we might trace this conservative-populist impetus to the political sensibilities of Mexico's drug zones, those rural areas where codes of "vengeance, prestige, loyalty, bravery, guile"³⁶ trump the republican ideals of state judiciary and equality before the law. In general there's a fierce anti-federalist sentiment in many drug-producing states (and in many narco films), where prevailing wisdom says that the national government is corrupt, and that politicians and lawmakers are careless about rural society, showily dismissing the drug trade as a criminal enterprise (while grafting generously from it behind closed doors). Critics of narco culture in turn lambaste the regions as backward and troublesome, thereby inflaming the whole rural vs. urban culture war we touched on earlier with regard to censorship.

The states I'm referring to include Michoacán, Guerrero, Sonora, Durango, Tamaulipas, and Chihuahua. But in no other state have drugs so thoroughly permeated the economy than Sinaloa, birthplace and inveterate mecca of narco culture in Mexico and whose capital Culiacán is a sort of heyday Detroit for the drug industry.³⁷ Sinaloan drug cultivation goes

back as far as the late nineteenth century, when Chinese immigrants and local farmers from the mountains of Badiraguato began refining poppies for American and border-city markets. By the 1920s, a narco-agricultural economy had taken hold. According to drug historian Luís Astorga,

“[The entrepreneurs] who persisted...became professionals...created dynasties, transmitted their know-how to the successive generations and succeeded in founding a source of permanent drug trafficking leaders to manage the business nation-wide. In the long term, they appear as a kind of oligopoly: they have been leading the most important drug trafficking groups since the beginning of prohibition.”³⁸

Not surprising then is the state's long-standing tolerance for drug dealing, or the way that drugs have become seamlessly embedded in Sinaloan culture. Fashion, music, idioms, even automobiles and religious practices, bear on narcotics. A 2011 federal report on narco culture warns that Sinaloans tend no longer to question the ethics of drug trafficking or to consider violent cartel rivalries anything more than business as usual.³⁹ This may be true to an extent, but we're still a long way from Gomorrah. For generations, Sinaloans have accepted trafficking as valid commercial activity (as early as the 1950s its local press was calling for decriminalization), but drug use has, until recently, been taboo. A similar attitude plays out in narco films, in which trafficking is narrative fodder but usage a tragic flaw, a descent into “American” vice that may prompt a hero's downfall.⁴⁰

Even beyond codes and mores, Sinaloa's influence on narco cinema is aesthetically formative. This is the state that gave us the corrido (and later the narcocorrido). The state in which trading narco gossip constitutes a local pastime (Sinaloans approach drug lore with a frankness and enthusiasm unlike any other regional group in Mexico).⁴¹ Even kitsch is a kind of narco aesthetic in Culiacán, where for many a nouveau riche sensimilla baron, chintzy décor and “mail-order Louis

XIV living-room sets” are *mais oui*.⁴² And so to bring us back to the topic at hand, the Sinaloan influence might also explain why the surface area of skin you encounter in a typical narco film is that you’d find in a local beauty pageant (another cultural mainstay).

But if these are regional films, how do you explain their popularity across the Americas? Film critic Ernesto Diezmartínez Guzmán says that, for Mexicans abroad, “watching this type of movie is a way of staying connected to their people, their land, their problems. It’s the same phenomenon that made narcocorridos [popular] even for those people born [in the United States] who aren’t fluent in Spanish.”⁴³ But why this land, these people, their problems? Why watch *Los Cuates de Sinaloa* over a schmancy highbrow porn like *Y Tu Mamá También* when your family comes from Oaxaca and both bootlegs retail at the same price?

Maybe the answer has something to do with what I was trying to say earlier about Octavio Paz and the emotional merits of cultural identity—the use-value of essence, if you will. Imagine for a moment that you’re a twentysomething Chicana motorist in post-SB1070 Arizona, where police have the right to stop brown people in public and demand proof of citizenship. (This may sound a bit liberalishly cloying, but indulge me.) Imagine the whine and the red whirl in your rearview mirror and the officer lumbering over to your rolled-down window with a look of bored suspicion. “You-sted hablay the English?” His flashlight scanning yesterday’s *La Voz Arizona* spread over the backseat, his ears twitching to the Shakira undulating jihad-like on your stereo (and in this fantasy scenario, you don’t care much for Shakira because why not and me neither). Imagine, in short, that in a moment of normalized interrogation, your body and the culture that assists its incarnation become evidence that you don’t belong, that you aren’t who you say you are. And maybe this has happened a few times.

And then imagine coming home and watching a movie full of *norteño* idioms and lush brazen banda music, a film in which a definitive regional identity is a thing to be exalted, lovingly owned. A film about a hero who is unambiguously the proud son of his place and time, and who'll fight with those who say otherwise.

There are many scholars who insist that complexity is the only worthy tactic with which to battle those who mean to fix your identity in place. Maybe they're right (it's hard to argue with a hundred years of *mestizaje* scholarship). But it seems unfair to dismiss the power of a simple story, to deny escapism the emotional value of its refuge. I'm not saying all narco films are morally simplistic, just that most of them can be if you need them to be.

And so awkwardly to loop this back to my original point: if narco cinema pits the conservative region (with its virtues of loyalty, community, honesty) against larger society (corrupt, impersonal, hypocritical), there's a similar moral confrontation echoed in the films' representation of sexuality: portraying sex modestly challenges mainstream skin-happy Mexican and US films by advancing alternative community standards, however ambiguously the audience is inclined to accept those standards or envision the kind of community they support.

And Mature Subject Matter

I suppose by now if these warnings have served an overlaying purpose it's been to share some of the confusion I've felt as a longtime viewer and to prep you on the paradoxes that lie ahead. We'll be watching a regional cinema that's becoming a global phenomenon in Latina pop culture; a cinema that is excessively violent and crude in its promotion of moral virtues and conservative ideals; that is crotch-grabbingly macho and driven by the flamboyant inclinations of melodrama; that is

produced for migrant and Mexican-American audiences but has found an expansive range of intimacy among Latinas and even far-northern outsiders like me.

In the blood- and coke-smeared mirror that narco cinema holds up to life on the drug war's battlefronts, it's often difficult for those of us further afield to pick out our reflections. But they are there. Regardless of whether you use drugs, whether your stance on legalization happens to resemble Bill Clinton's circa '95 or Bill Clinton's circa '15, we've come to the point at which a moral outside no longer exists. Of the many nefarious economies that spur globalization toward catastrophe, few are more fundamental than narcotics. This might sound a bit like a haberdasher directing you to the tinfoil aisle, but the facts are in. The narcotic industry is massively vital. Almost four times more profitable than Pemex, Mexico's state-owned oil corporation.⁴⁴ So foundational not just to the Mexican, but also the global economy, that taking any kind of moral position *against* narcotics is at this point a luxury that dazzles us into blindness. This is no longer, nor was it ever, only Mexico's or Latin America's problem, as much as the slur abides and is one people will fight for with all kinds of funding to take to their graves.

The late Charles Bowden, who spent decades chronicling the atrocities of the drug war in Mexico, put this much better than I will:

"Drugs may be the major American story of our era, the thing that did more to alter behavior and law, that redistributed income to the poor far more dramatically than any tinkering with tax codes, that jailed more people and killed more people than any US foreign policy initiative since the Vietnam War. But this vital force, this full-tilt-boogie economic activity, is absent from our daily consciousness and only surfaces when discussed as a problem. And this problem is always placed on the other side of town or the other side of a line or the other side of the river."⁴⁵

It's a valid stereotype: the North American is either blind to the problem or quick to displace it. According to Octavio Paz, "He builds a wall of indifference and remoteness between reality and himself, a wall that is no less impenetrable for being invisible."⁴⁶ Today, when the wall is no longer invisible but 20 feet high and 350 miles long, the musing seems all the more poignant.

But Paz isn't referring to your typical North American amnesiac, he's talking about his archetypal self-conscious Mexican. And it's my hope that when you watch these films, what you come to perceive in their kitschy excesses will be a kind of personal reflection. Partly this book will attempt to share mine.

Embedded in the drug war, the Mexican media's job is to report the harrowing details, but this can't be all that's required. Not to discount facts or the talented journalists who risk their lives gathering them. Nor to dismiss the high-brow "narco films" that take the drug war to Sundance and Cannes—we'll watch a few of these as well. But as a commercial product of (and not a news bulletin or auteur's reflection on) narco culture, narco cinema offers a different perspective. We need facts and high realism, but sometimes we also need the fantastic and fabulistic to fill out our expanding scope of things. What is realism—what is reality—without the mawkish bits, the wailing after the slaughter, the occasional brutal dream that wakes us in the middle of the night?

On that note, and in the spirit of Paz, I invite you to put your narco masks on, to stare into the screen and take stock of what you see. To keep staring until the rude figures inhabiting your reflection take on the tension of an inner life and you begin to discern what the films understand too well: that we are all narcos in the range of our greed and indifference, and in our longing for a better world beyond. I'm getting off my soapbox now, not to worry. Just a final platitude, if I may: the more intrinsically we're able to recognize ourselves

in the complex hemispheric dimensions of Mexico's drug war, the more inclined we may be to negotiate a resolution on humanistic terms; and, if you can get past the kitsch, this recognition just might be the rewarding side effect of taking in some of the best and most bizarre footage in Mexico's b-filmography.

If you can get past the kitsch.

Hecho de coca: A Sentimental Education

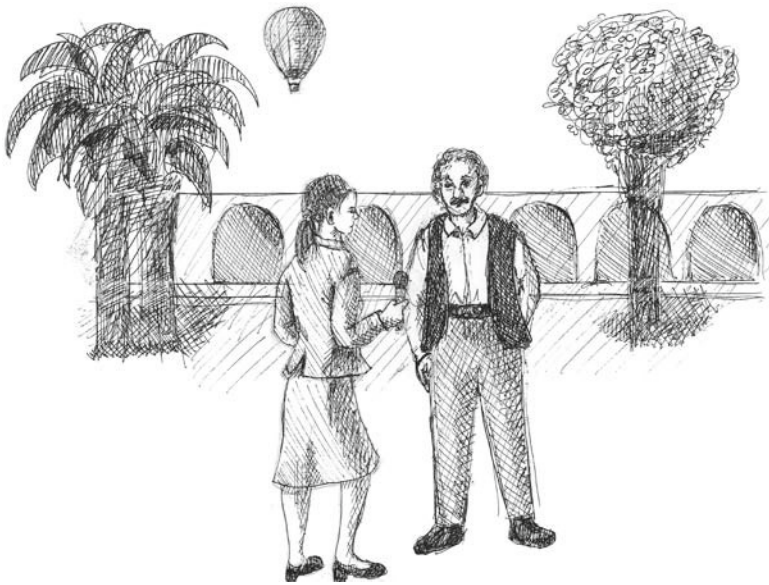


Figure 2.1 “But our country, too.”

The opening credits of our first film appear over black screen in a font my word processor identifies as Lucida Handwriting. This is not endearing type. The vibe is somewhere between wedding-registry gauche and yearbook duplicitous. *La Raza Mex presenta*. But foremost among its occlusive virtues, what makes it an auspicious choice over, say, Big

Caslon's competitive handshake, or the personality disorder of Andale Mono, and what renders its acknowledgement here a critical imperative rather than a waste of time is not its form—forget about form—it's the cogent poetry of the name itself. Lucida Handwriting. That suggestion of something luminous, brilliant trapped within a scrawl so personal it's difficult for others to understand, let alone divine its worth. In the public domain of typeface, there is not a more pitch-perfect metaphor for the film we are about to see or for the genre you may eventually come to love. But we're only two seconds in; forgive my impatience.

Interspersed with these typographically aware credits is the film's opening vignette, which goes something like this:

FADE IN:

EXT. FIELD—MORNING

Scene opens with a close-up of a stuff sack: a hobo's bindle the size of a compact car, navy and grease-patched. A muster of gloved hands circles its brim, tugging on drawstrings before a horizon of scrubgrass.

As the picture widens, the hands prolong into windbreakers, K-Mart jeans, trucker caps and cowboy hats: laborers, four. Standing in the center of the scrubby field, which is bordered far back by a row of thin trees and one-story hovels and beyond these by a mountain range whose titanic asymmetry sometimes wades through the dull clouds. The clouds are grey and ensconcing and filter grainy sunlight into the scene. Mongrel winds chew the boom mics. Overtop canned birdsong, at the rate of raindrops falling from eaves after a storm, a guitarist plunks. Indeed it is a dreary one in the fictional Real de Ahuichila. The kind of rural town that subsists on narco ag. The kind of weather people feel in their scars.

The four men begin to run. From the stuff sack in their hands a nylon canvass of Mexico's tricolors spills to the ground. It trails behind them, flooding the patchy grass to the field's edge where the men divide and begin stretching it taut.

What they are doing is assembling a hot-air balloon, one of the oldest drug-smuggling technologies in the history of American dependence. They do this in silence, in nods and syllables, fastening the basket, hoisting the envelope into a wind-trapping position. A burner is laid flat on the ground and a man crouches behind it, strafing the envelope with steady blasts of fire, like a bomber pilot in a world war. With each blast, the envelope billows to new latitudes, its tangled gores distinguish themselves: green, white, red, *esperanza, unidad, sangre*.

The balloon is now airborne, its anchoring ropes snap at the ground, and we see that a patch of bright blue has broken through the clouds along the western firmament. After a final credit (dir. Jorge Ortín) the untethered balloon vanishes upward, beyond the gray and the blue, into an over-exposed burst of sunlight, which shocks the whole picture white. In the second it would take to shield our eyes, the scene FADES TO...

INT. A POORLY LIT RESTAURANT

Where our story begins.

I wonder about the contrast between the blinding sun and the dark restaurant, but understand it would be fallacious to take it as any kind of symbolism other than accidental. Much of the cinematography ahead will have severe photic deficiencies: offices are cavernously dark, dusk forces a lively evening stroll into a midnight stumble. (I know nothing of the work of Manuel Martinez but feel it only fair he shared lighting credits with his deity.) Which isn't to say we shouldn't take it at all. Accident and intention bleed together in narco cinema: miscues assume narrative import, typeface becomes metaphor. When it's your task to defend the genius of b-cinema, it's tempting to read craft into the genre's impoverishments, even at the risk of smuggling up your argument.

But what is no accident, what is absolutely apposite, is the opening depiction of a Mexico robust and fragile on course to the United States. A Mexico *hecho de coca*, filled with

illicit cargo for northern markets, retreating from the hands that put it together in one fragmenting blast of white light. Don't give second thought to the *Coca, Inc.* on your DVD box (probably a last-minute revision, so last-minute it followed postproduction); *Hecho de coca* is the better title: it transmits, it resonates. Later in the film, the police comandante places it in an American adage: "Mexico is the country made of cocaine." And when the governor in the film tells us, States be damned, he's going to reclaim his country from the narcos, we already know from this opening vignette how quixotic his plan is, for that country has escaped him, and will return only to leave once more.

The title also plays on *Hecho en Mexico*, the stamp of national production whose future looked more uncertain the year this film appeared. By 2006, almost one thousand maquiladoras had shuttered within the last five years.¹ The narcotics industry, meanwhile, had achieved the distinction of producing 70 percent of America's drug supply²; without it, the Mexican economy could have shrunk by as much as 63 percent (according a leaked document from Mexico's Centre for Research and National Security).³ *Hecho de coca* suggests the present failings of a globalized Mexico and wryly points at the obvious competitive advantage for future success.

And so this is what's at stake, the hazard and providence of a tricolored balloon in perpetual flight through volatile weather. I think *Hecho de coca* has two great moments and this is the first: a glimmer of brilliance on the edge of the scrawl. But it's a far journey to the second, and I'm afraid I'm probably going to get a little smarmy along the way.

Before we go any further, though, let's take a closer look at the opening credits. *Felipe Pérez-Arroyo* is a familiar name, belonging to the main producer of *videohomes* for the wackily prolific La Raza Mex Films. RMF got its start in the 80s and early 90s making sexy-comedies, horror flicks and

cholo dramas, but since the aughts its focus has been narco cinema.⁴ *El Clon de Hitler* (2002), the parable of an emo Führer who punishes his overeating henchmen by tweaking their nipples, will be dealt with later on, while another 2002 offering, *Qué se muera la cabrona* (*Let the Bitch Die*), may receive a page or two in our chapter on gender politics, depending on how much space we devote to its timely cinematic inquiry, *Bill Gritón vs. Mónica del Wisky* (1999).

Next on the bill is none other than *Mario Almada*, a star who invites all manner of cliché about the OG or *jōnin* or John Wayne or Chuck Norris (John Wayne-cum-Chuck Norris would be chronologically apt) of narco cinema and whose whopping 3.5 minutes of screen time as the troubled town's governor earn him top billing (and likely the highest salary). Though it's tempting here to enter a lengthy digression about the regal longevity and roisterous merits and kill stats that have promoted Almada to one of Latina pop culture's most beloved nonagenarians, we'll have to save this for the next chapter and instead say something about...

Rafael Rojas. I suppose, truth be told, I really don't have much to say about Rafael Rojas, other than that he has the distinction of being the first of six Rafael Rojas listed as actors on IMDB where our film has no entry. Primarily known for his novela work, the Costa Rican actor will be playing Lucio, a hard-boiled Sinaloan cop with a heart of gold and a mean moustache.

As much as I share an affectionate (and often unreasonably fierce) loyalty to (most) people with a double-R alliteration to their full names, I admit to being not a little miffed that Rojas's credit precedes *Diana Golden's*, and that I'm even tempted to cry misogyny over this sequential blunder. Golden, originally from Colombia, might be one of narco cinema's better-known femmes, and in addition to being the star of just as many novelas as Rojas, she also happens to be an award-winning playwright, a Playboy

cover model (at age 41) and a terrific actress to boot. Today Golden will be playing Hilda Rebolledo, the top drug baroness of Real de Ahuichila. (And actually, if Ahuichila⁵ is narco central—Almada's governor tells us "All roads that lead to the border start here"—then that makes her the *country's* top drug baroness, meaning she's really overseeing the entire narcosphere from the crosshairs of her trusty rifle, and not just her expansive spa-like hacienda and its scraggly desert environs.)

It pains me to have to introduce *Jorge Hernan*, the film's lead, on a sad note, but according to his LinkedIn profile, Hernan has given up acting to work as a "networker" for a fruit juice company. I'm absolutely sincere when I say this is terrible news, and that he's a capable actor who gives a strong show as Felix, the lone incorruptible cop. Hernan, who is slickly handsome in a civil service sort of way, looks like a muscular version of the late Andrew Koenig ("Boner" from *Growing Pains*, anyone?). And even more than the names, it's he who upgrades our cast into an impressive A-list of b-cinema. So let's wish Hernan godspeed in the juice trade as we bid our credits farewell and move on to the story:

And so back to the aforementioned poorly lit restaurant, where Felix and his wife Maria are finishing dinner (blackened tortillas with shadow soup), whereupon Felix surprises his young wife with plans for a belated honeymoon to Cancún. The overworked junior officer has finally earned some time off from busting narco chops (i.e., intercepting cargo at roadblocks). Maria is delighted by the news and races her husband home to pack sunblock, pestering him with details along the way.

It's only unfortunate for newlywed bliss that Felix has lately proved too good at his job: that his multiple drug busts have so dearly cost the Rebolledo cartel that boss Hilda requires a little redress. Hence the three leotard-masked goons kicking

in the front door. Don't be fooled by the maraca-and-pan-pipe score; if we know anything about narco cinema, we know this won't be a pleasant scene.

In break the narcos, out come the fisticuffs. The newly-weds are repeatedly slogged, kicked, pistol-whipped (Felix), vagina-punched (Maria, whose stoicism to the home invasion and subsequent brutalization is a feat of unresponsiveness remarkable in a genre known for its wooden acting) before being forced to kneel before one another in what seems a cruel parody of courtly obeisance, their faces a beseechingly crooked arm apart. "You were told not to mess with us. But you did," the head thug informs Felix. He presses a revolver to the back of Maria's skull—"Too bad"—and sundry cranial matter of Maria splatters across Felix's aghast face. He's still wailing the next morning when the police arrive.

On our next visit to the restaurant, we discover Felix alone, taking refuge in tequila and practicing the Brando variations on the blubbering pout. He grabs an acoustic guitar from Maria's empty chair and begins to strum a morbidly tender (if somewhat abstruse) ballad about jilted love: "If you're going to leave me, / I'm going to ask you / how I'm going to die; / If I'll be incinerated / with these ashes / you can plate a brooch / to be in your chest, / both of us beating."

Halfway through the second verse ("Make a comb of my bones, / to stroke your hair") a rush of wind rustles the curtains and lo, in the empty chair appears the ghost of Maria. She's wearing the holographic aura of a vanquished Jedi and a white tank top. As Felix croons (a lovely tremolo), Maria bops cheerily to his sad melody, at one point reaches for his right eyebrow, and blows him a farewell kiss. Felix, of course, can't see her, and once the sustain on his final Em chord dissolves in the empty room, he has but a second to pout before the same rush of wind returns, this time for him, and away fades Felix into the congenial ether of his indulgence.

Now is probably a good time to pause the video for a few words from the *OED*:

Melodrama, *n.* 1. a. a genre comprising any of the types of melodramatic work, esp. exciting by exaggeration and sensationalism and often (chiefly in earlier use) accompanied by music appropriate to the action; the style of drama characteristic of such a piece.

b. Originally: a stage play, usually romantic and sensational in plot, and interspersed with songs, in which the action is accompanied by orchestral music appropriate to the various situations (now *hist.*). Later (as the musical element ceased to be regarded as essential): a play, film, or other dramatic piece characterized by exaggerated characters and a sensational plot intended to appeal to the emotions.

2. More generally: any sensational incident, series of events, story, etc.; sensationalist or emotionally exaggerated behaviour or language; lurid excitement.

and,

Kitsch, *n.* Art or *objets d'art* characterized by worthless pretentiousness; the qualities associated with such art or artifacts. Also *attrib.*, *Comb.*, and *trasf.*

2014 R. Rashotte *Narco Cinema*. The writer's snooty approach to a beloved subaltern craft came off as kitsch, precipitating his banishment from academe.

v. rare (trans.) to render worthless, to affect with sentimentality and vulgarity.

Ibid. Kitsch not lest ye be kitsched.⁶

A number of academics have written about twentieth-century Latina melodrama, mostly with regard to the telenovela.⁷ When I began researching this book, I figured this scholarship would help me translate the grosser sensations of movies like *Hecho de coca*, make the ooze accessible along some cultural and, ideally, political line. This it did, and for a while the arguments sounded persuasive enough in their cryptic grammar so that, by a few obscure turns, I would find myself nodding at points which would normally make me grimace. Points, for instance, about the dramatic superiority of allegorical stasis to character development; about exaggerated emotion as premium narrative fuel. Such conventions,

the studies argue, create an antielitist “emotional democracy”; or “[offer] the Latin American social body a realistic sense of redemption and revelation”; or attack/redefine colonial power structures “to find human spaces of liberation and agency, precisely because narco-dramas escape the oppressive and inhumane civilizing norms that have defined existence for much too long.”⁸

This is a snippet of the discourse, which you’re free to pursue in the stacks. I didn’t think I’d have much to add to it other than perhaps a confession: this melodrama stuff, well, no thanks. “Lurid excitement” sounded like phone-sex copy. I read “emotionally exaggerated behavior” and my first thoughts were, one, Uncle Julliard on an appletini mission; and two, that documentary *Jesus Camp* (the scary mulleted lady addressing the children in tongues).

More to the point, I wondered about the validity of melodrama as a frame for something as complex as the drug war, whether it weren’t another layer of Marx’s “sentimental veil” masking capitalism’s cruel mechanics (and thus better to tear away than appraise). And, along a more shameful but healthier apolitical vein, I’d started to suspect that the reason many studies of Latina melodrama devote maximum space to theorizing about their subject and minimum-to-zero space discussing any actual narco films was because the minds behind the secret words had accepted the very thing I was seeking to deny: these films are terrible. Slapdash matter with little art. 100 percent pure *poshlost mexicano*. I still think this is a fair description of many narco films, even of aspects of the best films. And doubtless, by watching this movie with me so far, you’ve sensed my reservation in how certain elements will conjure up Snicker and Hoot, my lonely familiars.

Melodrama will probably be the most unmooring characteristic of narco cinema for new viewers. Unmooring and then marooning—it will happen just like that, regardless of one’s intimacy with Latina culture. An analogy from the top

of my head: narco melodrama is a rabid peacock throwing its whole body against the glass cage of your TV screen. A novelty to slacken the jaw, but after a few minutes one gets antsy for a long shower and maybe an actual novel.

This isn't an original argument, I know. From its earliest incarnations and across cultures, melodrama has made an easy target for satirists, perhaps easier for none more so than the contemporary Western viewer, who is so practiced in the real-time translation of melodrama into kitsch that she can cut straight to the camp rewards with nary a full groan. And because it's such an easy target, bashing it seems unfashionably simple and requires pretty well obvious arguments with none of the sexiness of the "melodrama as subversive vox populi" school of thought.

The other danger in admitting this, of which danger I'm acutely aware, is that it will strike a certain kind of tenured reader as culturally insensitive, neo-imperialist, Gallo-fascist, phallopressive, and so on. Just another white man attempting to tell nonwhite people that what they're enjoying is false consciousness. One leading scholar calls the genre's critics a stuffy "bourgeoisie" lot, "members of the elite . . . less concerned with a channel or outlet for their emotions than with a manner of expressing the education of their emotions."⁹ Eep.

In my defense, though, isn't it just as pernicious to treat the audience as a single irony-free unit? Even today, from my pew in the church of True Belief, I still cast with those critics who emphasize the parodiable aspect of melodrama, and I remain skeptical about narco cinema's overall subversiveness.¹⁰

But furthermore, because I didn't think the genre itself was all that sincere about its commitment to the viewer—remember this is big-bucks mass entertainment—and when talented artists who share "elitist" aesthetic commitments (characterization, script revision, for ex.) are more and more ignored by mainstream audiences or summarily dismissed as

hegemony by brand-name professors—well, I’ll just be honest: I found something deeply manipulative in asking audiences to accept the most artificial ploys as worthy narrative strategies. Is it “elitist” to distinguish good and bad art, to think critically about how a narrative “educates emotion” (and, more to the point, how it might reserve and reassign the sentimental)? Does any authority on craft automatically mean neocolonial authority when it comes from above *los de abajo*? Maybe it does. But ten years of higher ed have taught me this: we can wax academic all the livelong day on the proletariat’s love of corndogs until winding up with a thesis that eating corndogs is an act of radical gastronomic disobedience, but it doesn’t get us any closer to ascertaining the relative, say, nutritional value of certain art forms in mobilizing social awareness, cultivating introspection, offering solace, stimulating the pathetic imagination—in short, doing the things we used to think art was supposed to do. And this film, I’m afraid to say, is starting to smell like a corndog.

Back to our story: it’s now been two years since Maria’s death and things have only worsened in our poor pueblo. Narcos are cackling, goons are slaughtering, locals are trembling—answers are required. We’re walking over to a press conference on the steps of town hall, threading through scrum toward our first recognizable figure: an 84-year-old Mario Almada playing the governor of Ahuichila. In high-belted slacks and checkers, he looks like everybody’s grandfather, and it’s with a gentle senescent authority that he reiterates his commitment to safe streets. But this isn’t enough for the reporters. Local trafficking has increased by 25 percent. As governor of “the state that deals the most drugs,” *when* does he plan to take action? “Today we’ll reassert our commitment,” he promises. “We have to eliminate the drug taboo from this town.” It’s a genuine commitment and a rare one for surviving the journey from press conference to private office, where the governor fist-bangingly declares that the only way

to stop this menace is to go after Rebolledo once and for all. His aide quibbles: the local police are corrupt; cleaning up this town would call for a solo mission and good luck finding someone for that job. The governor's not bothered, though. In fact he's got just the man in mind.

Meanwhile, the cartel is re-upping another hot-air balloon with half a ton of cocaine under the direction of Sofi and her boyfriend Eleazar, Hilda's second-in-commands. Once they finish the transfer, the couple meet with their *patrona* to discuss business. Which is going well. Given their daily payments to Commandante Barrero and the fact that Barrero is next in line for the post of attorney general, the Rebolledo cartel is set to eliminate their rivals and monopolize regional trafficking.

The only problem, as Sofi explains to Eleazar, is that Barrero, their police insider, is a "sexual degenerate." She worries what his new power as attorney general could show him capable of—a fear that proves well-founded when, a few scenes on, the musteline commandante slaps Sofi unconscious, rapes her, covers her in bruises and abandons her roadside (true villains in narco cinema can be this metastatically immoral).

Unfortunately for the cartel but fortunately for the good citizens of Ahuichila, the governor has bypassed the appalling Barrero to appoint Lucio his new attorney general. This is a dour, sardonic mustachioed cop imported from Sinaloa, and though his hard-drinking, spurs-on-the-desk manner frightens the secretary and rumors of his righteousness strike fear into the hearts of Felix's corrupt seniors, we like him right away, a man who gets things done. And Lucio likes Felix. In Felix he can sense a kindred spunk and so decides to test the junior officer by placing him on Barrero's roadblock mid-shift. It's a good plan—under Felix's watch, the police stop a van packed with Rebolledo cocaine and haul its driver back to the precinct for questioning.

Despite the death of several officers in the pre-arrest shoot-out (presumably, they warrant no further mention) Lucio is impressed by Felix's initiative, though he warns Felix not to take his job too seriously as this will cause "more problems than benefits." Lucio then shares with Felix this chestnut of career wisdom: "Sometimes you have to get your hands dirty. To get shit off the floor, you have to pick it up first." Subsequent meetings belabor the master-apprentice dynamic and the point of Barrero's guilt, but they are tremendously more watchable than the montage of Felix's wedding day (inspired by a tearful visit to the cemetery).

The Rebedollo cartel has hit a snag. The smuggler Felix captured happens to be a blabbermouth, and so Hilda orders Sofi over the precinct to take care of him. With a nod to the jailer, Sofi enters the holding cell, unsheathes a combat knife from her garter belt and slices his traitorous throat. Problem solved. Only Felix and Lucio now threaten Hilda's monopoly. And because Barrero has warned the *patrona* of Felix's longstanding righteousness, our hero stands unwittingly in her crosshairs.

If I may, I'd like to pause for a second and ask an important question: Where the hell are the corridos? Other than Felix's early *cancion triste*, there aren't any actual songs to speak of, though the mood-educating score is almost incessant and can be divided into: spa sounds (minimalistic plunks and strums and toots and percussive noise on delay; Gregorian synth); neck-hair straighteners (various atonic meanderings—Hitchcock by way of Casio); seat edgers (rattlesnake maracas and that slow breathy triplet that signals Jason's prowl in the *Friday the 13th* movies). Sometimes a horny riff emerges out of nowhere and smolders for a moment over no context. Action scenes sound like the last level of any early Nintendo game. All of which is vulgate, music-wise, in narco cinema. But by now we should have been treated to an appearance by *Los Tucanes de Tijuana* or *Los Bohemios de Michoacán* (or

if this were an earlier film, *Los Tigres del Norte*). *Norteño* musical interludes can be the most popular feature in narco films; the title of a corrido alone will sell a DVD and some of the more famous films can be described as loose dramatizations of beloved songs. All this to say the absence here is unusual, and that a frisky accordion solo might not be the worst thing in the world right now.

But I digress. Short her trusted driver, Hilda demotes Sofi to chief smuggler and sends her off to town with a Ford pickup full of cocaine. This is a supremely dickish move on Hilda's part, considering that Sofi was raped by Barerro about 18 hours ago and that her psychological convalescence is hardly underway (physically, though, what an improvement!). But then Hilda, we'll note, is a very dickish patrona, firmly in narco cinema's mold of the powerful woman: ruthless, manipulative, self-centered, two-faced, altogether Lady MacBish; masculine, I suppose, if your idea of "man" is fundamentally "asshole." Hilda's cruelties run from mean (frothing orders at her underlings) to psychotic (cracking their ribs under her steer-strength cowboy boots). Even at the sartorial level, the denim Western shirts and mom jeans (that style of dress favored by certain American women who can line dance to obscure Skynryd) make the lithe and splendid Golden gruffly unsexy here, and this lends a cruel praying-mantis-like edge to her hypersexuality. That's right—I mustn't forget to mention that Hilda has a touch of the nymphomania, and that any time she's able to get Sofi out of the hacienda for an hour is an opportunity to have off-camera sex with Eleazar. And so as Sofi humphs off to town with her Fordful of cocaine, and Hilda and Eleazar creep into the bedroom to enact a terrible misogynist death fantasy, I hereby promise to get to the bottom of these nasty gender politics two chapters on.

For now, though, let's reassemble with Felix, Barrero and their four-car police squad as they wait roadside for suspicious cargo to wind through their afternoon shift. And

aha!—here comes Sofi. The cops wave her onto the shoulder and Barrero orders Felix to search the Ford, counting on Sofi to start blasting once Felix begins to nose around her prolific stash. It's a setup that might have worked if Barerro, the impish sex offender, could have resisted taking eye contact with Sofi as an opportunity to grab his package and flash her all his teeth.

Emotionally inflamed by the too-recent memory of her rape, Sofi takes one look at those teeth, that package, forgets all about Felix, throws open the drivers'-side door and comes out gunning for Barerro. *Bang! Bang! Bang!* In the melee, several more cops go down, Barerro retreats, and Sofi takes a bullet fatally close to her kidney. Unfazed, she continues firing until Felix pulls her into her truck and drives away. That is, to be clear, the good police officer rescues the narco and abets her getaway.

I have to admit that this narrative pivot crashes us into a brick wall of nonsense and calls up many questions that will never be answered. Why would Felix help a trafficker escape? Is he instinctually chivalrous, to the detriment of his judicial duty? Or is he afraid that Barerro, who appears to be shooting at anyone in sight, might kill a potential informant? We never find out. Nor do we learn what conspired in the subsequent getaway so that in the next scene, the ungrateful Sofi is prodding an unarmed Felix through a cactus field with butts from her machine gun and promising worse to come.

(To mitigate the logical catastrophe of Felix rescuing Sofi, the writers have Felix thank *her* for rescuing *him* from the gunfight—i.e., they rescript her as the savior so that the director won't have to go back and reshoot the actual gunfight itself. This is just one of those narrative boners that we'll have to accept as good intention defeated by the cost of gun caps and food coloring, the same way that we accept Maria's nonresponse to her beating as a void for some later voiceover work that was never budgeted, or just forgotten about; or,

more glaringly, the matter of the title going from *Hecho de coca* to *Coca, Inc.* somewhere between postproduction and DVD pressing.)¹¹

Luckily for Felix, once she deposits her prisoner at Rebolledo HQ, Sofi is thrown into a career crisis when she discovers Hilda and Eleazar making love in the indoor swimming pool. Even more startling to Sofi than this evidence of her lover's infidelity is Hilda's reaction to being caught: with a slippery discard of Eleazar, Hilda reaches for her poolside rifle and begins firing away at her protégée. Sofi shoots back and makes for the door, pulling Felix with her. Hilda orders Eleazar to pants up and "go get her and kill her!"

Poor Sofi, what a rough, confusing day this must have been for her, is Felix's sentiment back in the arroyo. His concern leads to mutual grins, to more obvious flirtation, to Felix out of his handcuffs, to a tent-building effort, to a barely visible nightfall and an amorous romp among yucca, two mangy silhouettes churning behind the tent canvass all night long.

But at dawn, things become grim once more when Eleazar captures the new lovers and therein instigates an extended climax that somehow feels both hurried and every second its 14 minutes. Felix and Sofi are taken back to the hacienda. Felix is beaten. Hilda proposes that Felix kill Lucio to save Sofi's life, which gives Felix an idea to entrap Barrero, which is too nonsensical to merit the requisite four pages of theoretical spec. Hilda kneels at her private shrine to Jesús Malaverde, patron saint of narcos. Felix returns to rescue Sofi and becomes involved in a shoot-out-cum-mixed-martial-arts-battle-to-the-chokehold-of-death with Eleazar. Felix wins. He releases Sofi (in slow motion) from the noose (?) that binds her hands (alas, all but the makeup department have forgotten about the gaping untreated bullet wound in her stomach [possibly kidney]) and proceeds on foot to apprehend Hilda, barely making it in time to leap aboard the hot-air balloon she's commandeered for her escape.

Now we've reached the end and you can almost see the justice simmering behind Felix's smirk. "Can you fly?" he asks Hilda, his eyebrows gesturing to their climbing altitude. Hilda proposes a deal: she'll pay Felix triple Barrero's salary if he agrees to act as her new police informant. "You're talking to the wrong man," says Felix. "Everyone has a price," she tries again. But when the balloon touches ground, only Felix remains inside. And, given all we know about Felix, we can presume that he's avenged Maria's death (and Sofi's near death) and fulfilled the governor's promise to get rid of Rebolledo and make life safe again for the good folks of Ahuichila.

Or maybe we can't. And here's where the film gets interesting. Denouement: Felix and Lucio meet at an outdoor café (while Sofi waits subserviently out of earshot). Lucio congratulates Felix on his promotion to commandante. He knows Felix will keep the force in order now that he himself will be returning to Sinaloa. But before he leaves, Lucio has one question: "What happened up there with Hilda Rebolledo?" Felix grins and repeats Lucio's epigram about using one's hands to clean shit off the floor, to which Lucio replies, with wild laughter, "You're a fast learner, kid!" And therein lies our bamboozlement: Felix has sold out. He's made the deal with Rebolledo after all. The lone incorruptible cop has put himself on the payroll of the cartel that murdered his wife.

What's amazing about this ethical about-face is not that Felix's pristine code can be so casually soiled (forgive the pun, what with the shit on the floor); that money could mean more to him than the chance to put the florescent ghost of Maria to rest. It's not even that in this comic-bookish moral universe our hero can be corrupted without even the most gently probing psychological turn (apparently all Hilda had to do was repeat her offer). No, what puzzles and frustrates is the following scene: Felix and Sofi on a lovers' stroll through the market—long smooches, cheek strokes, a cotton-candy

fight, a flamenco jangling melancholic in the background. The couple takes a seat in the food court to discuss their vacation plans when Felix begins to tear up. “You have every right to remember your wife,” Sofi assures him. “Besides, it looks like you loved her very much.” Felix explains at length how Maria died and why he fears that Sofi might share her fate...and would Sofi really want to become a commandante’s wife, considering the risks? You bet she would. “Until death do us part, no?” she ghoulishly quips, all things considered. Felix groans and goes in for a kiss. End scene.

How can the film get away with this? Switching out stock happy endings at the last minute, revealing—and then revealing in—the hero’s caprice as if it were his moral protoplasm? All this ending does is make the earlier plot holes seem less nonsense than canny foreshadow. And if this weren’t confusing enough, the final scene takes us from sappy to all-out bizarre. The governor is leaving his office for the day and a reporter from the earlier scrum approaches to offer her congratulations: “It seems that we beat drug trafficking.” “That’s right, Miss,” he grins. The camera closes in on his weathered face to leave us with a bit of Almada wisdom: “There are no winners or losers here. The war against drugs is like any other war. We lose something. A friend, our lives. But our country, too.”

The first time I watched this, I was sure the line had been flubbed. *Pero también nuestra país*. Surely he meant to say, “We lose...[a] friend, our lives, but *not* our country.” The grammar suggests the mistake. So do the soothing flamenco riffs and the reporter’s grateful smile, which ends the film. How do you “beat drug trafficking” and “lose a country?” If the governor failed, why is he so pleased with himself, and what’s with this mutual goodwill between him and the reporter? It doesn’t make any sense. This isn’t just an ambiguous ending. In fact it’s not ambiguous, that’s what makes it so uncomfortable. It jars from the conventions of cinematic

ambiguity to give us a happy ending in form with content that resists it absolutely.

But if this is just bad storytelling, why is it so uncomfortable to watch? Because it's careless about the viewer? Or because it refuses to speak to *this* viewer in the cinematic language in which he happens to be fluent? To answer these questions, I think we need to revisit this melodrama business. Not to watch the film through the "narco mask," as I'd suggested earlier, but to examine the mask itself more carefully. "The last mask of the banal," Walter Benjamin called kitsch, "the one with which we adorn ourselves, in dream and conversation, so as to take in the energies of an outlived world of things."¹²

What is there to say about the outlived world of *Hecho de coca*? What energies does its visitor attempt to recuperate? Obviously what we don't find is the resolution formally promised us. Instead of ultimate good triumphing over ultimate evil, our catharsis turns out to be a comparatively mundane domestic fantasy (i.e., behind every narco assassin like Sofi is a doting housewife waiting for the right guy to remove her Kevlar and dress her in bridal white). And though at first this seems like a rip-off, a congruent strain of misogyny, it is in fact more complicated, because for Felix to receive catharsis, he has to do the opposite of what we expect. He can't kill the wicked witch, but must accept her bargain. Which is to accept the bizarre physics that rule this outlived world: sentiment is energy, and violence, it turns out, is inertia.

On second thought, maybe this expired world is not so distant after all. Maybe, through the film's nostalgic lens, it resembles Mexico ten years earlier, when the cartels weren't at such brutal war and narcos and state officials conspired to guarantee public security. Perhaps this is something like the world that Javier Sicilia, poet of the drug war, revisions when he reminds narcos, "In days of old you had codes of honor. You were not so cruel in your paybacks and you did not touch the citizens nor their families."¹³

The deal Felix makes grants him a wife for the one he lost and while the substitutability of women for this role is indeed troubling, what's reassuring is the echo of Lucio's epigram in Felix's decision. That decision—the film's moral centerpiece—teaches us that when the world is corrupt, the ethical imperative is not a wholesale self-actualizing crusade against it (this would be something like the US model), rather it's to choose your own corruption and by default, your salvation. The new commandante will be nothing like his predecessor, the rapist Barrero: Felix will use his cartel funding to marry Sofi and live happily ever after. And his reward for choosing negotiation over violence, love over revenge, is the last five minutes of the film: an outpouring of nostalgia that curdles all logical progress. Kitsch: "a simple invitation to wallow in sentiment...instantaneous emotional gratification without intellectual effort."¹⁴ But even the cheesiest forms of escapism can also be kinds of survival.

And for audiences living in extreme circumstances—migrants, *campesinos*, maquila workers—wouldn't the maudlin be a useful catharsis? To people constantly put into situations that exploit the full value of their physical lives, might not there be remedial value in an overinflation of the sentimental? I'm not sure, and frankly I'm still not convinced how subversive this is, or why it should be. But what I can say that I've learned, as I refit my mask of the banal, the one with the tragic grin and the tiny plastic tag that says *Hecho en México*, is that this outlived world is richer than I'd originally thought.

And so if the analogy isn't too corny, or maybe because it's just corny enough, I invite you to put your narco mask back on and join me as we continue our study with a closer look at the history of narco cinema.

Two Foul Score of the Brothers Almada



Figure 3.1 *One harsh dose of catharsis*

Forty years of narco culture in the Americas and all the windows looking in are busted. Come see for yourself: four decades of shattered glass, long hats, severed limbs, perfect whiskers, rotten blood. Two foul score of outrageous fortune and untimely ends.

Generation, in the social sense, is the wrong frequency, a flawed measure for comparing the crumbling statues of local barons with the new likenesses growing their shadows in the plaza at sundown. The power that moves narcotics concentrates from something deeper than human, something deeply discordant. It overwhelms the cycle of fathers and sons and warps our fallacies to its own false ends, vanishing facts under a swirl of rumors and drowning us with facts where rumors alone might have pulled us through.

Economically we became more liberalized and we got to be more of a world. “Transculture” replaced “multiculture” in academese, *Atlas Shrugged* went from bad fiction to economic policy, the market duly shrugged off more of its regulatory restraints, and fences and factories rose along the border: intermittent miles of barbed wire and smokestack and chain link and metal plate wherever city faces city at the southern edge of the American experiment.

The peso fell again and again, throwing migrants further north with every plunge. THC levels surged in the Sierra Madre. Incalculable masses of methamphetamine, cocaine, heroin, and marijuana travelled north via jetliner, submarine, semi-trailer, SUV, backpack, brassier, and rectum only to disappear into bloodstreams under volleys of English swears. Ex-soldiers from the United States and Guatemala took mercenary work with the cartels.¹ So did Wall Street bankers, illiterate children, and Mexican technocrats.² Billions of laundered dollars accumulated behind grin-and-grip photographs in the vaults of institutions deemed “too big to jail.”³ America’s “War on Drugs” became “Mexico’s Drug War.”

40 years in and the data are more accessible than ever. Death tolls (120 thousand since 2006), munitions records (252 thousand American firearms into Mexico per annum).⁴ Hit men post brooding selfies on Instagram.⁵ Bloggers comment on cartel snuff with meteorological nonchalance. World leaders recycle bracing proverbs about culpability and action

every time tensions flare, the wrong man dies, or the right men die at record number. But the problem is too sublime for the sound bite. Just 140 characters won't do. Click and click and click all you like but the profile photo of President Peña Nieto's Facebook page yields only more profile photos.

To grasp what it means to be part of a narco culture, we need a medium more attuned to the fact-rumor continuum. A chronotope that can move from the speed of money to low-gear stoned and build up heroes in the unlikeliest disjunctions. A dependable narrative for the young, impoverished, and migrant masses, for just about anyone with enough Spanish who finds herself drawn to a more traditional tale—a beginning, a middle, and an end—that describes how we've gotten where we are.

In the 70s and 80s, these seekers gathered in borderland grindhouses like the Bay Theater in San Diego.⁶ In the 80s and 90s, in the *videotiendas* scattered throughout border states and wherever migrants communed and were undocumented together. Since the aughts, you'll find them rooting through bargain bins in big-box stores in the foul gun- and porn-shop of the heartland, or rolling view-counters on YouTube and leaving comments like, *chingona esta peli!*, or *mejor que scarface, cabrón!* And of course, this whole time, they've been watching in torture houses and private jets.

This isn't to suggest that migrants, narcos, and teenagers are of a maturity all compact. Rather it's that higher powers of the age occasionally (and unwittingly) conspire to cast disparate heroes into a singular mold. And, if I may direct your attention to the screen, there are four heroes in the red car—the gambler, the father, the dreamer, and the reveler— inching toward US patrolmen at the Brownsville-Matamoros border on a sunny afternoon in '76 and coming that much closer to delivering all us rebels one harsh dose of catharsis.

The film is *La banda del carro rojo*. The titular vehicle is a red Pontiac sedan with a hundred kilos of uncut cocaine

packed into its chassis and several handfuls of mud smeared across its body (to hide the bullet holes). One glance from the Border Patrol and it's waved into secondary inspection, this Pontiac Lazarus from the auto graveyard shuttling four weary Mexicans over to no good. This candy-apple behemoth that looks like it's been slimed by a jungle, dredged by a derby... "What happened to you?" the officers want to know. "We fell into a ditch."

That's Lino Quintana (Mario Almada) in the driver's seat: aviator glasses, buckaroo scarf, moustache so triangular it could be velcroed to his whittled face. It was Lino's idea to smuggle the *merca* to Chicago, this is his car, his crew—"the red car gang"—and because Lino is clearly the suavest customer straddling the Rio Grande right now, it's his job to flirt with Immigration. "Where are you coming from?" "We were in Matamoros with some *amigas*," he says, nodding.

The officers would like him to get out of the car.

Rodrigo (Fernando Almada) waits in the passenger seat. You can tell he's Lino's brother by the twin stache and the cool detachment, though if you look at his eyes closely, you'll see a flash of the fear he's carried up there for years now, ever since his daughter developed leukemia and made his single parenthood financially untenable. Rodrigo knows that if he's caught today, he won't be able to fund the medical treatment in Houston that will prolong her short life just a few more years, and that this will be one more failure on him, another swipe of *pocho* karma for leaving home in search of a better life in America that's been anything but.

The scrawny fellow in the backseat with the flat cap and itchy beard: that's Pedro (Pedro Infante Jr., son of the golden-age-cinema idol). Don't be fooled by the hipster duds: it's been nothing but cops and robbers for this *mojado non grata* since we met him 80 minutes ago, swimming across the river during the opening credits. This coke deal is his chance to rescue Juanita from poverty and make their Hollywood

dreams come true—he's no criminal at heart, you see; all he's ever wanted to do is entertain. But Boom (Jorge Patiño) beside him—there's the real actor. Ah, Boom, you chubby knucklehead, smiling groggily for *la migra* as if it were just another hangover that's troubling you and not the bullet you took in the shoulder two scenes ago, when Cantu's gunmen tried to hijack the car.

Lino opens the trunk and watches the officers dig through it. More than the others, it's Lino, the gambler, who understands the risks and stakes. That so much depends upon a red Pontiac glazed with mud and packed with white powder. The all-in on the last crappy hand. The final scratch line on the lottery ticket called *el norte*, destiny just one cracked liberty bell away.

Miraculously, after a few incontinent minutes, the car is waved through customs and it's back on the highway, the American vein. From here it's just a 1,500-mile cruise to Chicago where the crew will trade the red car for a small fortune and fall into step with polite society. Their dreams may seem unique, but they're really just variations on the American genre that migrants have been translating for generations. And their dreams might have been realized if Cantu, the wicked casino proprietor, weren't dialing 911 at this moment to tip off authorities to the contraband innards of a certain red sedan heading north on rural road 368. The gang has barely a second to breathe relief before a convoy of cruisers is waiting at their tail.

And we're zooming through funky town. The red car plunges across the plains, police cars in tow. A drum fill grooves a wah-wah onto Sesame Street, a Hammond chirps dirty on the one.

Ahead, four of Brownsville's finest have swiveled their cruiser into a makeshift roadblock and blast rifles at the red car, which spots them and swerves east onto a dirt road: a dead end.

Tires screech and peel earth, rifles boom in the distance, a Rhodes chases the Hammond over an Amen break. The red car circles and re-circles like a wounded animal, and freezes when the cruisers arrive. The doors fly open and each man dashes for an abandoned farmhouse, taking shelter behind a pile of scrap wood. Rounds of police fire rip ferociously into the carcass of the red car.

Surrounded, our heroes look at one another, knowing this is it. That there's only one way to go out. And that every shot they'll fire and every shot they'll take, they'll mean. That in a moment, they'll say "ay" and then nothing more. Ay: "There is no translation for this word," wrote Hemingway. "Perhaps it is just a noise such as a man might make, involuntarily, feeling the nail go through his hands and into the wood."⁷ And before you accuse me of machismo (kind of unfair, though, given my subject), it needs be said that these men are martyrs. For every migrant who's been screwed over by the gringos, for every Chicana exiled in her homeland—oh, what the hell—for every recently confirmed humanities doctor looking at life in adjunct limbo. Yes, the martyrdom of these men transcends even the 50-state minefield of race in modern America. ("Ready?" asks Lino.) Their standoff is a universal gesture that says, "man is not made for defeat."⁸ That says, "Vamos!" as the gang of four storms the battleground with guns raised and the afternoon stinging their eyes.

Pedro gets two shots off before a bullet catches his chest; he spirals to the grass and another shot takes him from behind. A triplet in the thorax sends Boom scrambling for cover inside the red car, where he'll bleed out over the driver's seat. Approximately ten-million rounds of machine-gun fire bring Rodrigo to his knees and another half million knock him on his face where his brother Lino has now fallen beside him.

And just like that it's over. The police hold their fire, the music stops. Only the sound of a dying car horn, depressed

by Boom's lifeless face, continues to score this carnage, an alarm buzzing between falling octaves, until that, too, finally ends.

The sheriff approaches Lino and raises him by the scarf. "Who is your boss?"

The camera closes in on Lino's face for his dying words, the film's last: "*Yo no sé cantar.*" He falls back to the earth.

Yo no sé cantar. "I don't know how to sing," as in, *I'm no snitch*. Though a more licentious translation, taking into account the steel in his eyes and the journey that's brought them here, might be something like, "A man can be destroyed but not defeated."⁹ But why keep soliciting Hemingway to sell this film; wouldn't it be enough to say it's got *Los Tigres del Norte*?

La banda del carro rojo (*The Red Car Gang*) is based on the eponymous narcocorrido by the legendary Paulino Vargas. The song, itself based loosely on the story of a South American drug smuggler gunned down by highway patrolmen in New Mexico,¹⁰ was an early hit for *Los Tigres*, the *norteño* group that appears three times in the film to relieve the *bowchikawahwah* soundtrack with their cheerful *tejano* sound. You'll find them in their youthful prime here: big smiles and red leisure suits with gangly lapels, working a smoky pool hall in the Brownsville barrio like it's their Ed Sullivan stage and setting a precedent for the *banda* interludes that mark narco cinema today.

Partly why the film has been fingered retrospectively as the genre's classical hit is because of such bellwether formulae: the script lifted from a popular drug ballad; the automobile as techno-equine protagonist; the sequels bundled into the storyline (it seems Pedro, against medical logic, was neither defeated nor destroyed by his gunshot wounds; he continued smuggling in the second of *Carro rojo*'s two follow-ups). And, of course, there's the brand of the Almadás, the action stars nonpareil of Mexican b-cinema.

Exactly how many films Mario Almada has appeared in is a matter of speculation. The actor himself once boasted a C.V. of 300+ “big movies” (shot on 35mm film) and 1,000+ direct-to-videos (shot on 16mm and digital video).¹¹ Journalists often credit him erroneously with a Guinness Record—“the most prolific living actor”—and though Guinness denies the win, his celebrity remains golden in narco culture.¹² At age 93, Mario is our cinema’s best-known and best-paid actor, commanding 55,000 pesos (about \$4,200 USD) per film.¹³ Fernando’s career has been less prolific (his IMDB profile lists only 150 films, still 113 more than Horacio, the Daniel Baldwin of this grizzled fraternity), but lately he’s made a comeback teaming up with Mario to defeat Chuck Norris in a series of Internet memes (#25: “Chuck Norris is the law, but the Almadás write the laws”; #50: “The Almadás once visited the Island of Women. Now it’s known as the Island of the Almadás’ Women”).¹⁴

Originally from Huatabampo, Sonora, a tiny pretty agricultural city off the Gulf of California, the Almadás entered the film industry in the mid-60s, writing, producing, and starring in traditional Western fare and sometimes receiving critical nods for their efforts. In 1970, Mario won a prestigious *Diosa de Plata* for his performance in *Todo por nada* (*All for Nothing*). The following year he won another for *El tunco Maclovio* (*One-Armed Maclovio*). Both pictures are late examples of the Mexican Western, the *charro* film of the golden age, with its serenading cowboys and post-revolutionary nostalgia. A cinema popularly (and officially) beloved and usually typified by its ability to combine “the *macho* ethos, and national ideals . . . to produce a male image that came to stand for the nation’s,” according to film scholar Charles Ramírez Berg.¹⁵

By the late 70s, however, drugs had begun to replace gold and cattle as cinema’s loot of choice and working-class machos

like Lino and Rodrigo Quintana were relieving Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata on the cultural battlefield, creating a new subgenre that quickly rose to prominence. This was the so-called *cabrito* Western, often filmed along the US border and especially popular among migrant audiences.¹⁶ Unlike their state-sponsored *charro* ancestors, the *cabritos* were firmly in the *churro* mold of filmmaking: hastily and formulaically produced by private studios for maximum profit.¹⁷

The *churro* had been around since the late 40s and had always appealed to a working-class fan base; serious directors and filmgoers stayed away.¹⁸ But during the presidential term of José López Portillo (1976–1982), when federal funding for cinema was all but eliminated, established directors turned to Televisa and other commercial studios and *churros* were often what they were asked to make.¹⁹ (Though, and this according to Mario Almada himself, if the studios weren't interested, drug lords were often happy to act as financiers.)²⁰

The effective privatization of cinema, carried out by Margarita López Portillo, director of Radio-Televisión-Cinema (and the president's sister),²¹ was one in a series of questionable economic reforms that earned President Portillo scorn from the intelligentsia (for crippling Mexican culture) and later from the pueblo (for bankrupting the country). At the end of his term, the peso had fallen from 22 to 150 on the US dollar²² and the *churro* had been elevated from lumpen crapola to a de facto national cinema.

It was from this uneasy, underfunded milieu that narco cinema emerged, along with companionably violent melodramas about migrant abuse, political scandal, the hard knocks of barrio life. And let's not forget the sexy-comedies, which also thrived in these risky times, and also hadn't escaped the lure of cinematic violence (an eyebrow-raising number of them revolve around lethal orgasms and suicidal impotence,

themes rather than mere plot points, which surely are in need of larger synoptic treatment from the brave scholar willing to fish a thesis out of Alfonso Zayas's back hair).

Low budgets and commercial incentives made this a promiscuous and proliferative era for Mexico's private-sector cinema and it wasn't unusual for actors and producers to swing between b-genres. By the 80s and 90s, sexy-comedies would take on narco themes, narco action films would poach actresses from the sexies and Hugo Stiglitz could be found hobnobbing with cuckolds, cartel bosses, and giant sharks all in a month's honest work. Nor was it unusual to find drug traffickers lounging around film sets, lobbying to get their molls in the pictures and pitching their extreme biographies to directors.²³ Rubén Benavides, one of *Carro Rojo*'s screenwriters, says that narcos would pay to see themselves portrayed heroically on film, stipulating only that their avatars didn't die in the end.²⁴ Director José Luis Urquieta claims that filmmakers could charge double for the chance to have that avatar kill Mario Almada.²⁵

Back to aesthetics for a moment: if the *charro* lent a historical ideology—the “macho ethos” of regional loyalty and outlaw valiance²⁶—narco cinema's sensationalism comes partly from the antidrug films of the 60s. Think *Touch of Evil* meets *Reefer Madness*: noir gangsters, cackling pre-Mansonian addicts. Sometimes *lucha libre* got involved and El Santo would put aside his differences with vampires and killer bees to give comeuppance to the drug lords. Mostly these films are unofficial PSAs warning viewers against the false promises of trafficking, the horrors of addiction, and, later, the evil that hippies that do. (It needs be mentioned that hippies can be a nasty subspecies of wookie in Mexican cinema—rapists and killers with a Viking disregard for their non-kith. In Juan Orol's *El fantástico mundo de los hippies* [*The Fantastic World of Hippies*, 1970], drug-dealing flower

children battle each other for market share with a brutality to rival the cartels to come, on- or off-screen.)

We might have begun our history lesson with one of these antidrug films or with an earlier *cabrito*. We could have started with *Pilotes de combate* (*Combat Pilots*, 1970), a film about three air force pilots infiltrating a cartel submarine—perhaps the first narco film proper (directed by *Carro rojo*'s Rubén Galindo). And though a few other narco films appeared in the early 70s,²⁷ it feels treasonous to name anything other than *Carro rojo* as the standard bearer. It's not only that the film captures the faulty promises of contemporary migration and trafficking just as poignantly as it summons the spirits of earlier border outlaws like Pancho Villa and Gregorio Cortez.²⁸ It's also that the film kicks tremendous ass. It's snazzy and sweet and ragtag, buck-naked and brokenhearted. An epic, though of a scale closer to that of *Waterfront* than *The Godfather*. Let's call it a subjunctive epic: its greatness resides in capability rather than fulfillment, or in the tragedy of an enormous capability backfiring.

But I'm making an aesthetic call when I'm supposed to be discussing history. In that case, I'll point out that the film's release coincided with the implementation of Operation Condor, the first major joint Mexican-US antidrug effort, which eradicated most of Mexico's marijuana and poppy farms, fueled bad blood between the narcos and the DEA, and culminated in this bit of synchronicity: two years after the red car gang's tragic end, on September 9, 1978, to be precise, there was another smuggler gunned down by police at a roadblock, also likely to have been set up by an underworld rival.²⁹ More than a smuggler, he was Pedro Avilés Pérez, Sinaloa's original godfather, who oversaw the first large-scale exportation of heroin, marijuana, and Colombian cocaine. The original trafficker of the people, and second

only to Jesús Malaverde in the Sherwood plantations of the narco imagination.

Avilés Pérez would receive biopic treatment in Jorge Reynoso's *La Clave 7* (*Code 7*, 1999), a popular piece of historical revisionism (cell phones and SUVs abound). But the synchronicity here—that a matter of police slugs and foul play could have sparked dual revolutions in narcotics and film within just two years—if it seems overly superstitious then it's as good as any introduction to the helical twining of fact and rumor that is popular narco cinema as we know it today.

In the following pages, I'll review some of the key events of the drug war and consider how narco cinema has evolved in response to them. While my movie list is far from exhaustive—most films are out of print with copies languishing in private collections—my hope is both that general readers will find an entertaining historical context for narco culture and that, over time, fans with ampler funding will be able to rescue some of the lost footage and add to (or reconstruct) this humble foundation.

Without further adieu, I enjoin you to fill your narco masks with popcorn and psyche yourselves sufficiently up, for if they haven't seemed so already, things are about to get very weird.

The 80s: I Want My Narco TV

As the 70s boogied into the 80s, private studios kept pumping out low-budget cinema and narcotic matter continued to trickle into its b-repertoire. 1983 was a particularly handsome year for our genre: the red car gang starred in 13 films (mostly separately), *La banda de la sotana negra* (*The Black Cassock Gang*) also tried their hands at drug smuggling, as did *El Cafre* (*The Madman at the Wheel*), but when the father of *Lola la trailerera* (*Lola the Truck-Driving Woman*)

was murdered for refusing to transport cocaine, Lola took the wheel and Lola got even. Tangentially related: an undead werewolf terrorized a small town in the western Sierra Madre, Alfonso Zayas got into all kinds of sexy mischief, and migrants continued to battle the KKK (border cinema's dependable figurehead for Anglo aggression).

Mexico's drug lords, meanwhile, were busy expanding their sphere of influence beyond rural Sinaloa. The death of Avilés Pérez had left an international and dazzlingly remunerative empire up for grabs and it wasn't long before three of his partners rose to divide the spoils: Ernesto Fonseca Carillo (A.P.'s treasurer, a pioneer in cocaine smuggling whose nephew would later run the Juárez Cartel), Miguel Angel Félix Gallardo (a former state police officer and CIA cooperative) and Rafael Caro Quintero (the second-gen trafficker from the mountains of Badiraguato who, in 1985, would become poster boy for the whole racket).³⁰

With Avilés Pérez out of the picture, and thanks to DEA-funded military sweeps of drug farms in the Golden Triangle (Sinaloa, Durango, and Chihuahua), the three bosses not-so-quietly moved their headquarters to Guadalajara and from here—the glamorous urban center far from their small hometowns (pop: kith and kin)—they began to professionalize their industry on an unprecedented scale. They expanded production of heroin and marijuana, they struck loftier deals with the Colombian coke cartels (who, beleaguered by confiscations in Miami, were desperate for new shipping routes to the United States) and they diversified their billion-dollar portfolios by investing in hotels, nightclubs, and other luxurious fronts.³¹

The systemic integration of narco dollars into the federal economy also meant that, for the first time, the cartels were able to broker influence in the highest government offices.³² And if the rumor is true, the Guadalajara Cartel didn't have to lobby very hard. Between 1982 and 1986, the peso fell to

925 on the dollar and national debt rose to \$102 billion.³³ President Miguel de la Madrid, desperate for economic stability, allegedly agreed that if the cartel kept its money in the ruined Mexican banks, authorities would turn a blind eye to trafficking and also, presumably, to the grotesque and increasingly more public nature of cartel retaliation.³⁴

Pop culture wasn't as forgiving. By the mid-80s, the bed-fellowship of narcos and feds provided regular fodder for the tabloids, and filmmakers, perhaps emboldened (and definitely soured) by state budget cuts, took to addressing the conspiracy on equally lurid terms.³⁵ *Lo Negro del Negro* (*The Black Side of Blackie*, 1984) and *Verdugo de traidores* (*Executioner of Traitors*, 1986), for example, showcased police corruption, while *Escuadrón de la muerte* (*Squadron of Death*, 1984) and *El Narco—duele rojo* (*The Narco—Red Duel*, 1985) focused on political ties to the drug world.

Lo Negro is noteworthy for the scandal it caused in fabricating the misdeeds of Arturo “Negro” Durazo, Mexico City police chief and lifelong friend of president (and cinema-defunder) López Portillo. Mexican-film scholar David Wilt identifies the film as a key example of the “reality-based” exploitation genre, a genre whose implied verisimilitude is less to real events than to the sensationalist account the tabloids had given them (the film’s codirector was better known as publisher of the scandal sheet *Alarma!*).³⁶

But if Durazo’s crimes caused a scandal, it would be nothing compared to what happened when a DEA agent ran afoul of the Guadalajara Cartel. A murder case that sold more videos in Mexico and raised the ire of more God-fearing Americans than any drug event in the decade. A case with all the gruff fatalism of a corrido: the ballad of Kiki and Caro. And not only in Mexico could its maudlin chorus be heard.

It seems that around the start of every decade, a couple Hollywood executives suddenly recall how close they are to the border and how much of their industry is fueled by

cocaine and so decide to cook up another batch of that perennial blockbuster formula: America vs. the cartels. A *Times* bestseller is consulted, a liberal director approves a script, a phone call to Benicio del Toro is placed and, voilà, Americans get *Traffic* (2000) and *Savages* (2012) to thumb their way through the labyrinth of the Mexican underworld and out into the dawn of a new day. In 1989, that film was *Drug Wars: The Camarena Story*, a three-part Movie of the Week that recounts the murder of Agent Enrique “Kiki” Camarena and then, for three more hours, the bureaucratic snafu to apprehend his killers.

The film begins in Guadalajara, 1984, where Camarena (Steven Bauer) is undercover and on the trail of the elusive Rafael Caro Quintero (Benicio del Toro). For months now, Kiki’s been working over his sources for tips about a giant sensamilla plantation in the Chihuahuan desert (in real life, Rancho Búfalo: 12 square kilometers toiled by thousands of *campesinos* and guarded by Mexican DFS)³⁷ while Caro’s been living fat on transit fees from the Medellín Cartel and brokering \$48 million protection deals with the Mexican feds. He’s also been partying like a former child star, filling nightclubs and mansions with his sordid entourage and, every chance he gets, spitting radicalisms about US imperialism (“I’m a fighter for the people against social injustice!”). When the gallant Kiki leads an international bust on their pot plantation, Caro et al. are outraged. Using their government connections, they kidnap Kiki and torture him for days before giving him a snitch’s burial. From here on in, it’s up to Craig T. Nelson (ABC’s *Coach*!) and his crack team of agents to locate the fugitive Caro and see that justice is served.

Drug Wars isn’t a terrible film. It’s a long film and an Emmy winner (should this mean anything to you). At moments it begins to question some of the unseemly exigencies of Reaganomic policy—Wall Street’s proficiency at drug-money laundering; the political ties between the CIA and the

Guadalajara Cartel, which supported America's grudge match against the Sandinistas (most of Kiki's torturers had received CIA training)³⁸—but only insofar that they stymie the good DEAs from rounding up their men. Such big-ticket antinomies, veritable quicksand to a narrative of US innocence, are most often left as asides, the better to argue that government corruption in Mexico is endemic and in the United States it's, well, complicated. When Coach and co. kidnap a suspect in Mexico for extradition (two suspects in real life: Humberto Alvarez-Macháin, an obstetrician, and Rene Marin Verdugo, a suspected smuggler, both implicated in Kiki's murder) it doesn't play as a controversial breach of international law, it's the film's heroic final act (in real life, the cases against both men were dismissed; Macháin later sued the DEA and won \$25 thousand in damages).³⁹

And then there's the matter of Caro's philanthropy, which was much touted in Mexico (this is the guy who offered to pay off the national debt in exchange for his freedom), but in *Drug Wars* is constituted by scenes of the young capo tossing wads of pesos debaucherously outside a nightclub and, later, wielding a fishbowl of car keys and offering scrambles keep-sies to the club rats who groove in his limelight. His Robin Hood gestures are wildly narcissistic and otherwise meaningless. His smile always keens to a bray. When he tells Nielsen families that he wants "to steal a little bit of their souls" by flooding the United States with cheap cocaine, what evidence is there to doubt such *mephistophelismo*?

Of course, what he has taken is the life of a federal agent, an unprecedented move in the drug war, and I won't be so cynical as to disrespect the grief this caused Camarena's family and colleagues, just as I wouldn't disrespect the memory of US Customs Agent Jaime Zapata, murdered in 2011 by the Zeta Cartel, or that of Lesley A. Enriquez, the pregnant consulate worker gunned down a year earlier outside the US embassy in Ciudad Juárez⁴⁰; or the memories of the countless

Mexican casualties from every social level, even if their murders receive comparatively trivial media coverage (and certainly no national scandal on par with Kiki's). The narco industry is a brutal one, and true humanism doesn't grade on a curve.

But in *Drug Wars* it most certainly does. Shades of grey are smeared hurriedly toward black or white and this itself disserves Kiki's memory by turning him into an American Santo. It really does appear this basic, even at the physical level. Watching Kiki and Caro square off is watching a fixed fight between two versions of Latino masculinity. The Mexican rep looks like Sid Vicious masking as Leisure Suit Larry while the American is unmistakably the legitimate son of Jose Canseco and the Statue of Liberty. One uses the dance floor as rapist showroom; the other is a committed family man who actually dreams about returning stateside to mow his lawn. Both men come from below, both have overcome their hardscrabble beginnings, but only Kiki can move smoothly between the barrio and high office (just as we can, by watching him); Caro is just an evil bumpkin at heart. And while I have nothing but respect for del Toro's thespian skills, and am well aware of his power to vaporize 99 percent of those who (or who would like to) sleep with men, it needs be said that the producers left his Caro no room for character development, which means that instead of a 32-year-old billionaire at the head of an international empire, we get a 21-year-old skeezoid pipsqueak with no redeeming qualities, no professional acumen, no remorse, indeed, no self-consciousness at all. A "savage," Kiki calls him.

And if while watching this film you find that your eyes have narrowed into fine slits and your teeth are self-pestling and you are very much partaking in some of Coach's principled rage, I'd like to offer you a few character resurrections from the annals of narco cinema: a few films which, if they don't exactly sway your perception of Caro toward the pantheon,

will at least present you with an alternative story, if one just as partisan as *Drug Wars*.

La Mafia Tiembla (*The Mafia Trembles*, 1987), and its sequel (1989) are both fine Caro Quintero films, emeritus lionizations of the man who used to feed live traitors to his lions.⁴¹ Today we'll consider *Maten al fugitivo: La fuga de Caro* (*Kill the Fugitive: The Escape of Caro*, 1987), a prison-break film about a popular drug lord violently confounding the American paramilitary squad tasked with his apprehension. Lest anyone confuse Rafael Caro Quintero with the film's "Ramiro Cano Quintana" (played by the muscular, soft-faced Rolando Fernández), the film opens with the standard "any resemblance to real persons" disclaimer. However, given the oddity of the film we are about to see, this disclaimer reads less like liability insurance than a statement of artistic vision.

By the year of *Maten*'s release, media infatuation with the Camarena case had made Caro a narco celebrity, second internationally to Colombia's Pablo Escobar. Much of the sensationalism in the Mexican tabloids resided in his relationship with Sara Cosío Martínez, the 17-year-old niece of a former state governor and PRI boss. It was alleged, especially by the Cosío family, that Caro kidnapped her—twice (the second time on his escape to Costa Rica)—though gossip had it the affair was happily mutual.⁴² It was even commonplace, if slightly insane, to blame Cosío for his downfall (see, for ex., *Los Tigres'* corrido "El R-Uno").⁴³

Like a good tabloid, the film leaps into this scandal at once. We meet a sedate Cano, composed in suit and tie, sitting beside his lawyer in the courthouse, waiting for the judge to dismiss the paparazzi and call his trial to order. The lawyer leans toward Cano to reiterate their defense strategy, "Deny everything." Cano nods solemnly, eyeing the floor.

But when the judge starts droning a list of charges against him—"international drug trafficking"—Cano, the lover, begins to stir in his seat—"arms possession"—because he

can't help flashback to the last time with Diana—"falsifying documents"—the leggy vision of her on the chaise longue, her famished eyes and Bon Jovi coiffure—"kidnapping"—one silk shoulder strap, two silk shoulder straps slipping downward—"corrupting a minor"—her neck bending cygneously to his nettled maw—"Do you plead guilty to these charges, Sr. Ramiro Cano?"—a great speedy unsheathing feeling, when—"Yes. Yes! Yes!!!" Cano cries out breathlessly to a stunned courtroom. His lawyer rises. Flashbulbs expire in the gallery. There's nothing Cano can do now other than wait quietly for the bailiffs to escort him from this carnal memory to a holding cell.

Not only does this early conceit declare a dissenting verdict on the amicability question (unlike her avatar in *Drug Wars*, a manhandled love object whose only words in film—"Caro Quintero"—identify her captor to the DEA, Quintana's girl, Diana [Diana Ferreti], is a randy participant in their sexual escapades), it also alerts us that the film is prepared to stretch the limits of reality-based filmmaking far into the gonzo zone (and boy, oh boy, the places it will go).

Now that that girl part's out of the way, the film is free to drop the corsage and really get in touch with its inner Destro. With the aid of some roughnecks, Cano breaks out of a prisoner-transport bus and, via Benz and helicopter, beats a high-speed retreat from the ensuing police. This is more like it. Gunshots and revving cylinders and car bombs and smithereens that fill the screen. Nine whole minutes of carnivorous velocity, body count: 41. And Cano's barely cracked the arsenal that is the film's plot. Once the helicopter places him at the edge of a jungle, he and a squad of American commandos continue this cat-and-mouse along the muddy deltas of Stallone County, Oaxaca, Cano goluptiously demonstrating his expertise with rocket launchers, grenades, semi-automatics, fisticuffs, the speedboat (as weapon), and besting the Americans at every turn.

At least I think they're American—their leader, Col. Castro (Frank Moro), resides in Miami and takes orders from a US senator (I suspect the colonel is meant to evoke Caro's famous Latino nemesis from north of the border). What I am sure of is that these commandos are a ruthless bunch, far worse than *Drug Wars's* cartel. In one scene, two of the soldiers stick knives inside a small boy's mouth to carve out information on Cano's whereabouts. In another, the colonel's tracking dogs, two cuddly li'l scrappers, are caught taking a rest and then promptly machine-gunned for insubordination.

Not to undermine the obscenity of a forced glossectomy, but because it's always more sinking to see cinematic animals give up the ghost than any from the human ensemble, no viewer could by this point resist appointing Cano to honor the memory of those poor dogs by using all the weapons at hand to cut a clean path from our denial to vicarious vengeance. And off he goes: setting traps, blowing heads off, thumbing his nose in retreat. He breaks the greatest of school-yard taboos by making Castro drink his urine (symbolically, that is: a scene in which Cano goes for a pee match-cuts to Castro guzzling a tall stream from his canteen). Surely even the most hateful minuteman could belly up a grunt or two out of respect for a mission mercilessly accomplished.

In the final act, a wounded Cano stumbles into a medical colony in the middle of the jungle. Here, over a brief convalesce, he manages to win the heart of the coy and lovely Dr. Wendy (Rosa Gloria Chagoyán) and prove himself an indispensable part of her pastoral community by offering her patients intermediate lessons in mechanical engineering; by assisting Wendy in major surgery ("You should be a doctor," she tells him, hers a jealous awe); and by encouraging the local children to stay away from drugs. How could they have ever gotten along without him? When Col. Castro finally arrives, the villagers rally to Cano's side with bows and arrows, but to no avail. In the end, Cano is gunned down trying to rescue

one of the women he loves. The camera freezes on Dr. Wendy clutching an infirm boy to her breast, both of them crying out in grief for the death of a great man called Ramiro Cano Quintana. End scene.

It's fun to speculate if this vanity porn were funded by Caro himself. Before his arrest, Caro had propositioned the Almada brothers about opening a film studio together (the brothers politely declined),⁴⁴ so the chance of Caro acting as silent donor is not unfounded (though, for the record, I have no proof). But it does belie the point, as if DIY propaganda were less authentic or resonant. The film's popularity suggests it hit a mark among a Latino public fed up with the official narrative of American bravado. By way of pissing contest, the film counters that Caro is the real hero/victim of this debacle, the Mexican underdog fighting against an armed ganglia of American power. And even though the film scans like a creative-writing assignment from juvie, its message is essentially no different than that of *Drug Wars*: sometimes one man, one great man, can make a world of difference. A man who is great with the resources of the DEA or the Guadalajara Cartel at his disposal, but even craftier when he has nothing. A friend to the commoner, a leader of his peers, but depending on which theatre you're in, that great man is either all-American or all-Mexican and the spectator has to choose sides.

The antipodes are just as proscribed in a spate of bizarrely revisionist films featuring Kiki as central protagonist. *Camarena Vive!* (*Camarena Lives!*, 1990) and *La Venganza de Camarena* (*The Vengeance of Camarena*, 1992) played to the popular conspiracy that Kiki was alive and working as a drug smuggler in the United States (a theory put forth by former Interpol-Mexico chief Miguel Aldana Ibarra and reported widely by the state press).⁴⁵ The other film, *El secuestro de Camarena* (*The Kidnapping of Camarena*, 1985), produced just six months after Kiki's disinterment,⁴⁶ tells

the story of a “George” Camarena searching for the drug lord who kidnapped his cousin (evidently it was based on a telephone gameplay of the particulars). Each of these films conscripts Kiki into a national project of sorts: the 90s films continue to play up US hypocrisy (Kiki here is in cahoots with Caro himself); and *El secuestro* tells the story of a native son rediscovering his homeland (and rejecting his US roots, symbolized by the Chicana wife who refuses to bear him children or to attend the AA meetings from which she would most certainly benefit).

While we could have hours of snarky fun watching any of the above, I’d like to conclude instead by looking at a third genre to tackle the Camarena affair: the *campesino* film, examples of which include *Operación Mariguana* (duh, 1985) and *Yerba Sangrieta!* (Bloody Weed!, 1986). The former tells the story of Macario (Mario Almada), a recently deported migrant searching for his 13-year-old son among the farmworkers of a *sensamilla* plantation and battling the pitiless cadre of narcos who control it. The plantation, a green oasis in the yellow Chihuahuan desert, is based on Rancho Búfalo, the most infamous of the Guadalajara Cartel’s grow-ops. Before it was destroyed during a federal raid in 1984, Búfalo measured 12 square kilometers (the size of three-and-a-half Central Parks), and employed up to 12 thousand laborers.⁴⁷

Over a maudlin sunny harmonica-led score, Macario sets off from his hometown on a bus full of agricultural laborers and arrives at the ranch late one stormy night. The foreman, a burly Sgt. Santa Claus in a rain-slicked leather poncho, lines up the shivering arrivals and selects the firmest men for his fields. The young and elderly and sick are cast out into the rain-hammered darkness beyond the gate. At dawn, harvest begins: the laborers chop and bundle marijuana stocks while armed guards stand by, lending a draconian air to the camp’s inhospitality. The heat scorches, the tortillas are Dickensianly

rationed, fights break out randomly among the semi-starved, a snakebite puts a juvenile on his deathbed. If this weren't bad enough, working conditions take a turn for the unbearable when the laborers learn they won't be paid for their service. "We're used to be screwed over, but not like this... We're better off working in the States!" cries one of the bolder men. But his field machete is no match for the guards' AKs and the workers have no choice but to sulk back to the field.

The US comparison is telling, if by now slightly overwrought. It comes across much more artfully in the film's opening scene, in which a group of exhausted peasants, camped in a creosote flat, are roused by the spotlights of two pickup trucks. Before the *campesinos* have time break out of their sleeping bags, the truckers open fire. Cameras zoom in on the youngest of the blood-webbed brown faces; every last one dead.

For 80s moviegoers acquainted with our genre, the assumption is that the killers are either Border Patrol or KKK (or both). Once Macario arrives at the plantation, we recognize that the men were really narcos killing their fugitive slaves, but nevertheless the analogy persists: in the miserable living conditions, the harsh indifference of the bosses, the eugenic selection of the ablest men for the fields (the rest denied entry), the sense of social as much as geographical estrangement (the plantation is surrounded by 200 km of family-rending desert)—we are in a world very similar to the one that exiled Macario in his backstory.

I don't mean to suggest the film is invincibly melancholy. After Macario is caught poking around the foreman's office, he is roped to the hood of a truck and raced jouncily through the arroyo toward his burial plot, whence a violent reversal of fortune conscripts the remaining foremen into a long game of *Die Hard*, Macario pouncing from camp to camp, collecting leads on his son's whereabouts, and Almadaesquely defeating any narcos unlucky enough to interfere.

But action aside, the film's heart is in the campfire scenes, the moments when Macario breaks bread with fellow laborers, and listening to tales of their woe, becomes momentarily unburdened of his colossal solitude and vengeful needs. Here the film summons that Steinbeckian tension between populist hope and historical despair, and thus here it explicitly condemns Mexico's growing dependence on *el norte* and narcotics, equally alienating economies that destroy families and exploit laborers according to the logic of the free market.

Needless to say, the film is virulently antidrug. The maniacal scene in which a local inebriate corrupts Macario's son with a puff of his funny cigarette belongs to the archives of antidrug-film hysterodelia. And it's no accident that the father-and-son reunion occurs right after the army arrives to free the slaves and firebomb the crops. Macario is given the honor of torching a mound of the evil weed and through the pursuant billows of black smoke, the son's eyes meet the father's, the harmonica swells over strings.

I find myself wary of championing *Operación Mariguana* because that feels too easy. Here are all the right ingredients for a four-star academic swoonfest: the ending that eschews violent for emotional resolution; the narrative evolution from law of the father to bond of the family ("Let's go home to mom," Macario tells his boy as they walk away from the bonfire); and again, there's that didactic foreground of *campesino* exploitation and the tidy conflation of narcotics and migration.

And yet, while the rebel in me wants to find something bold to say about *Maten al fugitivo*—how Caro's final Robin Hood act was to entertain the masses on screen and how the performance works like moonshine in bad blood and what's so wrong with that?—I also know that I'd be deluding myself to say *Operación* isn't the better picture. In the mid-80s, when 40–50 percent of Mexicans lived outside the national

economy,⁴⁸ to make the DEA or the Guadalajara Cartel the noble underdog, to lionize a man of the people rather than the people themselves seems questionable moral infrastructure. *Operación* does what the Kiki and Caro films do separately: it checks both narco *and* American hubris and it does so with a simple grace and an Almada brother—shouldn't this be enough?

Besides, I have a feeling that we might be seeing more of Caro in the years to come. In August 2013, after serving 28 years of his 40-year sentence, Rafael Caro Quintero was released from prison, inflaming the old tensions and evoking the old martyr north of the border ("We are reminded every day of the ultimate sacrifice paid by DEA Special Agent Enrique 'Kiki' Camarena," said a DEA spokesperson upon Caro's release, "and we will vigorously continue our efforts to ensure Rafael Caro Quintero faces justice.")⁴⁹ Now, with a \$5 million bounty for information on his whereabouts (funds payable by the US State Department), Caro may have another movie in him yet.⁵⁰ I know I'll stay tuned.

In the decade to come, when the Guadalajara Cartel splinters and new barons arise in the plaza, and on screen, to overshadow Caro's legend; when the drug war becomes more brutal two decades on, and narco films devote more and more of their budgets to showcasing the gory specifics, it's nice to remember the ending of *Operación Mariguana*: a montage of newsreel footage of the real Búfalo bust that cuts to a scene at a train station, where a TV reporter catches Macario on the platform and folds a microphone into his resigned face. "In light of this very unpleasant experience, is there anything you'd like to say to the public?" A shaken Macario fumbles his words, but gets them out. "We'll go back to our homes, and, well...never again sow that damned weed!" Gripping his son's shoulders, he leads a group of ragged children aboard the homebound express and leaves us here in good moral standing.

This is a nice scene. Its antidrug message comes more in the spirit of César Chavez than Nancy Reagan and out of the last decade in which drugs could be distinguished as a Mexican export and an American vice. But before I pass out the hankies, I should probably mention that the film's director, José Luis Urquieta, good-humoredly admits that his collaborator, Reyes Montemayor, paid for his films with narco money. And that Montemayor, who produced several classic narco films in the 70s and 80s, would end the decade behind bars for trafficking cocaine.⁵¹

The 90s: The Lord and the Ant

I want a hero. An uncommon want, I know. Heroes abound these days in the cultural organs that still serve them. Lately it seems that every month a new narco is tapped for his misdeeds and appointed to churn gossip in the people's cauldron. The Mexican tabloid, *Carlos Monsiváis* once wrote, is known for elevating lurid crimes to Olympian heights: "[transforming] morality into legend...through a combination of 'unforgettable characters' and anecdotes."⁵² Sounds good to me—I'll take one of those, a character, a legend, or else this subchapter will shrivel into a footnote faster than you can say, "light up a stage and wax a chump like a candle"⁵³ (as I was known to say—to *dare*—to my puberty-pocked reflection many a Friday night around the decade's turn).

The problem is that we hit a dry spell after the Camarena affair. Narco cinema would continue to rehash its old formulae—the corrido interludes, the wheel-of-fortune motifs, the Almada shootouts—and producers were happy to promote tales of Colombia's fallen drug lords. But not until the late 90s would a Mexican antihero emerge as notorious and truly film-worthy as Caro. There was plenty of lore to work with, and plenty of money available for directors willing to gussy up a middling desperado. In 1991, for example, *Carro*

rojo-writer Rubén Benavides was commissioned by trafficker Oliverio Chávez Araujo to direct *Eslabón (Scorpion)*, a biopic about Araujo's late brother and smuggling partner.⁵⁴ But as a rule, high-ranking narcos now eschewed the kind of publicity given to their celebrity forbearer, and with good reason.

In the wake of his incarceration, Caro's partners were rounded up and convicted for their involvement in Camarena's murder (Ernesto Fonseca Carillo in 1985 and Miguel Angel Félix Gallardo four years later). In 1989, the remaining grandees of the Guadalajara Cartel gathered for a weeklong summit in Acapulco to modernize the *jus in bello* and divide the republic according to the old blood.⁵⁵ Félix Gallardo's nephews headed northwest to found the Tijuana Cartel (and inspire a film trilogy in *Los más buscados*, [*The Most Wanted*], 2004–2005).⁵⁶ The 31-year-old Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán placed his bid for Sinaloa (beginning a career that would land him on such prestigious lists as the FBI's most wanted and *Forbes's* most powerful). Longtime independent Juan García Abrego brought his Gulf Cartel into the fold and Fonseca Carillo's nephew, Amado Carillo Fuentes, was sent back to Chihuahua to continue his apprenticeship with veteran smuggler Pablo Acosta, "the Ojinaga Fox," and where, within five years, he would turn his snatch of the empire into the biggest cartel the world has ever known. When the capos convened again in 1994, it was Carillo setting the agenda.⁵⁷ Stay tuned.

By today's standards, diplomacy among the cartels was practically Augustan. Bosses collaborated on cocaine brokerage with the now friable Colombians; they shared informants, police protectors, and hit men; they established tariffs on narcotics moving through their turfs; all in all, they maintained a highly lucrative peace.⁵⁸ Still, disputes occasionally tested the alliance (and compelled media attention). When a mini-war for shipping routes broke out between the Sinaloa and Tijuana Cartels, what started as a quiet inter-narco

skirmish soon exploded into an international tragedy when Cardinal Posadas Ocampo was accidentally gunned down at the Guadalajara International Airport in 1993.⁵⁹ Narco cinema responded months later with *La Muerte de un cardenal* (*The Death of a Cardinal*, 1993). Chapo Guzmán was apprehended and sentenced to 20 years in federal prison for the murder (though in 2001, he made a harrowing getaway, which can be seen in that year's *La Fuga del Chapo* [*Chapo's Escape*]). But by and large, peace and quiet were the orders of the day.⁶⁰ We'll have to wait until the decade's end for fate to give us a satisfying legend.

The American press, meanwhile, had chosen its own Mexican for canonization: a 40-year-old diminutive light-skinned fellow with an easy smile and a ring of lanugo around his ample pate. A career politician from a family of old politics and older money who had once migrated (legally) to complete graduate studies at Harvard and who ran his campaign for the 1988 presidential election on the promise of bringing Mexico into the global economy.⁶¹ The prime mover of NAFTA, a one-time contender for *Time's* Man of the Year, WTO darling, apple of Kissinger's eye.⁶² In Mexico he was known as *la hormiga atónita*, "the atomic ant." Or sometimes as just "the ant." "That sobriquet reflects not only the traditional Mexican irreverence toward authority," beamed *The New York Times* in 1987, "but also recognizes the energy, drive and persistence that are the main components of Mr. Salinas's public image."⁶³

Hindsight, of course, is a son of a bitch: we know now that, despite spawning 22 billionaires, Mexico's GDP didn't grow at all during the Salinas presidency.⁶⁴ A month after he left office in 1994, the peso and minimum wage fell by more than half, the country entered an extended fiscal crisis (requiring a \$50 billion bailout package from its new NAFTA partners), and, thanks to Salinas's discontinuation of agricultural subsidy programs, drug cultivation would continue to expand

throughout the impoverished countryside, making narcotics one of the last secure means of economic mobility for millions living in Mexico.⁶⁵ Morality into legend and how.

Mexicans were shrewder in their vetting, however, which is why they didn't elect Carlos Salinas de Gortari in the first place (it's roundly accepted that a well-timed "computer glitch" saved him and his long-ruling PRI Party from a catastrophic defeat, although who can say for sure? Salinas had the ballots burned after he took office).⁶⁶ Once in power, Salinas wasted no time in implementing his neoliberal policies and rewarding his campaign supporters with generous opportunities in the new technocracy. He privatized or bankrupted 85 percent of public infrastructure and 30 of his closest allies walked away with extremely remunerative chunks of the old establishment, one of which chunks happened to include the state's media holdings.⁶⁷

This meant yet another blow to the national film industry. Just when Mexico was undergoing a cinematic renaissance in the Nuevo Cine movement (Alfonso Cuarón, Carlos Carrera, and Maria Novaro premiered their first features during Salinas's presidency) the government was striking off the last of its cultural-protectionist measures. Soon, without state subsidies, local theatres fell to the multiplex, making movie-going too expensive for the working class,⁶⁸ and quotas on Mexican content in theatres were removed (according to NAFTA protocol), ensuring that Hollywood dominated the box office.⁶⁹

However this hurt more conventional and auterish films, narco cinema, now forced into the fertile grounds of home video, thrived, and multiplied like a wet mogwai (around 200 new *videohomes* were released each year).⁷⁰ In fact, purists will argue that our history begins here—that the 35mm theatrical release we looked at earlier are not actually narco films, but expensive precursors to the VHS cassettes that started appearing in video stores in the late 80s. These were

cheap, risk-averse independent productions, most of them shot on 16mm over the course of a few weeks on budgets of \$50,000 to \$85,000; family members and familiar real estate provided cast and setting, a trend that continues today; and the producers' fiscal sense always trumped the director's vision,⁷¹ which meant that when a scandal hit the tabloids, the cinematic response tended to be kneejerk rather than cerebral in order to get it on the shelves pronto.

Needless to say, many of the 90s *videohomes* are...just awful. Some have production values on par with *Martian Fresh!: Beyond the Third Vector* (1990), the indie sci-fi I shot as a ten-year-old on an uncle's camcorder. Many of the non-narco *videohomes* (also much in the spirit of *Martian Fresh!*) are shamelessly derivative of contemporary American blockbusters; others are uniquely depraved. There are psychopaths, papacides, scamping vampires ("scampires"?), droopy boom mics, narcoleptic background extras who engage the camera in impromptu staring contests. There's a three-foot E.T. named Danik with weird spacy powers and the distinctly telluric ability to transform me into a sobbing infant. There's an actress (not a character) called "Princesa Lea."

I don't mean to imply that only Mexican b-movies were so appalling or expropriative (Turkish cinema is now infamous for its campy knockoffs, thanks to the Internet). And if you ever visited a North American video store in the 90s, you'll recall a host of US-produced straight-to-video garbage lining the shelves; every culture poops. My point is that if narco cinema emerged as a subgenre of border cinema in the 70s and 80s, a cinema with very modest studio budgets and a *charro* heritage, its aesthetic (and pecuniary) correlative in the 90s became the ultracheap, sell-the-box-before-the-film *videohome*: lewd, gory, and often utterly bananas. Now there were narco satanists; mohawked narcos on motorbikes hightailing it out of an approximate Thunderdome. All the processed cheeses melted together. In 1991, Mario Almada was battling

a drug-running union boss in *Muerte en Tijuana*, but he was also chasing fortune and glory in *Tijuana Jones*.

That such a shift (let's go ahead and call it a decline) occurred during the Salinas *sexenio* is fitting, not only because the 90s films, with their low-cost assembly and broad market appeal, with their perennial moral of cunning individuals thwarting the state, are saturated in the free-market logic that drove his economic policy; it's also fitting because, like the *videohome* itself, the Salinas family had a considerable investment in the labor of narcos.

Early in his term, Carlos Salinas waved a few red flags by accepting campaign donations from known drug traffickers and by appointing one of Kiki Camarena's alleged torturers as his secretary of education.⁷² Nevertheless, it was Raúl Salinas, Carlos's older brother, who turned out to be the black sheep. In 1995, when Swiss police began following the \$85 million in his bank account, they were led to an additional 288 bank accounts around the globe, raising his unexplainable income to a total of \$500 million. Most of the money, the police concluded, had come from drug bribes: "When Carlos Salinas de Gortari became President...in 1988, Raúl...assumed control over practically all drug shipments through Mexico."⁷³

One rumor had it that the bribes he received from the Juárez Cartel went through the federal police to the deputy attorney general, a Salinas relation by marriage.⁷⁴ Though another rumor had it that the leader of that cartel, now by far the most powerful cartel in Mexico, would meet with the president directly in his office at Los Pinos.⁷⁵ That leader was a Sinaloan transplant in his early forties, the son of impoverished farmers, and the nephew of a Guadalaran capo. His net worth was now \$25 billion USD and, more than anything, he valued privacy.⁷⁶

Few pictures of him exist. He prohibited publicity under penalty of death. (His domestic servants say he resembled "the

heroes in old Mexican movies...with a big moustache.)”⁷⁷ But if we fast-forward to the summer of ’97, when he’s dying on an operating table in a Mexico City maternity hospital, there’s nothing he can do to prevent the cameras from stealing in.⁷⁸ And I think by now he’s ready for a couple close-ups.

The Lord of the Skies is a dapper lord. Tall and swarthy; lean, but solid. His face is one of those so-handsome-it’s-almost-ugly faces that line the walls of Italian barbershops, complete with requisite cop moustache and a single dark wave of digit-drowning hair. About his musky décolletage dangles a gold letter “A” á la Carrie Bradshaw. “A” for “Antonio Fontes Canseco,” narco cinema’s premier Amado Carillo Fuentes, in *El Señor de los cielos* (*The Lord of the Skies*, 1997). In the film’s opening scene, we meet Canseco (Miguel Ángel Rodríguez) entering the hospital for facial reconstructive surgery. That anyone this good-looking would be forced to pursue a disguise is the greatest injustice this film and its two sequels permit.

The Lord of the Air, on the other hand, is played by Jorge Reynoso. Which isn’t to say necessarily that Jorge Reynoso—whose dimensions suggest a modest duplex and whose eyebrows are furrier than President Salinas’s whole body (one surmises)—isn’t handsome. Let’s say instead that Reynoso’s looks are of a rougher genre. He has a giant’s affability. He’s even sort of cuddly, which, though it doesn’t go far in interpellating his bruiser persona when the time comes that a *cabrón* needs stitches, makes him seem the bruiser you’d feel least intimidated by when he noogies your head a little roughly in friendship. He seems big-souled. He could also hold his own against any Almada at a fan convention, but that doesn’t mean he cuts a dashing Carillo in *El Capo de capos* (*The Boss of Bosses*, 1997) and it’s best we get his portrayal out of the way first.

Whereas *El Señor* offers a career-spanning *narco roman*, *El Capo* takes place between 1993 and 1997—Carillo’s final years and the height of his power. By this point, the stakes of his legacy had been planted. He’d buried his enemies and protégés. He’d moved his throne to Ciudad Juárez, the border city and NAFTA-factory showroom, and ruled it with an almost feudal license (between 1991 and 1995, hundreds of narcos were murdered in Juárez and a grand total of zero suspects were arrested; his bribery budget ran \$500 million per annum).⁷⁹ He’d taken primary ownership of the “Mexican trampoline,” bouncing Colombian cocaine into the United States at a rate of 30 tons per week; and driven down the value of raw cocaine by establishing wholesale markets in Peru and Bolivia.⁸⁰ He’d purchased international airlines, factories, hospitals, nightclubs, hotels, Mexican and American banks.⁸¹ He’d fixed it so there was no longer any doubt: this onetime peasant was the most glorious of Sinaloa’s bandit sons—though you’d be damned even to whisper as much in public (silence, to him, was indeed golden).⁸² And when one of his Boeing 727s got confiscated in a perfunctory raid, the loss was worth less to him than a spilled ice-cream scoop is to you and me.⁸³

Still, as the opening scene of *El Capo* makes clear, it’s not easy being the boss of bosses. Untouchable is just an 11-letter word. And when the most powerful narco in the land risks something so innocuous as a meal in a public restaurant, he flashes a chink in the organization’s armor and—*Action!*—draws his enemies in for a stab at infamy. In this case, it’s four gunmen, lazily charging the family restaurant, scaring up a gaggle of screams, collapsing tables, scattering cutlery, and turning a quiet brunch into a mini Waterloo. Through the pandemonium, “Leonidas Carrion” is whisked from his date and bottle of cognac and raced back to his mansion to catch his breath...and plot his revenge. (This scene is based

on an actual assault, during which Carillo's wife had been wounded, as Hellenic a catalyst as any for the war to come, though for some reason, she didn't make the script).⁸⁴

Back at badass HQ, a shaken Carrón dispatches the guards to murder his fellow leaders in the Juárez Cartel (a trifecta of assassinations reminiscent of the final act of *Godfather I*). It's only after his partners are dead that Carrón realizes it was the Castellanos brothers behind the hit (the Arellano-Félix brothers, aka, the Tijuana Cartel) and that the real job of getting even has just begun. Thus commences a convoluted tale of betrayal, revenge, corruption, temptation, paternity, more revenge, elective surgery, kidnapping, and, finally, revenge, only tangents of which connect to the actual biography. In the end, Carrón survives the operating table (where the real Carillo died) and with a new identity, sets out to take down the police officers who'd been pursuing his case.

I'm less than romanced. Unlike *El Señor*, which disclaims itself "based on real facts," *El Capo* makes no bones about its fan fiction, which is okay in principle, but there's a limit to how far you should stray into make-believe when your subject happens to be one of the most interesting people of the decade. If the plot is disjointed, its hero is practically atomized. To explain his development is to broadcast a psychological hopscotch: one jump and he's shedding shotgun casings in a massacre at the disco; jump again and he's a Salinas-era technocrat, walking us through a computer lab with the pride of middle management. Here he's crying boozy tears over the death of an occasional lover; there he's wincing at the stubbed toe of his brother's fatal heart attack. At his hacienda he's a narco rock star; at a Puerto Vallarta nightclub, he's that star's teetotaling manager before he trips on the safe square and face-plants into some tried apocrypha (the narco as mystico-romantic: "Ay, *mi vida*... I have constant premonitions... of death"). He's merciful and gross, chilly, chivalrous, and elsewhere. He is a man with too many qualities.

In consequence, we're forced to seek other founts of melodrama (and find them, begrudgingly, in the romantic trials of his police antagonists). Perhaps this is the film's prevailing meditation on the pathology of leadership: you have to be all the stereotypes at once. And though this would make his facial reconstruction surgery a happily found metaphor, there's been too much love lost in excavation to say anything more about it.

Let's turn then to the more interesting biography of *El Señor de los cielos*. This film is structured as a series of death-bed flashbacks that traces the highs and lows of Carillo's \$25 billion career: the Charles Foster Kane treatment. The action begins 12 years premortem, in 1985, when a joint US-Mexican task force erupts on the hacienda of Epifanio Fontes (Emilio Franco) to arrest him for Camarena's murder (Fontes is based on Ernesto Fonseca Carillo, one of the three Guadalupe capos). A shootout ensues, Canseco escapes, but uncle Fontes is dragged off to jail where his lawyer breaks the news that because of US pressure, Fontes won't be able buy his freedom this time, though, if he cooperates, he can insure safe passage for his precocious nephew. Fontes agrees: he wants Canseco to uphold the family legacy and so arranges for him to train under Francisco Acosta, a rocky first-gen trafficker from the border town of Ojinaga, Chihuahua (a fictional Pablo Acosta Villareal, played by Oscar Osornio).

Arriving in Ojinaga, Canseco learns quickly how much denser and wilder the narcosphere is in northern Mexico when his new mentor, a skinny ponytail in a blazer-over-T-shirt ensemble with a floozy on his lap and a hitler of cocaine in his van dyke—quite obviously the fugitive member of some new-jack-swing group living far too long on the psychotic edge of fame—orders Canseco to prove his gumption by shooting two of his (Acosta's own) bodyguards. Canseco doesn't hesitate and—*kapow! kapow!*—after Acosta has cackled sufficiently over his friends' corpses, he formally

appoints Canseco his new right-hand. The mentorship proves short-lived, however: exactly five minutes later, the insane Acosta dares police to shoot him in a drug bust. They comply. The police chief then offers Canseco a deal: if he can supply him with some primo Colombian cocaine, Canseco is free to claim Acosta's turf. It's a win-win for Canseco, though it instills in our young arriviste an abiding cynicism about the vicissitudes of power.

(I'm not sure if this police chief has a real-life equivalent, but Carrillo had several high-ranking feds on his payroll, including Commandante Calderoni, the national director for drug interdiction, and General Rebollo, Mexico's drug czar.⁸⁵ For Calderoni's story, check out *Por mujeres como tú* [For Women Like You, 2004].)

The film progresses quickly from here. Fate clears a landing strip, an empire arrives one Cessna at a time. The Colombians descend with suitcases of white powder and the Americans circle overhead with duffle bags of greenbacks. Soon Canseco is buying out airplane dealerships, trading his light Cessnas for 727s. Soon his man in the feds proves too greedy and gets replaced (read: murdered) for "El General" (based on Rebollo). By the time he's preparing to enter the hospital for plastic surgery, police say Canseco is moving 30 tons of cocaine and earning more than \$200 million a week. He's outdone even his uncle and become the most powerful capo in Latin America. (There is no mention of his rivalry with the Tijuana Cartel, nor any hint of the bloody catastrophe Juárez became under his watch. His only judicial antagonists are a pair of unbribeable cops—one American, the other Mexican, as in *El Capo*). Still, something's wrong. If fortune has given him such excellent oral sex, why does he look so unhappy?

Working his way to the top, the real challenge has always been maintaining the good grace of Laura, his mercurial sweetheart (Lina Santos). Years ago, in the early days of

their courtship, he used to worry that her job as a boutique clerk made her too classy for a narco like him. And even after they married, his sense of inferiority and the tenuous nature of her affection remained primary forces behind his professional drive, as if success in trafficking could bend his romantic destiny to the same golden end. On his wedding day, he informs his uncle (out on prison visit) that he plans to take over the Juárez Cartel. Oh, what a glorious afternoon! Laura, in expired cream-colored finery lists to his hunched shoulders, guests dote and coo, French reds decant in plastic cups on plastic tables, and the hired corridista sings about a love so strong it makes him want to open his veins. The next morning, Laura locks herself in the bathroom to protest her groom's work schedule and in that instant, Canseco develops a mysterious heart condition that will send him hobbling to the medicine cabinet whenever his wife's hand recoils from his grip.

At the peak of his career, Laura files for divorce. Everything is falling apart. Canseco has become a high-functioning melancholic: throwing himself into his crimes by day, self-medicating at night with tumblers of whiskey and handfuls of nondescript heart medicine. His police informant, El General, has been arrested, the authorities have discovered his smuggling routes. And then one morning we find Canseco hungover and half-naked in a cheap hotel room, a forgotten one-night stand passed out beside him. As dawn prods through the curtains, Canseco flops to the bedside, slaps his face, and staggers toward the mirror like a collapsible Jim Morrison. He picks up an empty beer bottle from the table below and, taking a long draw on his gloomy reflection, backhands the bottle into the shattering glass. Time stops. Time returns in back-up slow motion. His huffs and screams echo from vacant octaves. He clutches his arm, weathering another heart attack (or whatever this is) while a sort of Muzak cover of Rush's "Tom Sawyer" plays in the background.

Say what you will about prog rock, this climax is marvelously scored. Even without the Ayn Rand-inspired anti-government lyrics, the instrumental delivers all the spacey, kitschy weirdness and baroque gynophobia of the original. It's an ideal song for this Kane's reckoning, which has been brought on by the twin evils of female and judicial oppression. And it carries us to the final scene, in which Canseco lies on the operating table, the memory of lost love once again activating his heart condition. One of his aides recognizes the boss's writhe and administers a shot; moments later, the EKG slows to a flatline. The surgical anesthetic and the painkillers have counteracted lethally and the most powerful narco in the world has died of a broken heart. A tragic ending for one who had been materially, but never spirituality, allowed to jump caste.

I think I know what kind of hero this is. The Wikipedia profile matches to a tee: "cunning" (check), "moody" (check), "having a troubled past" (*sic*; check), "treated as an outlaw" (check), "capable of deep and strong affection" (check), "socially and sexually dominant" (check and check).⁸⁶ Why, it's the old Byronic model: the Gothic softy, the saturnine swashbuckler. The hero who, according to Camus, is "capable only of an impossible love" and thus doomed to "suffer endlessly."⁸⁷ The larger-than-life antihero who "knew himself a villain, but . . . deem'd / The rest no better than the thing he seem'd; / And scorn'd the best as hypocrites who hid / Those deeds the bolder spirit plainly did."⁸⁸ (Compare these lines from *Corsair* with Amado Carillo's taunt to the Salinas brothers: "The people who steal money from Mexico and take it out of the country to Switzerland are more of a disgrace than I am.")⁸⁹

How did a serial murderer and freebase enthusiast wind up masking, competently, as Childe Harold? And why might audiences prefer a sexy brooder to another prizefighter like Caro's avatar in *Maten el fugitivo*? The simple answer is that

Carillo's contradictions were spectacular. They ran far beyond the Robin Hood and Genghis Khan poles set by his predecessors. His openly criminal deeds and mastery of international finance made him a kind of Salinas doppelgänger and yet he stayed camouflaged in rumor for most of his life (everyone knew his name and knew enough not to speak it aloud). He was a Sinaloan peasant with a Gatsbyean hold on destiny who died in his mid-forties undergoing low-risk surgery. The polarities inherent in his character—those he cultivated and those fated to him—kindled a fascination with the Carillo legend which *El Señor* was right to set in mood lighting with a quarter-naked Ángel at center stage.

More to the point, in all his reincarnations, the Byronic hero's duty is to inspire a search for order while simultaneously denying the possibility of finding comfort or agency within that order (be it lyrical, moral, existential).⁹⁰ Byron scholar Jerome McGann explains, "Our sympathy for such a man is the melancholy sign of human ineffectuality...[he] instills in [us] a dislocated and melancholy intelligence...he threatens to expose to the observer his *own* hidden heart."⁹¹

Could we extrapolate McGann's reading into a bold statement about national cynicism and ineffectuality in the NAFTA 90s, to diagnose the melancholy heart of the pueblo in the technocratic age? Remember that the original Byronic hero was the son of regency England: he came of age under—and spent his life sneering at—a parliamentary monarchy headed respectively by an insane man and an asshole; an empire engaged in noble war with the French and merciless war with the colonies. He saw firsthand the rise of a new economy in which low-wage, low-skilled factory jobs were beginning to replace traditional labor—all for glory of the old regime and the wealthy mercantilists who supported it. That he was a beneficiary and scapegoat of such a regime made him a celebrity. That he could bond his celebrity to the history of his nation made him a legend.

This is why *El Señor*'s two sequels fail: not only do they take an unrepentant turn to the fictional (the last is a jail-break film), but with the loss of an interesting personage in Fontes Canseco (and a strong lead actor in Ángel Rodríguez), the franchise is rudderless and uses violence gratuitously to simulate momentum. We're back in typical 90s *videohome* territory and longing for a romantic fix.

We might comb the archives for other Byronic Carillos—like Caro, he was a cinema darling in the years after his fall⁹²—but I don't think we'll find one up to *El Señor*'s caliber. Instead, let's end the decade by looking briefly at a much different film: *Masacre en Ensenada* (*Massacre in Ensenada*, 1998). This *videohome* is based on the death of Fermin Castro, a suspected marijuana dealer gunned down by the Tijuana Cartel at his ranch in Baja California along with 18 members of his family (seven of them children and one just a baby). The massacre shocked Mexico. Even veteran law enforcement agents who'd built careers tracking the cartels were speechless at such a horrific breach of the narco code, which forbade harming civilians.⁹³

There isn't much to say about this film and I mention it mainly in transition. In the following decade, massacres like this one, which *The New York Times* compared in "ferocity" to the Mexican army's attack on the Zapatistas,⁹⁴ would become the rule in inter-cartel warfare. In the film, the massacre itself is only a lead-in to an unrelated story about a corridista (El Puma de Sinaloa) caught, against his will or deed, between rival cartels, and struggling to save his family from collateral vengeance. In the end, he'll manage to outsmart and outgun both sides, and the narco responsible for the opening massacre is allowed to redeem himself by saving a child from a grenade attack. The premise goes from misleading to standard and the resolution is perfectly happy. A simple tale about the dangers and small conciliations that come with maintaining the frail infrastructure that bridges

the ant's world and the Lord's and that calls for faith where direction is long gone. Only narco cinema could shroud 18 bystanders in cowboy manga.

As for our heroes, at the end of his term, Carlos Salinas exiled himself to a Dublin mansion across the street from Bono.⁹⁵ His occasional visits to Mexico have the uncanny ability to cause earthquakes (“[Even] the earth doesn’t like him,” declared a Mexico City housewife on the third instance).⁹⁶ Carlos’s brother Raul was eventually incarcerated (not for embezzlement or racketeering—but for *murder!*) and was released after serving a decade of his 27-year sentence.⁹⁷ The only Salinas now courting the public eye is Carlos’s son, who gives TED Talks about why Mexicans should stop blaming their misfortune on the government and instead confront their penchant for self-victimization.⁹⁸

Amado Carillo Fuentes continues to remain dead, though conspiracy revives him from time to time (as Telemundo did in 2013 for the 75-episode first season in a novela about his life; former-model Rafael Amaya stars). Ciudad Juárez, capital of his kingdom and the city touted by the Salinas administration as the model of NAFTA success, has become synonymous with its feminicide—the indiscriminate rape and murder of thousands of women, many of whom worked at the maquiladoras. In 2009, Juárez earned the distinction of being the most violent city in the world, with a murder rate of over 3,000 victims a year.⁹⁹ At the time of writing, a hit costs \$85, factory workers earn 61¢ an hour and 500 street gangs prowl the ruins of Carillo’s empire.¹⁰⁰

While gangs, police, army and cartels have been accused of perpetrating the Juárez murders, *videohomes* have blamed them variously on: a serial killer (*16 en la lista* [*16 on the List*], 1998); and a serial killer (*Las muertas de Juárez* [*The Dead Women of Juárez*], 2002).

That’s showbiz for you.

The 00s: 00s: 00s: 00s: 00s: 00s

It's easy to sound off nihilistically from afar; this is usually what drug policy does best. Nevertheless, I stand by the heading. Zeroes. Nada y nada y nada y nada y nada y nada y nada. I wouldn't know where else to begin, though I'm not sure where to take it from here.

I suppose I could share some of my false starts: my purple lyrics about Mars-red skies and a rusty tang to the wind and blood crawling iambically across cobblestone plazas I've never visited. Where the late-night arrangements of severed limbs, next to shotgun casings and cigarette butts, have achieved the semantic capability of a primitive alphabet. In perpetually open cities where narcos war for corners, and municipal, state, and federal police battle each other under rival cartel banners,¹⁰¹ cities I've seen only on film.

I could sing you something ghoulish from the *alterado* songbook. One of the new hardcore narcocorridos that make the 70s hits sound folkloric and Raffiesque: "With an AK-47 and bazooka at the neck / heads flying off anyone who dares, / we're blood-thirsty madmen, we like to kill."¹⁰²

Or I could fan out some truly nauseous statistics and ask you to guess: there have been 60 thousand narco-related homicides in Mexico since President Calderón declared war on drugs in 2006,¹⁰³ or 120 thousand, or 150 thousand.¹⁰⁴ The cartels earn \$19 or \$29 billion a year.¹⁰⁵ Either 70 or 90 percent of their weaponry comes from the United States.¹⁰⁶ The percentage of investigated crime in Mexico is 4.5 or 6.¹⁰⁷ Approximately 45 percent of victims are under age 30.¹⁰⁸ Kidnapping rates tripled last year, though only 1 percent of the kidnappings were reported to police, and 30 percent of victims were killed.¹⁰⁹

The truth is that any overview of the contemporary drug war will fail to capture the situation on the ground, and only

the most politic and lunatic voices will find moral absolutes in this catastrophe. Context itself gleams over the violence with zirconic fraudulence, and so better to leave it at this: at the century's turn, the narco pax crumbled, racing fissures through the cartels that supported it. A flux of unstable alliances and rivalries advanced further across the country, pulling virtually every violent tendency into its excitement. Gangbangers now fight cops who fight special forces who fight rogue nephews who fight AWOL privates who fight cult leaders who fight child soldiers who fight the unknown narco who, on New Year's Eve, 2010, sewed a man's face onto a soccer ball and left it in a plastic bag near city hall in Los Mochis, Sinaloa.¹¹⁰

Some more Byron, perhaps? Hemingway? *A country can be destroyed but not defeated*? Better I roll it back to zero and get on with the show.

The Tijuana Cartel has its films, as does the Gulf. The Sinaloans, their hit squads and splinters. I've watched *La Familia Michoacána* wipe out whole genealogies and the Knights Templar preach the Book of Revelation one tiny apocalypse after another. But if we're going out of fear—and I mean excruciating terror—and because as goes the fear in the pueblo, so goes the action on screen, let's call it right now: in the millennium of narco culture, the zeroes belong to Los Zetas.

Born on the cusp of 2000 when the Gulf Cartel corrupted the local garrison into soldiers of fortune. Came of age 2003–2005 fending off the Sinaloan siege of the greater northeast. 2010 unleashed the Oedipal monster and the Zetas mutinied against their Gulf leaders to become an independent cartel. Now, 15 years on, in the full grotesquerie of adolescence, with more black flags planted than even the Sinaloans, their closest rivals,¹¹¹ the Zetas have become Mexico's most fearsome cartel. And like their Guadalajaran and Juarense predecessors,

in quaking below the official narrative of Mexican modernity, they pull the history of their nation into the catacombs. Let's return once more to the beginning.

Year 00, Early Zeta Era. The former head of Coca Cola Mexico is elected president of the country and "life tastes good" at last. His victory ends almost a century of one-party rule and signals the possibility that genuine democracy has finally betided poor Mexico. As if moved by the *esprit républicain* in the air, the Gulf Cartel, a syndicate active for generations in the northeastern state of Tamaulipas, adopts a new system of merit-based recruitment under the leadership of Osiel Cardenás (aka, *El Mata Amigos*, "The Friend Killer"). Cardenás rejects the nepotism and regionalism that encumber the old system—he wants killers with experience and talent; cousinship counts for less. 38 ex-soldiers from the *Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales* (Mexico's Green Berets) have already signed on as his guard. These are men who've had advanced training in counterinsurgency at Fort Bragg and months of field experience mutilating Zapatista rebels in Chiapas.¹¹² Cardenás admires the new formation and sends word to the barracks: the Gulf pays much better than the republic.

Year 05, EZE. Seven hundred federal soldiers arrive in Nuevo Laredo, border city and coveted smuggling route, to end the war between the Gulf and Sinaloa Cartels.¹¹³ The Zetas arm themselves with grenade launchers and flak jackets and hang banners in the plaza inviting soldiers to defect.¹¹⁴ They promise life insurance policies, houses, model-year trucks.¹¹⁵ Soon their ranks swell to four thousand and include former Kaibiles, special-op commandos from the Guatemalan military, notorious for their Spartan training and civilian massacres (their motto, "If I retreat, kill me," will be adopted by the Zetas); and municipal police officers who, flouting the traditional exchange of dirty money for judicial blindness, now actively kidnap and murder on the cartel's orders.¹¹⁶ Like an

occupying army, the Gulf and the Zetas take control of the press in Tamaulipas and provide community service—even hosting children’s parties—to smooth their reputation and entrench their civil power.¹¹⁷ Two years later, the Sinaloans agree to a ceasefire.¹¹⁸

Year 10, EZE. Leadership rivalries and tactical disputes polarize the Zetas and the Gulf, prompting the old guard to declare publicly a split: “In our ranks we do not want kid-nappers, terrorists, bank robbers, rapists, child-killers and traitors.”¹¹⁹ Civil war erupts in the northeast and spreads across the country as the cartels line up on either side: Sinaloa and *La Familia* back the Gulf; Tijuana, Juárez and the Beltrán Leyvas (former Sinaloans) support the Zetas, whose numbers now exceed ten thousand.¹²⁰

Year 15, EZE. Despite waging a perpetual two-front war with the military and half the underworld, a war that has cost the Zetas most of their founding members, the syndicate continues to expand internationally, offering the “Zeta” brand for a licensing fee and awarding franchises throughout Mexico and Central America—two-month guerilla-training programs optional (*La Familia Michoacána* were proud alumni until declaring independence in year 06).¹²¹ Extortion, kidnapping, racketeering, industrial sabotage, human trafficking, and piracy now fill chapters in their portfolio, of which drugs constitute only 20 percent.¹²² They’ve forged transport routes into West Africa and struck distribution deals with Italian mobs.¹²³ They’ve “liberated” hundreds of Zeta prisoners in jails throughout their territory, and several times have closed down the American border solely as a show force.¹²⁴ The US State Department calls them “the most technologically advanced, sophisticated and dangerous cartel operating in Mexico.”¹²⁵ Hydra metaphors swamp the literature: no matter how many Zetas die, several fresh heads hiss forth.¹²⁶ Z42 leads the troops 12 years after the death of Z1.

These are the DEA bullet points. Sketch a few together randomly and maybe you'll form a picture like the one we get in *Los Zetas* (2007), a *videohome* that somehow watches less like a movie than a synopsis of one. Here is that synopsis: for 90 minutes, the gang roams the city in black T-shirts and baseball caps, extorting money from locals, murdering stingy families, visiting strip clubs, decapitating police wives, and encouraging children to take advantage of the lucrative drug market at primary school. There's not much more to it than that. Finally, an incorruptible commandante and the son of a murdered businessman have enough and decide to wipe out the entire gang—problem solved.

Sleepy narrative aside, the problem with the film is its action: this is Zeta-light. It doesn't come close to capturing the Gallic ferocity of the cartel that naturalized beheading as an intimidation tactic.¹²⁷ The Arellano-Félix brothers of Tijuana may have been first to murder women and children on a newsworthy scale (as you'll remember from *Masacre en Ensenada*),¹²⁸ but the Zetas have so salaciously capitalized on an image of criminal amorality that the old-school cartels have come to view them as "psychotically antisocial," even as they've adopted some of the nastier PSYOPs from the Zeta field manual.¹²⁹

However much on a tactical level the distinction is becoming erroneous, narco culture at large still holds a degree of professional comportment and noblesse oblige to the older cartels, and grants mayhem to the Zetas and street gangs. The distinction is underscored in *El cartel de los "Z": La Realidad de Mexico* (*The "Z" Cartel: The Reality of Mexico*, 2011), a movie intent on finger-painting the Zeta story into an approximate Bosch or Brueghel.

The film opens on a breezy afternoon somewhere in the borderlands where a dozen migrants, tots to grandmas, are crossing on foot to the United States: sloshing across marshland and rustling through shrubby inclines under a cloudless

blue sky. Complaints of hunger and thirst occasionally stall their progress, but the *coyote's* entreaty to hurry is respected; everyone wants to get through this fast as possible. But when a clearing appears a few steep yards ahead and a gunshot echoes from its height, the migrants freeze in their tracks. Atop the hill, two rows of armed men are eyeing them through the sights of their AK-47s. The *coyote* raises his arms and calls for calm. A mother and daughter make a run for it and four expert shots curdle them into the tall grass.

Zetas out! A sinewy V huts downhill and swallows the migrants in a cilia of machine guns and pistols, which then propels the captives aboard a flatbed truck. Three hyperventilating women are knocked to the ground and executed. The handheld camera judders and zooms arbitrarily over the actors, who look like real migrants (maybe they are) and like real narcos (no comment). If not for credits flashing waist level and some atonal noodling from the Casio philharmonic, you might wonder if this were bona fide Zeta snuff.

In a few minutes, the kidnapped will arrive at an abandoned warehouse, where they'll be locked in windowless rooms until their ransoms are wired. The women whose families are unable to pay up will be sent abroad to work as prostitutes; the men will be trained as future Zetas (later still, we'll glimpse the famous counterinsurgency classes).

But before the flatbed departs for base, the Zetas hit a snag. Two white trucks have just pulled into the near distance and the six men coming into focus, decked out in a companionable armory, are training their guns on the Zetas and demanding they hand over the *pollos*. Taunts fire back and forth, parallels edge off to 50 paces: the interlopers in old blue jeans, white shirts, and cowboy hats; the Zetas in black Kevlar and fatigues. The old guard facing the new. The new shoots first.

When the smoke clears, the lead Zeta saunters over to the lead trespasser, who is on his back in the dry grass with four

shots in his chest, his blood goatee chomping at brave words. The Zeta kneels down and knocks away the narco's cowboy hat with the butt of his gun. Then he lifts him up by the bling, and shoots him in the face. A subtitle flashes: *La Realidad de Mexico* (just so we know what we've gotten into).

The leader of these Zetas, a behemoth named Ursulo, is played by Flavio Peniche. Not-so-fun fact: in 2003, Peniche was incarcerated for shooting—and killing—an extra on the set of the narco film *Juana la alacrana* (*Juana the Scorpion*). Apparently the homicide was a prop mix-up and Peniche was later exonerated, but that doesn't change the fact that I am very afraid of this man. Not out of hyperbole but purely as a matter of record do I admit that he's had lead roles in several blockbuster nightmares of mine, nasty life-impeding dreams that have extracted from the depths of my 35-year-old unconscious heretofore untroublesome phobias (the fear of clowns, for one—especially those creepy old-world Pierrot and Punch varieties—this owing to Peniche's uncanny resemblance to a hairless Boy George). And in these nightmares, Peniche is usually doing something expressly pollutive, as Ursulo is now, back at the warehouse, whispering lecherously with a handgun to the temple of a seven-year-old boy, kissing him, telling him he'll make a great Zeta, while the boy's mother wails a few feet away within the shackling arms of burly dead-eyed men. Or, as Ursulo is moments later, raping the boy's mother (Angela, our heroine, played by Marisol Guillen) in a scene no less disturbing for its tenebrous lighting or modern office decor or for the two remaining fully clothed, particularly in those moments when Ursulo grins at the camera and moans cogently, it seems, at me.

This rape scene continues for a very long time before flash-wiping to more of the same. Just passed the two-minute mark, and so in concord with the pornographic rule of three, Ursulo yanks Angela around and directs her downward, digging the barrel of his handgun into her scalp. He unzips,

throws his head back, rosy cheeks aglow. He makes soft, but malefic locomotive noise and, tunneling further into the pleasure of his assault, tosses his gun aside to rest his hands on his waist.

Aha! Angela, emboldened by Ursulo's disarmament, clamps down—all the way until her teeth meet—and, ducking Ursulo's keel, rushes out the room, manages to escape the compound, and winds up on a deserted city street, screaming through her blood-cached mouth about the perils of her “endless nightmare.”

Maybe this is typical slasher fare, no good reason to take offense. Maybe my discomfort runs psychically deeper, and there are wounded Ursulos howling from the pit of every man (note to query Jung's *Red Book* for “bald eunuchs”). But what makes the scenes I've described (a third of the film) so irredeemably hideous in their historical context is that they're meant to evoke the San Fernando Massacre, one of the worst atrocities in the drug war to date.

San Fernando is a small city in Tamaulipas, about a two-hour drive from Brownsville, Texas. A generation ago, birders would have endorsed its quiet infinitude of coppery-tailed trogons and crimson-collared grosbeaks; Américo Paredes recommended the dried beef.¹³⁰ On August 20, 2010, three US-bound panel trucks carrying 75 migrants from South and Central America were stopped on a rural road outside San Fernando limits. A squadron of Zetas, including 16 of their police affiliates, escorted the trucks to a private ranch where they offered the migrants a choice: work for us as hit men and domestic servants, or else. One woman accepted the offer and another, an 18-year-old man from Ecuador, managed to escape. The rest were executed one by one with single shots to the head (other reports say the cartel used a sledgehammer to conserve ammunition).¹³¹

Ambassadors up and down the hemispheres rose from their desks and Mexico's parliament rushed legislation to

safeguard migrant transit routes, while promising to target kidnapping organizations more aggressively in its war against the narcos.¹³² This sort of tragedy, all were assured, would never be allowed to happen again. Then, six months later, it happened again. Only this time there were almost 200 bodies discovered in over 40 mass graves.¹³³ Rumors began circulating online that the male victims had been armed with sledgehammers and forced into gladiator matches in which the last man standing would be awarded cartel membership; the women had been raped and killed and the children dissolved in tanks of acid. (*The Houston Chronicle* and *Borderland Beat* repeated these far-fetched details with shrugging caveats; a retired FBI Agent hedged, “I don’t see it as . . . a successful way to recruit people . . . It would be more for amusement.” He also offered, “The stuff you would not think possible a few years ago is now commonplace.”)¹³⁴

El cartel de los “Z” channels the same spirit of over-the-top sadism to elaborate its anti-Zeta message. It spares nothing in gore to pay back gore. For much of the film, the cartel tortures and slaughters with paramilitary detachment while its leader Ursulo goes about his masterminding in a kind of venereal rapture. In the end, Angela and a farmworker named Joaquin (Agustin Navarro) undertake a first-person-shooter-like infiltration of the camp, mowing down nine Zetas and running a tenth over a table saw. Having already emasculated Ursulo in the medieval sense, Angela finishes the job by delivering the *tiro de gracia*¹³⁵ that explodes his cranium and summons the film’s credits.

I can cheer this ending, somewhat. Watching Ursulo destroyed feels at first like a tousling from the angels. But the part of my brain that doesn’t believe in angels can’t stop wondering if this is appropriate catharsis. Does the world need a death-metal version of “Hattie Carroll”? Must Zeta massacre begat anti-Zeta splatter film to call attention to the dangers that migrants face crossing the Zeta-controlled

northeast corridor, or to preserve the San Fernando Massacre in popular memory? On the other hand, if the Zetas trade on legends of their inhumanity, isn't the film really just playing to their propaganda? What does it say, after all, that I'm watching this movie on a YouTube channel filled with pro-Zeta corridos?

Against what I know to be sounder judgment, I decide to pursue these questions in a third film uploaded to that channel. It's getting late and I want nothing more than for this movie to end before it even starts. I want to erase my browsing history, cobble a thesis together, and get on with my life. What I do instead is steep tea and fret. I think, maybe a little meditation to cleanse the somatic palette, but by the time I select a mantra on Wikipedia, the full stream of *Me dicen el Z: el alterado* (*Tell me of the Z: The Disturbed*, 2012) has finished loading, and my partner is making worrisome comments about turning the lights off when I come to bed.

My tea tastes like headache from over-steepage.

Something is off with this film. In the opening scene, there are no gun rattles or bone snaps, none of Ursulo's lascivious reverb. The only sound emitted by my laptop, dimmed to the faintest stress of its tintinnabulary icon, is the neutral strum of a flamenco over some male banter, two men goodheartedly discussing...corn. The lattice of fingers over my eyes slides apart as a gentle voice inside me prompts, *pee wee: a rainbow*.

A voice reassuring as the tableau on my screen, in which two generations of chunky rancher, dressed in matching plaid, are standing by the side of a rural road and surveying a cornfield under a huge blue sky crayoned white. The second-gen, a fun Bruno Kirby sort, I recognize as actor Jorge Aldama, miscast as a capo in *Los Zetas* and a much better fit here as Jacinto Jr., the farmboy. He's encouraging dad to nix his retirement plans—there's another harvest in those old muscles yet ("You're stronger than an oak!"). Dad grins and

Jacinto tosses a hoe into the bed of the GMC truck that centers the shot. The cornstalks sway like hippies in the late-afternoon breeze. In fades a credit for “Sky Duran Cervantes” and though I don’t know the actor, I sure do like that name.

Back home, a startling MacMansion—no tin roof for these field hands—mom’s griddling tortillas on the induction stove and Mr. Sunshine’s straining through the venetian blinds to whiff a guess at her secret ingredient (lavender?). The dinner table is set, the family convenes, Jacinto’s parents commence the teasing: when is that playboy son of theirs going to settle down and get married? Jacinto, the rascal, has a pretty good idea when, but his lips are sealed. Mom and dad will have to ice the Moët a little longer. Just when they’re tucking into a second round of tortillas is about the time I start conjuring imaginary data on happiness indexes in war-torn countries, spinning precepts about the hard-won joy of simply living through daily tragedy, all that *carpe diem* dance-like-no-one-is-watching hoopla—and find myself warming to it. Maybe living in constant fear of extortion, kidnapping, and rape plumps the smaller things with replenishing goodness. Maybe deep in the heart of Zeta country there are people who can love so simply, so unboundedly.

It’s early evening now and Jacinto and his girlfriend are inside the Herradura Restaurant (and fine-dancing emporium), snuggled into a corner table, clinking piña coladas and frosty cervezas and pecking at each other between ballads. A scene later, they’re standing together on her porch where Jacinto announces the time has come: finally he’s been able to put enough money aside and within three months, he’ll be able to afford a proper wedding, that is if she’s... well... what does she think? I say it with her under my chamomile breath: *Ay, m[“I do!”]i amor, que rico!* (close enough). He lifts her and wheels her in the air, nuzzling her neck. She squeals in delight, but reminds him they’ll have to wait until the wedding night to take these nuzzling matters further. Jacinto

groans shucksingly. (That these starry virgins appear to be in their mid-forties is unusual, I admit, but I'm prepared to leave it at that. Their happiness is now my happiness and through it I've almost forgotten what kind of movie this is supposed to be.) The girlfriend rushes inside to tell her father the good news and it's home and off to bed for Jacinto. Tomorrow, he and dad have a busy day of installing wheel-chair ramps on the local Narnia portals.

Then night falls. On the exterior of the family mansion. From the darkness beyond the driveway creeps a weary bassoon. Followed by six men. Six armed men. A thicket of men with vertical uzis, front and center of which is—*oh, sweet Jesus Marion Joseph*—it's Flavio Peniche.

This time leading the Zetas as Potro ("Colt"). Anemic under a black Stetson, wearing a stubble goatee and a sport coat over some Ed Hardy, he resembles nothing so much as a metrosexual Heisenberg. That clown smile is there, though, like a ribald tattoo on my frightened inner child, and I wince at the hidden extent of his imperative when he says "Pay up or die!" because in Peniche-land, death is a laborious departure.

Things devolve quickly here. All the nice people we've met are gunned down for refusing to pay protection. So is every other spotless soul in a 50-mile radius. One nice lady gets her throat slit in front of her preschooler. A pregnant woman is stabbed repeatedly in the womb, whereupon the offending Zeta removes his combat knife and licks it clean with a saucier's approving nod. Following the exchange of vows at a barnyard wedding, a pew of Zetas rises like insurgent whack-a-moles to haul the young newlyweds off for an old-fashioned charivari with an *alterado* twist (Petro rapes her while his henchmen disembowel the groom).

This is pretty much the entire film: carnage with ad hoc context. I see no point in analyzing the miracle of Jacinto's recovery (49 gunshot wounds, by my count) or his proficiency

with the chainsaw in exacting revenge. Deconstructing the slapped-on *happily ever after* will be of no scholastic or informational service to anybody, anywhere, in any language, in the foreseeable chunk of our common era. Only in its lack of closure does the film achieve verisimilitude. Only in the confusion of its morally simplistic anti-Zeta message with the hairiest of Zeta propaganda do we take away a sense of the insanity underlying the contemporary drug war, and I'm afraid I won't be able to stomach another bloodbath this chapter.

So is this where our history ends, with the Zetas' plot-less depravity? Have the murder and torture videos streaming online become the latest media correlative of narco cinema, replacing the borderland grindhouse and *videohomes* of decades past?

Happily, the answer is no. Although today we studied a few black snakes, the number of professional fireworks in the cache is increasing each year. Recent narco films are shot in HD, the productions looks slicker, the cinematography has largely achieved a soap-opera-level radiance, and the cost to filmmakers is more reasonable than ever (actor-director Fernando Sáenz estimates that a three-minute shot, which used to cost \$120, now sets him back a whopping 30¢),¹³⁶ which means producers can splurge on things like special effects and guerilla-grade props. And though the current odds still favor misses to hits, there's a new generation of actors and directors who've demonstrated an obvious passion for their craft and this, compounded with an expanding fan base (and sadly, no end to the drug war) might mean a renaissance is around the corner.

Not that this would fundamentally disfigure the genre. What the best films from the new crop do so fondly is handle their debts: they reassemble the archetypes into forms that speak to the crises of today's drug war. Take, for example, two of the recent John Solís "blockbusters" (Solís is sort of

the García Bernal of the current narco cinema): *El Muletas al 100* (*Crutches to One-Hundred*, 2009) turns kidnapper and prolific hit man Raydel López Uriarte into another gothic outcast racked by girl and police trouble, much like *El Señor de los cielos* in the late 90s; *El Pozolero* (*The Stew Maker*, 2009), based on the life of Santiago Meza López, freelance narco clean-up man, infamous for having dissolved 300 corpses in a signature brew of lye and hydrochloric acid,¹³⁷ is the tale of a country mouse driven mad by the narco lifestyle: his out-of-control binges and final repentance form a chastening lesson about addiction that recalls the ending of *Operación Mariguana*.

I could go on cross-referencing the new heroes with the old, but I think I've made my point. For some viewers, the history of narco cinema will remain a repulsive criminology. For others, kitsch will render the hagiography worthless, the way the pink bubblegum spoils the all-star cards. But here's the thing we shouldn't ignore—we see it over and over again in anti-heroes like *El Muletas* and *El Pozolero*, in the red car gang and Childe Carillo; we see it even in the Rafael Quintero figurine from *Maten al fugitivo*, wronged by the government and fighting to the death alongside the peasants who champion the singular cause of himself—what narco cinema does best is plumb the tragedy of individuality to a level at which the burden of self becomes vaguely, but still obviously, analogous to the burdens of a nation in perpetual crisis. A nation whose greatest chance at fiscal solvency has become exporting contraband (along with a huge chunk of its citizenry) but that officially gives no more than dismissive address to how this economy warps the culture. I say “vaguely” because I don't mean to suggest a neat allegory and by “officially” I'm making a distinction between the pueblo and the state. Though he's as corrupt as the politicians, because he owns his crimes and because his nationalism is sincere, the narco in the cinema always represents the people.

It's no accident that, despite critical guffaws and outright prohibition, narco cinema has become Mexico's popular cinema in the same way that pornography is now America's popular cinema. Both industries are probably much more lucrative than their mainstream counterparts, and both understand that their shadowy position in the culture affords them a special insight into that culture's secreting machinations, which insight they capitalize on to keep the inner beasts tantalized.

In narco cinema's case, what we get are national antiheroes whom we simultaneously admire and despise. Maybe it really doesn't matter that much if the portrayals can seem ridiculous. Sometimes we do want to laugh at them. We want them to fail just as much as we need them to succeed. I don't think the films pardon the crimes any more than they resolve the tensions that drive the criminal: his sentimentalism and stoicism, his passion and resignation, his saintliness and sinfulness. Because these inner contradictions are unresolvable is fundamentally what makes the tormented narco such an intriguing character and, even in his grossest, most artless iterations, a timely reflection of his culture. (And maybe this goes much deeper than I'm qualified to speculate. See Octavio Paz: "The Mexican... uses analysis rather than synthesis: the hero becomes a problem.")¹³⁸

Of course, this isn't true of every hero. I can think of one recent protagonist who is brazenly unproblematic. Who, unlike the damaged Pozolero, he of trucker hats and ravaged principles, a man who's literally terrorized by the ghosts of his victims—this one's an iceberg. No primal scenes inspired his criminal turn and there are no cartel bosses whose ire can't be shrugged off with a modest smile. A young *tejano* of means, he traffics, he murders, he says, "because I like the adrenalin rush. It's fun." And when women, those perennial instigators of narco downfalls, flutter in to ruin him, he simply murders them or charms them to his side. The badass

in the police shootout at the film's start is the same badass racing babes around in sports cars at the film's end. He was always the winner, he'd solved the puzzle of self long ago, and then put it aside and grabbed his machinegun.

Cronicas de un narco (*Chronicles of a Narco*, date unknown) is based on the life of Edgar "la Barbie" Valdez Villareal, the light-skinned, blonde-stubbled leader of Los Negros, an enforcement squad for the Sinaloa Cartel. The film dutifully, if not so dramatically, chronicles Villareal's rise as he overcomes the Gulf Cartel (and its Zeta army), the Nuevo Laredo police force and the American DEA.

While the notion of pant-loading terror has been thrown around generously in this chapter, *Cronicas*, it must be said, gives me a serious case of the Oompa Loompas, and not for the reasons you'd expect. Flavio Peniche isn't involved. In fact, none of the actors who appear in *Cronicas* work in narco cinema; most come from the middling orders of the mainstream (Valdivia is played by model and could-be Tom Cruise impersonator Diego Dreyfus). The film credits no studio, director, or production team. Also unusual is that the characters switch arbitrarily between English and Spanish—why on earth would the Nuevo Laredo police force break into English in the middle of a debriefing?

And why would the film crew want to distance themselves from this project? Well, for starters, this happens to be the only movie in our history guaranteed to have been financed by its subject. After his arrest in 2010, Villareal confessed to spending \$200 thousand USD on a film about his life (a film filled with dialogue on the order of "He's handsome, he's rich, he's very charismatic. All woman just die for him"). When *Cronicas* premiered on YouTube months later, no one believed the film was anything other than the lost footage.¹³⁹ One sharp commentator noted that the blonde hit man in the film's conclusion looks remarkably like the subject himself.

Other commentators were less kind (in *Simpsons* terms, few were saying *Boo-urns*). There's no harsher leveler today than the comments section.

Flawless characters are about as attractive as gangrene, but why this film has accumulated pages of mean commentary and snarky anthropomorphic punctuation is because of the exclusionary foundation of its *éclat*: this is not the rock star in cruciform, but the rock star in coitus. Psychological conflict is alien to him. He speaks for nobody but himself. Perhaps a studio like JC Films would have given Villareal the full romantic treatment, or at least a few psychological tweaks: he certainly has the biography for it, and that studio's head, Juan Manuel Romero, has expressed interest in filming Barbie's story (he's also voiced concerns about his own safety if he were to do so).¹⁴⁰

This brings us to the last point I'd like to address before ending our history, one that's been bothering me for a while. Earlier I argued that it shouldn't matter whether the films are funded by narcos as long as consumers draw on their comforts. After all, it's not like Hollywood has ever sought funding from questionable sources, right? Romero, currently one of the industry's top producers, insists that he's never met any narcos nor accepted their money.¹⁴¹ If his films are as profitable as he says, there's no reason to doubt him. I've come to suspect that the practice was more common in decades past, and have no evidence that it is currently so widespread as some suggest. The atypical casting and lack of credits distinguish *Cronicas* from any narco film I've seen.

Still, being confronted with a bona fide vanity project creeps me out. It raises a much more sinister question about spectatorship. I've talked a little about what these films might mean to a general audience, but what do the narcos think? Do the films check hubris or exploit it? Can they teach drug dealers and hit men a lesson about their humanity or do they intend to humanize the criminals to us, to justify the ways of

narco to the culture? Furthermore, if filmmakers and *corridistas* are now the unacknowledged legislators of the narco-sphere, do they have a responsibility to remind narcos of their code, as poet-activist Javier Sicilia suggests?

Some industry names have gone even further. In 2011, Mario Almada himself publicly advised the narcos “to retire, to do something good; you already have lots of money, put it to good use, because what starts badly ends badly.”¹⁴² A few chapters back, I mentioned that Mario Hernández, who’d been making narco cinema since the 80s, recently gave a chastening retirement speech to his fellow directors: “Given the current situation, no responsible person would make films which encourage admiration for the narcos.”¹⁴³

But then, according to Juan Manuel Romero, it’s retailers like Walmart who keep asking the studios for narco DVDs. “[If] I were to make a sexy-comedy,” says Romero, “it wouldn’t sell, although I would like to [make one].”¹⁴⁴

Walmart. Now there’s an entirely different portion of the one percent. And even if he convinced every last Zeta to hang up his balaclava and follow the Eightfold Path, we all know that not even Mario Almada could get through to the *buchones* at Walmart.

Narcas y Narcos



Figure 4.1 *La Mariposa Traicionera*

“So yeah, what chapter does *Slut Commando* fall into?”

—My nosy conscience!

His name is Bernabé Melendrez. His eyes are brown, his beard is neat, his cheekbones, I’m pretty sure, are crabapples.

His nickname is *El Gatillero* ("The Gunman") and even his happiness seems to partake of the larger weariness that name connotes. He is the man you picture when I ask you to envision a man on a cold Sunday morning in front of a tackle shop with a weight on his mind. More specific? Sometimes I think he resembles a corpulent Thom Yorke, though other times, when "Knives Out" cycles onto my playlist, I think of Yorke as an emaciated Melendrez, grievously in need of a home-cooked meal, an ice bucket of Tecate and the clemency of a real friend. Few things achieved between the sticky aisles could please me more than finding 16 foot-lamberts of him glowing in my neighborhood multiplex, hearing his reedy voice in Dolby Surround, watching him give *the look* to Brad Pitt, the one that would have earned him this walk-on as Tarantino's latest obscurity. Whereas Mario Almada is stoicism itself, and Jorge Reynoso jives between chummy and batshit, Melendrez's signature look is a portrait of angst so masterful it's shocking how malleable it can be, infusing scene three's establishing shot with apocalyptic portend, and the aftermath of scene seven's triple homicide with gunner's remorse. It's more than angst. It's a look many of us will see only three or four times in real life, that of a man falling murderously in love.

And yet moments ago I watched this sensitive philosopher mud-wrestle a guy to death inside an operational pigsty.² I guess it's time to ask: Is this cinema only for men?

So we come down to it. Women and men. That old fiasco. The planetary misalignment. The pageantry, the pomp and the encrustation. The sighing, the thrusting, the sweating, the weeping, and the clink of studded belts and the compound stank of love and love. And, of course, the academic conceit that it's all a shoddy performance, never more essential or revelatory than when it takes place on stage or screen.

I admit that I've been reluctant to consider this subject since the moment I not so forgivably ducked it in the introduction by turning a warning about machismo into a history of Sinaloa. But now that we're already 399 words into its very own chapter, I can't continue dodging it much longer. And so, after walking you lovingly through these here barracks and coughing over the flatulence; after genuflecting to a series of loincloths filled out by Mexico's most wanted; after trimming off choice cuts of Byron, Hemingway, and Vanilla Ice and throwing them right at your face—and calling all this “the history of narco cinema”; after beginning a chapter on gender politics with an ode to Bernabé Melendrez, I finally say no more: it's time we confront this ugly business of all the sexy women.

The problem is that this chapter is bound to be a deal breaker for some readers, and that it probably already has been for more still. What narco celebrity is to the government detractor, patriarchal authority is to the prudent scholiast, and many smart viewers with enviable principles will agree that the women of narco cinema are just moving pieces in a fantasy conjured straight from the phallus's vermicular brain. And because I believe this thesis is valid, and because I also happen to know that there are enough strong and complex female characters to trouble it headily, and because the last thing I want to do is insert these characters into another treatise on the politics of ambiguity—I want them to remain comprehensible and I want you to enjoy yourselves—I'm at rhetorical pains on how to proceed with minimal offense. On how to pick out the curved bones and butterflies in the PC-charged game of Operation that is humanities scholarship today and offer you something politically apt and quasi-entertaining about the narca experience in this narco's world.

Actually, this Operation analogy works sort of...unhorrribly. And structuralism's due for a comeback any day now.

I can't think of anyone who doesn't like board games.

How about this: let's put on our narco masks, I'll grab a pair of tweezers and together we'll try to fish out the female archetypes that occupy what we could call "the repressive phallic body of narco cinema" (or, if you prefer, just "the body of narco cinema"). We'll consider the good women and the bad girls—machismo's enablers and resisters—each of them correspondent with fun little Milton Bradley-TM pictographs. Though I can't guarantee that the figures I'll end up championing will satisfy every ideological persuasion, I enjoin you please to keep in mind that broaching gender politics with even the most innocent *entendre* can constitute a banishable offense for the untenured academic, and so maybe also to remember that old Ice-T adage about hating the game rather than the player (while ignoring that adage's concupiscent subtext, as I assure you I am).

(Is this responsible scholarship? I don't know. But my tweezers are clenched and my commitment to this analogy is already too sentimental for me to back out now.)

Let's begin with some easy points: the offending archetypes. And from this category none is more roundly objectionable than **the slice of bread**. The Bimbo. Warm, sugary, and insubstantial, an affront to mother's tortillas: suffer, poor narcos, the romantic diabetes of her. The Bimbo can be one of the narco's truest enemies, though he's often too bug-eyed to recognize it. Her main narrative duty is to pick him up and tire him out and make him sniff furtively after one more thin slice—into lush subtropical backyards where she lounges poolside in bikini-floss and Lolita sunglasses, crisping to radioactive doses of male gaze; into travertine bedrooms, where she's tucked under a snarl of leopard-print bed sheets while her caveman is out starting fire but ready to widen that snarl to make room for any new brute if the gold gleams right off his rings and chokers. Pampered, tiaraed, a moll with a baby's voice and breasts made by and for the hands of men,

you've seen her, you know her, nothing redeeming here, eye candy between shootouts, let's move on to:

The broken heart, aka, the wailing mother (or sister, cousin, aunt, niece, neighbor). Unlike her nemesis the bread slice, the broken heart is thoroughly uncarnal—eight parts spirit to two parts flesh (the pleading eyes and imploring hands) and favors the kind of wardrobe that would leave her ready at a phone call's notice to attend mortuary services. A symbol more than an agent of the hearth, her primary role is to raise and lower chins by saying things like, "Take care, *mijo*" or "Do your family proud," or "My God, look what they've done!" Sometimes her murder or rape (usually at start or climax of a film) will provoke the hero's quest for the kind of self-understanding that comes only with violent revenge.

Okay, Catholic fetishes aside, let's go for some real points: **the butterfly**, *la mariposa traicionera*, narco cinema's answer to the femme fatale. Here's a specimen worthy of closer study. More refined (and often older) than the bread slice, the butterfly possesses a beauty both graceful and bewitching: a complex pattern of sneering, caressing, shedding, frisking, slapping, and other kinky flexion attends her allurements. But she's more than just beautiful: I submit she is also the craftiest figure in narco cinema. Whereas the broken heart is the center of moral wisdom, the butterfly enjoys boundless and supple intelligence. She's smarter than the hero by dangerous degrees and often more dubious in her ambition. In her worst incarnations, we feel scorned by her self-loving trickery and side with the hero when he turns against her (if the spell breaks), though at her best, when she woos us from him by promising that we have what he lacks, viz., the cerebral dexterity to spar with her in love and war, we also end up fools for her love and thus she has her way with men on both sides of the screen.

Michoacán a poco madre (*Badass Michoacán*, 2002)³ contains a specimen of the former, less artful genus in the seductive Margarita (Irene Arcila), shrewdest and most dangerous of the three antagonists making life difficult for capo Alberto Quintanar, “The Michoacán Dog” (Agustín Bernal). And just a glance at “The Michoacán Dog,” the film’s hero, will tell you this isn’t the kind of narco to suffer antagonists peaceably. Even his lips are muscular. His clothes are 50–90 percent leather in any given scene. His voice thunders and envelopes like a basso profundo at odds with the bartender who’s cut him off. His physique has the rough chewed-on quality of an old WWF action figure, something wicked from the heel squad. He makes Schwarzenegger look like Baryshnikov. I would walk the Trans-Canada highway in my underwear to avoid an altercation with him. Etc.

Not only does he look the part, the Dog is a staunch defender of the narco code, which code he is fond of decreeing self-referentially, as in, “The Dog never forgives...treason!” (a luckless entrepreneur is informed); or “Whoever wants to surprise the Michoacán Dog will die!” (a would-be assassin learns too well when he pops up from the tree line). The Dog is cunning but unselfconscious, methodical, and remorseless. His libido could offend a Roman orgy. He is paternally loyal to Antonio (Manuel Benitez), the BFF who smuggles Dog’s contraband into Texas; to the farmers who grow his marijuana and line dance woozily at his harvest bacchanalia (*cervezas* and *norteña bandas* courtesy of the Dog). In short, he is the ideal narco hero: successful, honorable and unapologetically macho. But soon to meet his match.

Margarita is a *Real-Housewives* looker, say late 30s, with hoop earrings, loud eyes, and a gym membership. Her knotted shirts rise to wink her navel when she waves her finger in the face of her stubbornly parochial husband, Antonio. Why she’s stuck in Michoacán with this dink is unclear. This is a woman who’s owed more, who demands more, who needs

more and right now. When Antonio dismisses her advice to turn over the Dog for a million-peso reward, she decides enough is enough and hatches a plan. Dog himself is fond of stratagems. In the opening scene, he stacks two traitorous farmers against a tree so that when the bottom traitor can no longer support his brother's weight, the top will be left dangling from the noose around his neck. But these demented Boy Scout antics match poorly with the designs of the Michoacán Bitch (the film's terminological implication, just interpreting here).

Step one: with minimum coyness, offer herself up to Dog's brute charms. Step two: convince the cuckolded Antonio that the only way to regain his honor is to turn Dog over to Comandante Ruvalcaba (Roberto "Flaco" Guzman) (and to collect the bounty, up from a million pesos to a million dollars since Dog's latest murder spree). Step three: now that Dog has escaped prison with the help of his loyal *campesinos*, let him kill Antonio and get that old softy out of her life once and for all. Step four: lead Dog directly to Comandante Ruvalcaba, who by now thinks, to hell with jurisprudence, I'm just going to blast the bastard to death. Step Five: pay Ruvalcaba five million dollars for permission to annex Dog's old fiefdom. That, ladies and gentlemen, is how you conquer the narcosphere. The Michoacán Dog is dead, long live the Michoacán Bitch (again, merely interpreting).

On an intellectual level, her ability to con the menfolk into killing one another demonstrates a true capo's savvy. But the conventions of narco cinema make her actions dishonorable. Dog was loyal to his people and spread his wealth; Margarita arranged her husband's murder because he couldn't bring her the luxury she craved. Dog could gun down a dozen foes with less anguish than it takes for me to say goodbye to old shoes; Margarita manipulates others to kill on her behalf. This makes her a cowardly villain, just a long con in a short skirt, and thus, too, the recipient of narco cinema's rampant

old-fashioned eve teasing: beware the treacherous butterfly—she is too sexy and too clever and she will destroy honest men.

We find a different specimen aflutter in *El Chrysler 300* (2008), a hugely popular narco film oft-recommended as an introduction to the genre. *El Chrysler* is the story of Chuy (Oscar Lopez) and Mauricio (John Solís), two young drug-smuggling brothers-in-law with fast-rising stock in Sinaloa's black market. Their trafficking skills are so esteemed that Oscar Solano (Jorge Luke), head of the enemy cartel, tries to woo the duo to his side, but with no success. Battle after battle with the Solano clan, the brothers prove fealty to their old padrino until finally (and unwittingly), they must do so with their lives.

This is excellent narco cinema. The film maintains a steady pace along several narrative corkscrews and manages to shift our pathetic allegiance back and forth between the two cartels until the very end. Watching the film a second time, though, what struck me most was a pointed theatrical difference to the rivalry. It's as though two films were mashed together, each ensemble the proponent of its own acting school; two directors committed to adverse modes of cinematic self-consciousness. I don't think this is accidental.

Chuy and Mauricio, the good guys, evoke the blinding sincerity of boys'-adventure narratives: firmly in the tradition of *videohome* acting. But their enemy, Oscar Solano, a narco rock star partying away his golden years, slurs around his MacHacienda in a Jack Sparrow daze, chewing his words like a wad of tobacco, and exposing himself at every turn as the jumpy vessel of Luke's method acting. In the case of Oscar's daughter Sabrina (Claudia Casas), her theatricality comes across in a kind of postmodern awareness of her role as a stock bimbo, and through her ability to use that ditzy performance to manipulate men. Like her wasp cousin Veronica Lodge, Solano is always twirling her long dark hair, biting

her lip, bugging out her doe eyes in mock surprise to extrapolate her subservience to male characters—and then getting what she wants from them. Within such shapely chrysalis the treacherous butterfly stirs and, indeed, Sabrina will prove to be the keenest player in the tragedy which lies ahead.

Sabrina's agency is both an ability to dissimulate and a power to choose whom to dissimulate for. Her second line in the film, "I'm a modern girl," cues her first act: when police barge into a cantina to arrest Chuy and Mauricio, she pretends to be their hostage in order to help them flee (this endears her to Chuy not because she defers to him, but because she's willing to perform deference for his benefit. It also makes him seriously consider jumping ship for the Solano cartel, which was her plan all along). When male characters prove unworthy beneficiaries of her performance—as her father does, constantly boozing and womanizing in her "mother's house"—she flips to the other team. The twists that make for such seductive viewing are her handiwork and none of the boys is able to see beyond the reflective pink lipstick.

The one person who is aware of her dissembling ways is Lucia (Xochitl Monroy), Chuy's sister and Mauricio's wife: the broken heart archetype uniting their blood. Until the end of the film, we see her only at home: preparing meals, discouraging the boys' drinking, leading long sisterly talks with Chuy about the dangers of fickle women like Sabrina (to gild the symbol, Lucia's pregnant). But Lucia proves no slouch in the badassery department, as well: when two of Oscar's goons break into her house to rape her, she shoots both dead, afterward to rush into Mauricio's arms and sob.

Soon rogue waves of cartel violence clash up the chain of command and Chuy and Mauricio's padrino is killed. The boys retaliate by storming Oscar's hacienda and gunning down him and his entire crew. In the final act, they outsmart Oscar's police informant with a nice trick of their own—the duo pretend to die in a shootout with the corrupt police,

only to pop off their bullet proof vests and commandeer the ambulance taking them away. Up ahead on the dirt road, Sabrina waits for them in driver's seat of the titular Chrysler 300.

Signifying both criminal stature and masculine mobility, cars have played a long-standing symbolic role in narco cinema, and when Chuy and Mauricio see the Chrysler ahead, it reaffirms their victory and their masculinity. Sabrina gives up her driver's seat and races over to Chuy for a kiss and fondle. The three get into the car to continue the getaway in style, Sabrina in the backseat popping beers for the boys, twirling her hair, squinching their shoulders. Then she pulls out a handgun and plugs them both: two shots in her lover's chest, one smack in the middle of Mauricio's forehead.

The boys, like most viewers, presumably, had underestimated Sabrina's loyalty to her father and failed to recognize the death's head in her cleavage. Her labored sashay away from the Chrysler, a sack of money in one hand and a pistol in the other, isn't an argument between high heels and desert terrain, it's the shucking of bimbo pupa down fantastic legs, and when Sabrina turns around to shoot Chuy twice more for spite, we recognize the butterfly fully formed and understand at once that her greater weapon has always been her ability to charm and deceive us by playing to our stereotypes. Her victory is that of female performance itself, over the men who discredit her and over the generic conventions that would make her treachery unsympathetic. Because, though our allegiance shifts often in this film, there's no question: she's the hero now. At least until the next and last scene, in which Lucia and her little brother track Sabrina and a new beau to a motel and sufficiently aerate her theatrical body to reclaim the film in the name of Sincerity.

So much for that theory. But there's something to be said about Lucia's transformation that bears out a feminist interpretation of *El Chrysler*, as well. What began as a macho

buddy pic has, by its end, been taken over by more formidable female heroes. Compared to Sabrina and Lucia, Chuy and Mauricio are uniform and static. Inversely they become the stock characters whose passions and gunplay we've seen a hundred times. The film knows this too, which is why it ends by leaving the blood feud in the hands of its more compelling women (though male characters gracelessly barge in to take control of the sequels, a later spin-off, *4 Damas en 300* [4 *Ladies in 300*, 2011] puts the women back in charge).

What does it say about the genre's explicit misogyny when the strength of one of its all-time most popular films is an ability to disrupt the narrative of male dominance? Beyond the film itself, should we make something of the fact that, in 2013, Casas won a congressional seat in Baja California, partly, she admits, by parlaying her popular image as Sabrina Solano?⁴ Google her and you'll find campaign posters of her twirling her hair for the voters of Tijuana's District 16. Right next to headshots of her in a cerulean halter top, aiming her pistol at you.

The Texan and the Truck-Driver

The question gnaws: Are the heroines of *El Chrysler 300* subverting machismo through their wily and homicidal feats or subsidizing it by reaching out to the male demographic that enjoys watching sexy women fire assault rifles? We might ask the same of their peers, and there are plenty of dangerous women lurking the canon. From avenging angels like *La Pistolera* (*The Gunwoman*, 1979) and *La Contrabandista* (*The Lady Smuggler*, 1983) to the stripper/assassin María Navajas in her eponymous trilogy (2006–2008), female anti-heroes have been weaponizing their sensuality to transform the anxiety of a narco's betrayal into the catharsis of narca justice since the golden age of our cinema.

Which isn't all that surprising when you consider that narco culture, from its earliest days, has always depended on major female contributions. Decades before Pedro Avilés earned notoriety as Mexico's first "godfather," Ignacia "la Nacha" Jasso had been successfully running the dominant cartel in Ciudad Juárez for generations.⁵ Her contemporary María Dolores Estévez (aka "Lola la Chata") headed a matriarchal smuggling outfit based in Mexico City, which shipped heroin and marijuana as far as Canada (Harry Anslinger, America's original drug czar, called her a dangerous "Negroid"; "her graciousness [underlies] her power," wrote William Burroughs, a devoted customer).⁶

Once narco cinema established itself as genre in the 80s, stories of high-ranking female drug dealers, particularly of their downfalls, began vying for screen time with the macho legends. The popular trilogy *El fiscal de hierro* (*The Iron Prosecutor*, 1988–1990) based its villain on Simona Reyes de Pruneda, a mother of seven and head capo in Nuevo Laredo, who was incarcerated in 1974 after fighting a three-year standoff with federal police.⁷ More recently, *La Reyna del pacífico* (*Queen of the Pacific*, 2009) and *Cayo la reyna del pacífico* (*Fall of the Queen of the Pacific*, 2011) have capitalized on the story of Sandra Ávila Beltrán, a preeminent west-coast trafficker with a steamy past in the Sinaloa Cartel (she is a relative of both Caro Quintero and Félix Gallardo). In 2009, when the incarcerated Beltrán spoke to Anderson Cooper for a segment on *60 Minutes*, audiences in the United States were shocked that the new face of Mexico's threat could be so attractive and confident and . . . womanly. Perhaps it's a testament, if not quite to its egalitarianism, then to narco culture's historical consciousness that, for many Latinas in the know, Beltrán was less a shock than a sensation. As of 2011, 46 female cartel *leaders* have been apprehended by Mexican police.⁸ Even the Zetas have an all-female cell in their

organization (*Las Panteras*), though whether they inspired *Las Zetas* (2012), a madcap narco sexy-comedy, is arguable.

Critical discourse on girls-with-guns cinema largely pivots on the question of whether the genre demeans women to patriarchal ends or liberates them via hegemony-busting fantasy. At the moment, scholarly favor tips to the latter (though not without due shout-outs to “paradox,” “undecidability,” and the good old “interstitial”). The author of *Super Bitches and Action Babes* claims that her position on Xena: Warrior Princess “is pragmatic and postfeminist,”⁹ while the editors of *Reel Knockouts* are clearer: “We like the threat that women’s movie violence presents to the...divide between women and men.... We do not think that...being objectified ruins the toughness of heroines.”¹⁰ Legendary feminist(-)upsetter Camille Paglia declares, “I venerate the armed woman as a transcendent symbol of independent female power”¹¹ and revisionist studies of Blaxploitation films have, more succinctly, venerated the armed black woman as a symbol of African American power, a symbol with mighty resonance along the microwaves of American pop. Yvonne D. Sims, in *Women of Blaxploitation*, argues that not only did the likes of Coffy and Foxy Brown lend feminine form to the black power movement, they uniquely inspired Hollywood to develop its own action heroines in the 80s and 90s: “[Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson] redefined the ways in which women in general were represented in film by portraying...new character[s] who held [their] own among men *and* women.”¹² If not for Foxy Brown, then no Ellen Ripley—the Aliens would have won—goes her argument.¹³

I think there’s truth to this: these characters were certainly inspirational, but unique, original? Any *otaku* will tell you that Shaw Brothers Studio in Hong Kong and Toei and Nikkatsu in Tokyo had been marketing comparable action babes since the mid-60s. And you had to venture only a half-

click south of the border in the mid-70s to find a drug lord from San Antonio who could hold her own against any back-talking lawman or hustler. She was a middle-aged bombshell, this Texan, red-headed, svelte, and tricky, whose passion once destroyed the boy she loved. "A female of heart," as her corrido goes, whom "one should take care not to cross."¹⁴

The first time we see her, though, she doesn't look like a female of heart. She looks like senior waitstaff at some middling Tex-Mex chain: a scowling beauty sealed in a tiny pageant of pleats and buckles and knots and a big black sombrero, leaving her rundown motel room in haste to make a graveyard shift. That two armed men float behind her on the veranda, pausing to scan for foes in the parking lot, seems almost inconsequential (if they trouble the impression). When danger arrives, it's she who spots the enemy headlights. It's she who, seizing a guard's M-16, plows down the interlopers with an aim both reckless and successful. It's she who pulverizes the residual interloper when she flees the scene in her Chevrolet Impala.¹⁵ Until the next morning, she alone is our hero and villain, our intrigue and fury. Then she becomes someone else.

A quiet dynast ferrying a sextet of grandchildren across the US border in a pick-up truck. She wears a bowler hat, she pets a toddler, smiling a rictus of matronly devotion for the customs officials who kindly wave her through. But once at the stash house, where she shoos away the little buggers and gathers herself in the mirror, a close-up reveals that this is indeed a gorgeous woman, volumes sexier than in the rapture of her kill mode. The lid of her granny wig opens on a soufflé of red hair fluffing and spilling down to her shoulders, prompting one enamored henchman to declare his intentions on the spot, and crumble at her icy rebuff.

Who is she, you ask? Why, she's much more still. When police question her about a murder near the nightclub, she's a little chatterbox. When she's behind the desk in that nightclub's

office, she's sullen and half-amused. And when she moves on the club's stage in her carnival ensemble, part stoned major-ette, part Salome, gyroscoping her silver wingspan as every pupil in the crowd dilates to accommodate each kick and twirl and round, each cheerful sway and pagan thrust; when she strips down to her golden skivvies and spangles across the stage, back-stroking and t-rex-paddling through the smoke and house magenta; when her dance mate lies down in expiration and she crouches beside him, spreading her hand over his abs and grinning daggers between her fingers—it's now through the swelling applause and in the severity of her amour propre that we recognize who she really is: the grande dame of narco cinema herself, the original treacherous butterfly. Ladies and gentlemen, *Camelia la texana*.

Let's be clear upfront: this isn't the Camelia whose corrido we waltz to in the cantina, a mere Bonnie to her boyfriend's Clyde. And if anyone in the audience should like to believe as much: by all means. Like her cinematic godchild Sabrina Solano, Camelia knows how dumb men can be when they've figured women out. And while we're on the subject of masculine dumbness, let me add how fallacious it was of me to signal the advent of narco cinema in 1976 with *Carro Rojo* when, that same year, another film appeared, also inspired by a *Tigres del Norte* corrido, that has proved just as foundational and bodacious and with a lead more irresistible than the sum of the red car's passengers.

Contrabando y traición (Smuggling and Betrayal) tells the story of Camelia (Ana Luisa Peluffo), cabaret dancer and drug baroness, and Emilio Varela (Valentín Trujillo), a barrio boy seeking a modest fortune in her organization. Emilio needs just enough money to wed his sweetheart, the goody María, and build the foundation for their simple life in Cuernavaca, and then he's out for good. But when a few small jobs prove his loyalty and he finds himself climbing the chain of command, trading his denim jacket for a maroon leisure

suit and tumbling naked with his boss under the cottonwood of the Bravo riverbank, María Who and her *Cuerna-what-the-?* unceremoniously retreat from his underworld nights. It's only after his uncle becomes a casualty of narco violence that Emilio rediscovers his moral compass and announces his retirement plans to Camelia, who promptly shoots him in the back on his way out the door.

And so we return to *El Chrysler*'s dilemma. If your focal allegiance is with Emilio, Camelia equals devil woman. She takes advantage of his good-boy naiveté, uses him for sex and commerce, but the moment he declares independence, she draws blood. On the allegorical level, she incarnates the merciless and seductive narco lifestyle, which poisons Emilio's noble intentions and destroys him slowly, first by sundering the bonds of family. Certainly a portion of the audience will take this moral lesson and condemn her. The film invites us to do no less.

At the same time, more thoughtful evidence tells us it's Emilio who's the fickle one, unable to choose between María and Camelia, pining for the former's transcendence while delighting in the latter's vagina. Camelia knows exactly what she wants from her partner and what she won't abide. That their romance falls into the May-December category underscores this disparity: Valentín Trujillo was 25 the year the film was released; Ana Luisa Peluffo was 47. His character is a gaggle of nerves in an ill-fitting frame; hers, a millionaire who dances seminude in front of shaggy packs of men for fun. When they first make love (at her instigation), Emilio paws at her chest with the trembling urgency of a teenager trying to reassemble a CPR mannequin in front of his peers.¹⁶ Camelia warns him, "Careful, Emilio. Don't play with me. I'm a very dangerous woman. *Too dangerous.*" In a rare position of vulnerability (i.e., naked, with this rubus on top of her), she reasserts her authority as boss and lover (while subtly criticizing his sexual inadequacy). At the film's end,

when Emilio proposes for her what is the equally vulnerable possibility of his desertion, she follows up on that promised danger: *kapow!*

Should Emilio have expected any less from her? A slap or a palm full of tears? Of course not, and neither should we. To condemn her according to the ethics of narco cinema would be to support the double standard by which narcos are professionally justified in killing whenever they feel betrayed and narcas who do the same are vixens scorned. In fact, what detractors probably fear most (and what contemporary viewers steeped in gender theory will probably see as old hat) is her deviant femininity: not content to stay home and reproduce little Camilios, she heads a successful business and practices guiltless love with partners of her choosing. Charming men, duping men, killing men—her deviant actions challenge patriarchal control while allowing her to thrive undetected within patriarchal supervision. Or at least “detected” on her own terms. Vulgar as this may sound, it needs be said that, for a woman of any age, Peluffo is stupefyingly sexy. And at 47 specifically (and we’re talking 47 in 1976—smack dab in the middle of the century’s ugliest decade, when gingivitis was a form of ideology and nobody ate his vegetables) her self-confidence is both a cause and effect of her sensuality, and all the more reason for detractors to hiss.

In this regard, of *Contrabando*’s many sequels, spinoffs, and remakes, perhaps none is more disappointing than *Emilio Varela vs. Camelia la texana* (1979). This movie begins where the original ends, with a much older Emilio (Mario Almada at 58) and a much plainer Camelia (a singer named Chelo, age unknown but appropriate) discussing the terms of Emilio’s retirement, which, once more, involve the exchange of gunfire and Camelia coming out on top. Left for critters off some scrubby rural road, Emilio’s body is discovered instead by the beautiful and (one hopes) post-pubescent Beatriz (Silvia Manríquez) when her uncle’s car breaks down.

This Samaritan family collects the half-corpse, brings it home to the guest room, observes it peeplessly, feeds it sandwiches, and soon enough, it's an Emilio once more, its power meter recharged to flaming vitality—and primed for revenge.

One morning early into his convalescence, a few of Emilio's moustache clippings find their way into Beatriz's coffee; by afternoon, she has conceived his son (*teasing!*—they sleep together, of course). Now that he's finally poised to head the family he'd wanted with goody María (where is she, by the way?) Emilio hijacks a few of Camelia's drug shipments to fund his approaching paternity. Camelia retaliates by kidnapping his girl, and though Emilio is able to gun his way through the rest of the film's uninspired purgatory to rescue Beatriz and kill Camelia, in the end he is shot down again, this time fatally.

The film's great deficiency is sexual in nature, in that what we're watching is about as sexy as owl love. Every drop of Camelia's hard nectar has been leeches, watered down, and then transfused to Lothario Almada. It's Emilio who has the (somehow unambiguous) relationship with the younger lover, Emilio who has to swat away horny barflies when he's tucking into a tequila and a think. Camelia, once the simpering cabaret dancer, is now a schmaltzy lounge singer, crooning ballads in formless gowns. It's indicative of the film's narrative favor that Chelo is fourth-billed on the opening credits; her screen time is meager and there is so little chemistry between her and Almada as to suggest that an earlier relationship might have been one of Emilio's employment duties.

This sounds crass. I'm not suggesting that all successive Camelias meet the Peluffo standard in middle-aged allure, only that because this particular film trades on continuity with the '76 original, it's not just disruptive, it's downright offensive that Camelia's eroticism, a key power source, is taken away in efforts to reduce her to categorical villainy. A Camelia in an olive muumuu is a Camelia defanged. To quote

Peluffo's original, from a scene in which goody María comes moping into the nightclub to win back her fiancé: "Emilio is a very manly man [*un hombre muy hombre*]! He needs a very womanly woman! [*una mujer muy mujer*]!" A womanly woman is strong, smart, brassy, sexy and she knows how to use her body for business and pleasure. If her critics believe she's nothing but a destroyer of good men, or a titillater of bad ones, and if my job is to argue carefully that's there's power in such contention, confidence and hauteur and something political and a whole lot more, then I fail on all counts, because I, too, am smitten. Because I love—because I cheer—without complication. Like María herself several times into *Camelia's* harangue, I find my eyebrows rising in salute to that superb décolletage—and a clenched fist slowly thereafter.

Long live la Camelia! For almost 40 years, the cult of the *Texana* has been performing its mysteries on stage and screen. Peluffo's *Camelia* dies in the sequel, the spoilingly titled *Mataran a Camelia la Texana* (*They Killed Camelia the Texan*, 1976), but walks on to the set of *Las Dos Michoacanas* (*The Two Women from Michoacán*, 2011) so that her daughters may toast her—"The greatest *mafiosa* who ever lived!"—before a chubby accordionist toots out the opening notes of her corrido. A son avenges her in *El hijo de Camelia la Texana* (*The Son of Camelia the Texan*, 1988), 11 years after a daughter did the same in *La hija del contrabando* (*The Daughter of Contraband*, 1977). In 2010 she becomes the subject of an opera ("I conceived this as more than an opera, but as a contemporary art piece" says librettist Ruben Ortiz Torres)¹⁷ and Telemundo premiered the first season of her new telenovela in February 2014.

If narco cinema has never reproduced a heroine quite up to her caliber or renown, it's come closest in Lolita Chagano, aka, *Lola la Trailera* (*Lola the Truck-Driving Woman*) in a trilogy of namesake films directed by Raúl Fernández, the

mind behind that piece of Caro Quintero agitprop, *Maten al fugitivo*.¹⁸ The Lola films—which appeared in the 80s, and which also share with *Fugitivo* its lead actors (husband and wife Rolando Fernández and Rosa Gloria Chagoyán) and its tone of cartoonish bedlam—well, they are very popular films, and no credible study of narco cinema would be complete without them. But I might as well warn you upfront that the following pages are brought to you by a niggling sense of archival responsibility rather than anything close to true appreciation on behalf of this Camelia man.

Lola (Chagoyán) is a dreamy Emma Bovary-type whose romance is the open road and whose gallant is the semi-trailer. She'd love nothing more than to join her father on his long hauls, but he chides her, "This is men's work," and time and again leaves her sighing in a veil of diesel exhaust. But when dad's murdered by his crooked boss Leoncio Cárdenas (Milton Rodríguez) for refusing to transport narcotics, Lola agrees to complete his cross-border odyssey (unaware of the contraband). For most of film one, it's Lola on the open road, hauling ass from coast to coast, ignoring the put-downs and come-ons of her macho colleagues and attracting a misfit convoy of prostitutes, mechanics, hobos, and her godfather, gooniest of all, whose hobbies include wisecracking and strip poker with 13-year-old boys (played by, *padrino* is, the comedian Borolas).

Last to join her orbit is Jorge (Fernández), a federal agent building a case against Cárdenas while working undercover as one of his truckers. Several chance meetings on the big-rig circuit kindle a romance between Jorge and Lola, and when Cárdenas captures him, she steps in to rescue her man. Both sequels pit the couple against El Maestro (Frank Moro), a mad-scientist arms dealer with an inexplicable hate-on for fair Lola.

And fair she is—maidenly so. Save the action sequences and the corny gags, the series' appeal is Lola's charisma. Like

Salma Hayek, Chagoyán is in very desirable possession of some exquisite bones encased by some haughty curves. Also like Hayek, her mix of Middle Eastern and mestiza glamor (Hayek is part Lebanese, Chagoyán part Armenian) have been iconic of Mexican sexiness for Hollywood (in Hayek's case) and for the *videohome* industry (in Chagoyán's).¹⁹ But whereas Hayek is sometimes typecast as the hot-blooded Latina spitfire,²⁰ Lola's personality might best be described as demure moxy. She can be feisty, oh yes, but she also seems hardwired for male deference. Just look at her eyes: palliative, her smile: generous. Her voice sounds like the spoken-word interlude in a lullaby. It's easy to understand how her default nonthreatening femininity might appeal to the macho viewer seeking both a bad mama and a good one, and for that reason I have trouble endorsing her.

Though maybe it's just me. I did happen upon an academic article very much in favor of the series and whose thesis might be that Chagoyán's "vernacular-modern gynocentric politics" have helped "[reconstruct]... Mexican modernity along the lines of social justice and ethical conduct" to the benefit of "subaltern subjectivities."²¹ Chagoyán herself is described here as nothing less than "the modern Mexican embodiment of the Aztec Coatlicue, a powerful feminine archetype, who... predates the mother/whore dichotomy and is 'the creator and destroyer of all matter and form.'"²²

Peddlers of Milton Bradley structuralism aren't in any position to throw stones. But I have some stones, they are heavy, and I'm very confused (and not only because it's been demons on the old frontal lobes parsing clauses like "... extensive fissuring, shaped by insidious politics of taste and social clout, is to be found within commercial televisual discourse, but not so exaggerated as to strain the limits of the timeworn populist paradigm of representation...").²³

Here's the thing: Coatlicue has become a kind of household goddess for Chicana/o scholars since her resurrection in

Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. And if you've read *Borderlands*, you're aware that Anzaldúa doesn't evoke the goddess lightly. Her chapter on Coatlicue is both the spiritual avowal of mestiza culture at large and the worst shamanic bummer on record since the Apostle cocooned at Patmos. Powerful stuff on both counts. Lola's films, on the other hand, are action-comedies. And their jokes are as loud and broad and mean-spirited as any you'd overhear from Rob Ford at a fertility festival. If you don't mind a little animal cruelty (viz. cat tossing and dog punching) or a gag about a homosexual E.T.; if you think you might get a rise out of watching an elderly madam with a feather in her hair boogie down to "Vamos a la Playa," by all means, see these films. But is it fair to appoint Lola "the creator and destroyer of all matter and form"? I mean, can't she just be Lola? (Film two, 30 min. in—see her purple T-shirt that reads "ME").

The bigger problem, as far as gynocentrics are concerned, is that two out of three times when trouble shows up, Lola is damsel in distress and on the last occasion she's B. A. Baracus. It's true that Lola does step up when Jorge is in trouble and that, in doing so, she kills the series' two head villains. Also true: by the last film, she has overcome her reticence with firearms (and, taking a lesson from la Texana, she's learned that flirting has its place in the arsenal). But no one can deny that Jorge's action scenes are the series' musculature. He's the brave special agent going after criminal masterminds: the shootouts, the punch-outs, the budget-eating explosions are foremost in his domain. Lola's action sequences take predominantly two forms: racing trucks and wrestling women. She's so proficient at the latter that in each film she's pitted against a new buxom contender and we all know what that means, right? A bit of the soft-core roughhouse? How a grapple heats a spank and a tug threshes a shriek? It's been a while since I've glimpsed any MLA proceedings, but I just can't see Lola's "chick fight" as "a quasi-sexual fantasy that

develops through performative and audiovisual style and syntax, into an act of cultural affirmation and show of political strength.”²⁴ I see it as spring semester at the Chagoyán school of arousal: flower bashfully in the shade of your strong man, and then break just like a little grrrl.

Still, if I can’t I enjoy the films (or their scholarship), I can appreciate their popularity. The first premiered in 1983, months into the Peso Crisis and a year after the Reagan administration passed the Bus Regulatory Reform Act, which required that Mexican truckers, who had previously enjoyed the freedom to travel anywhere in the United States, now had to hand off their cargo to American truckers at the border.²⁵ This turned the truck driver, long venerated in Mexico as a kind of macho folk hero,²⁶ into a canny symbol of migrant laborers, whose mobility had been curtailed by US law for much of the century. (The American feud is played up with extra gusto in the third film.) That this trucker, unusually, happened to be a woman, whose vulnerability is overstated at every turn—well, sure, this probably resonated with some audience members.

Might we take this further? Couldn’t we also argue that maybe her deferential attitude is a strategy she adopts to get ahead without ruffling feathers in a macho industry rather than an essential character trait, and thus wouldn’t said adoption ring true to female viewers in the mid-80s trying to break into or rise within male-dominated workforces? And couldn’t even a faithful *Cameliate* acknowledge that a working-class heroine may be a more realistic role model for young impressionable viewers, because surely not every girl growing up in the borderlands will become a drug lord, and maybe, just maybe, killing narcos sets a better moral example than killing pious Emilios and that there’s indeed something noble in Lola’s hesitancy to violence? And if I can’t see the reason in such arguments—to the point where my once-disinterested chronicle of the first queens of narco cinema

now reflects my own biases, to hell with the fandom's—is that because chasing pretty flutters through my erogenous zones is a nearsighted little sun-starved lapidologist who'd rather be spanked by a middle-aged Camelia than coddled by the Lola next door and who makes a big political fuss about the distinction, even when it's become progressively more hard-going for him to explain what precisely that distinction is or why it matters at all?

The answer to the above questions is no. Let's move one.

La Güera Mendoza

While our butterflies soak in a nice preservative bath, I think we should finish our round of Operation by going for the big points. I want a feminist narco film: a film directed by a woman with a strong female lead and cogent takes on contemporary women's issues. A film that even audiences intolerant of splatter works, cleavage fests, and unironic moustaches could rally behind. I think I know just the one: *La Güera Mendoza* (2005), directed by Tina Teóyotl.

Yes, that's a woman's name. Despite careful inference, over the years there have been several women behind the cameras. Isabel Samperio, Verónica Ángeles, and Patricia F. Sáenz have been scripting narco films since the dawn of *videohome*. Sáenz, most prolific of the three, with over one hundred scripts to her name, has also directed five narco films.²⁷ Lourdes Álvarez has directed over 40 films and Aurora Martínez, “at least 72” (according to her Wikipedia page, which smells like an inside job and which grunts at IMDB for its failure to archive “at least” half her oeuvre).²⁸

I don't know much about Tina Teóyotl. The director of only three films, she lacks the credibility of Álvarez and Martínez, at least where quantity is concerned. Lately she seems to have returned to her day job as continuity advisor for various telenovelas. But of the few narco films directed by

women that I've seen (and I admit, there were few I've been able to purchase or find online) this is easily the most rewarding and it might yield a new archetype with which to end this chapter and maybe even salvage a genre. Let's spend a little time digging this one out.

Like many narco films, *La Güera Mendoza* is a family tragedy, though the dynamics of its families and the courses of their downfall suggest a closer kinship to the Andronicuses or the Atrouses than, say, to the Solanos of *El Chrysler 300*. This is some old cruelty in high-def. The classical tropes are everywhere, from the framing device (the hero addresses her audience in the opening and closing scenes) to the dialogue (exposition regularly petrifies into aphorism: "Life collects its toll and I paid a very high price"). Even the musical interludes work to highlight the generational dissonance at the core of the film's tragedy: the sharp-dressed corridistas to whom we've grown accustomed have been replaced by a cumbia garage band, five boys in their early teens struggling with acne, rhythm, and key, preening with all the hubris of male adolescence.

Of course, the center of any tragedy is its hero, in this case a middle-aged smuggler and mother of two, known as la Güera Mendoza ("Mendoza, the blonde," played by veteran b-actress Alicia Encinas). When we meet her, in the opening scene, she's at a turning point in her career—idling the last cart before the peak of Fortune's wheel, if you will, which cart happens to be a Ford pick-up, one of a pair she uses to run drugs into the United States several times a day. La Güera is parked on a sunny residential street and she's plucking sample-size cocaine packets from the net of the blonde wig she teases and sprays into a clandestine layer of her own honey-blonde sprawl each time she crosses the border. "They'll never discover my secret," she laughs mirthlessly to herself. Her thick face carries an extra pound or two in makeup. Her smile and cloudy blue eyes are Arquettishly coy.

A synthetic whistle rises in the background, like a steaming kettle: a postproduction bit of atmosphere that is as annoying as you'll suppose, but la Güera sighs, unfazed. She doesn't hear a thing. She'll break the fourth wall when she's good and ready.

What she also fails to hear, though, are the two *cholos* creeping behind her truck. And when they pop into opposite windows and stick her with handguns, demanding "whatever you have," she fails to appreciate their threat. She snorts, removes her black shades. Almost blind-blue, her eyes. "I have children your age," she says. "I wouldn't want to hurt you."

The *cholos* don't listen, and off they sprint down the road with her briefcase. If they knew what her own children know: la Güera isn't one to let maternal feelings subtract from her *narca* duties. But the thieves learn this only after the Ford squeals into high gear and bowls them to the ground. Smoothing a filigree of hair back into place, she steps out of the truck and for the first time we see her in full, her black heft and yellow tangles, her pantsuit furry and ensconcing. Camelia la Texana is a middle-aged beauty, but la Güera is a beauty in middle age.

The surviving thief, wriggling on the pavement, takes his own cap-a-pie and settles his gaze on the pistol in her hand. He begs her to spare him. "Show some balls, *chamaco!*" she says and plugs him twice in the chest. Now she looks at the camera: "In this business, if you forgive, you lose." And with these foreboding words, we cut away to our first dithyramb, the cumbia kids crooning songs of experience in octaves just a couple weeks old.

It's an apt juxtaposition. The film is about parents who err and children doomed to know better. Since she began smuggling cocaine, roughly a generation ago, after her husband skipped town, la Güera had been outsourcing the duties of single parenthood to her own mother (Alicia Cepero) with negligible damage to her two sons, or so it seems at first.

Grandma raised the boys, kept the hearth warm; she'd been the sole recipient of the family's unambiguous love and the kindly sage who brokered la Güera's steely logic with feminine intuition whenever the narca brought business to the dinner table. But now that la Güera has been tapped to replace Aurelio (Mario Almada) as head of the northern cartel, this arrangement has run its course and her sons have turned against her, provoking the oddest gender reversal I've encountered in narco cinema.

From the moment we meet them, about 20 minutes in, Demetrio (Fernando Sieber) and Alberto (Héctor Soberón), both telenovela handsome, are determined to turn their mother's action flick into a melodramatic PSA. Demetrio is a warmhearted father-to-be who wants his fiancé to quit waitressing so they'll have more time to eat ice cream together (fact). He loves the idea of family, he likes to say the word aloud. "Family." He breaks into a dumb smile at the thought of strong family ties, and despises his mother for sundering her own via her criminal efforts. "People who are in that business always have a bad ending and hurt their families," he warns her, especially aghast that she can't see the damage she's caused his brother Alberto, who began using drugs years ago to get her attention and has now graduated into a full-fledged nostril-snuffing addict. Alberto blames his mother for the death toll amongst his junky retinue: "What you earn is blood money stained by kids like myself who want to do something with their lives but can't because they're six feet under!"

Let's just never mind that the actor playing this kid is 41 years old and radiates the healthy sheen of a Timberland ad (as in most narco films, there are congealing faux pas which, for brevity more than encomium's sake, we won't catalogue here). I'd like to focus instead on how la Güera's paradox—that trafficking drugs to support her sons has furnished them with the moral high ground to disown her—informs

the filmmaker's dilemma. Because what gives this film contemporary feminist cred, and makes it possibly unique in narco cinema, is that Teóyotl won't be content to bring us just another *Camelia*; she wants to explore the personal and familial consequences of maternity deferred without reverting back to the old motherly archetype I've been calling the broken heart.

The film is defensive about this task from the start. Early scenes in which Aurelio, "the strongest man in the North," tries to justify his appointment of a female successor to the all-male cartel seem to make an explicit case to the audience about the value of 3D heroines—and of female directors: i.e., listen up, *cabrones*, *Mario Almada* is telling you that he's "interested in all people" (not only men) and that la Güera "has talent and guts" and does "clean work." But what kind of cartel, and what kind of film, will la Güera lead? How will the director deny her protagonist the fate of the treacherous butterfly or the broken heart (to give us a female not of heart, but soul) when the narrative seems caught between the happy ending of motherhood regained and the tragic conclusion that seems to befit every ambitious narca in the history of narco cinema?

Teóyotl plays to form and chooses the second path, pans her camera to the bleak stars conspiring over the House Mendoza. A faction of Aurelio's men, those disgruntled by his decision to bring a woman into their crew, kidnap and decapitate Demetrio and Alberto (after gang-raping Demetrio's pregnant fiancé). The severed heads arrive at the Mendoza residence in birthday wrapping and when la Güera unravels the blue faces of her boys, she kicks fate into barbarous overdrive. If it weren't bad enough that her sons are dead, it quickly turns out that grandma was in on their assassination. *Abuelita*, who also felt abandoned by her daughter, sought solace in the bed of one of Aurelio's hit men, trading tabs on the Mendoza sons for some dubious TLC (so much for an ideal maternity).

Meanwhile the border police have wizened to la Güera smuggling technique and are closing in by the hour.

At this point La Güera understandably loses it. Long fits of wailing ensue. The film's climax and denouement are composed almost entirely in tears. Parched legato screams while la Güera tortures and murders her sons' torturers and murderers. Mascara-laced choke-ups as she castigates and then abandons her mother—"I came to kill you, but I see you're not worth it. Because to me, you're dead already!" An unbearable two-and-a-half minutes of grandmother and mother trading belts of vocal terrorism on opposite sides of a wall, grandma screaming away with the animal intensity and variety of a burning barn, la Güera crouching against the wall, clutching her stomach and moaning (unnervingly sexually), her face half-melted behind a smear of make-up, until an off-screen gunshot ends grandma's lament once and for all. Such is the power of her Llorona Effect that even the sawdust-veined Aurelio breaks down when he learns that his son, who'd been involved in the plot to murder Demetrio and Alberto, has been killed by la Güera: his eyes mist over and he crackles us a bit of Lear: "The fair men pay for the sinners...forgive me, son":

The tears finally stop. In the final scene, la Güera is alone at the family mausoleum. Her luxurious black furs are now mourner's garb, her makeup is sparse and her unruly hair has been flocked into a braid and drained to its natural red.

For the next minute, she walks toward the cemetery gates, staring at us. Pausing sometimes, her hands fumbling as if she's about to tremble an apology. Other times, she sneers, her eyes narrow, she swaggers slightly on the path, ready to hex us for refusing to leave her alone. Until she exits the cemetery and drives away in her Ford, she rarely breaks our gaze, but never says a word. Then the screen goes dark.

This reminds me of the final scene in *La Dolce Vita*, where the blonde girl calls out to Marcello on the shore and then,

chastened by his bluffer's smile and shameful rebuke, turns her despondent eyes on us. We, the audience, are implicated in her question, whatever exactly it is. Of course, la Güera is no symbol of innocence. Here she's closer to Marcello in her mute guilt, in the way that her downfall proves the reversal of Blake's maxim: sometimes wisdom leads to the road of excess and when you go far enough down that road, whatever wisdom remains will help only to process your prodigality.

Countless narco films end in grief, but most would have stopped a scene earlier, in the pity orgy. It's her silence, and our struggle with it, that takes us beyond the limits of melodrama, that unsettles us with the Aristotelian mix of fear and pity that is supposed to serve our catharsis. Her silence is both the stoic refusal to fall apart once more and the gravitational humbling of fate.

Has the film then succeeded in generating a narca worthy of unambiguous veneration by virtue of her character's ambiguity? The notion that a woman's "unnatural" ambition to dominate a man's game will ultimately ruin her family—this moral holds little against the film's overwhelming solipsism because we know La Güera never had a choice: smuggling was the only way that she could have supported her children and in the end it was also what destroyed them. This is why classical tragedy works so well as the film's structure. The downfall is preordained but within its constraints, the artist can work the dynamics of character in a way that cannily speaks to contemporary issue of maternal responsibility in a global economy. Rather than espousing a tried moral lesson, the film displays a moral sensitivity that male filmmakers rarely, if ever, allow their female characters. As much as I love *Camelia la texana*, the fact remains that—*eihn eihn eihn eihn eihn!*

Oh...balls.

I'm afraid the inquest is over, folks. My turn has ended. We've lost. You can tell by that obnoxious buzzing sound my conscience is making that the patient is unresponsive.

I see my mistake. In trying to retrieve **the apple of empowering self-consciousness**, I've scraped a few vital nerves. A grieving woman has been saddled with the additional burden of redeeming a chauvinistic genre, and a lone female director has been celebrated, her film essentialized, in what in hindsight looks to be a clear case of me forcing women to do the resurrective work while letting the boys slack off. Bad medicine, this; my cheeks are as red as the patient's nose.

Before I begin drafting my defense to the House Unacademic Activities Committee, I'd like to say that my respect for this film is in no way by default. And if I went too easy on *Camelia la texana* earlier, that's because I have feelings, too, you know, and love is a beautiful prejudice. If nothing else, maybe this chapter has suggested that women play a more complex and pivotal role in what looks on the surface like an unflinchingly macho genre. Maybe soon we'll see other Güeras taking over for Almadas, and more Sabrina Solanos in the drivers' seats. And lastly, as I set my tweezers on the gurney next to my narco mask: I hope that future scholars will be able to track down other films by female directors, and that these doctors will be more rigorous and sensitive so as to avoid something so malpractical as an Operation analogy in their evisceration of the "phallic body of narco cinema," or whatever we'd called it.

...and Narco Gays?



Figure 5.1 *¿i ¿i ?!?!*

For a while I used to think that whatever was to be said about homosexuality in narco cinema could be scrawled overtop a glory hole packing a shotgun. There are no Pride bumper stickers on *El Chrysler 300*. No *Omarcitos* whistling through the blighted alleys of Monterey. Mario Almada once boasted that he'd played every kind of character except a homosexual—"If

I played that, it wouldn't even be believable"¹—and when actor Sebastián Ligarde came out last year, it'd been a decade since his last appearance in a narco film, and this chapter was still only a footnote about the curious alliance of machismo and melodrama, requiring no more than 20 seconds of your critical attention.

Enter Christian González and his film *Narco Gays* (2002), a bad-narco-worse-cop scheme that takes place in a bizzaro Sinaloa, where most of the male characters, and all the main ones, are homosexual, in various steps from the closet.

Here's the English description on the back of the bilingual DVD package released by DistriMax, Inc. (all *sic*): "They look like a macho men, boots, jeans, hat, gun, but they are gays, doing business in the narco world, if you want to know what is a gay doing in a macho world? Don't lose this movie."²

Having advertently watched this movie three times, I still don't know what these gay men are doing in this macho world. I'm not even sure this is the fundamental question the film poses and have come to find it invidious copy, an attempt to market an hour-and-a-half queer joke when it's much more than that, or might be more, or might indeed be something much worse.

Synopsis: Max (Alan Ciangherotti) and Rony (Gibrán González) are rising narco stars in the employ of don "Frankie" Francisco (Fernando Somilleda), whose cartel is a veritable Stonewall of sexy and homicidal twentysomethings—"Tender mice for an old cat," the don calls them. But Max, who'd make a convincing body double for a *Jump Street*-era Depp, is Frankie's most ambitious lieutenant, even if "tender" would most certainly go unticked on his sociopathic evaluation. When Frankie bequests his empire to Max, the ungrateful heir decides to hurry his succession by murdering the don, a plot very much to the displeasure of Rony, Max's dainty partner, who'd prefer that the couple retire from the drug war and open a boutique.

A boutique? *A boutique!* Max is the sort who'd wound small creatures to make an obscure point. He has no time for "princess" Rony's fantasies or "mother" Rony's moralisms when a kingly future is just a coup away. The other source of the couple's friction—as revealed in the opening squabble, one of the film's many—is that Rony doesn't know "how to be gay" according to Max's standards. What gay man, secure of his sexual preference, spends his free time doting on a woman like Vicky (Zdenka Erceg), the gloomy Croatian waitress with the constant pout of one for whom oxygen is no more than a Precambrian fart? It won't be until halfway through the film—when Rony, on Max's orders, shoots a rival coke dealer in the penis—that Max accepts Rony's fidelity, but only for so long.

Meanwhile, Johnny (Jose Llaven), a bi-casual narco with a West Beverly haircut and the smile of a shark-fin salesman, has been making a nuisance for everyone here in Crazyville: stealing cocaine from Max and flirting handsily with Rony and Vicky. And Armando (Miguel Ángel Rodríguez), a closeted bisexual cop in a mullet-over-denim ensemble (true to the film's hyperbole, Armando is "the most corrupt agent in the country") has been raping Johnny and extorting both "money" and "ass" from Vicky, who, it turns out, is aka Natasha Kusova, Ukrainian mafiosa extraordinaire, hiding from Interpol in Sinaloa and whose secret Armando will keep as long as said "money" and "ass" flow gratuitously into his filthy hands.

The "narco gays" throw an all-night orgy for don Frankie: a monster's ball in the morning-after haze, when Max shoots the don and seizes the throne. Max then arranges a meeting with Armando to declare his ascension and renegotiate the cartel's protection fee. Twenty percent, the cop demands—throw in the murder of the Ukrainian girl and we've got ourselves a deal (why, oh why, Armando, must poor Victasha die, given the "money" and "ass" graft? "Because [she's] a whore").

Which brings us to the showdown. Apropos of very little, Johnny asks Vicky to marry him. She accepts. Max tracks the fiancés to their apartment in what looks to be a bombed-out quarter of Sarajevo. He leads them into the rubblework alley and orders Rony to shoot Vicky, lest her mortality provoke in Rony some sort of future heterosexual “regeneration.” Fighting tears, Rony tells Vicky that he loves her and shoots her in the forehead. Armando then strolls in to shoot Max and plant a couple smooches on Rony and Johnny’s cheeks, whereupon these two survivors, last of the “narco gays,” embrace and stumble off screen. Up scroll the closing credits, half of them incorrect (Rony is here called “Chupamirto”; Vicky is simply “Croata”).

Plot twists to nowhere, penis shooting, last-minute name revision: this is far too reasonable a synopsis and to be honest, I can’t attest to its accuracy. The single review of the film I found online describes it as “a series of supine happenings...without logic or continuity...each sequence automatically canceling the last.”³ Part of me is inclined to agree, and take it further, because three viewings on, there’s still a lot that doesn’t make sense. At one point the camera spontaneously freezes on Armando’s head, as if by its own accord. The practice is never repeated and carries no symbolic or narrative purpose that I’m able to infer. The soundtrack, which moves boldly from early 90s hip hop to Goa lounge to neo-feudal cantatas, tends to obscure the tenuous sanity of the scenes it describes rather than guide us with some tonal cues. The theme song, for instance—which is repeated several times, including at the very end when Rony and Johnny reach for each other, two broken men viscerally struggling with the horror of their lovers’ deaths—is a Spanish version of “Louie Louie.”

And then there’s the dialogue, much of it nonsense phrases like, “my ass also has a heart” and “*cha cha cha!*” scattered randomly to spice up the longeurs. In one scene, Armando

tells Max, “I didn’t know you were so young,” prompting Max to reply, by way of explanation, “Youth impresses me.” Armando proceeds to tease Max about Rony’s apparent laconism: “The one with the blue eyes...who is he? Stone man? Or is he from a wax museum?” While I might guess that “stone man” is a wonky *verbum pro verbo* where “statue” would have sufficed, what I’m absolutely certain of—having watched the following scene, a close-up—is that Rony’s eyes are brown. All the film’s expletives have been censored in postproduction.

The vanishing point in this dadaist contortion is the orgy scene. Here the narcos amass by the swimming pool in back of don Frankie’s hacienda. When dusk settles, they strip down to their thongs, cue up some strobe- and black-lights, and while the DJ oonce oonce oonces them away from the sun, the aged don guzzles scotch and paws them salaciously from his deckchair: his weekend reward for narco excellence. This scene, which lasts exactly 7.5 minutes and contains very little dialogue, alternates between fast and slow motion as the camera careens through the throng of pumping bodies—just like the nightclub scene in any film about young people on chemical drugs. What makes it unique is the serious attention paid to a topless pimply morbidly obese hit man named Husky, grooving viscously in the dayglo melee: his weight billowing his height, his nipples perking to the circular palpation of his wetted fingers. Sometimes we go close-up on the breasts or gut; other times it’s the full profile. The camera will pan to his fellow “narco gays,” now slapping together in a soft-core orgy, but rarely does it stray far from Husky, licking his whole hand, masturbating his navel, his eyes locked upward with the ecstasy of a dying saint. I have now watched this scene for 24.5 minutes, which is the amount of time Kundalini experts say is required for an image to nest in your subconscious. (Though presumably they don’t measure this cumulatively. And by “they,” I’m pretty sure I mean a

YouTube comment wobblingly glimpsed once upon a plank pose [Husky's moves never failing to chasten my pudge]).

Three great prohibitions have restricted my happiness since I began writing this book and, I worry, will continue to govern my life for much of the future:

- (1) I will never successfully coax my partner into some *Camelia la Texana* cosplay.
- (2) Even if were successful, no establishment this side of Harajuku would carry the wardrobe, accessories, and scents required to illumine such a fantasy.
- (3) I will never understand *Narco Gays*. It is beyond my analytic and ironic capabilities, ergo it tantalizes me silly. What the philosopher Jacques Derrida called the khora—"that third thing (between the intelligible and the sensible) that makes it possible to think anything like the difference between pure being and pure nothingness" and whose "singularity...is its very resistance to being identified"—that's sort of what *Narco Gays* is to me.⁴

Each prohibition has proved distinctly harrowing, and with regard to the final, here's why: either this film is masterfully attuned to the zeitgeist of contemporary humanities studies and has intentionally inflated its kitsch value to a level at which plot, character, setting (devices of this sort) fall to the empire of the absurd in order to teach us that camp is the real basis of our sexual ontology and performance the true vehicle of our desire; or the film is a wiener. It's simple as that. Just as, on a moral level, it can't spread both gay pride and homophobia, it must yield a yay or a nay from the avant-garde. Great ideas come from the supreme divide. *Narco Gays* does not. The promiscuity of high and low culture breeds the most laudable icons in our modernist wings. *Narco Gays* has no discernable ancestors, or even DNA. Waters and Warhol? *Rocky Horror* and *Priscilla*? No. Despite how it sounds above, tedium-abridged for the sake of its essential weirdness, it's not even remotely funny. It's not so bad it's good. But it may be very important. I think of it as the movie Judith Butler would make with a grant from the Sinaloa Cartel.

And lest this sound like some jokey attempt to prevaricate a horrible film whose sheer suckage I'll wind up conceding in the end, here are a few facts about director Christian González that may reveal a sharper eye behind the camera. At age 22, González entered Mexico's Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos to hone his technical skills and bandy *Cahiers du Cinéma* with other aspirant directors, including Alfonso Cuarón, who once solicited González's editorial advice on an early short film.⁵ A year before convocation, González began teaching film labs at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, the country's most prestigious institution, while continuing to find his cinematic voice. His debut *Thanatos* (1985) won an Ariel award from the Mexican Academy of Film and his sophomore feature, *Polvo de luz* (*Dust of Light*, 1988), played the festival circuit from Russia to Colombia and was lauded by film scholar Carl J. Mora as "an impressive achievement...[a film with] scenes of great beauty and...[a] haunting musical score."⁶ These honors alone make him narco cinema's most venerated director.

In 1990, when González left the art house for *videohome*—what he called "putting Tarkovski in the drawer and going to work"⁷—the course of accolades may have lagged, but it never entirely ceased. His 1992 film, *El Imperio de los malditos* (*The Empire of the Damned*), screened at Mexico's Sexual Diversity Film Festival and later received a full-chapter analysis in Jorge Ayala Blanco's *Eficacia del Cine Mexicano* (*Mexican Film Efficacy*).⁸ In 1999 he won a lifetime achievement award from Anprovac (The Association of Home Video Production and Distribution). Despite the stigma *videohome* still holds among Mexico's cineastes, his films continue to screen at international festivals and González is regularly invited to conduct workshops around the country. The more bizarre offerings in his 90+ filmography (which isn't limited to narco cinema) have earned him a cult following and the title "King of Mexploitation."⁹

Given his education and prolificacy—and his outsider status as a professional “insider” within the *videohome* community—I think it’s fair to assume that here’s a director who has thought critically about how kitsch informs his medium and how camp might be used to comment on the culture that consumes that medium. Sometimes I wonder if *videohome* is to González what the umbrella is to Christo, or the urinal to Duchamp: a conventional object adopted for cultural reflection under the glow of an artist’s aura. That he’s written a novel called *Chichifo Kitsch* (literally, *Gay Prostitute Kitsch*; to date unpublished) makes me wonder whether kitsch in *Narco Gays* is a vehicle for exploring homosexuality or if it’s the other way around.¹⁰

I have wondered often since my first encounter with *Narco Gays*. I stare into screens but remain benighted. I squander psychological bandwidth wondering about kitsch vehicles.

González describes his turn to b-film as an aesthetic conversion: “I realized that the prosaic is part of our values, the *naco* that we are but don’t want to accept. I woke up wanting to explore this in cinema.”¹¹ In interviews he digresses on Kieślowski and Kubrick with the blithe air of an overlooked peer,¹² and curses merrily when discussing his métier, proudly highlighting its lumpen appeal: “What I consider my success as a filmmaker is my ability to interact with viewers who are completely marginalized . . . prostitutes, drug addicts, pickpockets, police, all of these people who speak the same language.”¹³ “In Mexico,” he says, “we haven’t accepted the carnival that we are.”¹⁴ Is this what a narco-auteur sounds like? Is González the genius in the rough, the artiste-cum-class-warrior? “If you pay attention to *videohomes*, I do stand out,” he says. “Why?” Yeah, why? “Because [my videos] look like cinema. . . . Because I respect my work.”¹⁵

All the same, like any great auteur, he can sound conflicted about his craft. He’ll talk discouragingly about his experience at film school (“the bastion of a frustrated few who

never want to leave it")¹⁶ and then advise young filmmakers to attend one ("but ignore the teachers, they don't know what they're doing or saying").¹⁷ He sees his oeuvre as cinema of the oppressed but dismisses other *videohomes* as banalities of the "don Mario Almada school."¹⁸ He also admits to have gotten "fed up with working with actors who aren't actors. This is a huge defect of the *videohome*."¹⁹

Most baffling, in an early interview, González condemned Mexican cinema for showcasing drugs and violence, taking particular umbrage with sexist depictions of women: "If a woman is not a prostitute, she's being raped, or willing to have sex on the spur of the moment...commercial producers [should] return to family entertainment."²⁰ Three years later he directed *Por un salvaje amor* (*For a Savage Love*, 1992), a film that *El Universal* called "the most misogynistic movie in the history of world cinema."²¹

Misogyny may have stayed the course in González's throughput, since it's the least ambiguous fault with which to condemn *Narco Gays*, whose male characters compulsively throw gang signs at the mere thought of women. Here's Rony explaining his sexual preference: "You know why I'm a fag? Because women are bitches. They're always dirty. They don't clean themselves." In every one of her scenes, poor Vicky/Natasha, the only female character, is forced to weather such comments (and much worse) to the point where her heroin deadpan could almost seem less like bad acting than an exoskeletal retreat if she weren't enjoying the attention so much. Romantic encounters between her and the bisexual characters are about congruent with a decomposing monk's perspective on courtly love: she screams when Johnny jumps her—*strangles her*—to coopt a kiss, but once their lips meet, she yelps with delight; Armando leads her to the bedroom with his arm around her waist and tells her he plans on loving her "by force"; in the sweaty, saxophony aftermath, she snuggles up to him and concedes, yes, that was a little fun.

While this is maximally offensive, it is also hopelessly kitschy. An optimist might argue that the film's over-the-top misogyny does kamikaze work on the homophobic front. If, in *Narco Gays*, sex with women is dull, traditional, just plain no fun, sex with men is lively, exciting, dangerous. Gay culture, in short, becomes an allegory of narco culture and straight culture is just a series of outmoded and corrupt laws, restricting love and commerce to the banal.

Armando, a married cop and the film's categorical villain, is the character who struggles most with his homosexuality. In the opening scene, he catches Johnny in a cocaine deal and forces the narco, at gunpoint, to perform oral sex. "I want you to know I'm the law," says Armando, declaring his judicial and heterosexual authority as he unbuttons his jeans. When he encounters Johnny several scenes on, he beats him up and reminds him, "I'm not a fag." To prove it to himself, he rushes off to rape Vicky.

Max, the hero, is the character most secure in his homosexuality and the one who challenges the law. At his meeting with Armando, the cop asks him, "Are you a fag?" Max, rubbing a wad of American dollars over his face, answers, "I used to be. Now I'm gay." His ascension to the narco throne has awarded him the discursive power to define his sexual identity in the face of an oppressive authority. In the final scene, when Armando kills Max, he pronounces him an "ex-gay . . . and a fag again."

Could we take this further and suggest that the film is making a kind of meta point about the homoerotic in narco cinema? By using camp so extremely, is it interrogating the macho conventions of *videohome*, exposing male-on-male melodrama for what it really signals: not just a crack in the veneer of manliness that encourages male bonding,²² but a secret desire to love one's brother narco?

Furthermore, and to the obvious point, if the film were just a poor attempt to cash out on cheap laughs by parading a series

of homosexual caricatures, what sort of hater could sit through an hour and a half of this without feeling duped? At what point does watching attractive men make out stop being a gay joke? When does self-consciousness set in to make this all confusing, annoying, angering, interesting, arousing, big-time glandular?

But then I think of Husky dancing and feel freshly ashamed for making a mystery out of what is patently a terrible joke. And then I review a few scenes to confirm their bigotry and find myself confronted with such devastatingly vortical kitsch that my moral position is ripped inside it and I just watch, mesmerized. I'm not even sure this is camp anymore. The film appears both self-conscious of its badness and completely numb to it. It is a blind eye winking at a mirror. Then I think: Does the film recognize that the self-knowing, black-humorous engine of postmodernity has run its course—that nothing spoils pure kitsch the way camp does? And if the film appears so singularly naïve and humorless about itself, is that part of an illusion to fool us into thinking that what must be camp is really kitsch (when really it's camp in disguise, or, again, a wiener)? It's nothing like a Lynch film: the banal isn't serving an existential crisis. Maybe here it's the existential attending to a crisis of the banal, or it's the existential's sense of the banal that's been thrown into crisis. I don't even know what these last two propositions mean. Now I'm just shuffling words around to see if I can come up with a sentence to throw light anywhere on this crazy-ass fadoodle. See what this film's done to me?

This where I'd arrived. A crisis of scholarship. And so one week in fall 2013, while recovering from some post-Thanksgiving bronchitis, I sorted through my DVD collection and had me a González-thon. Fifteen films in six phlegmatic nights. What I sought was context for genius. I needed an essence, a discernable pneumatic scheme.

What I found instead was *El Clon de Hitler* (2002), a decidedly non-sci-fi flick about Hitler's clone replotting world

domination from the barrio. A film that goes from silly—magic-marker stauches and raw-meat brunches and incest fantasies—to downright repulsive by the last scene, in which Holocaust footage is spliced with shots of gang members grieving the clone's death. Then I found *Darketos* (*Goths*, 2002), a sequel, a plotless rumination on how bad things had gotten in the barrio since El Führer's untimely demise, and how much better they've become since the ghost of Hitler's clone arrived to offer some self-help bullet points and reunite the gang under a new missive: Hitler is "god" of *nacos*, the true leader of Mexico's "cosmic race."

A few brain cells, working in tandem, told me that these films are no more a rehabilitation of Third Reich ideology than I am a fancy mastodon. Let those brain cells continue their fiery relay and they would doubtless suggest that *Narco Gays*, which is just as trashy and tedious, is no extolment of LGBT culture, its kitsch implosion no statement or reflection on kitsch—it's all just *kitsch*, albeit less refined. Camp slag.

I decided to give those brain cells a rest from their conspiracy and continue my marathon. I watched *Por mujeres como tú* (*For Women Like You*, 2004) and *La curva del olvido* (*The Forgetting Curve*, 2004), almost completely intelligible and technically proficient political dramas such as you'd find any afternoon on Lifetime. I watched the madcap giallo *Mujeres de media noche* (*Midnight Women*, 1990) and the gore fest *24 cuadros de terror* (*24 Frames of Terror*, 2008), both of which, at their most graphic, seem a couple heartbeats away from snuff. Though I couldn't find a copy of *Shibari* (2002), an erotic melodrama about Japanese-bondage enthusiasts (González is particularly proud of this one),²³ I did see *Rojo Orgasmico* (*Orgasmic Red*, 2012), an erotic melodrama about a director making a film about his Japanese-bondage enthusiasm.

The more films I watched, the more tissues I gunked, the more sleepless nights I accumulated, the more convinced I became of an auteur's handiwork. His penchant for

repurposing old narratives through the “found” medium of *videohome*—is this what’s going on and, if so, what could be more postmodern than that? His best-known film, *Ritmo, traición y muerte: La cumbia asesina* (*Rhythm, Betrayal and Death: The Cumbia Killer*, 1991), is an S&M take on Bizet’s *Carmen*, while *Sí Honarás tu coca madre* (*Thou Shalt Honor Your Junky Mother*, 2005) is essentially *My Fair Lady from the Barrio*: Eliza Dolittle kidnapped and gang-raped by her fellow urchins as a just reward for abandoning them. *Sí Desearás la mujer de tu narco* (*Thou Shalt Covet Your Dealer’s Woman*, 2005) is ye old farmer’s daughter yarn, the NC-17 version, the one that ends in castration, as told by Zalman King. (This *Thou Shalt* series itself being an unfinished homage to Kieślowski’s *Decalogue*).

The formulas and popular morals of narco cinema have no place in González’s depth of field. Out go the corridistas and in come the naked ladies (and a few gentlemen going full-dorsal nude, as well [c.f. Hollywood mores]). Whether his narratives are based on operas or fairytales or whether they’re whispered directly from his own depraved muse, the results are always unique. He’s right about himself: his work stands alone in the narco cinema canon. If the narcotic correlative of most of our films would be cocaine (the rises and falls of noisy egos), that of González’s work must be some weird designer hallucinogen that retails by the bitcoin and that makes the user feel less like an active participant than a paralyzed witness to the hydroponically surreal and artisanaly obscene frontiers of human existence. I won’t mince words: this is the most original director to have ever shot narco cinema.

My greatest surprise though, and a tantalizing one, was that homoeroticism isn’t anomalous to his filmography. In *Sí Matarás* (*Thou Shalt Kill*, 2005), the wise don Salomón employs two openly gay narcos at the top of his organization: consummate pros who torture and murder with the best of their hetero peers while shouldering the additional responsibility of raping men who betray the cartel. One of these

enforcers is a bit of a gargoyle about the whole rape thing, always simpering and ogling, permanently hunched as if to latch on command, and pursuant to which latches he takes wicked delight in describing his genitalia in euphemistic non sequiturs (e.g. “daddy” and “the crying bump”) to his bound victims, all of whom are practically screaming through their eyeballs by the time the gargoyle leans in for a face lick and “the crying bump” comes that much closer to exploding its “melon water with milk.” So there’s that guy. But his partner is a chummy fellow with a handsome grin and a good head of hair who, in his wool-knit turtlenecks, looks sort of like a humanities TA: all around a convivial and attractive guy (by TA standards) who just happens to moonlight as a same-sex rapist for a drug cartel.

None of which probably bodes well for a gay-friendly reading of *Narco Gays*.

But what to make of *Nosotros los chemos* (*We, the Junkies*, 2001)? This is the story of gas-huffing pillagers and rapists who live in a garbage dump at the edge of town. Rolo, their leader, is played by telenovela heartthrob Armando Zamarripa. Of all the junkies, he and his abs comprise the most interesting subject for the Quebecois filmmaker making a submersion documentary on the trials of these NAFTA underdogs. Jean Claude is played by Flavio Peniche. Remember Peniche? That serial nerve molester from the Zeta films? He’s much less menacing here, with a blonde brillo pad poking out his toque and with the lip-smacking sniveling fuss he makes whenever he zooms his camera toothsomely on Rolo’s big brown muscles.

This doesn’t seem to fare more tolerantly at first. But what begins as a gay joke (or a French joke; or the conflation of the two in pan-American bad taste) evolves a degree of human interest when Jean Claude rushes Rolo to the hospital and saves his life after a vicious police raid on the dump. Near the end of the film, at which point Rolo is the only gang member to

survive another battle with the psychotic police, Jean Claude saves him once more by bringing him to Montreal to share his stake in the “developed world” (J. C.’s words). In the final scene, a sartorially gentrified Rolo lords over the breakfast nook and its spread of red wine, croissants, and cocaine (what’s known up here as a “Moreal Monday”). “If you make me happy, I’ll make you happy, too,” promises Jean Claude. Rolo grins, reviewing footage of his old life on J. C.’s camera.

Is this a happy ending for Rolo? Or is he prostituting himself for the cocaine and health care? Is the film suggesting a joyful coupling, or has Rolo been forced to adapt his Mexican manliness to the queer tastes of the “developed world” as a matter of survival? His grin is no answer, because it’s the same dumb oxygen trap he’s been sporting the whole film, less an emotional gauge than a physical reminder of how a lifetime of gasoline ingestion pollutes the nerves.

I was beginning to understand that zombie state myself. Halfway into my marathon, my fever climbing like a spy, my beggarly frame shivering into bed at 4 AM only to lay awake for hours hacking up slimers and salty lougies, my perspective on things was starting to slip. I’m a lousy sleeper after the orangest days, but give me a few seasonal germs and bedtime becomes a war of attrition between my divisions of consciousness. Hours would drag by and I’d be compulsively revisiting the same dailies from my marathon. It was a bargain out of insomnia: contextualize these scenes and you shall be released—those cinematic moments when the camera starts to jangle and zoom in on the inappropriate places, when the screen goes grainy or the music breaks out in a sudden rash of dissonance. Those depictions of ordinary madness that slip into an otherwise lucid narrative and slip away as if they were never there—the Gonzálisms—they were like adrenalin shots administered to prolong the torture.

I replayed the scene from *Sí Honarás* in which the villain is called upon to imagine complete and total fear and

so envisions a cemetery where a woman tries to dress him in a fuchsia scarf while a portly tenor in a gray suit stands by singing “Una Furtiva Lagrima.”²⁴ (I stumbled down the hall to the bathroom and horked out another batch of Chernobyl spunk). I rethought the opening credits of *Sí Desearás*: a couple in lucha-libre masks hot-oil wrestling, ripping their swimsuits off, smelling each other’s feet.²⁵ (I reached over my partner’s grinding molars to grab a tissue off the nightstand and sink it with a chewy web of veined gunk). I pondered the scene in *Por mujeres* in which two cops try to break an unsnitchable narco by feeding him a forkful of green beans. The narco shakes and moans, but won’t utter a word. He’s terrified of those beans. And so the cops beat him and call his family into the interrogation room, whereupon the lead cop (the film’s hero) begins feeding those beans to the wife’s breasts. And when even this WTF fails to loosen the narco’s tongue, the cop smiles a friendly grin, kisses the narco’s young daughter on the cheek, and shoots her shih tzu in the face.²⁶

Page after page of these moments fill my notebook, parenthesized by the requisite *¿?!*. Replaying them through a 100.7-degree shiver of pure exhaustion, though, that’s a different confusion. I was losing it tediously, my perspective vanishing into the consensual delusion of an idiot teleplay that never ends but repeats and never ends but repeats. And when there were no scenes to turn over and when my partner had risen and dawn’s glow embroidered our bedroom curtains, there was only one image left: a blind eye winking at an all-seeing universe and a rattling arm span trying to bridge the eternity in between.

* * *

Eff this. There’s a time and a place for the ambiguous. What I wanted was Boolean. Is *Narco Gays* a bad joke or is it art? I needed authorial intention.

And so after having committed six days to my marathon viewing, and over a year to maintaining an objective distance from the movers and shakers of narco cinema, I decided to get on the e-horn and contact raculfright_13, whose *Blogo Trasho* often reviews Mexploitation films and whose Skype interview with González, filled with responses like “the producer ... wanted to write this in the new screenplay because he wanted to show why Dracula is ‘*muy malo*’” rekindled my old suspicion about a genius stymied by the studio system.²⁷ I asked racul to pass on my email and, two days later, I’d made contact with the auteur himself.

Patricia Rojas, his wife and producer, acting liaison between González and me, very graciously offers to send me anything I’d like from her husband’s catalogue. The prospect of pursuing my questions over another swath of the 73+ movies I’ve yet to see makes me cackle maniacally, but I limit my requests. I’d like to see *Shibari* (maybe the film he’s most proud of) and I delicately ask González if his work is divided into commercial films and passion projects—essentially, does he make a few stinkers to finance his dreams (I don’t say “stinkers”).

He tells me “My work is very complicated.” When he has complete freedom from the producer, as he did with films like *Shibari*, the work is “more interesting and personal” and has a “cleaner and more poetic cinematographic language.”²⁸ But he also calls many of his studio films “interesting” as well,²⁹ and says he tries to direct these pictures from the audience’s point of view so to “enjoy [the spectator’s] emotions and black humor.”³⁰

I tell him that his films seem to me ironic about their kitschyness. I toss out “hyper-camp.” What role does kitsch play in his aesthetic? González:

When one portrays Mexican society in all its social strata, kitsch involuntarily accompanies even the learned and best-educated people. I remember a *videohome* distributor using his finest gold Mont Blanc pen to open a juice box.

What's beautiful about this is the irony, in the sense that "having bad taste is cathartic, and to a certain point, fun."

Especially in my more vulgar and trashy *videohomes*, like *Narco Gays* [!!!!], *Gordita la del barrio*, I allow the situation to be kitsch and give it a farcical tone, which I consider very healthy and very close to reality in Mexico.³¹

I have no idea what he's talking about. "Cathartic" and "reality" aren't words I would use to describe any aspect of *Narco Gays* and, by round two of our e-mail exchange, my compulsion is so strong that I blurt out my remaining questions with the grace and reserve of a pubescent crying bump. Could he tell me everything about how *Narco Gays* was conceived? His direction process? What did the actors think? The producers? The audience? In my most diplomatic language, with nods to Judith Butler and the aesthetic value of camp, I suggest that the film somehow manages to mix gay jokes with gay pride. Is this a valid reading? Or could it be one or the other?

González:

In traditional Mexican *videohomes*, "macho" men (like the Almada brothers, Jorge Reynoso, etc.) strongly reject looking or acting like homosexuals. Therefore, *Narco Gays* had to be done with *video-home* actors who are more open to free sexual orientation. There was a certain strange code for the "macho" men in the film; some actors agreed to film homosexual scenes provided they were always in the dominant and active position.

During *Narco Gays*, a discussion arose between the actors and the Director since I pointed out that being homosexual may not be a permanent condition, which is to say that the menu of homosexual pleasures is vast and diverse. The active homosexuals in *Narco Gays* turned this into a controversy: let's say that those who play the male role and mount their partners are really machos, and that even if there's penetration, they will continue to be macho. Some of the gay actors argued against this, defining their heterosexual partners as "repressed homosexuals." The young actors stopped seeing their bisexual facet in a normal way, and interpreted the everyday of homosexuals.³²

He answers my final question—"Yes, *Narco Gays* is fully conscious of its kitsch and is even a pioneering film

in this subject”³³—and waxes proudly on his achievement: “*Narco Gays* was a true showcase of the diverse preferences or nuances of homosexuality. Some of the [actors] played ‘locas’ (queers) and others felt more comfortable not being dominant. Actually, the film had very strong scenes that were cut because the producers said that the *videohome* audience wasn’t prepared to see such explicit sexual acts because Mexican culture is so repressed by the morals [of institutions] like the Church and machismo.”³⁴

But then frustration sets in: “Ignacio Rinza’s script had many limitations and [called for] a comedy in the style of *La Cage aux Folles*, with [that film’s] clichés... [*Narco Gays*] was pulled in two directions. It was very difficult to direct because the tone was totally strange.”

And then his frustration and pride sort of collapse: “In general, the *videohome* has been transformed into a very low-budget production system...the scripts deteriorate and [it’s difficult to] fix shortcomings in production. *Narco Gays* was no exception, so the original script was transformed by [these] circumstances. The actors agree to participate for very low salaries. You carry out production in eight or ten days. You use borrowed locations. The actors bring their own costumes. The film crew is limited to ten. All these circumstances change the script during filming. In this case, the film’s creative ‘value’ is the Director, since not just anyone is able to coordinate these shortcomings and make a film.”³⁵

How was it received by the critics? “Badly.” By audiences? “Some found it funny and clever. Others couldn’t understand such caustic humor.” The producer? “He sold it successfully and got more from it than anyone.” The actors? “It was another movie on their CVs and it gave them enough money to survive for a week.”³⁶

And by the director? “It was a very strange movie because the energy that went into its development was trying to make it a comedy, but I had filmed more human things like jealousy. Obviously, my interest was to see Gay people, not

gay caricatures. Gibrán González (actor), in Husky's dance sequence, had a violent reaction when the old gay [don Frankie] touched him too much and we had to calm him down. This really disturbed the energy on set. The actresses felt relegated to the background, very annoying for them. Personally speaking, it's not a movie that satisfied me. They didn't know how to handle it; it wasn't a lucky film. Obviously the actors depended more on the film's exterior than on the interior lives of their characters, but for them it was a difficult experience."³⁷

* * *

I guess we're about done here. Any attempt to deconstruct the above-related perspective on love and cinema wouldn't yield a pulp or pixel of real insight or make you and me closer friends. A scene-by-scene analysis of the polyphonic tension between authorial and directorial voices engendering—just...never mind.

Now that my bronchitis is gone and my spirit basically repaired to good standing (no more songs of my sputum, I promise; and sorry about that), it looks as though I'm back where I started, only this time I see a little pink on the horizon. Is *Narco Gays* good or bad, a gay joke or gay pride? I have no idea, and that's okay. Most viewers who aren't alienated by the homophobia will reject it as absurd, or ersatz absurd, and even if a hopeful few happen to find it queered and absurdist, it's not my place to take sides. I've come to terms with not understanding this one, and have realized how silly it is to seek a high-theoretical explanation for content that demands that you just sit back and enjoy its crazy. To paraphrase Freud, sometimes an obese hit man masturbating his bellybutton on the dance floor is just an obese hit man masturbating his bellybutton on the dance floor. Husky stayed the same, it was my scholarship that got small.

On that note, let's leave the last word to González, reminiscing here on his life as a filmmaker: "What amuses me in all of this is thinking whether the madness pursues me or I pursue the madness. Who the fuck knows, but it's been an interesting career."³⁸

This.

Yes, *that*.

That about sums it up, doesn't it?

Nothing more to add.

No sir.

For argument's sake, though, if we were to go full scholarly on this and break down what it means for the film to be "fully conscious of its kitsch" according to the internal (and internally suspect) phallacy of a bisexual ontological basis to homosexual desire (which, granted, some may genuinely see "the menu of homosexual pleasures [as] vast and diverse" and others may tactically partially substantiate such a claim in so far that it challenges the hegemonic positionality of Church and state in becoming-Mexican as a micropolitical tendency with carnivalesque interstiaity, as González himself implies variously where quoted above) the first point we'd have to annihilate, and I'm talking smithereens, would be blah blah blah, Gayatri Spivak blee-blah-bloh-bloaw—is this legible anymore? If you're reading this in e-book form, can you woosh your pointer and thumb far enough apart to enlarge and interpret this stream-of-consciousness drivel?

How about now? The Neville Brothers rock! Jesus stole all my turnips! But that's okay because *Point Break*'s on TBS later tonight and I'm going to eat me some KETCHUP CHIPS! I pity the poor fool who won't accept a beautifully tossed frisbee! Uncle Einstein, where are you? There you are!

Peek-a-bood

Okay, now we're really done here.

Postscript: From Culiacán to Cannes



Figure P.1 *¡Que viva narco cinema!*

Quitting narco cinema has meant the most gorgeously pang-free break with any of the addictions I've had to curtail along my 15-year journey from eternal youth to premature grey. On the obsessive-compulsive meter aligning my nervous system, the films rank somewhere in the busy middle: just above cinnamon nicotine gum, but still several notches below tutti

frutti nicotine gum. Three weeks clean, the cravings have been manageable and particular, and the tricks of self-delusion largely inoffensive. As for no longer having to write about narco cinema, let me say how wonderful the release is when every second page no longer brings a new moustache to describe.

I should be categorically happy. Life is proceeding on a fresher plane. I'm reading Carlos Fuentes again. I've already planned to lose five pounds, and most of that through outdoor activity. Yet knowing that I won't be watching regularly anymore makes me sad in a way that breaking most other addictions hasn't. It feels like bidding farewell to a good friend rather than snubbing a bad one. Even if the departure is amicable and undertaken for good reason, it doesn't stanch the sentimental feeling that something important to me and my experience of the world is receding day by day.

"Addiction" sounds here like a gimmicky *entendre* and in a moment I'll try to explain why I'm as serious about its usage as I am about "friendship." But before we get to that, I'd like to offer a few words of acknowledgment—and just a few—to my succession aides.

First there was *Heli* (2013), a film about a teenage factory worker whose family is pulled into the roughest tides of narco violence after his younger sister agrees to hide a package of cocaine for her boyfriend, a federal soldier. Then came *Miss Bala* (2011), about a beauty-pageant contestant who moves through her three-day ordeal with fame a bit like a marble in one of those tilting labyrinth games: her little world pitched and sloped at every turn by the unfriendly forces of narcos, police, DEA, and national media, before she's unceremoniously junked out their maze. Do the plots sound familiar? How about the one about the repatriated migrant who finds his hometown overrun by narcos and has no choice but to grab the bloody pickaxe bequeathed him and start climbing the cartel's ranks (*El Infierno* [Hell, 2010])? Or the film about

the capo sneaking across the Iraqi border to rescue his brother, an American soldier captured in combat and slated for execution (okay, *Salvando al Soldado Pérez* [*Saving Private Pérez*, 2011] is wacky even by *videohome* standards).

These films are not narco cinema, or not quite. Each has earned major awards and paeans of the highest critical order. *Heli*'s Amat Escalante won Best Director at Cannes in 2013 and *El Infierno* took home nine of Mexico's Ariel Awards in 2011, including prizes for Best Picture, Director, and Actor. *Miss Bala* picked up three awards at film festivals in the United States and Europe, and *Soldado Pérez*, a silver Ariel. While we can split these films into two stylistic camps—the social realist and the black humorist—together they form a school that film critic Sergio Ramos calls *nuevo cine de narco*: the old *videohome* aesthetic imbued with art-house chic.¹

Combining scenes of hyper-brutality and long passages of unnerving quietude, *Heli* and *Miss Bala* constitute the social realist division. They render personal tragedies of the drug war with exquisite futility. The unforgettable scene in *Heli* in which the narcos light a soldier's genitals on fire while a group of children watches quietly from the sofa, the noise from an idling videogame underscoring the labored breaths between screams—this about captures the aesthetic.

El Infierno and *Soldado Pérez*, on the other hand, are wicked fun. Though they've been largely ignored by world-cinema crowds, they've won over Mexican and Latina audiences with their elaborate in-jokes about the kitsch and barbarism of narco culture. In *El Infierno*, we share the protagonist's horrible bemusement as he encounters the garish haciendas and blood-thirsty oafs that have annexed his childhood town. *Soldado Pérez*—with its giant marijuana-leaf swimming pool and multi-touch trafficker-intel monitor and “Godfather Theme” truck horn—is to narco kitsch what a Clooney-Johansen sex tape would be to the Internet. Both films feature narcocorridos (though no *banda* interludes),

excessive violence, the tight britches, and gilded Glocks. Mario Almada makes a cameo in *El Infierno* and septuagenarian b-actress Isela Vega appears in both. Beyond the level of form, the films remind audiences of the virtue of family solidarity, which we know has been a moral mainstay of narco cinema since the beginning. But Raza Mex productions these aren't.

It's easy to see why journalists and academics investigating the bizarre world of narco cinema tend to gravitate toward, and then cling desperately to these four films. I was no exception. In the proposal for this book, I'd sketched an entire chapter on *nuevo cine de narco* and its ambivalent place in the canon. It was the guilty pleasure I'd saved for last, a chance to watch real pro cinema again, and I relished the opportunity to sharpen my critical skills against it. But my satisfaction in actually watching these films was moot. And trying to write about them made me feel guilty, as if it would be wrong to say much more than I already have. There are two reasons for this: these films are excellent; and they were made for people like me.

Miguel Rodarte, star of *Soldado Pérez*, calls his film a "spoof" of narco culture and, in the same breath, criticizes traditional narco cinema for "[celebrating] that culture."² Though his film itself isn't so mean-spirited, it's no less ironic in its "homage." The same goes for *El Infierno*. As regards the social realist branch: *Heli* is one of those extraordinary films of which you could say that silence is its own psychologically complex character who somehow manages to avoid turning the movie into a film-school thesis (for this feat, Escalante ranks beside Ki-duk Kim and Terrence Malik at his soberest). But watching *Heli* feels sort of like seeing the goriest images and videos from *Narco News* at a Whitney exhibition: the irony bridging spectator and subject is vast and brutal. *Miss Bala* is not half as grotesque and in fact, conceptually it's very much like a traditional narco film in

that its script interweaves two drug war scandals—the Caro and Kiki affair and the arrest of Laura Zúñiga, a former Miss Sinaloa whose ties to the Juárez Cartel cost her the crown—and cherry-picks sensational details from each for a fiction set in contemporary Tijuana.

The thing is, though, I've seen Caro and Kiki do battle already. And Zúñiga has her own *videohome* in *Miss Narca* (2010). It isn't simply that I feel a sense of injustice in the fact that these high-budget (contextually speaking) *nuevo cine* films have been happily claimed by a national film industry that mocks and condemns narco cinema; or that the line between praise and prohibition in this case is an aesthetic one arbitrated by the Mexican government; there's also a part of me that prefers the *videohome* version: its brutality just feels more sincere.

When I began researching this book under academic pretensions, I was aghast at much of what I saw: the nonchalant misogyny, the kill sprees and maudlin aftermaths, the amateur and kitschy everything. But through the course of writing, something strange happened: at an uncertain point, I started really to enjoy the films and to question my scholarly motives. I saw how easy it would be to subject narco cinema to the standard operandi: to praise its anti-hegemonic potential while calling out its pro-hegemonic tendencies, to drag it across that moral spectrum on which artistic merit is measured only as a capacity to liberate or further oppress marginalized subjects. This is standard scholarly procedure, and I still salute its motives, but in practice it now strikes me as very unfriendly. Allowing little to the subject other than a distant political admiration, today's typical scholar encrypts his findings in the theory de la mode, leaving out his own impulses, inner conflicts, secret desires, so that the onus of personality stays with the subject itself, and much of that bent back to argument.

What I'm trying to say is that narco cinema has helped me come to terms with this. All that's good and bad in these films

has forced me to confront the insincerity in my own scholarship. The films have challenged me to be unprofessional, to hone my sentimentalism and my snark along the same red line and in doing so, they've given me a means for staging my own sneak attacks (probably too brattily at points) on an institutional culture whose endemic confusion of novelty with true agency is, I think, commensurate with "the corporatization of academia" that those in the scarcer positions of power more strongly, if too casually, like to condemn.

Staring into the mirror for almost two years with my mask on has given me greater perspective on narco culture, its history, and its aesthetic, but it's also changed me personally. This is what I mean by friendship, and this is why concluding with *nuevo cine de narco* would be as cold a betrayal as grinding my favorite films through the latest academic shibboleths.

I won't pretend that mine is anything like real intimacy. At the best of times I felt more like a war correspondent embedded, with serious protection, on the furthest periphery of narco culture. But even from my obstructed vantage, one thing that I've learned—probably the greatest insight I can offer you—is that these films aren't just fantastic narratives; what they deliver is the fantasy of narrative itself. They provide the hopeful illusion that somewhere in Mexico the police are still incorruptible and that justice will prevail; that a brave man can strive in a global economy as fixed as ours and still come out with a new suit, tuition for his kids, and maybe a second floor on his mausoleum in Sinaloa's hallowed grounds.

This is why I call narco cinema an addiction: when I'm not following the drug war, I don't need it; when I spend my days researching cartel genealogies and collocating crime reports on *Narco News* and *Borderland Beat*, I crave it absolutely. It comforts me. I understand.

Narco cinema: a cinema of hyperbole, of snoring corpses, alligator tears, and high-octane braggadocio. And yet for all its extremity, it's essentially less ironic than *Heli* or *El Infierno*. Because it's not about bearing witness on the world's stage, but giving myth to a tight and diffuse community, myth in the sense both intimate and unreal. The films don't require the suspension of disbelief, that's precisely their gift to viewers. They paint the real massacres in fake blood and allow us to imagine, for too brief a time, that it's all pretend and that it matters.

Until the cartels are given a chance to go straight and the reconciliation can begin; until the humanist rapture unsettles us from the spell of global capitalism, I'll still watch now and then. And, since at this point there's nothing left for me to say, and because Wednesday has replaced Thursday as my new Friday, I think I'll watch one or two right now, and cheer obnoxiously at the top of my lungs: *¡Que viva México! ¡Que viva narco cinema!*

But before I get started, I should admit one last thing: I was wrong about the pangs. I miss this already.

Notes

Oye, Lector

1. This sounds facetious, yes, and though I'm pretty sure I've got the question's gist about right, if footage of this event ever turns up on YouTube to reveal that this loquacious young man is actually a scarfless old modifier scrooge, please let this declaration of a hazy memory exonerate me morally and aesthetically in the court of public opinion (as well as legally in all actual courts, everywhere in the world).
2. Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove, 1961), 19, 23, 31.

I What Is Narco Cinema?

1. Hereupon, for readability's sake, I'll drop the more scholarly feminine/masculine Latina/o combo for Latina, Chicana, etc.
2. See, for example, Grace Morales, "SUDAMÉRICA SUDARIO: Narcocine, Sicaresca y Meninos Da Rúa." *We Love Cinema* (2010).
3. Álex Madrigal, "Millones de latinos compran narcopeliculas." *El Universal* (2010); Juan Pablo Proal, "Cine de narcos en México, pura realidad." *Puebla On-line* (2009); Valeria Perasso, "Reality Took Over from the Imagination of the Film Maker." *BBC Radio World Service* (2008).
4. Pablo Proal.
5. Reynoso qtd. in Bernardo Loyola, "Narcotic Films for Illegal Fans." *Vice* (2009).
6. Sergio Ramos, "El Narco como entretenimiento," 2. *De Primera Noticias*.
7. Ramos.
8. Ramos.
9. Ramos; Reynoso qtd. in Bernardo Loyola.
10. Reynoso qtd. in Bernardo Loyola.
11. Reynoso qtd. in Bernardo Loyola.
12. Reynoso qtd. in Bernardo Loyola.
13. Ramos.

14. "De los narcocorridos a las narcopeliculas." *Semanario la Gaceta* (2011).
15. Though incomplete, the best list available is an appendix to David E. Wilt's *The Mexican Filmography, 1916 through 2001* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2003).
16. Gabriela Polit Dueñas, *Narrating Narcos* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), 8, 84.
17. John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, "Barabarization and *Narcocultura*: Reading the Evolution of Mexico's Criminal Insurgency." *Small Wars Journal* (2011): 3–6.
18. Fabiola Martínez, "Pacto de medias para limitar información sobre violencia." *La Jornada* (2011).
19. Hernández qtd. in Perasso.
20. Hernández qtd. in Perasso.
21. Bernal qtd. in Francisco Gómez, "Villano del cine busca alcaldía del Parícutaro." *El Universal* (2007).
22. Juan Llamas-Rodríguez also notes this debate about censorship and self-censorship. See, "Narcocinema and the Politics of Drugsplotation." *In Media Res* (2012).
23. Almada and Reynoso qtd. in Bernardo Loyola.
24. Rafael Romo, "Narco Films Gain Popularity in Mexico." *CNN* (2011).
25. "Mexico." *Committee to Protect Journalists* (2014); Dave Gibson, "Another 'narco-corrido' singer murdered." *The Examiner* (2012).
26. "Getting Away with Murder." *Committee to Protect Journalists* (2012).
27. Though the murder of actor Emilio Franco is rumored to have been a cartel hit. See, "Mexican Actor Emilio Franco Shot Dead during Burglary at His LA home." *Mail Online* (2010).
28. Cf. the *Vice* documentary. Though *Vice* has lately joined the vanguard of submersion journalism, its 2010 "Narcotic Films for Illegal Fans," the first mainstream-US report on narco cinema, adheres to that *check-it-bro:-shit-is-whack*-style reportage for which the company is notorious.
29. Ioan Grillo, *El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 167.
30. Madrigal.
31. Elyssa Pachico, "Juarez Murder Rate Reaches 5-Year Low." *In Sight Crime* (2013).
32. Romo.
33. Sullivan and Elkus, 3.
34. Reynoso qtd. in Bernardo Loyola.
35. Almada qtd. in Bernardo Loyola.
36. Jorge Alan Sánchez Godoy, "La narcocultura en Sinaloa." *La Jornada del Campo* (2007).
37. Elijah Wald, *Narcocorrido* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 56.
38. Luís Astorga, "Drug Trafficking in Mexico: A First General Assessment." *UNESCO*.
39. Secretaría de Seguridad Pública, "Jóvenes y Narcocultura." (Mexico City: Gobierno Federal, 2010), 4–5.

40. Wald, 50.
41. Wald, 55.
42. Wald, 59.
43. Qtd. in Ramos.
44. Charles Bowden, *Down by the River: Drugs, Money, Murder, and Family* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 64.
45. Bowden, 4. In disclosure, I have used this Bowden quote and made a similar call for “overcoming our collective amnesia” about drug culture, though not with regard to narco cinema. See Ryan Rashotte, *Biopolitical Itineraries: Mexico in Contemporary Tourist Literature*, Diss., University of Guelph, 2011.
46. Paz, 29.

2 Hecho de coca: A Sentimental Education

1. “Statistics.” *Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s*.
2. Payan ctd. in Viridiana Rios, “Evaluating the Economic Impact of Mexico’s Drug Trafficking Industry.” Graduate Students Political Economy Workshop. Institute for Quantitative Social Sciences (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2008), 3.
3. Bowden, 3.
4. Ramos.
5. The film was shot in San Martín de las Pirámides, a small town in the highlands northwest of Mexico City where hot-air balloon tours are a popular attraction.
6. Of course the *OED* contains neither example, but I have very little money right now and ponying up the legal fees for a battle with the good folks at Oxford would require black-market organ donation on my part, hence this obvious footnote.
7. Hugo Benavides’s *Drugs, Thugs and Divas: Telenovelas and Narco-Dramas in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008) summarize this succinctly and is where my context for existent scholarship primarily comes from (10–12). But see also *Soap Operas and Telenovelas in the Digital Age* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).
8. Benavides, 10–12; 120.
9. Benavides, 10, summarizing Jesús Martín-Barbero, *De los medios a las mediaciones* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1987).
10. Benavides, 12.
11. Title switcheroos are quite common, actually: many recent narco films have one title on the DVD box and another in the film credits. Is this an attempt by studios to pad their filmographies, or does it betray a fickle executive sensibility?
12. Walter Benjamin, “Dream Kitsch.” *Selected Writings*. Vol. 2.1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 4.
13. Javier Sicilia, “Open Letter to Mexico’s Politicians and Criminals.” *Narco News* (2011).

14. According to the definition offered by Winfried Menninghaus in "On the 'Vital Significance' of Kitsch: Walter Benjamin's Politics of 'Bad Taste.'" *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity*. Ed. Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), 41.

3 Two Foul Score of the Brothers Almada

1. Deborah Hastings, "U.S. Soldiers Accepting Cash, Drugs for Mexican Drug Cartel Contract Hits." *NY Daily News* (2013).
2. Tracy Wilkinson and Ken Ellingwood, "International Banks have Aided Mexican Drug Gangs." *Los Angeles Times* (1998).
3. Matt Taibbi, "Gangster Bankers: Too Big to Jail." *Rolling Stone* (2013).
4. Topher McDougal, Robert Muggah, David Shirk, and John Patterson, "Made in the U.S.A.: The Role of American Guns in Mexican Violence." *The Atlantic* (2013).
5. Joseph Cox, "Mexico's Drug Cartels Love Social Media." *Vice* (2013).
6. Norma Iglesias, "Reconstructing the Border: Mexican Border Cinema and Its Relationship to Its Audience." *Mexico's Cinema: A Century of Film and Filmmakers* (Lanham: SR Books, 2005).
7. Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 81.
8. Hemingway, 78.
9. Hemingway, 78.
10. Wald, 34–36.
11. Qtd. in Bernardo Loyola.
12. Sara Wilcox, PR & Marketing Executive, Guinness World Records North America, Inc. "Record Confirmation." Email to Ryan Rashotte. September 13, 2013.
13. This is what JC Studios pays him. See Madrigal.
14. "Mario Almada vs. Chuck Norris." *Taringa!*
15. *Cinema of Solitude* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 99.
16. Maximiliano Maza, "El Cabrito Western." *Cine Mexicano* (1996).
17. Adán Avalos, "The Naco in Mexican Film: Border Cinema and Migrant Audiences." *Lapsplottation, Exploitation Cinemas and Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 189.
18. Avalos, 189.
19. David R. Maciel, "Cinema and the State in Contemporary Mexico." *Mexico's Cinema: A Century of Films and Filmmakers* (Lanham: SR Books, 2005), 210.
20. Qtd. in Iván Cadín, "Narcos metieron dinero al cine." *El Universal* (2011).
21. John Mraz, "Mexican Cinema: Of Churros and Charros." *Jump Cut*. 29 (1984): 23–24.
22. Enrique Krauze, *Mexico: Biography of Power* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1997), 760.

23. Cadín; "Cine de narcos: capos en búsqueda de la inmortalidad." *Proceso* (2009).
24. Julio Alberto Rubio, "Cuenta el guionista Benavides como los narcotraficantes pagan porque se les haga su película." *Proceso*. 932. (September 12, 1994): 72.
25. "Cine de Narcos."
26. Berg, 99.
27. These early films include *La Choca*, a highbrow hat doffer (1973); *Mexico de noche* (1974); *Los Desarraigados* (1975); and *La Puerta falsa* (1976). *Contrabando y traición* (1976) is the closest rival to *Carro rojo* and we'll consider it at length in the following chapter.
28. In 1916, to replenish his military supplies, Pancho Villa, iconic general of the Mexican Revolution, led a cross-border raid on a small town in New Mexico, prompting the US government to send 5,000 troops into Mexico to try (unsuccessfully) to capture him. Gregorio Cortez, a turn-of-the-century Mexican-American farmer, was pursued across the borderlands by 300 US authorities for having shot the sheriff who had mistakenly killed Gregorio's brother.
29. Elaine Shannon, *Desperados: Latin Drug Lords, U.S. Lawmen and the War America Can't Win* (New York: Viking, 1988), 69.
30. Shannon, 113–134; Bowden, 126.
31. Grillo, *El Narco*, 63, 65.
32. Bowden, 243.
33. Bowden, 145.
34. Shannon, 111; Bowden, 146.
35. David Wilt, "Based on a True Story: Reality-Based Exploitation Cinema in Mexico." *Latsploitation, Exploitation Cinemas and Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 158–162.
36. Wilt, 158–160, 164.
37. Bowden, 149–50.
38. Bowden, 146–147, 153.
39. Ronald J. Rychlak, "Humberto Alvarez-Machain v. United States: The Ninth Circuit Panel Decision of September 11." *The Federalist Society for Law and Public Policy Studies* (2005).
40. Marc Lacey and Ginger Thompson, "Two Drug Slayings in Mexico Rock U.S. Consulate." *The New York Times* (2010).
41. Bowden, 75.
42. Carlos Monsiváis, *Mexican Postcards* (New York: Verso, 1997), 160–161.
43. "Operación Cóndor favoreció la actividad de Rafael Caro Quintero." *El Informador* (2013); Monsiváis, 160–161.
44. "Cine de Narcos."
45. Astorga.
46. Withheld by Mexican censors until 1991, it was something of a hit in US border cinemas. See Wilt, 166.
47. Bowden, 149–150.

48. Bowden, 159.
49. "U.S. Furious over Freeing of Mexican Drugs Baron Rafael Caro Quintero." *The Guardian* (2013).
50. "5 Million Dollar Reward for Info. on Rafael Caro-Quintero." *Borderland Beat* (2013).
51. "Cine de Narcos."
52. Monsiváis, 159.
53. Vanilla Ice, "Ice Ice Baby." *To the Extreme*. SBK, 1990.
54. Though the project fell apart when the incarcerated Araujo was critically injured in a two-week prison riot. See Rubio.
55. Grillo, *El Narco*, 78.
56. See also *El fin de los Arellano* (2003).
57. Ed Vulliamy, *Amexica: War Along the Borderline* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 30; Bowden, 154, 286–287.
58. Grillo, *El Narco*, 78–79.
59. Grillo, *El Narco*, 79–80.
60. Bowden, 297.
61. Bowden, 235.
62. Bowden, 258.
63. Larry Rohter, "Man in the News; A Mexican on the Fast Track: Carlos Salinas de Gortari." *The New York Times* (1987).
64. Bowden, 253.
65. Bowden, 59–60, 215; Peter Andreas, "U.S.-Mexico: Open Markets, Closed Border." *Foreign Policy*. 103 (1996): 59.
66. Krauze, 770.
67. Bowden, 251; Krauze, 773.
68. Tania Molina Ramírez, "Sintetizan en libro la caída de la industria cinematográfica nacional." *La Jornada* (2008).
69. Ramos.
70. Cadín.
71. Alejandro Alemán, "Qué es el Videohome? (1)." *El Salón Rojo, El Universal* (2012); Avalos, 194.
72. Bowden, 236–238.
73. Qtd. in Grillo, *El Narco*, 84; Bowden, 263.
74. Bowden, 246–247.
75. Bowden, 228, 243.
76. Bowden, 296.
77. Bowden, 43, 114, 294, 304.
78. Bowden, 295.
79. Bowden, 27, 214, 232.
80. Bowden, 214, 248–249.
81. Bowden, 183, 75, 183, 203, 286, 262, 271.
82. Bowden, 48.
83. Bowden, 214.
84. Tijuano, "The War for Tijuana, a 20+ Year Conflict. Part 1." *Borderland Beat* (2013).
85. Bowden, 165, 288, 291.

86. "Byronic Hero." *Wikipedia*.
87. Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 49.
88. Lord Byron, "The Corsair." *The Works of Lord Byron*. Vol. 3. 1900. *Project Gutenberg* (2007): 265–268.
89. Qtd. in Bowden, 255.
90. Jerome McGann, *Byron and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 25.
91. McGann, 25–26.
92. *Capo: jefe de jefes* (1998); *La Avioneta Clandestina* (1998); and *El último narco del cartel de Juárez* (1998) might be Carillo films, but I haven't been able to find copies of them. My guess is based on the title and year.
93. Ken Ellingwood and Eric Lichtblau, "18 Slain Execution-Style at Farm Near Ensenada." *Los Angeles Times* (1998); Vulliamy, 27.
94. Sam Dillon, "Gunmen Kill 3 Families in Mexico Over Drugs." *New York Times* (1998).
95. Bowden, 264.
96. Bowden, 378.
97. Ian Bruce, "Mexico Frees Ex-Leader's Brother." *BBC News* (2005).
98. Well, at least one TED Talk: Emiliano Salinas, "A Civil Response to Violence." *TEDTalks* (2010).
99. "Death Toll in Ciudad Juarez Tops 3,100." *Borderland Beat* (2010).
100. Grillo, *El Narco*, 165; Vulliamy, 30; "Business Environment." *Juarez Invest*.
101. Vulliamy, 23.
102. Qtd. in Kai Flanders, "The Deadly World of Mexican Narco-Ballads." *Vice* (2013).
103. "Mexico Drug War Fast Facts." *CNN* (2014).
104. And this doesn't cover 2013–2014. Mark Karlin, "Fueled by War on Drugs, Mexican Death Toll Could Exceed 120,000 as Calderon Ends Six-Year Reign." *TruthOut* (2012).
105. "Mexico Drug War Fast Facts."
106. Will Grant, "Do American Guns Kill Mexicans?" *BBC News* (2012).
107. Roberto A. Ferdman, "99% of Kidnappings in Mexico Went Unreported Last Year." *Quartz* (2013).
108. Melissa Dell, "Trafficking Networks and the Mexican Drug War." *Scholars at Harvard* (2012): 5.
109. Marguerite Cawley, "Mexico Kidnappings Highest in 16 Years." *In Sight Crime* (2013); Ferdman.
110. Olga R. Rodriguez, "Hugo Hernandez: Mexico Cartel Stitches Rival's Face On Soccer Ball." *Huffington Post* (2010).
111. Ioan Grillo, "Special Report: Mexico's Zetas Rewrite Drug War in Blood." *Reuters* (2012).
112. Grillo, *El Narco*, 96, 98.
113. Grillo, *El Narco*, 102.
114. Grillo, *El Narco*, 94, 99, 106; Vulliamy, 243.

115. Grillo, *El Narco*, 105.
116. Grillo, *El Narco*, 103–105; Vulliamy, 33.
117. Vulliamy, 233, 283.
118. Grillo, *El Narco*, 115.
119. “Gulf Cartel Split with Zetas Public.” *Borderland Beat* (2010).
120. Grillo, *El Narco*, 128; “El cártel de los Zetas tiende acuerdos de ‘no agresión y colaboración.’” *Infobae* (2011).
121. Grillo, *El Narco*, 105, 211; John Bailey, “Los Zetas’ y McDonalds.” *El Universal* (2011).
122. Vulliamy, 291; Grillo, *El Narco*, 105, 269; Ioan Grillo, “Mexico’s Drug War Leads to Kidnappings, Vigilante Violence.” *Time* (2014).
123. Julieta Pelcastre, “Zetas Trafficking Drugs to Europe Through West Africa.” *Borderland Beat* (2013).
124. Vulliamy, 287.
125. Dwight Dyer and Daniel Sachs, “Los Zetas’ Spawn: The Long Afterlife of Mexico’s Most Ruthless Drug Gang.” *Foreign Affairs* (2013).
126. Ryan Villarreal, “The Mexican Hydra: Kill a Drug Cartel Boss and Another Emerges.” *International Business Times* (2012).
127. Grillo, *El Narco*, 106.
128. Vulliamy, 27.
129. Grillo, *El Narco*, 106, 115, 128.
130. Américo Paredes, *The Hammon and the Beans* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1994), 186; Dale A. Zimmerman, “Notes on Tamaulipas Birds.” *The Wilson Bulletin*. 69.3 (1957) SORA.
131. US Consulate Matamoros, “Zetas Massacre 72 Migrants in Tamaulipas.” Unclassified Cable (2010). *The National Security Archive*; Gary Moore, “Ending the Zetas Killing Spree: An Invisible Success Story.” *In Sight Crime* (2011).
132. US Embassy in Mexico, “Mexico Presents Migrant Protection Plan.” Unclassified Cable (2010). *The National Security Archive*.
133. Moore.
134. Dane Schiller, “Mexican Crook: Gangsters Arrange Fights to Death for Entertainment.” *The Houston Chronicle* (2011); “A Nightmare of the Massacre in San Fernando.” *Borderland Beat* (2011).
135. In narco parlance, the final shot to the head.
136. Madrigal.
137. Vulliamy, 47.
138. Paz, 34.
139. Luciano Campos Garza, “Crónicas de un narco, la película de ‘La Barbie’ filmada en Monterrey.” *Proceso* (2012).
140. Ángel Plascencia, “Alcalde actúa en videohome sobre ‘El Chapo.’” *Reporte Indigo* (2014).
141. Madrigal.
142. Leticia Carillo, “‘Sólo espero el final pero que sea de trancazo’: Mario Almada.” *Corre Camara* (2011).
143. Hernández qtd. in Perasso.
144. Madrigal.

4 Narcas y Narcos

1. I'll tell you the same thing I told him: *Commando Zorras* (yes, "Slut Commando," technically, unfortunately) was part of a box set I purchased in order to collect narco films by female directors. And while the particular film you're referring to, Steven, was directed by a man, it happens to have been written by a woman. So that's interesting. Anyway, I haven't even watched it.
2. In *Las nieves de enero* (*The January Snow*, 1995).
3. The bilingual copy of the DVD is subtitled *The Michoacán Dog*, but I prefer my translation.
4. She told reporters that one day she'd like to be mayor of Tijuana "And after that, why not, the first female president of Mexico." See "Claudia Casas pasó del cine sobre narcotráfico al Congreso de Baja California." *El Telégrafo* (2013).
5. George W. Grayson, *Mexico: Narco Violence and a Failed State?* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2011), 23.
6. Qtd. in Elaine Carey, "'Selling is More of a Habit than Using' Narcotraficante Lola la Chata and Her Threat to Civilization, 1930–1960." *Journal of Women's History*. 21.2 (2009): 64, 70, 74.
7. Ezequiel Parra Altamirano, "Dimensión Política." *Periódico Express de Nayarit* (2013).
8. Pablo Perez, "Women on the Rise in Mexican Drug Cartels." *Agence France-Presse* (2011).
9. Rikke Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes: The Female Hero in Popular Cinema, 1970–2006* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2007), 23.
10. Neal King and Martha McCaughey, "What's a Mean Girl like You Doing in a Movie like This?" *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 3–6.
11. Camille Paglia, "The Million Mom March: What a Crock!" *Salon* (2000).
12. Yvonne D. Sims, *Women of Blaxploitation: How the Black Action Film Heroine Changed American Pop Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006), 17.
13. Sims, 17.
14. Los Tigres del Norte, "Contrabando y Traicion." *Contrabando y Traicion*. Fama Records (1975).
15. An uneducated guess.
16. I admit this isn't exactly an objective reading.
17. Qtd. in Daniel Hernandez, "Mexican Opera Tackles the Myth of 'Camelia la Tejana,' Icon of Narcocorridos." *Los Angeles Times* (2010).
18. The third in the series was directed by his son, Raúl Fernández Jr.
19. Catherine L. Benamou, "Con amor, tequila, y gasoline: Lola the Truck Driver, and Screen Resistance in cine fronterizo." *Latsploitation, Exploitation Cinemas and Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 176.

20. William Anthony Nericcio, *Tex[t]-Mex: Seductive Hallucinations of the 'Mexican' in America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 166–167.
21. Benamou, 173, 182.
22. Benamou, 176.
23. Benamou, 175.
24. Benamou, 181.
25. Clint W. Alexander and Bryan J. Soukup, “Obama’s First Trade War: The US-Mexico Cross-Border Trucking Dispute and the Implications of Strategic Cross-Sector Retaliation on U.S. Compliance under NAFTA.” *Berkeley Journal of International Law*. 28 (2010): 313.
26. Robert R. Alvarez Jr., *Mangos, Chiles and Truckers: The Business of Transnationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 39.
27. Other female writers include Silvia Becerril, Gabriela Sanmiguel, Karmelinda Valverde, and Carmen Buitron, who has also directed at least one film.
28. And because the rest of the numbers in this and the following paragraph come courtesy of IMDB, you may assume gross incompleteness.

5 . . . and Narco Gays?

1. Qtd. in Loyola.
2. The Spanish synopsis is racier and translates: “Whoever saw them . . . Big guys, big boots, big hats, big guns and very ‘gay’!!! They say that in this life each chooses his cross, and the cross of these men isn’t exactly drugs, but guns, and not exactly guns of iron, although with these they also settle their scores.”
3. Alberto Acuña Navarrijo, “El otro cine de diversidad sexual. Segunda parte (y final): Narco gays.” *Revista Cinefagia* (2011).
4. This isn’t Derrida speaking, but one of his interpreters. Niall Lucy, *A Derrida Dictionary* (Madlen: Blackwell, 2004), 68.
5. I don’t know that *Cahiers* itself was banded—exercising a bit of license here. Christian González, “Interview by Marco González Ambriz.” *Revista Cinefagia* (2004): Part One.
6. *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896—1988* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 181–182.
7. González, *Revista Cinefagia*, Part One.
8. Unfortunately no copy of this book exists in a 100 km radius of Toronto. The details in this paragraph come from González’s IMDB profile except where noted below.
9. Vanesa Capitaine and Aaron Soto, “Mexploitation.” *Vice* (2013).
10. *The Internet Movie Database*.
11. González, *Revista Cinefagia*, Part One. “Naco” is sort of the Mexican-Spanish equivalent of “hick.”
12. González, *Revista Cinefagia*, Part Three.

13. González, *Revista Cinefagia*, Part Two.
14. González, *Revista Cinefagia*, Part Two.
15. González, *Revista Cinefagia*, Part Four.
16. González, *Revista Cinefagia*, Part One.
17. González, *Revista Cinefagia*, Part Two.
18. González, *Revista Cinefagia*, Part Two.
19. González, *Revista Cinefagia*, Part Two.
20. Qtd. in Mora, 181–812. To be fair, González was condemning film violence officially here, that is, on behalf of the state department's Dirección de Cinematografía, for which he headed the censorship office in 1989.
21. Alejandro Alemán, "Top 10 de *videohomes*." El Salón Rojo, *El Universal* (2012).
22. Sympathy, kindness, and tenderness "open the macho's defenses" and "lessen his manliness," to paraphrase Octavio Paz (30–31).
23. González, *Revista Cinefagia*, Part Two.
24. To be clear, that woman died by his hands, so there's a karmic spin to the vision. Still, weird.
25. Admittedly, as a symbolist tableau for the 1.5 hours to come, this is just about perfect.
26. Is there a cause here? Were those beans poisoned? My ancient VHS copy makes portions of the dialogue sound submerged, so I can't say for sure. In any case, why the breasts, why the shih tzu?
27. Christian González, "Interview by Raculfright_13." *Raculfright_13's Blog Trasho* (2013).
28. Christian González, Personal Interviews. "Mi obra es muy complicada. En algunas ocasiones tengo libertad total y se pueden hacer proyectos interesantes y personales, ej. SHIBARI, DOBLE MUERTE, LA PERVERSIÓN, CAFÉ ESTRÉS, MURIÓ EL AMOR. Eso se nota mucho por la estética y el lenguaje cinematográfico más limpio y poético."
29. "Las películas por encargo, como FEMDOM, que considero que es una película menor, en todo caso EL DESTAZADOR, es más interesante.... Con la RAZA MEX he realizado películas interesantes como el Decálogo del Narco, una idea personal de la que sólo puede hacer 4 mandamientos."
30. "Las películas más comerciales, procuro sentarme en la butaca del espectador y disfrutar de las misma emociones y humor negro, con películas como LA CUMBIA ASESINA, POR UN SALVAJE AMOR, IMPERIO DE LOS MALDITOS."
31. "Cuando uno retrata la sociedad mexicana en todos sus estratos sociales, el Kitsch involuntario, acompaña incluso a personas cultas y bien educadas. Recuerdo a un distribuidor de videohomes tratando de perforar con la punta de su finísima pluma de oro Mont blanc, la tapa de un jugo envasado. "Lo que da belleza al asunto es la ironía, en la cual "tener muy mal gusto es catártico y hasta cierto punto divertido. "Sobretudo en mis videohomes más vulgares y corrientes, como NARCO GAYS, GORDITA LA DEL BARRIO, permito que la situación sea kitsch y le doy un tono de farsa, que considero muy sano y muy cercano a la realidad mexicana."

32. "En el videohome tradicional mexicano, los hombres 'machos' (como los hermanos Almada, Jorge Reynoso, etc.) rechazan enérgicamente ser, parecer o actuar como homosexuales. Por tal motivo el reparto de Narco Gays, tuvo que ser con actores de videohome, pero que son más abiertos a la libre orientación sexual. "En los hombres 'machos' que se dedican a la actuación existe un cierto código extraño, algunos actores aceptan filmar escenas homosexuales siempre y cuando tengan el lugar dominante y activo. "En Narco Gays, surgió una discusión entre los actores y el Director, ya que yo les señalaba que ser homosexual puede no ser una condición permanente, es decir, que el menú de placeres homosexuales es vasto y diverso. Los homosexuales activos en Narco Gays, hicieron una polémica acerca de esto, digamos que los que hacen el papel del hombre y montan a sus compañeros son realmente machos y que incluso que si hay penetración, seguirán siendo machos, durante el rodaje la queja ante esta postura es que algunos actores gay definían a sus compañeros heterosexuales como 'homosexuales reprimidos.' "Los actores jóvenes dejaron ver de manera normal su faceta bisexual e interpretaron lo cotidiano del homosexual."
33. "Sí en Narco Gays se asume el kitsch con conocimiento de causa, incluso es una película pionera en el tema."
34. "La filmación de Narco Gays fue un verdadero escaparate de las diversas preferencias y/o matices del homosexualismo. Algunos de ellos jugaban a ser 'locas' (queers) y los más de ellos se sentían más cómodos sin ser dominantes. Realmente la película tuvo escenas muy fuertes que se cortaron porque los productores decían que el público de videohome no estaba preparado para ver actos sexuales tan explícitos para la cultura mexicana acostumbrada a la represión tanto de la moral como de la Iglesia y del mismo machismo."
35. "El guión de Ignacio Rinza, tenía muchas limitaciones, entre ellas que querían que la película fuera una comedia del estilo de 'LA JAULA DE LAS LOCAS' (AU CAGE OU FOLLIES) con sus lugares comunes. Ya filmada la película fue muy extraña porque tenía que jalar para un lado o para otro. Fue muy difícil de dirigir porque el tono era totalmente extraño. El videohome, en general, se ha transformado en un sistema de producción de bajísimo presupuesto, esto incluye el deterioro de sus guiones y el 'solucionar' en pleno rodaje las carencias de la producción. "Narco Gays no escapó a esto, así que el guión original fue transformado por las circunstancias. Esto incluye, aceptar a los actores que acceden a participar en los personajes con un sueldo muy bajo. Realizar la producción en 8 a 10 días. Utilizar locaciones prestadas. El vestuario lo llevan los mismos actores. El personal de filmación (crew) no excede los 10 elementos. Y durante el rodaje se va cambiando el guión de acuerdo a todas estas circunstancias. "La parte creativa 'valorada' es en este caso el Director, ya que no cualquiera puede conjuntar todas estas carencias y hacer una película. Después bien el Productor que consigue venderla al mejor precio y seguramente gana mucho más que todos los que participaron en ella."

36. “Narco Gays, por la crítica fue mal recibida. “Para los actores, es una más en su currículum y el dinero que ganaron les sirvió para sobrevivir una semana. “Para el Productor, logró venderla seguramente bien y ganó más que todos. Se estrenó en televisión por cable (CINELATINO) a altas horas de la noche. Sin embargo no es la película que le ha dado más. “El público reaccionó de distintas formas, a algunos se les hizo graciosa y ocurrente. A otros no comprendieron el humor tan cáustico.”
37. “Como Director, fue una película extraña porque la energía que se armó alrededor de toda la elaboración de ella buscaba ir a la comedia, pero yo había filmado cosas más humanas como los celos. Obviamente mi interés era ver personajes Gay no caricaturas de gay, incluso Gibrán González (actor), en la secuencia del baile de Husky, tuvo una reacción violenta cuando lo tocaba mucho el gay viejo y tuvimos que calmar los ánimos. Se alteró mucho la energía en el set de filmación. Las actrices se sentían relegadas, como en un segundo plano, muy molesto para ellas. En lo personal no fue una película que me llenara en nada. No la supieron manejar, la edición no fue afortunada. Obviamente que los actores estuvieron más pendientes de lo exterior de la película que de lo interior de los personajes, para ellos fue una experiencia difícil.”
38. González, *Revista Cinefagia*, Part Four.

Postscript: From Culiacán to Cannes

1. Ramos. Pluralized—“*nuevo cine de narcos*”—in his article.
2. Damarys Ocaña, “Narco Cinema Rises.” *Poder* 360 (2011).

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