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ABSTRACT: Given the political force of how different social sectors conceive of narco-masculinity, what can we make of 21st century Mexican representations that neither fear nor admire narcos? Three post-2007 theatrical release feature films, *Rudo y Cursi* (2008), *El infierno* (2010), and *Salvando al soldado Pérez* (2011), invite viewers to laugh at the link between masculinity and criminality. Their refusal to take narco-masculinity seriously complicates debates regarding Mexican masculinities in general, violence, and the role of the local in the global circulation of goods and images. These comedies suggest that neoliberal policies and discourses cannot digest national class-based histories, while national, class-conscious perspectives cannot metabolize neoliberal economics.

KEYWORDS: Narcocultura, Masculinity, Mexico, Film Comedies, Narco-Masculinity

RESUMEN: Dada la fuerza política con la que diferentes sectores sociales imaginan la narco-masculinidad, ¿cómo podemos concebir las representaciones mexicanas del siglo XXI que ni temen ni admiran a los narcos? Las películas a continuación, estrenadas a partir de 2007, *Rudo y Cursi* (2008), *El infierno* (2010) y *Salvando al soldado Pérez* (2011), invitan a los espectadores a reírse de la conexión entre masculinidad y criminalidad. La negativa, por parte de estas películas, de tomar en serio la narco-masculinidad complica los debates relativos a la masculinidad mexicana en general, la violencia y el papel de la circulación local y global de bienes e imágenes. Estas comedias sugieren, más bien, que las prácticas y discursos neoliberales no podrán digerir las historias nacionales basadas en la conciencia de clase hasta que no metabolicen la economía neoliberal.

PALABRAS CLAVE: narcocultura, masculinidad, México, comedias, narco-masculinidad

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NarCoMedia: Mexican Masculinities

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Mexican narco-masculinity is serious business. It links certain performances of maleness to the power over life and death. It affects economics, politics, and cultural production. It establishes hierarchy and business practices within the illegal drug industry. It terrorizes vulnerable communities and threatens to break the democratic social contract. It rages against government and law enforcement, while also confronting them with their mirror image. At the same time, outlaw masculinity serves as a foil for politicians and state authorities; they legitimate their hold on power by emphasizing the difference between their own masculinity and that of the stereotypical drug lord. In addition, *narcocultura's* presentation of violent hyper-masculinity as a melodramatic object of consumption and dark pleasure has become big business (*Narcocultura*). The exploits and melodramatic lives of exceptional men involved in the contemporary drug trade and so-called drug wars sell big in blogs, music, film, and *telenovelas* targeted to popular classes in Mexican and Mexican-American communities. Whether citizens and consumers celebrate, fear, or despise narco-masculinity, they buy exciting images and tales about those few men who defy the social constraints meant to domesticate individuals and peripheral nations into a regulated global economy. Within the drug trade, among law enforcement officials, and in the broader context of *narcocultura*, complex affective responses to narco-masculinity reveal tensions regarding

how to define value(s), legitimacy, and the local/global relation.¹

Given the seriousness of narco-masculinity in the contemporary Mexican drug wars and consumer culture, comedic representations of it easily seem morally obtuse or at least inappropriate. Yet three post-2007 theatrical release feature films in particular, *Rudo y cursi* (2008), *El infierno* (2010), and *Salvando al soldado Pérez* (2011), treat narco-masculinity with marked disrespect. They deploy irony, farce, satire, and ridicule in a variety of ways. While it would be productive to parse the differences among these subgenres as they appear in these films, I am more interested in the implications of using any comedic mode to represent narcos.² These three texts play across genres, national borders, and ethical as well as aesthetic codes to make fun of narco-masculinity. Paul Julian Smith (2014) and Ignacio Sánchez Prado (2014) have studied these films in light of contemporary Mexican film history. In different ways, both scholars focus on the evolution of viewing practices and the national film industry in the context of popular consumerism, transnational sensibilities, and the neoliberal privatization of culture. My reading adds to their discussion by foregrounding the question of what it means to laugh at the link between masculinity and criminality. How does refusing to take narco-masculinity seriously complicate debates regarding Mexican masculinities, violence, and the role of the local in the global circulation of goods and images?

Taking narco-masculinity seriously

While acknowledging that masculinity takes many forms and produces different social hierarchies around the world, gender theorist R.W. Connell identifies “transnational business masculinity” as the global hegemonic type of the 21st century. Those individuals who control the dominant financial and political institutions of the current world order express this masculinity. Its most notable characteristics involve “increasing egocentrism, very conditional loyalties (even to the corporation), and a declining sense of responsibility for others (except for purposes of image making)” (Connell 369). Connell notes that this transnational business masculinity “differs from traditional bourgeois masculinity by its increasingly libertarian sexuality, with a growing tendency to commodify relations with women” (369). This set of traits correlates to a particular relation to violence, in which the “transnational business masculinity” of the neoliberal type eschews direct, physical violence while at the same time managing corporate-based global economic systems that often inflict horrific violence from a distance and on increasingly large scales. In contrast to narco-masculinity’s relatively local savagery and high drama, the elegantly suited masculinity of neoliberalism calmly disregards world-wide costs of business such as low-wage and slave labor, deforestation, oil wars, resource-depletion, and air pollution.

Connell addresses two main types of masculinity that compete with transnational business masculinity in “the world gender order.” First, gender instabilities caused by global interconnectedness give rise to anti-internationalist and staunchly masculinist fundamentalisms. Exemplified by such groups as the hard right wing of any number of nations, the Taliban, or ISIL, these fundamentalisms retrench into conservative religious traditions and isolationism or invasion. They seek to stop the cultural liberalization that accompanies economic globalization. As for the

second type, the 20th-century battles over the primacy of either capitalism or communism gave rise to military-style bureaucratic masculinities (think Stalin and Pinochet). These figures, according to Connell, are now “a fading threat, and the more flexible, calculative, egocentric masculinity of the fast capitalist entrepreneur holds the world stage” (371).

Successful narco-traffickers have more in common with the CEO’s of legitimate global corporations than with Taliban or ISIL militants insofar as the illegal drug trade primarily involves business across borders, domination over rival corporations, personal advancement, and avoiding government regulations. The drug trade has no necessary connection to nationalist fundamentalism. Rather, it shares the priorities of corporations: growing transnational consumer markets, lowering business costs, and increasing profits. However, cartel violence has more in common with that of the ‘masculine fundamentalists’ Connell describes (370). It targets local turf wars and compels expressions of loyalty. Rather than hide their destructive side effects, as legal businesses try to do, cartels flaunt them publicly.³

In the absence of the rules that govern the legal economy, as well as the protections provided by legal corporate structures, high-level drug dealers employ aggressive displays of gendered power to set and police the illegal industry’s business standards. They rely on credible performances of ruthlessness and violence to control their industry. Widely referred to with the antiquated terminology of ‘lords,’ ‘barons,’ ‘capos,’ or ‘kingpins,’ male leaders in the illicit drug trade oscillate unpredictably between cruelty and generosity as a way of dominating the social networks on which their profits depend. Inspiring fear and loyalty (or inspiring loyalty through fear) among subordinates protects cartels’ money-making efficiency. Building legends about the outsized masculinity of industry leaders works similarly to branding in the legal corporate world; it gives consumers and potential workers a dynamic, affective attachment to the organizations. Convincing

performances of a simultaneously fearsome and seductive hyper-masculinity exert executive control and discipline in the drug trade and its territories. Thus, both the threat and the largesse of narco-masculinity are a sober, conservative matter of business management.

From the point of view of the legal economy and government officials, however, narco-masculinity connotes rebellion more than control. Its excesses defy the cool, rational image of the masculinity associated with the leaders of legal transnational corporate organizations. Especially for Mexico, the tension between autocratic masculinities and rebel masculinities reflects a long history of regional resistance to federal power. The rural bandits who became major actors in the 1910 Revolution were subsequently memorialized in popular culture as folk heroes. Recognizing that affective connection, official discourse since the founding of the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional purposefully mythologizes 20th century outlaw rebels like Pancho Villa in order to appropriate the Revolution's defense of economic and civil rights for the poor, and of indigenous/mestizo identities, into nationalist ideology. Associating rebel masculinities with deep national identity, or imagined *mexicanidad*, though, produces a crisis of legitimacy for Mexico's contemporary relation to neoliberal economic and social policies in the context of globalization.

Narco-traffickers are today's rebel bandits. In the 21st century Mexican drug war, the explosion in violence especially during the Calderón presidency (2006-2012) resulted from transnational pressures on the Mexican government to limit drug trafficking across the border. The United States-sponsored "War on Drugs," in tandem with internal corruption in the Mexican state, sparked new dynamics in the long-standing turf wars among cartels. Government discourse more insistently represented narco-traffickers as hyper-masculine, savage antiheroes, rightly feared

by civil society and hunted by law enforcement. This view appears in sociological and historical studies, public policy documents, and crime fiction.⁴

At the same time, and for the same characteristics, the narco is celebrated within vulnerable communities as a virile popular hero. He embodies the rebellion of communities disadvantaged by uneven modernization and globalization, as well as defiance of governmental authority whether it comes from the United States or Mexico. Narco-masculinity offers an alternative gender ideal through which marginalized groups imagine the possibility of competing with legal global capitalism, even if they do not actively participate in selling or consuming illegal drugs. In answer to the extractive effect of "legitimate" transnational capitalists, the most economically powerful and admired narcos bring money back from the consumer metropole into the peripheral local economies. They fund schools, churches, and cemeteries. In light of such largesse, narco-masculinity's ruthlessness is often represented as the natural result of socio-economic marginalization and stagnation, and therefore not legitimately subject to hegemonic disciplining. Its strength derives from class loyalty and the exemplariness of rags-to-riches success.

Prominent cartels insert representatives from the rural poor into transnational financial life. While no one denies the high cost in social stability, and even lives, the communities benefit from having cartels as a symbolic focus, a rallying cry for relevance. As the protagonist of this type of rebel narrative, the narco figure lives out the tragic irony of achieving business success and yet remaining excluded from hegemonic sociality. In order to fulfill his role as this kind of hero, he must embrace his criminal status, his ostentatious consumption, and his inescapable class identity. The psychological costs of excess and violence define him as a marked man, which is an essential component of his melodramatic

charisma. The expectation that individual narcos will die violently at a young age feeds nationalist and regionalist desires to identify a genuinely Mexican cultural type, however predetermined by tragic defeat he may be.

This ambivalent idealization of narco-masculinity defines *narcocultura* texts like corridos, telenovelas, and *video-homes* (straight-to-DVD films).⁵ Many communities on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border embrace *narcocultura* out of enjoyment of the nationalist, populist pride that it expresses, as illustrated by the long history of the revolutionary corrido and its evolution into the narco-corrido (Wald; Ramírez-Pimienta). Such enjoyment is based on the equation of deep *mexicanidad* with outlaw status, rural roots, and extreme (both hyper-violent and self-destructive) expressions of masculinity. It would seem that audiences, voracious for cheaply produced *video-homes* about narcos, seek realism and escapism at the same time. On the one hand, the most popular films tell known, real-life stories taken from contemporary news sources and crime and set in real-life locations (northern Mexico's deserts, highways, cantinas, cemeteries).⁶ On the other hand, the transformation of such *realia* into criminal melodrama and aesthetic play transposes the sources of fear and insecurity into the realm of predictability and cliché. This translation of physical danger into viewing pleasure may well work as a kind of vaccine against fear. By actively consuming these serious, sensational narratives, the poorer populations most likely to be affected by *el narco's* real violence turn it into a desirable commodity.⁷ Identifying with and enjoying violent narco-cinema provides an imaginary inoculation against being victimized.

Whether they vilify or venerate the figure of the narco, both *narcocultura* and official discourse foreground masculinity as the battleground on which struggles over class competition and nationalism play out. Real cartel practices have global reach. Certain forms of masculinity become Mexican-identified through iterative, ambivalent engagements

with economic and cultural globalization. Local music, narratives, and icons absorb and respond to transnational economic, political, and cultural networks of signification. Representations of narco-masculinity rely on a double consciousness in which an imagined global audience structures conventional narratives and tropes. The hyper-masculinity in these forms of representation appeals to a global taste for stereotype even when it addresses mainly among Mexican and Mexican-identified audiences. Who plays the role of hero and who plays the role of antihero in fictional as well as nonfictional texts about drug dealers depends on the genre and target audience of each narrative. In spite of their different ideological investments, both populist discourse that praises narcos and official discourse that fears or attacks them treat the category of masculinity with sober respect. Given the political force of how different social sectors conceive of narco-masculinity, what can we make of 21st century Mexican representations that neither fear nor admire narcos for their expression of masculinity?

Funny business

When read together, *Rudo y cursi*, *El infierno*, and *Salvando al soldado Pérez* critique the intersection of nationalism, global drug trafficking, and masculinity. They parodically cite images of hyper-masculine Mexican narcos that are transnationally produced and circulated. They expose the similarities of the drug trade with legal global economic practices. They make visible the fantasy that narco-masculinity is somehow authentically Mexican as opposed to the sanitized, non-located hegemonic masculinity associated with legal global capitalism. In these films, transnational business is serious while its uncritical association with masculinity is funny.

Written and directed by Carlos Cuarón, *Rudo y cursi* was produced by Cuarón's brother Alfonso along with Guillermo del Toro and Alejandro González Iñárritu. It

stars Gael García Bernal as Tato (“Cursi”) and Diego Luna as Beto (“Rudo”). The actors reprise aspects of the adolescent rivalry they portrayed in *Y tu mamá también* (2001, co-written by the Cuarón brothers and directed by Alfonso Cuarón). *Rudo y cursi* is not a film about narco-trafficking; rather, it follows a conventional story of the rise and fall of two naïve brothers seeking success as professional soccer players.

Billed in the United States by *Rolling Stone* as “Good-natured fun! A rowdy, ramshackle comedy” (DVD jacket), this film depicts the relationship between masculinity and legitimacy as impossibly fraught. The humor of the film derives from the irony of audiences’ awareness of this relationship while the protagonists are surprised by it over and over again. The brothers’ innocent primary motivation is to honor their impoverished mother by becoming successful enough to build her a house. Sons of different fathers who are both absent, the young men engage in a mutually supportive rivalry to establish themselves as manly protectors of their mother and sister. Beto’s and Tato’s rural upbringing, however, has hardly prepared them for the unscrupulous world they encounter when they begin to make money and seek celebrity status.

Through the efforts of a shady Argentine agent, Batuta (played by Guillermo Francella), the brothers do achieve success on national professional teams, only to succumb to the typical pitfalls of quick riches and absurd overreach. Tato falls in love with a model on whom he lavishes gifts before she dumps him for another up-and-coming player. Focusing on his ridiculous desire to become a singer, he loses his goal-scoring mojo. For his part, Beto develops a gambling problem, and his creditors have him shot; he loses a leg, and thereby his soccer career. These clichéd personal trajectories complement the film’s portrayal of the rivalry between the two brothers. They share the same rags-to-riches trajectory, although their failures take different forms. Cursi, the kicker, cannot score with his lover or with his singing career. Rudo, the goalie,

cannot block the gunshot that maims him.

The humor here derives from the protagonists’ unsophistication regarding their chances of achieving manliness through honest effort. This film demonstrates the castrated irrelevance of men who try to play by moral rules in a context of ubiquitous corruption. Tonally the lightest film of the three under consideration here, *Rudo y cursi* is nonetheless the saddest. It suggests that, given the contemporary predominance of mediatized value and organized crime, convincing masculinity (implicitly defined by the protagonists as non-violent, family-oriented, and self-sufficient) has become unattainable by legitimate means. The protagonists’ bumbling triumphs and dramatic failures are put into stark relief against an undeveloped secondary character, the local narco whose dominance they are forced to accept in the end.

The young men had intended to take their fathers’ places in their familial roles, but the conclusion of the film finds them outmaneuvered by a new father figure who bests them at their own goal. While Beto and Tato are away in Mexico City pursuing their soccer dreams, Don Casimiro buys the nearby ranches, builds a highway to develop the rural area, marries their sister and builds the house the boys had wanted to build for their mother. Don Casimiro appears onscreen during the wedding reception for the sister, where both she and her mother fawn over him. The women enjoy his beneficence in the absence of other reliable men in their community. While Beto and Tato had protested the family’s having anything to do with the narco because of his violence and criminality, in the end they have no way to argue for the superiority of law-abiding masculinity. They must subordinate their egos and their manliness to Don Casimiro.

The narco is a secondary character in relation to Beto’s and Tato’s adventure in the big city, but he looms large in the film’s thesis regarding masculinity. The film’s protagonists are clownish rubes, while the narco plays the straight man. The lack of character

development for Don Casimiro demonstrates the pervasiveness of “what everyone knows” about narcos; he barely needs to be represented at all, much less as a stereotype. In *Rudo y cursi*, the narco is taken as the only uncontested type of masculine figure. The conclusion invites viewers to enjoy the irony of Don Casimiro’s stabilizing effect on the family in contrast to Beto’s and Tato’s drama. To see the humor in the conclusion we must have already assumed that a narco is not an appropriate father figure or a legitimate competitor with loving sons for their mother’s respect. At the same time, we must acknowledge that Don Casimiro, in fact, has succeeded exactly in the way that Tato and Beto had defined their own noble goal. The figure of the narco here is neither heroic nor evil. He is an empty cypher for the socio-economic reality within which the brothers cannot win. In the end, their simple dream looks ridiculous because it never had a chance to overcome the infiltration of drug money and narco-masculinity into local, domestic arrangements.

Whereas the protagonists in *Rudo y cursi* learn over the course of the film that nice guys will always finish last in the current economy, *El infierno* takes that idea as a given and then explores its effects on men who want to think of themselves as heroic rather than criminal. The third film in Luis Estrada’s trilogy of cultural-political satires (with *La ley de Herodes* of 1999 and *Un mundo maravilloso* of 2006), *El infierno* was commissioned in 2010 for the bicentennial celebration of Mexican Independence. This dark comedy depicts the rise of a hapless everyman, a migrant laborer named Benny (played by Damián Alcázar), in the ranks of the local drug industry in the deserts of northern Mexico.⁸ Benny’s motive for becoming a hitman was simply to earn enough money to extract his lover and her son from the drug war and move back to the United States with them. His plan reflects an earlier version of the same goal; the opening scene of the film flashes back to twenty years

earlier, when he had first left his mother and younger brother to seek work in the United States.

In the story’s present, Benny returns home after twenty years away, with nothing to show for his honest labor. His journey from the border quickly introduces him to the new ubiquity of *el narco* and the social devastation it has wrought. He learns that in his absence his brother, “El Diablo,” became a violent, powerful player in the local drug scene before being murdered. Hoping to protect what is left of his family, Benny takes up with Lupita, the woman who had born his brother’s child. In order to protect Lupita and his nephew, Benny succumbs to the manipulation of his childhood friend, El Cochiloco (played by Joaquín Cosío). El Cochiloco methodically grooms Benny to become more and more enmeshed in the competition for the regional *plaza* that is being waged between the local drug lords, the Reyes brothers. Predictably, Benny begins to perform all the clichés of narco-masculinity when he starts working for the cartel. He quickly learns to enjoy the cash, prostitutes, and cocaine that serve as payment for his new line of work. The film mockingly depicts Benny as an ignorant dupe when he begins to imitate his bosses’ sartorial style. Viewers clearly see the irony of his remaining blind to the contradiction between his own violent actions and his sense of self as both victim (in relation to *el narco*) and hero (in relation to his family).

One of *El infierno*’s most memorable and funny montages depicts Benny’s and El Cochiloco’s adventures in terrorizing local residents in the style of a goofy buddy film sequence rather than the dramatic exposition of criminal savagery. Through the careful staging of scenes that display diverse methods of killing used by real-life contemporary hit-men (shootings, beheadings, acid baths, the posing of bodies as *narcomantas*, etc.) the montage visually cites well-known crime scenes from the Mexican drug war since

2007. This parade of horrors is accompanied on-screen by cheerful norteña music. The humor depends on an assumption that the film's viewers will find both the music and the chilling murder scenes familiar to the point of cliché (Biron 827).

This playful deployment of image saturation turns more profoundly parodic in the film's conclusion. After both Lupita and El Cochiloco are killed by Reyes's henchmen, Benny finally discovers the collusion among government officials at all levels with local cartels. Left for dead after having been shot for informing on the Reyes brothers, Benny spends time in the desert contemplating what he has learned. Finally, he returns for the local celebration of two hundred years of Mexican independence, and one hundred years of the Mexican Revolution. Like a vengeful Messiah, Benny unleashes apocalyptic violence against the narcos, the police, the church, and the government. He shoots everyone on the dais as the patriotic fireworks explode in the night sky.

Estrada's meta-cinematic gesture in this famous scene repurposes icons and emblems of Mexican national history and identity. The flag, the lectern, and the dais covered in patriotic bunting, for example, no longer connote positive national aspirations based on a glorious history. Here they represent the profiteers of drug violence and are also themselves the bloodied victims of it. Estrada presents this mordant critique of endemic corruption, however, through such hyperbolic visual satire that he underscores the fantastic nature of Benny's final act. The scene privileges the desecration of nationalist symbols from the point of view of the film's audience rather than from any diegetic perspective. In fact, the subsequent scenes return to a more soberly realist style and show Benny's nephew, El Diablito, as he continues the cycle of destruction. Now he seeks to avenge the death of his mother as well as that of his uncle and

father, two men whose extreme violence he admires and imitates.

The humor in *El infierno*, then, does not stem from the plot about cycles of revenge and violence, which foregrounds tragedy and critique. Rather, the humor emerges in Estrada's juxtaposition and exaggeration of two kinds of image saturation. The film plays with its viewers' affective relationship to violence by having Benny and El Cochiloco imitate scenarios pulled from contemporary news headlines and websites like *El blog del narco*. These images in journalistic form frighten, outrage, and eventually numb the public, but the controlled frame of *El infierno* domesticates such images of murder and mayhem. Through repetition, emphasis on absurdity and pointlessness, and the relatively sympathetic character of Benny, the film ridicules this violence as nothing more than a set of imitative behaviors enacted by men who experience narco-masculinity as a dissociative performance rather than an identity.

The tragedy, as the film's conclusion points out, is that some people take narco-masculinity so seriously that they imitate it for real, thus inflicting explosive destruction on local communities in ever-shorter cycles. *El infierno* signals early on its metatextual awareness of the grave risks of this role-playing. In one of the first scenes of the film, Benny asks his *padrino*, an honest car mechanic, about the region's recent history. He tells Benny (and us) of how the rivalry between the Reyes brothers for the *plaza* has exponentially increased prostitution, kidnappings, and murders. Because the older Reyes wants to bring his son into the business, the younger Reyes has begun a war to defend his own interests. Listening to this account, Benny exclaims "¡Está buena la película!" His *padrino* answers, "¡Qué película y qué hijo de la chingada, ahijado!" Thus, *El infierno* emphasizes the indistinction between its own fictionality and the socio-economic reality

that surrounds it: you can't make this stuff up, but it clearly follows a compellingly melodramatic script.

Unlike *Rudo y cursi* and *El infierno*, whose protagonists are victimized by their relationship to narco-masculinity, *Salvando al soldado Pérez* features as its main character a powerful, confident drug lord named Julián Pérez (played by Miguel Rodarte). "El soldado Pérez" refers to Julián's younger brother Juan, who, before enlisting in the army, had emigrated to the United States with their mother in order to escape the violence of *el narco* in Sinaloa. This 2011 film parodies the plot of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998, screenplay by Robert Rodat). Director Beto Gómez (with co-writer Francisco Payó González) updates the story by placing it in the Iraq War and by having a private group led by a Mexican narco save one young U.S. soldier who has been taken prisoner by the Iraqi army. *Salvando al soldado Pérez* plays with a wide variety of tropes from Hollywood action and crime films as well as Mexican *video homes*. A number of scenes and sequences, for example, recall iconic shots from *Rambo*, *Scarface*, *The Godfather*, the James Bond series, and U.S. westerns. Unlike those films, however, *Salvando al soldado Pérez* takes neither its subject matter nor itself very seriously. It blends smooth, special effects-based montage with amateurish scenery and visuals. It inaccurately represents Middle Eastern geography and languages. It exaggerates racial and ethnic stereotypes. In direct response to the dedication to war realism in Spielberg's movie, this film's unevenness posits representation itself as a field of ideological battle between competing forms of masculinity.

The humor in *Salvando al soldado Pérez* targets three main issues, which can be correlated to the film's plot, style, and character development. In the plot, the joke is on the arrogance and futility of the United States's global war on terror. A gang of five fearless Mexicans outperforms and then escapes from the most expensive army in the world. This feat echoes the 9/11 attack on New York City

by a tiny group of terrorists who produced large-scale violence in the geographic center of political and economic hegemony. The twist in Gómez's film, however, is that a small group of Mexican thugs, led by a notorious narco, plays the role of hero. In contrast to the logic of *narcocultura*, in which criminal rebellion is equated to heroism, *Salvando al soldado Pérez* upholds the definition of heroism as positive self-sacrifice on behalf of victims of violence. Saving a U.S. soldier from both his Iraqi captors and his own failing military leaders, Julián and his men triumph morally and well as militarily.

The second joke develops around the importance of style over substance in projecting narco-masculinity as superior to both military and hegemonic business masculinity. The film includes numerous shots of Julián's gang posing or strutting in their ostrich leather boots, *piteado* belts, Rolex watches, Versace-style norteño shirts, skin-tight wrangler jeans, and Stetsons. These costumes imitate the ostentatious style of musicians like Los Tigres del Norte rather than the sedate clothing of many real-life 21st century narcos who send their children to private schools and socialize with high society. Each of the modeling breaks in the film occurs in a moment of preparation for battle, when the main characters gather their courage and inspiration for their mission. These pauses in the action provide comic relief from the shooting and chasing scenes. They imply that narco-style provides the manliness its wearers seek, rather than that the style is a mere sign of inherent identity, or of something already achieved. The film's subtitle emphasizes the preening poseur status of Julián's gang: "Pueden perder la vida, pero no el estilo."

A third type of humor in the film concerns the character development of the protagonist, Julián Pérez. He is a hyperbolic caricature of "el jefe de los jefes," the most powerful of vicious and tragic drug lords from near Culiacán in Sinaloa. Julián deploys all the mythical abilities of shadowy capos to serve the simplest and most innocent of goals:

to please his mother. Through flashbacks interspersed with the contemporary rescue mission, we learn that Julián first killed a man when he was still a child. In the diegetic present, he is a widower with a pampered, gluttonous son. He surrounds himself with crude henchmen and a metrosexual super-assistant, Eladio. Julián lives in a mansion stocked with high-tech surveillance and information systems on an estate that features a swimming pool shaped like a marijuana leaf, a personal chef, a fleet of golf carts for travel around the grounds, and a private zoo of exotic animals (a nod to Pablo Escobar, Jesús Zambada, and Scarface, among others). He casually executes his own employees for oversights in their work. Like a consummate professional, once he accepts the mission of saving his younger brother in Iraq, he devotes all of his managerial prowess, government connections, and laser beam concentration to the task.

On the other hand, Julián's motivation for this mission is entirely romantic and sentimental, which would seem to contradict his ruthless, amoral persona. In the second flashback to his childhood, we learn that his first murder was in defense of his mother's honor; with a slingshot, he killed a messenger who had tossed money on the floor disrespectfully in compensation for his father's death in the cartel's service. Julián impresses the local narco with his coolness under pressure. His new mentor tells him, "Todos necesitamos una familia para sobrevivir. Para eso somos hombres, para cuidar lo que queremos... Estás con nosotros o simplemente no estás. Esta bala era para ti." This speech equates the cartel with family, and does so under the threat of death. Thus, young Julián associates the trauma of his father's murder with his own first kill. He associates manliness with protecting family in the very moment that he (prematurely) leaves his mother's house. Finally, he accepts the replacement of his nuclear family by the cartel. But he never really had any choice.

The first scene in the filmic present features Julián's arrival at a hospital in Los Angeles to seek his estranged mother twenty-five

years later. Having reached the pinnacle of power he now has the freedom to reconcile with his original family. His mother promises to forgive Julián for his criminal life only if he brings Juan home alive. Thus, while the film's farcical plot centers on the themes of mindless war, accidental military success, initiation rites among men, and national as well as racial stereotypes (the Mexican gang uses chile sauce as a torture/interrogation tool, for example), the sincere motive at the heart of things is Julián's search for salvation through his mother's blessing.

He obtains it in the end. The last scene in the film features Julián dancing with his mother at his estate back in Mexico, where the family and the warriors all celebrate the success of their mission to save Juan. In the soundtrack that accompanies the scene, Chavela Vargas sings "Corazón negro," a ballad that narrates Julián's exploits and his redemption in heroic terms: "Hoy es un gran guerrero The same story is repeated over the closing credits in a fast-paced corrido titled "Soldado Pérez" by Los Tucanes de Tijuana. These musical gestures underscore the fictionality of narco-corridos that contemporary narcos commission to be written about themselves, hoping to buy their way into becoming popular legends. Here, the filmmaker engages Los Tucanes in this enterprise as a wink to his audience in relation to the self-regard of narcos in general, and his protagonist in particular. Of course, the very last piece of text before the credits tells us that "Julián Pérez murió tres meses después en una emboscada." All these efforts to immortalize the narco as a liberating warrior actually depend on our foreknowledge of his early death, a death that no mother's blessing can forestall.

Mothers, brothers, and fatherless boys

In spite of their darkly comedic nature, *Rudo y cursi*, *El infierno*, and *Salvando al soldado Pérez* share in common two forms of sincerity: familial loyalty and the search for

masculine role models. The protagonists of all three films are motivated by their desire to please and care for their mothers. All three films also explore how brotherly love eventually overcomes fraternal rivalry for mothers' love and for worldly success. The stories all begin with an early scene featuring two brothers, in which the dynamics of competition and connection are clearly signaled. *Rudo y cursi* opens in the banana orchard where Beto and Tato labor together before being discovered by their agent. Later, they literally face off against each other on opposite teams in the climactic soccer match. When they both lose, in different ways, however, they end up in the final scene of the film together on a beach ruefully commiserating about their failures. *El infierno* opens with a scene set twenty years before the principal action of the film. It depicts Benny's original departure for the United States in an effort to earn money to send back to his mother and younger brother. In a reversal of roles, and after El Diablo's death, Benny becomes the one who tries to live up to his brother's violent reputation after returning home. The murderous Reyes brothers, the antagonists in *El infierno*, provide the counter-model to this fraternal ideal. As for *Salvando al soldado Pérez*, its first scene establishes the archetypal relationships among Juan (as younger brother needing protection), Julián (as fearless and skilled older brother), and Julián's lifelong friend, Carmelo. The boys engage in a slingshot competition at the end of which Carmelo acknowledges Julián's worthiness as an unbeatable opponent. These opening scenes indicate that being boys together in a certain way determines how men will challenge and yet also depend on one another, in mutually supportive rivalry for their mothers' approval. Childhood loyalties carry over into adulthood, and the absence of fathers seems to make them stronger.

The search for masculine role models provides another type of thematic coherence and sober reflection when these films are

read together. A curious consistency among them traces assumptions and values about everyday Mexican masculinity and how role models for it change over time. Joaquín Cosío acts in all three films. In *Rudo y cursi*, Cosío plays the abusive stepfather figure, Arnulfo, for whom Beto and Tato's mother settles in the absence of other options for adult male companionship. He comes off as lazy and ignorant. He insults the boys as well as their mother. When the boys return from Mexico City, they see their mother's bruises from his beatings, but feel powerless to intervene. In the hierarchy of options for masculinity in this film, Cosío's character represents the increasingly irrelevant, backward machismo of the poor. In contrast to him, the younger men eschew violence and show emotional vulnerability in their relations with women. In comparison to Arnulfo, Don Casimiro represents a new kind of villain. He lavishes women with gifts and provides the economic benefits to which honest working class men have no access. The new illegitimate father, the film implies, retains patriarchal power, keeping it beyond the reach of honest young men with more egalitarian ideas about gender. This dubious improvement in terms of the threat of domestic violence comes at the agonizingly high price of the increased social instability, crime, and violence that accompany *el narco* and its wealth.

In *El infierno*, Cosío plays the deliciously layered role of El Cochiloco. He hopes to achieve upper middle-class respectability by selling his services as a vicious hitman. In public, he is a manipulative, violent, threatening stereotype of a henchman for narcos. In private, he is an attentive husband, father, and provider. When his son is killed in revenge for a death in a rival gang, the barrier between his profession and his family life is breached; his careful distinctions dissolve, and his own death ensues. Cosío's character tries to teach Benny how to control this situation and play the system against itself. Unlike Benny, who symbolically takes down the entire system in

the end, however, El Cochiloco succumbs to the logic of revenge that imprisons most narcos in a cycle of deadly violence.

Finally, in *Salvando al soldado Pérez*, Cosío plays one of the senior members of Julian's gang. When we first meet his character, Rosalío Mendoza, he is hosting his goddaughter's lavish birthday party while dressed in a ridiculous prawn costume. This clownish image humanizes the character who has been billed to Julián as an expert pilot, drug smuggler, and successful liaison between Mexican cartels and U.S. markets. As the plot unfolds, he represents the accidental successes that bumbling 'experts' can achieve simply for being loyal, energetic, and fearless. Rosalío's role in the rescue mission implies that whoever survives *el narco* into middle age or beyond offers a wealth of knowledge about the military, business, psychology, and masculinity. He has no need to prove himself, and so he willingly turns his skills to a deeper purpose than profit: to helping Julián save his younger brother. The whole gang's improbable success in rescuing Juan from Iraq celebrates this change in purpose, but it is Rosalío who dramatically pilots the rescue helicopter that takes all the heroes and Juan to safety when they are under fire from both the U.S. and Iraqi armies. At the same time, however, the film's farcical representation of that triumphant moment (the sequence features slapstick gags, deliberate close-ups of the gangs' belt buckles, and long shots of the helicopter wobbling in the air past minarets while clotheslines dangle from its sides) signals that even the 'pure' motive of saving Private Pérez is inseparable from the prescripts of melodrama and the inane conventions of war/action/spy/gangster/western blockbuster films. The clichéd hyper-masculinity evident in these forms of representation appeals to a global taste for stereotype and also slyly deconstructs the notion of the Mexican macho ideal.

Tracing Cosío's roles in these three films reveals the comic actor's function as the malleable face of generic Mexican manhood. He

seems able to occupy almost any role except that of wealthy, hegemonic corporate masculinity. This exception proves the rule that for nationalist purposes, Mexican masculinity can only be coded as rebellious and violent, even if it may occasionally also be heroic. In this sense, narco-masculinity is just everyman masculinity dressed up in rebellious costume in order to revel in its difference from global hegemonic masculinity. The costuming involves clothes, but also plotlines. Pleasure, whether that of those who enjoy the temporary powers attained at the highest levels of *el narco* or that of the consumers of these images, depends on the self-consciously futile pursuit of imaginary self-determination in an over determined socio-economic sphere.

Narcos get their ideas about masculinity from the mediatized sacrificial caricatures that fuel "gore capitalism" in the era in which legal globalization and the illegal drug trade are inextricably bound together. As Sayak Valencia Triana puts it,

Con el advenimiento, aceptación y normalización del capitalismo gore, ¿seguirán siendo válidas las categorías de *legitimidad* e *ilegitimidad* para describir la aplicación de la violencia?, ¿qué convertirá a la violencia en algo legítimo?, ¿el precio que se nos cobre por ejercerla? El monopolio de la violencia ya no es propiedad exclusiva del Estado-Nación sino del Mercado-Nación. El monopolio de la violencia se ha puesto a subasta y la puja más alta en México la está haciendo el crimen organizado. (n.p.)

As we have seen in the most deeply held motives of the protagonists in *Rudo y cursi*, *El infierno*, and *Salvando al soldado Pérez*, there is nothing funny about the situation in which people cannot escape the necropolitical logic of *lo narco*; there is only pathos in that lack of choice.⁹

But there is something hilarious about the whole constellation of imbalances and forms of (self)exploitation when in *Salvando*

al soldado Pérez, for example, the Mexican news media reports the story of how a small group of *pistoleros* saved a large number of U.S. soldiers from captivity in Iraq. Admitting that few details about the rescue have been independently confirmed, a reporter announces, “Pero de lo que no hay duda es que se trata de mexicanos.” Against all odds, this blind national pride reasserts an exuberant desire to claim for *mexicanidad* a special relationship to out-of-scale, outrageous, out-law masculinity.

The expression of this desire might not have gotten laughs in a Mexican film before the advent of what Ignacio Sánchez Prado calls “the Second Reinvention of Mexican Cinema,” best represented by Alfonso Cuarón’s *Y tu mamá también* (2001). This reinvention entails “the construction of a national cinema thoroughly uninterested in engaging with the nation as such” (92). “It does not pose a homogenous national discourse, as the inherent contradictions of the nation are central to its narrative construction [...]. Rather, we are confronted with a complex spectrum of different social strata that constantly interact and problematize each other” (193). The collapse of Mexicanism in the age of neoliberalism and “Americanized frameworks of meaning” fundamentally alters the calculus for the Mexican film industry. As Sánchez Prado shows, in contemporary films that do not necessarily deal with *lo narco*, the identity politics of race, class, and gender supersede national concerns. However, when feature films targeted to both popular and middle-class audiences represent narcos, the self-conscious use of parody resists both identity politics and nationalist ideology. The use of intertextuality, trans-genre pastiche, and transnational citations of multiple types of representations of narco-masculinity not only destabilizes any particular notion of ‘real Mexican masculinity,’ but it also makes a joke out of even wanting to define such a thing in the first place.

In the three comedies I have examined here, Joaquín Cosío stands in as the relatively

unexamined background figure against which the protagonists experiment with different options for contemporary masculinity. The young men in *Rudo y cursi* find themselves stuck between the outdated, small-time *machismo* represented by Cosío’s abusive character and the more charming and seductive patriarchal stance of the narco who replaces him. For his part, Benny in *El infierno* has no way out of the pervasive culture of narco-violence other than self-immolation. Finally, *Salvando al soldado Pérez* rejects the notion of realistic character development altogether, presenting all five members of Julián’s gang as cartoonish exaggerations of fictional archetypes. This exaggeration, in concert with the appeal to a hyper-personal moral code in relation to honoring one’s mother, renders meaningless all the binaries on which serious discourse about narco-masculinities depends: good/evil, conservative/rebel, legitimate/illegitimate, authentic/mediatized, local/global. *Salvando al soldado Pérez* plays with the silliness of its own characters and situations. It also indicts these binaries for being equally meaningless when they are used to classify real people who try to participate in the contemporary global trade of goods, images, and (national) identities.

These comedies make visible how Mexican narco-masculinity both resists and is constructed by the irresolvable tension between global economics and local identifications. They home in on the intersection of two non-coterminous facts: that neoliberal policies and discourses cannot digest national, class-based histories; and that national, class-conscious perspectives cannot metabolize neoliberal economics. Both axes of this intersection fixate on narco-masculinity as the crux of the issue, whether they vilify it or celebrate it. Texts that refuse to take narco-masculinity itself seriously may not motivate viewers into direct political action; in fact, they may depress political energy by mocking identitarian impulses. Still, given the aura that narco-masculinity exudes for those who fear and/or revere it, some demystification just

might allow for more effective accounting of the globalized, neoliberal nature of *lo narco*, and perhaps thereby of intervention into the more nefarious effects of both the drug trade and the war on drugs. The complex, ambivalent deployment of humor deflates the out-sized symbolic power of narco-masculinity, whether it is imagined as inevitable, heroic, or malign. Maybe narco-masculinity dies when we're all laughing.

Notes

¹Masculinity's symbolic relation to national identity, dominant ideologies, and power is, of course, not particular to the illegal drug industry, Mexico, film, or the present. This relation is, rather, worldwide, and across time. For a concise account of its contours in modern Mexico, however, see the introduction to Robert McKee Irwin's *Mexican Masculinities*. For an elegant treatment of the connection between masculinity and 20th-century Mexican film, see Sergio de la Mora's *Cinemachismo: Masculinity and Sexuality in Mexican Film*.

²I draw from Martha Elena Munguía's treatment of "la risa como un fenómeno multifacético, complejo, ligado a la heteroglosia, con una infinita capacidad de transmutación de voces y acentos. Detrás de la risa puede acechar la garra del llanto, puede estar la alegre burla del que desenmascara verdades oficiales, la ironía mordaz" (Munguía 31).

³See *El Blog del Narco* for reports of the very public atrocities committed by rival cartels: beheadings, hangings, dismemberment, video messaging, kidnappings, *narcomantas*, etc.

⁴For in-depth historical and sociological accounts that focuses on narco-masculinity as sociopathic, see Poppa; Grillo; Molloy and Bowdon; Rodríguez Castaneda; and Reguillo. For public policy documents and rhetoric, see Archibold, Cave, and Malkin; "Plan Mérida;" and Witness for Peace. For crime literature and literary/cultural criticism regarding the serious denunciation of narco-masculinity, see Mendoza; Pérez-Reverte; Polit Dueñas; Maihold and Maihold.

⁵Mexican narco-cinema is dominated by the straight-to-video industry and sold primarily in the United States. Shane Smith's 2009 documentary about this phenomenon, *Mexican Narco Cinema*, explores the curiously nonchalant yet also obsessive way in which such low budget crime films

celebrate local drug dealers as an endless source of cheap home entertainment. They formulaically rehearse stories of revenge and passion drawn from daily news reports about murders and corruption among drug cartels and corrupt law enforcement agencies. They typically cost only forty to fifty thousand dollars to produce because they are shot on location, mostly in Tijuana, with few special effects (actors fire blanks from real guns while crew off-camera shoot victims with paintball guns to simulate wounds). Filming usually takes just two or three weeks, and the directors use actors drawn from the real milieu in which they are filmed. A few professional actors, such as Mario Almada and Jorge Reynoso appear in hundreds of these films. Scripts for this type of cinema can be prepared very quickly (3-4 days), because much of the action and dialogue is improvised based on the plots of successful narcocorridos.

⁶One particularly popular example is the 1978 film *La banda del carro rojo*, based on a corrido by Los Tigres del Norte (Shane Smith).

⁷*El narco* refers to the illicit drug trade in general, including the collateral damage it causes by widely distributing cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine, by promoting direct violence as a business practice, and by attracting violent law enforcement to embattled communities. *Un narco* refers to a single drug dealer, usually a higher-up in cartel organization.

⁸See Biron "It's a Living: Hit Men in the Mexican Narco War" on the film's treatment of *sicarios* as laborers in the global economy.

⁹I am referring here to Achille Mbembe's definition of "death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*...[U]nder conditions of necropower, the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred" ("Necropolitics" 40).

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