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Güeros: Social Fragmentation, Political Agency, and the Mexican Film Industry under Neoliberalism*

Güeros: fragmentación social, agencia política y la industria mexicana del cine bajo el neoliberalismo

JACOBO ASSE DAYÁN**

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the impact of NAFTA on the Mexican film industry with special emphasis on the effects of neoliberal ideology, both on film audiences and its contents. It describes an industry that caters exclusively to the economic elites, blindly following the logic of economic optimization and foregoing any attempt at a cinematic project rooted in national culture. The author then analyzes Alonso Ruizpalacios' *Güeros* (2014) as an interesting case study illustrating the difficulties of trying to resist neoliberalism after decades of living in a society and working inside a film industry strongly shaped by its ideology.

Key words: Mexican cinema, neoliberalism, NAFTA, ideology, *Güeros*.

RESUMEN

Este artículo discute el impacto que ha tenido el Tratado de Libre Comercio de América del Norte (TLCAN) en la industria cinematográfica mexicana, con un énfasis especial en los efectos de la ideología neoliberal, tanto en las audiencias como en los contenidos. El trabajo describe una industria que sirve exclusivamente a las elites económicas y que sigue a ciegas la lógica de la optimización financiera, dejando de lado cualquier iniciativa cinematográfica con raíces en la cultura nacional. El autor analiza la película *Güeros* (2014), de Alonso Ruiz Palacios, como un interesante estudio de caso que ilustra las dificultades que se enfrentan al tratar de resistirse al neoliberalismo, tras décadas de vivir en una sociedad y de trabajar en una industria fuertemente modeladas por esa ideología.

Palabras clave: cine mexicano, neoliberalismo, TLCAN, ideología, *Güeros*.

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INTRODUCTION

Neoliberalism is perhaps most readily identified as a set of economic policies that emphasize free trade through deregulation, privatization, and fiscal austerity. From the 1970s on, these policies have shaped the economic and social orders of almost every country in the world with what can at best be described as mixed results. There has been economic growth in some places for some periods of time, but there have also been crises, economic inequality, social fragmentation, and increasingly precarious working conditions.

But neoliberalism is more than just a set of policies; it is an ideology, a whole world view that shapes not only our living conditions, but also ourselves, affecting our identities, aspirations, and moral values. And this is where things get tricky, since neoliberalism is not only an outside phenomenon to support or reject, but a force that impinges upon our subjectivity, making it hard, even for those who fervently oppose it, to imagine a viable alternative.

Mexico's history with neoliberalism is pretty typical for a Third World country. Driven by a financial crisis and a long history of corrupt and repressive governments, in the late 1980s its people welcomed the neoliberal prospect of less government with some enthusiasm at first, but soon, after the inevitable disappointment, with a kind of resignation to its inescapability. Mexico's incorporation into world markets became official in 1994, with the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), but it had begun a few years earlier, with a process of privatization and deregulation of its main industries. Among those affected was the film industry, which was state owned and operated, and, therefore, in need of a complete overhaul in order to comply with NAFTA's legal requirements, and perhaps more importantly, with its ideological dictums.

This overhaul dictated a smaller role for government in film production, a reduction of screen quotas for Mexican films, the sale of its national chain of theaters, and the deregulation of ticket prices, which immediately doubled. The results of this transition are open to interpretation. Some, following neoliberal dogma, have proclaimed it a great success, citing the industry's overall growth, since it now occupies the fourth place worldwide in the number of screens and tickets sold; improved production values; and the international acclaim the films have received. Others deem it a categorical failure. Cinema, they claim, has become big business in Mexico, but mostly for transnational corporations that have inundated the market with Hollywood films, leaving most Mexican films, even those that have earned international awards, mostly unseen by Mexican audiences. Even graver is the fact that cinema has become just one more consumer good, accessible only to a minority of the popu-

lation, and has practically given up any aspirations it once might have had of being an expression of Mexico's cultural diversity.

Güeros (2014) is a kind of paradoxical film that supports both sides of this argument. A product of the Mexican neoliberal film industry in many ways, it is, as an internationally prize-winning film, a feather in its cap, confirming the superior quality of today's Mexican films as compared to those produced before the neoliberal transition. On the other hand, *Güeros* offers a stark critique of the effects of neoliberalism on Mexican society, emphasizing the social fragmentation that has left its people almost completely devoid of political agency. This critique extends to the Mexican film industry as well, which the film comments on through a series of episodes that subtly parody the formulaic strategies it has used to pander to its middle- and upper-class audiences, exposing it as just one more self-serving consumer industry that peddles conservative ideology as a commodity.

What follows is an attempt to understand the effects that 25 years of neoliberalism –policy and ideology– have had on the Mexican film industry, as well as the challenges facing those who would like to alter the course. I will begin, in Section One, with a brief review of neoliberalism's history and ideological underpinnings. Section Two gives an account of the neoliberal transition of the Mexican film industry, both as it pertains to its material conditions of production and exhibition, as well as to its content. Finally, Sections Three to Five are an analysis of some aspects of *Güeros* that will help illuminate the topic at hand.

NEOLIBERALISM: HISTORY, POLICY, AND IDEOLOGY

Before turning to the Mexican film industry, I will briefly go over a few aspects of neoliberalism that will be useful for our analysis. Beyond its main tenets, policies, and history, which I will mention only briefly, I will focus on its ideological underpinnings. More than just a set of policies, neoliberalism is a world view, with its own idiom and metaphors through which we interpret our daily lives. It is these ideological features that will allow us to understand the motives and justifications for the Mexican film industry's neoliberal transformation. For the task of reviewing neoliberalism's history, as well as revealing its ideological inner workings I will rely heavily on Fernando Escalante's book *Historia mínima del neoliberalismo* (Minimal History of Neoliberalism) (2015).

Neoliberal History and Policy

Neoliberalism became prominent in the late 1970s with the rise to power of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States, and was further facilitated by Deng Xiaoping's liberal reforms to China's economy (Harvey, 2007: 1); it would soon spread, with very few exceptions, to the rest of the world. These policies, as is well known, emphasize free trade, deregulation, privatization, and fiscal austerity, all of which are meant to ensure that the free market is allowed to flourish without any social or political interference. But, while the "neoliberal moment" began in the late 1970s, its intellectual history dates back to the 1930s, with the writings of Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, Walter Lippman, Louis Rougier, and others (Escalante, 2015: 28). They were attempting to revitalize the principles of classical liberalism,¹ but with an economic emphasis, trying to fight the dominant collectivist spirit that arose in part due to the Great Depression and which led to welfare interventionist policies like the New Deal.

In 1947, the Mont Pelerin Society was formed by 36 scholars committed to developing and promoting this new kind of economic liberalism (Escalante, 2015: 41). The society's purpose was long-term. Their inaugural declaration stated they did not align with any political party (Escalante, 2015: 41); they did not want to engage in a political fight, but to develop an ideology. It is telling that they chose such an anodyne name, providing them with a certain amount of discretion. It is important to note –and, given their current dominance, difficult to imagine– that they were iconoclasts, outsider radicals who advocated principled, radical ideas at a time when a more pragmatic, cautious Keynesianism was the norm.²

Neoliberalism's time would come, as I mentioned above, in the late 1970s, thanks to the deep economic crisis of the 1970s. The increasing military spending of the Cold War, coupled with the Vietnam War and an oil crisis that saw the price of a barrel soar from US\$2 to US\$12 in less than two years, put a strain on U.S. finances. Politically, three presidents (Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon) were caught lying about the cost of the Vietnam War. And then there was Watergate. Europe was no better off. In Britain, Prime Minister Edward Heath was forced to declare a state of emergency on

¹ Classical liberalism's troubles go back to the late nineteenth century, since it proved incapable of lifting the working class from miserable living conditions (Escalante, 2015: 25). World War I made things even worse for liberalism, as governments were forced to intervene to keep production up, thus infringing upon the people's freedoms. The critical moment was the crisis of 1929, which generated massive unemployment, prompting governments to use public spending to activate the economy, as exemplified by the U.S.'s New Deal. There was a deep distrust of the free market, and collectivist ideas were prevalent everywhere (Escalante, 2015: 27). It is in this context that Hayek and company felt the need to renew liberalism, turning not to political rights, but to the free market as the road to freedom and wealth.

² Keynesianism advocates a watchful eye from the state, which must intervene in the market to prevent undesirable outcomes caused by the private sector.

four occasions between 1970 and 1974. A million Britons were unemployed and inflation was up to 14 percent. Terrorism abounded: in Italy, the Red Brigades; in Germany, the Red Army Faction; and in Spain, ETA and FRAP. In the periphery, the protectionist development model began to fail, and many countries turned to the political left, many of their governments openly expressing sympathy toward the Soviet Union. In under ten years, the world had radically changed (Escalante, 2015: 94-95).

The stage was set for a change, and neoliberalism fit the bill perfectly, at least in the central countries. The general perception was that governments were to blame for the crisis: too much spending, too many wars, and too many lies. Neoliberalism advocated the exact opposite –at least on the surface–: small government and the smallest amount of intervention possible. The youth movements of the 1960s had an individualistic ethos that fit in well with these ideas. They were mostly comprised of college-educated kids with an unprecedented amount of consumer possibilities in a world with too many rules (Escalante, 2015: 100). To them, neoliberalism was a radical program that meant freedom. The new political left abandoned the classical causes of inequality and public welfare and concentrated on personal freedoms, authenticity, and the right to difference (Escalante, 2015: 104). Neoliberalism fed on these protests and was able to maintain an anti-establishment character.

With Thatcher and Reagan in power, the 1980s became what Escalante refers to as “the offensive.” The U.K. and the U.S. implemented policies of privatization, deregulation, and tax and public-spending cuts; and a systematic campaign against unions significantly diminished their power. But domestic policy was only the beginning. For the free market to flourish, it needs to expand, and so it was necessary that the peripheral countries open their markets as well. They were basically forced to by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. In 1979, then-U.S.-President Jimmy Carter appointed Paul Volcker as Fed chairman; in order to contain inflation, he proceeded to raise interest rates from two percent in 1979 to nine percent in 1981. This was unmanageable for the countries on the periphery, which had large debts. The World Bank and IMF would then offer to alleviate their situation by renegotiating their debt, but only on condition that they open up their markets to foreign capital (Escalante, 2015: 107). In 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed and any alternative was effectively gone. Capitalist neoliberalism was perceived as the only option. Even the cataclysmic financial crisis of 2008 prompted no substantive changes to the new world order. As Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek have famously remarked, it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Fisher, 2009: 2).

Before ending this very schematic history of neoliberalism, it is important to note three important points. First, despite neoliberalism’s discourse about small

government and free markets, the neoliberal state does not disappear or remain idle at all. On the contrary, its intervention is indispensable for creating and maintaining markets, as can be attested by the numerous wars, foreign government overthrows, trade agreements, and bank bailouts by the governments of the economic powers. But, since these interventions are made in the name of freedom, they are excused. Second, despite the market's globalizing impetus, borders play an essential role in making it more efficient, as they allow capital to exploit the different conditions that each country has to offer: cheap natural resources in one country, cheap labor in another, a tax haven in another, etc. (Escalante, 2015: 183). And the last point concerns the relationship between the economy and democracy. Neoliberal thought exalts the economy beyond any other discipline, and sees it as the all-important path to freedom and prosperity, which means that it cannot be subjected to the caprices of the people's will, leading to a kind of paradoxical state of affairs in which, in order to attain freedom, the people must relinquish their freedom to influence economic policy.

Neoliberal Ideology

In the very schematic history of neoliberalism outlined above, one argument relies on a very superficial kind of logic. Following Escalante, I pointed out above that the neoliberal moment began when the economic crisis of the 1970s was attributed to a series of bad government interventions, prompting people to embrace the exact opposite of that (at least on the surface), that is, the idea of a non-interventionist neoliberal state. But this is faulty –or at least incomplete– reasoning. The opposite of “bad X” is usually not “no X”, but “good X.” So an extra argument is needed to go from bad results in government intervention to advocating no intervention at all. It is not even clear that no intervention should be even considered, as, *prima facie*, it would be hard to believe that doing nothing to foster a good economy, development, and social welfare would result in exactly that. This is where neoliberal ideology comes in, where the efforts of Hayek and company pay off.

To understand the inner workings of neoliberal ideology, we must begin by understanding its relationship with neoclassical economic theory, which tries to predict economic performance by completely divorcing economic activity from its social context. It fundamentally relies on a series of mathematical models used to predict supply, demand, prices, employment, etc., which are equally valid in any social context. These models are not derived from empirical research, but from a set of assumptions. The most important of these assumptions is that the individual is a selfish agent constantly striving to maximize his own individual profits, with no regard for

anything else (Escalante, 2015: 161). This selfishness –or, as economists like to call it, *rationality*– is what supposedly guides the behavior of consumers and suppliers, an interaction of millions of individuals' wills that results in the "optimum" prices, which, if kept away from external interference, will lead to an economy in "equilibrium."

I have put "optimum" and "equilibrium" in quotation marks because they are prime examples of a kind of trick that neoliberalism, through neoclassical economic theory, has played on the public. That is, by assigning words with positive connotations to terms that refer to mere possibilities in a mathematical model, neoliberalism elevates the market, which is fundamentally just a mechanism to process information through the system of prices (Escalante, 2015: 21), into a symbol of freedom, a promise of wealth and even a normative system for our moral conduct. In reality, from the technical point of view, all that "optimum" and "equilibrium" mean in economic theory is that they are the points at which prices stabilize given the economic forces in the world; but, to the general public, to common sense, they become desirable results. An excellent illustration of this is the existence of what is called the "natural rate of unemployment," an implicit acceptance –a naturalization even– of the idea that there will always be unemployed people, and that this is part of having an optimized economy. When unemployment becomes a good thing, there can be no doubt that the academic argument has become ideological (Escalante, 2015: 77).

But there is more. It is not only consumers and suppliers who operate under this selfish rationality; according to neoliberalism, it is also public servants. This means that all politicians will do whatever they can to maximize their own profits, and that the supposed public good that drives them is just something they say to get reelected. Even if government officials are well-meaning and think they have the public's interest at heart, they are only imposing their ignorance on the market, which is the only mechanism that "knows" what is good and fair. The only way to optimize the system is to make the public interest coincide with the private interest. Or, in other words, there is no public interest; there is only private self-interest. As Thatcher famously said, "There is no such thing as society; there are only individuals."

This is the ideological argument of neoliberalism. On the social level, as we have seen, it commands reducing the public sphere in favor of the private, in order to not impose our ignorance –or even worse, our own political agendas– on the market. But more important, perhaps, are its effects on the individual level, that is, on each of our own identities and world views. On a personal level, the market becomes the prevailing metaphor through which we interpret the world and relate to it (Escalante, 2015: 103); each of us is interpellated as a profit-maximizing agent: *homo oeconomicus*, a sort of personal enterprise in which every one of our actions must be evaluated in terms of a cost-benefit analysis of investment and profit. Even our moral

codes become imbued with a sort of distorted Darwinism, a kind of survival-of-the-fittest teleological argument whereby whatever actions we take in our own self-interest are the ones that are economically and morally just.

This might begin to explain why, despite its less than stellar economic results, deteriorating working conditions, and repeated crises, neoliberalism has not been seriously challenged. Whatever troubles are encountered are interpreted through the neoliberal ideological matrix, which, to no one's surprise, prescribes more neoliberal policies as the solution.

Mexico's Transition to Neoliberalism

Mexico's political transition to neoliberalism conforms to the general pattern outlined above. As a neighbor of the U.S., this transition was inevitable, and like many other countries on the periphery, it was precipitated during the 1980s by a financial crisis. This transition was consummated with the enactment of NAFTA on January 1, 1994, but its roots go back many years, at least to 1968, with the student movements that led to the infamous Tlatelolco massacre.

Mexico has a long history of strong governments and particularly of strong presidents. One political party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI),³ ruled continuously from 1929 until 2000, aided by a long series of murky elections. These authoritarian governments were deeply involved in every facet of society, including the economy. During the 1950s and 1960s, its protectionist, import-substitution policy obtained excellent results that reached a sustained growth of 6 percent annually (Camp, 2010: 569). Things began to sour in 1968, when violent police intervention in a public school ignited a student movement to protest government repression. This movement grew from June until October 2, when, pressured by the upcoming inauguration of the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games, the government decided to put a stop to the protests with a massacre during a demonstration at the Tlatelolco Plaza, in which an estimated 150 to 200 protesters were killed.

This episode was the beginning of the political decline of the Mexican state, but its control over the economy continued to increase well into the 1980s (Camp, 2010: 569). President José López Portillo's administration (1976-1982) escalated state expansion by financing infrastructure projects with massive, high-interest foreign loans secured with Mexico's proven oil reserves as collateral (Camp, 2010: 571). The crisis came when, near the end of his term, oil prices plummeted, leaving Mexico with an overvalued

³ Originally named the National Revolutionary Party (PNR) and later the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM).

peso and an unmanageable debt at high interest rates. López Portillo responded by nationalizing the banking industry, thus expanding indirect state control over the economy to an estimated nearly 80 percent (Camp, 2010: 570), alienating much of the business community and sparking anger in the general population, who blamed the government for their economic hardships. Just a couple of months later, the IMF approved a US\$3.8-billion loan to the Mexican government on the condition that it implement a series of free-market reforms.

López Portillo's appointed successor was Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988), the first Mexican president to have studied in the U.S. (at Harvard), and so began the era of the technocrats. De la Madrid and his advisors believed that the state-led economic strategy would not solve Mexico's economic troubles and favored an approach stressing foreign capital investment, declining tariffs, and increased trade (Camp, 2010: 578). After him came Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994), another Harvard graduate, who explicitly embraced neoliberalism as the way forward for Mexico. He did not have a hard time selling it to the Mexican people, who were tired of a series of repressive, inept, corrupt governments. Besides, by then, the Mexican people equated economic freedom with democracy and modernity and saw neoliberalism as a historical inevitability, a necessary result of an increasingly globalized world (MacLaird, 2013: 110).

Salinas de Gortari began to negotiate NAFTA in 1990 and signed it in December 1992. For most of his six-year term he enjoyed high approval ratings, generating wild optimism about Mexico's future prospects. However, the final year of his term was disastrous. First, on January 1, 1994, the same day that NAFTA went into effect, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) staged an uprising in the southern state of Chiapas, taking control of much of its territory.⁴ Then, in September a prominent Mexican political figure, José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, was assassinated, and Salinas de Gortari's brother Raúl was prosecuted for the crime. Finally, in December, right after he handed power over to Ernesto Zedillo, the peso sharply devaluated, showing that all the presumed financial progress was just a façade. Since then, the Mexican people have had a complex relationship with neoliberalism: with a kind of fatalistic acceptance of the inevitable, they are resigned to passively watch as the country's resources and industries are sold and its culture colonized, but all the while enjoying what they can of the consumer perks that neoliberalism affords.

⁴ The EZLN uprising is a very telling episode of neoliberalism. The fact that it coincided with the day NAFTA came into force is no coincidence; it was originally designed precisely to protest neoliberal economic policy on behalf of the indigenous people, who were being left behind. However, the EZLN quickly turned away from its original Marxist language and its complaints against government agrarian policies and the privatization of communal lands and toward a defense of indigenism, a cause that was easier to digest for an international community very much aligned ideologically with the neoliberal economic project (Escalante, 2015: 187).

In 2000, the PRI finally lost a presidential election; however, somewhat inexplicably in a country with such a high degree of economic inequality, it lost to the right-wing National Action Party (PAN). In any case, by then, elections did not matter that much anymore, at least when it came to economic policy; neoliberalism was already deeply engrained in Mexico, and no serious challenges to it have emerged since. The neoliberal offensive continues, with the few remaining bastions of public life constantly under attack. Recent advances have been made in the energy industry, where Pemex, Mexico's state-owned oil company, recently opened up to foreign investment, and, as I write this, on the all-important education front, the teachers union in the southern state of Oaxaca are on strike, protesting a new reform that implements standardized tests for all teachers and strips them of their tenure. They enjoy little support from a population that equates unions with corruption and inefficiency.

THE MEXICAN FILM INDUSTRY'S TRANSITION TO NEOLIBERALISM

Up until the late 1980s, the state was heavily involved in the Mexican film industry, an unacceptable –and soon to be illegal– state of affairs under neoliberalism. And so, from 1988 to 1994, it underwent a complete transformation in all its facets –production, exhibition, consumption, and film content– until it complied with both NAFTA's legal requirements, and, perhaps more importantly, with neoliberalism's ideological dictums. The following is a brief account of this transformation.

Privatizing a National Cinema

Before neoliberalism came to Mexico, its film industry was almost entirely controlled by the state. In the field of production, a private sector existed that was exclusively dedicated to producing very low-brow *fichera* and masked-wrestler films,⁵ but any film with any kind of artistic intentions was, if approved, completely financed by the state. Exhibition-wise, a few private theatres existed, but most of them belonged to Compañía Operadora de Teatros, S.A. (COTSA), nationalized in 1961 (MacLaird, 2013: 24). The government regulated ticket prices, keeping them affordable, and there was a 30-percent screen quota for Mexican films.

⁵ *Ficheras* are prostitutes who work in bars as taxi dancers, servicing clients for money. Picaresque comedies featuring them became a very large sub-genre of Mexican films in the 1970s and 1980s.

Due to a series of bad administrations, the results of this arrangement went from bad to worse. After the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, in the 1940s and 1950s,⁶ the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s were a complete disaster. Each president appointed his own people to run the film industry as they saw fit, without any regard for continuity. For example, while President Luis Echeverría (1970-1976) appointed his brother Raúl, who invested in the expansion of the National Cinematographic Bank (NCB), opened the National Cinematheque, and gave ample support and freedom to young directors, with some good results, López Portillo, his successor, undid all the progress when he appointed his sister Margarita, who dissolved the NCB, neglected the Cinematheque to the point that it burned down in a fire, and “supervised” production so as not to allow “coarse themes that poison the mind” (Mora, 1997: 63). In general, filmmakers complained about the prevalent cronyism that, sadly, seemed to confirm the warnings of neoliberal ideology about the politicians’ conduct regarding the public well-being, not to mention producers’ widely reported practice of embezzling from the funds earmarked for production (Mora, 1997: 50).

Adding to this mismanagement of the industry, the advent of video and cable television in the 1980s resulted in the middle and upper classes largely abandoning cinemas,⁷ except for the sporadic Hollywood blockbuster. There was no longer a narrative capable of unifying the public into a national audience like it did in the days of the Golden Age (Sánchez, 2014: Intro., par. 9), perhaps a reflection of a society increasingly fragmented by social and economic divisions.

It was in this context that Salinas de Gortari’s neoliberal privatization project was accepted without much resistance; Congress passed his 1992 Federal Film Law spearheading the change in 20 minutes (MacLaird, 2013: 27). But the transition had already begun a few years earlier, in preparation for NAFTA’s 1994 deadline. The film law’s main impetus was privatization and deregulation. It did not go completely private, as neoliberal orthodoxy would want, because its Article 14 still recognized that film production is an activity of “national interest” –more on this later–; however, it greatly diminished the role of the state in production. Where previously it would completely finance films, now it would only “facilitate the initial development of projects and promote finished projects as national culture, but not have creative control or financial responsibility for the productions” (MacLaird 2013, p.27). In other

⁶ The Golden Age was aided by World War II, which saw a drop in production in the U.S. and Europe, as well as in Argentina, allowing Mexican cinema to dominate the Latin American markets. Also, Mexico’s film industry received financial support from the U.S. State Department in exchange for anti-Axis propaganda in its content (MacLaird, 2013: 24).

⁷ Sánchez Prado reports that between 1989 and 1991, 10 082 video clubs opened across Mexico (2014: Intro., par. 2).

words, the state, through its Film Institute (Imcine), would provide partial funding, but only if the project had already obtained private backing, a kind of free market seal of approval for the project's financial viability.

Later, in 2007, a new law allowed private companies to contribute funds to the production of certain government-approved film projects and deduct their contributions from their income tax. This resulted in films' increased commercialization, including brand and product placements. Also in 2007, a law was passed approving a one peso tax on each movie ticket bought in Mexico, which would go toward Mexican film production; however, this law never went into effect, as the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) sued, arguing that it violated NAFTA. The proposed legislation was ultimately deemed "unconstitutional" by the Federal Commission for Regulatory Improvement, an agency whose policy objectives were initiated under Salinas de Gortari to facilitate deregulation and privatization (MacLaird, 2013: 30). In short, while the government does still provide some public funding for productions, filmmakers have been left to their own devices in trying to secure most of their financing from the private sector. The result is what has been characterized as a "post-industrial cinema," that is, one made up of individual –sometimes heroic– efforts to get funding, as opposed to an established infrastructure geared to sustained and continuous production (MacLaird, 2013: 2).

However, the most significant change in the industry had nothing to do with production or funding, but with exhibition. One of NAFTA's provisions mandated that the screen quota for Mexican films gradually come down to 10 percent, and in 1993, the government sold COTSA, the national theatre chain, to the private sector and deregulated ticket prices. The expectation was that the theatres would be renovated, but most of them were sold and changed use, and the chain was eventually dismantled in 1994 (Saavedra Luna, cited in MacLaird, 2013: 28). In their place, upscale multiplexes with state-of-the-art seating and projection equipment were built, most of them in affluent urban neighborhoods, often inside shopping malls. Prices doubled and are no longer affordable for the lower classes (MacLaird, 2013: 28). In recent years, gentrification has intensified, with many multiplexes offering only VIP theatres "with amenities such as all-leather individual recliners with side tables, a full bar, an extensive food menu (which can be ordered from waiters summoned by a button next to the seat), and a comfortable lobby that resembles a posh café" (Sánchez, 2014: conclusion, par. 1). Post-1992, cinema in Mexico has ceased to be identified as a cultural experience, to become, for the most part, an experience of consumption for those who can afford it.

Audience and Content Shifts

Higher ticket prices, the gentrification of cinemas, and their concentration in urban areas caused a radical shift in film audiences, excluding most of the population. As of 2012, only 28 percent of Mexico's inhabitants went to the cinema at least once a year, and people who live away from large urban areas –42 percent of the population– were left without a cinema nearby (MacLaird, 2013: 46).⁸ This radical shift in audiences –from the lower to the middle and upper classes– was accompanied by a shift in the content of the films produced in Mexico, with post-1992 films unashamedly catering to the interests of the new, more affluent audience. As often happens in privatization processes, whatever censorship there was under state production is substituted by an –often more conservative– kind of market censorship. Three major trends in this direction have been identified: the proliferation of romantic comedies; a new sort of neo-Mexicanism that aims at re-writing Mexican history from an upper-class point of view; and films that feature sensationalistic and apolitical violence. Inevitably, this content shift has ideological consequences; it is worth a brief analysis.

Romantic Comedies

The romantic comedy is a genre that allows an evasion of national identity issues by centering its plots largely on issues of intimacy and romance (Sánchez, 2014: ch. 2, sec. 2, par. 2). Its appearance in Mexico in the 1990s was partly due to its popularity in Hollywood during the 1980s, but it is also a manifestation of the audience shift mentioned above and a new growing neoliberal identity. As with their Hollywood counterparts, Mexican romantic comedies are usually centered on affluent urban middle class characters with jobs related to advertising or media. The films are characterized by Misha MacLaird as

possessing a light tone, quick pace, urban settings, thirtysomethings of middle- to upper class standing, familiar and sentimental themes, conflicts regarding sexuality or parental figures, superficial levels of narrative and character reflection, permissible social critique of corruption and crime, drugs and excessive sex as vices, modern foreground showcasing

⁸ This does not mean that the remaining 72 percent of the population does not watch movies at all, as the pirate market in Mexico is huge, and largely tolerated by the authorities. But the preferences of this “pirate audience” are not taken into account by producers, and this not reflected in the content of their films, as they do not receive any income from their viewing.

an abundance of visible commercial brands and consumer technology (CDs, computers, etc.), and a backdrop of picturesque and folkloric Mexico. (MacLaird, 2013: 48)

The film that launched the genre in Mexico was Alfonso Cuarón's first feature *Sólo con tu pareja* (1991), centered on a publicist's sexual escapades. Despite an abundance of sexual activity and nudity, the deeper tone of the film is quite moralistic, as the main character is punished for his promiscuity and finally redeems himself by renouncing his former lifestyle and finding true love. The publicist would become a ubiquitous character in these films, "a trade clearly related to the new economic configurations of neoliberalism" (Sánchez, 2014: ch. 2, sec.3, par. 3), a reflection of a new understanding of citizens as consumers (Sánchez, 2014: ch. 2, sec.3, par. 3). Beyond providing Mexico's more affluent classes with films that reflected their own privileged perspectives, romantic comedies managed "to playfully present the impact of NAFTA on Mexico's middle class as a central concern, yet managing to reconcile a co-existence of U.S. business culture with family-centered traditions and values" (MacLaird, 2013: 26).

Neo-Mexicanist Films

If romantic comedies aimed at providing light entertainment and escape, neo-Mexicanist films tried to re-engage cinema's affluent audiences with Mexico's culture and traditions by basically re-writing Mexico's cultural history from their own point of view. Through superficially optimistic and teleological narratives that portray the past—including its hardships—as the inevitable road to a better future, these films make Mexican cultural history easy to digest, not only for Mexico's elites, but also for international audiences (MacLaird, 2013: 26).

The most successful of these films was Alfonso Arau's *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992), a film that offers a romanticized gastronomic version of Mexico's history, from the revolution of 1910 up until Mexico's symbolic marriage to the U.S. with the signing of NAFTA (Sánchez, 2014: ch. 1, par. 14). The film portrays the story of a rich family of women living in a border town as they survive the revolution with all their privileges intact, including the undying loyalty of their servants. This survival is portrayed as well-earned: when the revolutionaries come to their door asking for a donation of provisions for the cause, the mother of the family scares them off with her rifle, telling them that they can take whatever is in the barn (barely anything, as it turns out), but the house provisions are "for her own private cause," and that if they try to enter her house she will shoot them, as she has a very bad temper. The only

thing that the family loses to the revolution is a daughter, who falls in love with a revolutionary and runs off with him to become a revolutionary herself. She might be claimed as a progressive feminist character: however, she would be an odd one, as she comes back in the 1930s for the wedding of her niece (who is marrying a U.S. American) in a Model T (a symbol of social status) and married to her revolutionary (Sánchez, 2014: ch. 1, sec. 1, par. 9). Near the end of the film, we are surprised to learn that the story is being narrated from the present, by the granddaughter of one of the daughters, still privileged, and still cooking traditional Mexican dishes, just like her forebears used to.

“Revolutions wouldn’t be so bad if you could eat at home with your family every day,” says the revolutionary daughter when she comes back, thus managing to embed bourgeois family values within a violent, social revolution. Sánchez Prado sums it up well: “The revolution in Arau’s movie is never an issue of class inequality, but rather a guarantee that social change in Mexico, like the one brought about in the 1920s or the one taking place in the late 1980s, never threatens the status of the privileged” (Sánchez, 2014: ch. 1, sec. 1, par. 11). A comforting message for an affluent movie audience to hear in a country that seems to be in permanent need of social change.

Sensationalistic Violence and the Politics of Fear

Since the beginning of the government’s war on the drug cartels in 2006, Mexico has become the host of a series of brutal, even unimaginable, acts of violence, but even before that, Mexican cinema had been attracting audiences with hyperrealist, stylized depictions of violence, to the point that it has become a formulaic subgenre of Mexican cinema (MacLaird, 2013: 102). It is sometimes thought that films depicting violence are necessarily political and usually progressive, as they delve into the depths of social reality, but this is not always the case. Historically, Mexican cinema’s representations of violence had usually been acts of resistance by the lower classes against injustice or by women against violence. More recently, however, they have focused on urban crime and corruption (MacLaird, 2013: 103). This is violence seen as a threat to consumer privilege from a middle- and upper-class perspective, a result of what Sánchez Prado has called the “citizenship of fear,” in which politics are not about social justice, but about “the systemic failure of the Mexican state in preserving the spaces of modernity enjoyed by the new movie-going audience” (Sánchez, 2014: ch. 3, sec. 1, par. 4).

The most obvious example of this trend is a box office hit called *Todo el poder* (*Gimme the Power*) (2000). Its plot begins when middle-class TV newsmen Gabriel is robbed while

reporting about rampant crime in Mexico City. In the next scene he is robbed again, along with all the clientele of the restaurant where he is eating. As he seeks help from the authorities, he finds out that the policeman who is helping him is corrupt and works in tandem with the thieves. As he goes up the ladder of power, he discovers that the attorney general himself is part of the corruption scheme. In the end, though, with the help of his girlfriend Sofía, they unmask everyone and are set free to prosper –Gabriel, we are told during the credits, strikes it rich by making TV commercials. The first thing to note is that the film’s depiction of crime in Mexico City is –certainly before 2006– a wild exaggeration, more the result of bourgeois paranoia than a reflection of reality. But more importantly, in the world of *Todo el poder*, “Crime is not a result of social inequality, but of individual and institutional corruption” (Sánchez, 2014: ch. 3, sec. 4, par. 11), and no real structural changes are called for; all it takes for everyone to prosper is some good private citizens to care enough to stop government corruption.

Also in 2000, *Amores perros*, the most expensive and critically acclaimed Mexican film ever, was released. Despite a progressive exterior, it is nothing more than an expression of this same citizenship of fear, as Sánchez (2006) successfully argues. Particularly striking is the way in which El Chivo, one of the main characters, is punished for leaving his family to join a revolutionary group striving to “make the world a better place.” The film never bothers to question whether his cause was just; all violence is treated as an apolitical infringement of family values.

Together, romantic comedies, neo-Mexicanist films, and sensationalistic violence perform an ideological shift to match the audience shift, placing the middle-class urban subject as the privileged witness of the contemporary (Sánchez, 2014: ch. 3, sec. 1, par. 1). No longer an instrument for social change, ideology is commodified for consumption by the new neoliberal audiences. Post-1992, Mexican films are no longer about national identity or cultural expression; they are just one more consumer good.

The Mexican Film Industry “Optimized”

The award ceremony of the 2016 Arieles (Mexico’s Academy Awards) began with a speech by Mexican Minister of Culture Rafael Tovar y de Teresa, who proclaimed Mexican cinema to be in good shape. He boasted that, in 2015, 140 films had been produced in Mexico, a number unrivalled since the Golden Age of Mexican cinema; he also praised their quality, stating that they had been awarded 450 international prizes. He then proceeded to congratulate the audience –full of actors, directors, and film executives– as they were, he claimed, responsible for this success. The audience clapped, presumably in agreement.

Later in the broadcast, the Ariel de Oro, the Academy's maximum honor, given in recognition of a notable career in film, was presented to Paul Leduc, a director who came to prominence during the 1970s with a series of anti-establishment films. After thanking the Academy, he read a speech that served as a stark rebuttal of Tovar y de Teresa's optimistic assessment. He did not contradict any of his numbers, but added a few, which support a very different interpretation of the current state of the Mexican film industry. He began by clarifying that, of the 140 films produced, only 46 were features, many fewer than the 80 features produced in 1945. But the more significant difference is that the films of the Golden Age were actually watched by the Mexican public, while most of today's productions will remain practically invisible. Cinema, he continued, is a very profitable business in Mexico, but not for Mexican filmmakers. While Mexican film companies struggle to generate annual revenues of Mex\$15 million, Twentieth Century Fox and Universal Pictures exceeded Mex\$1.5 billion each, and Warner and Disney surpassed Mex\$2 billion each.⁹ In the three preceding years, Leduc noted, overall box office grew, but in that same period, attendance to Mexican films fell to almost half, from 30 to 18 million tickets sold. International awards are being won, but those very films are not being shown in Mexican cinemas, or even on Mexican TV, private or public. All the while, the government continues to turn a blind eye to the numerous violations of the 10-percent screen-time quota set for Mexican films. This avalanche of numbers, he continued, demands we ask why this is so and who it benefits, concluding by asking state officials to clarify what exactly the cinema project is that they are trying to advance. In what amounted to a kind of schizophrenia, the crowd, composed of the same people who had applauded the now-rebutted official version, gave him a standing ovation.

By many statistical measures, Mexican cinema's transition into neoliberalism is a resounding success. Mexico has the largest Spanish-language audience and the fourth-largest film market in the world. With the multiplex system, between 1994 and 2011, the number of screens more than tripled, from 1 432 to 4 818, and audiences more than doubled, from 82 million to 189 million (MacLaird, 2013: 34). In 2015, this growth placed Mexico in fourth place worldwide in both the number of screens (Canacine, 2016: 25) and in cinema tickets sold (Canacine, 2016: 23). Mexican films have improved in production resources, as the average budget per film grew from Mex\$940 000 (about US\$94 000 at the time) in 2000 to Mex\$22.4 million (about US\$2 million) in 2012 (Sánchez, 2014: concl., par. 2). A "star system" has developed, with many world-renowned Mexican actors and directors working at home and in

⁹ Actually, his figures fell short of reality. The 2015 Canacine report boasts about a new box office record attained by Universal, with over Mex\$3 billion, followed by Fox at Mex\$2.8 billion and Paramount and Disney slightly over Mex\$2 billion.

Hollywood, some even winning Oscars; and, in general, Mexico's film industry has gained international recognition.

On the other hand, as Leduc pointed out, a problem exists with the domestic exhibition of Mexican films. In an industry flooded with Hollywood films, Mexican films accounted for only 5.3 percent of the total box office (Canacine, 2016: 17), and, as I pointed out above, most of the Mexican population has been excluded altogether from attending cinemas. Those who can attend overwhelmingly choose Hollywood films, and the Mexican films that do get seen are not the expression of national culture, but mostly one more consumer good for the middle and upper classes. So Leduc's question is worth answering: What is the point of all this growth? Is it just about economics? Or is there still a culturally significant national cinema project?

Neoliberal ideology, as we know, has its answer: the market has processed everyone's rational preferences and told us which films should be produced, what their content should be, and which should be exhibited, where, and at what price. And the results are clear: the Mexican people want mostly Hollywood films, with a few ideologically conservative Mexican films mixed in, shown in multiplexes in affluent urban areas, many of them in VIP theatres with food service. The problem with the –lack of– exhibition of Mexican films is simply the result of government interference; excessive production resulting from the government's partial funding of films that the free market has not fully approved. As soon as this interference stops, the market will reach equilibrium. Furthermore, the 72 percent of the Mexican people who have stopped going to theatres are not being excluded; they have just freely and rationally decided that they would rather invest their money in some other consumer good. This percentage should be interpreted as a necessary percentage for the industry to be optimized, something akin to the natural rate of unemployment, but for consumption. And finally, economic growth is always good; it means that people are finding more consumer satisfaction through cinema. Any other idea of what is good is an imposition of our ignorance on consumers' freedom; there is no such thing as the public interest, there is only individual interest, and it is being maximized by the free market. In case we needed someone to spell out this answer for us, Jack Valenti, head of the MPAA at the time of the signing of NAFTA did so. After Canada obtained a cultural exemption from NAFTA to protect its film industry¹⁰ –an exemption that Mexico did not ask for– Valenti insisted that “this [debate] has nothing to do with culture. . . . [This] is all about the hard business of money” (Valenti, quoted in Larrea, 1997: 1124).

¹⁰ MacLaird reports that this exemption never made much of a difference, as Canada suffers the same imbalance in distribution as Mexico (2013, p.36).

There is, of course, another very different answer to the question, one that is, presumably, part of the motivation for Leduc's speech and for the audience's standing ovation. It hinges on the possibility of something having value that is not reflected by consumer choice; in this case, on cinema having a cultural value that escapes our individual consumer decisions, and more specifically on national cinema having cultural value to the nation. Ironically, this is exactly what the 1992 Law of Cinematography –the law that spearheaded the neoliberal transition– explicitly states in its Article 14:

National cinematographic production constitutes an activity of public interest, without this undermining its commercial and industrial character, for it expresses Mexican culture and contributes to the strengthening of the bonds of national identity between the different groups that make it up. Thus, the state will foster its development in order for it to fulfill its function of strengthening the multicultural composition of the Mexican nation, through the funds specified by Law. (PEF, Segob, 1992, Article 14)

Following this rationale, Mexican cinema has a serious deficit, and whatever growth it has managed under neoliberal policies has not been in the right direction. The “multicultural composition of the Mexican nation” cannot be strengthened by the myriad of Hollywood films shown in our cinemas, or by the 5 percent of Mexican films that do get seen, when they are seen by –and filmed for– only 28 percent of the population.

And so, there appears to be a political conflict between the Mexican government's cultural objectives and the conditions stipulated by NAFTA. However, despite appearances, not much conflict exists at all. Article 14 is nothing more than a bit of demagoguery planted in the middle of an utterly neoliberal law. All the articles in the law that actually matter, that determine the material conditions of the industry, obey neoliberal dogma. Theatres were privatized, screen quotas for Mexican films reduced, and prices deregulated. The only provision of the law that infringes on the free market is funding for national productions, and it is actually a reduction over previous levels; but, more importantly, it is ultimately ineffectual when it is not matched by legislation to guarantee their proper exhibition. Furthermore, no one in the Mexican government is advocating a renegotiation of NAFTA or trying to obtain a cultural exemption.

Perhaps more important than the question of whether a conflict exists between Mexico's government and NAFTA's conditions is whether an actual ideological conflict exists (beyond the sporadic rhetoric like Leduc's speech) between the Mexican people and its government's policies on cinema. That is to say, after so many years of

neoliberalism, is there still a national culture that we want protected from international capital? And would we be willing to trust our government with this protection? And if we did, and if it did resolve the problems of film exhibition, would the content of Mexican productions be substantially different –less conservative– from the current content? And if it were, how many of us would go and watch them? In other words, do we still have a cultural identity that is substantially different from the one we have been consuming from Hollywood and other international cultural outlets for so many years? Or have we been colonized for too long? And, of course, then the difficult question arises of who is the “we” in this last series of questions.

The schizophrenia displayed by the audience at the Arieles might serve as a perfect metaphor for the ideological questions I just posed. The fact that Leduc’s speech refuted Tovar y de Teresa’s does not necessarily mean that the applause for either of them was insincere. The audience reaction to Leduc was more enthusiastic, probably responding to a more effusive, nationalistic sentiment, but the one for Tovar y de Teresa jibed more with their work and their lives in a neoliberal film industry, under a neoliberal national economy, in a neoliberal world order from which we do not really know the way out –institutionally, or even in our own imaginations.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF *GÜEROS*

I now turn my attention away from neoliberalism and the Mexican film industry in general, and to the analysis of *Güeros*. Before a deeper analysis, it will be useful to briefly describe its production, reception, and plot, and about how the analysis of the film fits within the larger structure of this article.

Production

Like most recent Mexican films, *Güeros* is a co-production, financed in part by private enterprise, in this case, Catatonia Films, a small Mexican production company with five full-length films to its credit –none since *Güeros*–, and supported also by public funds, through Conaculta (the Mexican equivalent of a Ministry of Culture), and by Difusión Cultural UNAM, the cultural arm of the same university whose strike is portrayed in the film, and which opened its campus for the film to be shot on location. Even with all three entities chipping in, the film’s budget was a modest Mex\$2 240 000¹¹ (slightly

¹¹ As reported in the *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, Mexico’s official national gazette, found online at http://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5383762&fecha=27/02/2015.

under US\$200 000 at the time of production). It is the first feature film by Alonso Ruizpalacios, who has a background in theatre, and who, in true *auteur* fashion, co-wrote it with Gibrán Portela.

Exhibition and Reception

The film was first shown in March 2014 at the Berlinale, and continued on the festival circuit until March 2015, when it was released in Mexico on 48 screens across 32 cities¹² (Imcine, 2016: 86). Well-liked by Mexico's cultural elites, it became the most attended Mexican film of 2015 at the National Cinematheque (Imcine, 2016: 96). However, although it won the most prizes of any Mexican film in 2014, a total of 16 international awards and 5 Arieles, including best picture, outside that circuit, it did not manage to draw in large audiences. It sold a total of 55 530 tickets and grossed Mex\$2 479 145 (less than US\$200 000), placing it in twenty-fourth place for Mexican films in 2015 (Imcine, 2016: 72). It was distributed in six countries, including the U.S., where it grossed a very modest US\$60 000. It is now out on DVD and Blue-Ray and also available to stream on Netflix Mexico.

Plot

The plot of *Güeros* centers on its main character, nicknamed Sombra (Spanish for shadow), who is a student at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in Mexico City, which is in the middle of a student strike in reaction to the government's plans to begin charging tuition. He lives with fellow student Santos and is visited by his younger brother, Tomás, sent to him by their mother from the coastal state of Veracruz, because of bad behavior. Sombra is in love with Ana, an upper-class student who is very involved in the strike and has a radio program in the striking students' radio station.

Tomás finds Sombra and Santos in a kind of paralysis: they are supposed to be writing their dissertations, but they are not doing it; they never leave their apartment, so they have not paid their electricity bills and are forced to steal electricity from their neighbors; they support the strike, but do not attend the student demonstrations. This inactivity is wreaking havoc on Sombra, who is beginning to suffer from

¹² Not a high number, considering that there are more than 100 cities in Mexico with populations of 100 000 or more.

panic attacks. All of this changes when they are forced to flee their apartment because the neighbor catches them stealing his electricity. From this point on, the film becomes a road movie, with Sombra, Santos, Tomás, and eventually Ana embarking on a quest to find Epigmenio Cruz, an obscure rock and roll figure from the 1960s who Tomás listens to obsessively, as his father did before him. Epigmenio is dying alone from cirrhosis of the liver in a small hospital, but, they claim he could have changed Mexican rock and roll forever. Their quest to find him takes them on a tour of Mexico City that passes through a lower class neighborhood, where they have a potentially dangerous encounter; a student assembly at the university, where Ana joins them; an upscale party populated by the very hip community of artists and intellectuals; the neighboring town of Texcoco, where they finally find and talk to Epigmenio Cruz; and finally, back to Mexico City, where they find themselves in the middle of a student protest.

Their encounter with Epigmenio is the climax of the film. After Epigmenio angrily refuses to autograph Tomás's audio cassette, Sombra explains who they are and why they have come looking for him, an introspective speech that reveals the healing effects that the road trip has had on him; he now appears ready to move again. Later, in the car, he and Ana talk about the prejudices that have kept them from getting together and finally kiss. Back in Mexico City, they find themselves in the middle of a student demonstration. Ana immediately gets out of the car and joins it; after some hesitation, Sombra does too.

Why Güeros?

Güeros is not a typical neoliberal film; it does not fit neatly into any of the categories outlined above, so it will not serve as one more illustration of them. This is not to say that it has managed to escape neoliberalism. It is a neoliberal film in many ways: it clearly targets a sophisticated middle- and upper-class audience; it is crafted as an *auteur* film featuring black and white cinematography reminiscent in style of the French New Wave; it played in 15 international film festivals before opening in Mexico; it is set in Mexico City; its protagonists are middle-class and educated; it is a comedy with a light tone, and a romance is in the middle of its plot.

What is interesting about *Güeros* is that it is a neoliberal film that is aware of its own condition and struggling to transcend it. This struggle is manifested in two main ways. First, its plot attempts a criticism of neoliberal policy and its effects on Mexican society. Its focus on the state of mind of its protagonists—rather than on the actual political struggle—serves to illustrate the all-important ideological dimension of neoliberalism. Secondly, through a series of self-referential episodes, the film

seeks to address the state of the Mexican film industry, its recent neoliberal malaise, and its own place within it. I will try to unpack these two manifestations in Sections 4 and 5, respectively.

LOOKING FOR EPIGMENIO CRUZ: FROM THE 1960S POLITICAL REBELLION TO THE 1990S POLITICAL PARALYSIS

The central topic of *Güeros* is political agency, and, more specifically, political agency in Mexico in the time of neoliberalism. The plot is set against the student strike, but the film's real focus is not on the political struggle, but on the students' state of mind. That is to say, it is not about the fight against neoliberalism as policy –an outside entity– but against neoliberalism as ideology, the enemy within, existing in the mind of each member of a society that has been living under it for so long.

Collectively, the film portrays in-fighting and disagreements among the students. These range from divergences about the goals of the strike –while some want to concentrate on very specific demands regarding the university, others want to turn it into a broader social movement– to divisions rooted in class and gender –when Ana gives a speech at the students assembly, she is subjected to shouts of “shut up you classist bitch!” and “striptease!” But the main focus is on Sombra and Santos, who seem to have internalized these collective divisions and find themselves paralyzed in many ways: politically, despite their support for the strike –Sombra shudders at Tomás's suggestion that they are scabs– they do not attend the student protests; in Sombra's words, they are “on strike from the strike.” Sentimentally, Sombra is in love with Ana, but does nothing about it; academically, they are supposed to be writing their dissertations, but instead we watch as Sombra steadily presses the “delete” key on his dissertation file; and physically, they never leave their apartment, to the point that their electricity has been cut due to non-payment. They sit around, trying –and failing– to learn to do magic tricks and watching *Big Brother* on TV. Santos tries to scrape the fungi off the soles of his feet, and even has a Bartleby moment, when asked by Tomás why he doesn't just change universities, he replies, “I'd prefer not to.” Sombra is doing even worse; all this stasis is having an effect on him, as he has frequent panic attacks, for which he is prescribed –in true neoliberal fashion– a vacation: “Go to the beach with your girlfriend.” Escape, don't engage.

The whole country appears to be feeling the debilitating effects of neoliberalism. In Veracruz, Tomás's mother has to work as a seamstress –presumably sewing clothing that will end up being exported to the U.S.–, so she has no time to watch him; the last straw of his bad behavior is when he tosses water-filled balloons at a

mother and baby from the roof of his house. In Texcoco, a different group of kids emulate this behavior by tossing bricks from a bridge; as in Tomás's case, their parents are nowhere to be found. All around, the family appears to have disintegrated –Ana cannot talk to her parents, and Sombra only talks to his mother when he needs money–, and no other social structure is there to pick up the pieces; the state is nowhere to be found and everyone is left to his or her own devices. The only presence of a state official is a cop who signals at Sombra and Santos to stop. But cops are not to be trusted, and as they try to get away from him, a wrong turn of the wheel takes them into a bad neighborhood where the unknown awaits –one of the consequences of marginalization and social fragmentation. Later, Tomás meets a lone migrant from Central America who expresses his gratitude at the opportunities that Mexico has afforded him: cross a border, become a different part of the chain of production; the essence of neoliberalism.

A clue to the roots of Sombra and Santos's paralysis is given to us via a recurring piece of idle conversation. It is on the topic of breakfast: after embarking on a brief catalogue of the different types of breakfast there are –English, Mexican, student breakfast– they come to “continental breakfast,” which sparks some anger in Santos, who gripes, “What the fuck are they talking about? What continent? It's like saying that it's the breakfast of people over there. Who are they over there? And who are we here?” Continental breakfast is a product of capitalism and urbanization. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as people moved into cities and took jobs that required less physical stamina, the full, calorie-filled breakfast was replaced by a light continental breakfast. It is unclear if the film is making symbolic use of this somewhat obscure origin, but even if it is not, their annoyed reaction still remains at being subjected to a classification that comes from outside and makes little sense. Similar complaints appear again in the context of the strike, when their road trip accidentally takes them to the university and they are not allowed into the assembly until a friend vouches for them and lets them in; a discussion ensues about the exclusivity of the strike, and how certain groups seem to think they own it. Sombra and Santos's malaise seems to spring from a sense of social fragmentation and the ensuing impossibility of creating a truly collective movement, rendering any possible social activism ineffectual. This theme is emphasized by the film's title. Literally translated, the term “*güero*” means “blonde,” but it is widely used to refer to people of higher social class, regardless of their hair and skin color. That is why Santos gets angry when a security guard at a party calls them “*güeros*,” even though only Tomás has light hair, and Sombra is in fact very dark skinned.

This stagnant situation is finally alleviated by two events. First, Tomás's arrival from Veracruz. He represents a younger, more active Sombra. He still listens to Epigmenio

Cruz, like Sombra and their father used to, an indication that Sombra's paralysis is not a character trait, but the result of a process that has slowly eaten away at his true idealistic self. Tomás is constantly pressuring Sombra and Santos to leave the apartment, particularly when he finds out that Epigmenio is dying alone in a hospital and wants to go seek him out. They still will not budge, and it is not until the second mobilizing event—their neighbor coming after them after realizing they were stealing electricity from him—that they are finally forced to leave. It is then that the film changes from stasis to road trip; even the camera is visibly shaken from its tripod and put in motion.

The road trip is a quest to find Epigmenio. He represents the 1960s and the 1968 student movement, and he acts in the film as both a symbol of political agency—the 1968 and the Tlatelolco massacre are still the main reference point when it comes to social protest in Mexico—and a question regarding the relationship between the 1999 strike and the 1968 movement. We never get to hear Epigmenio's music. They only listen to it on an old Walkman, and all we hear is the grind of the gears as they rotate the cassette tape. He remains idealized, just as 1968 has. No actual music could have lived up to the obscure figure who "could have changed Mexican rock and roll forever" and who, "they say, made Bob Dylan cry." But while the search for him symbolizes their own search for political agency, there is an ironic element in their relationship to the 1968 movement. While the 1968 protesters demanded more freedom from an oppressive government, their 1999 counterparts were advocating for the exact opposite, that is, for the government to remain involved in keeping education free and public. As noted above, the 1960s youth movement's individualistic spirit played into the hands of neoliberalism, and, ironically, today's paralysis might be, in some small part, the result of yesterday's rebellion.

In the end, as often happens—and has perhaps become commonplace—, what matters is not the destination, but the road. By the time they find Epigmenio in a lonely Texcoco saloon, their experiences—and just the act of moving—seem to have had a healing effect on Sombra. Predictably, Epigmenio is a complete disappointment, but he provides an opportunity for Sombra to show us how much he has managed to understand. After Tomás (young Sombra) is dismissed by Epigmenio, Sombra takes charge, with a determination that we have not seen before, as he gives the climactic speech of the film. He introduces himself as Federico, using his real name instead of his shadowy nickname, and tells him that they have come because for the last six months he has not been able to sleep or to leave his apartment. They used to listen to his music with their father, but back then he did not understand his lyrics; now he does. He understands what his father understood, "that in life you'll run into a bunch of assholes who don't understand anything, that can't see beyond

the surfaces . . . but that as long as you have that, as long as you can see beyond the surface, then no one can take that away from you, that feeling.” His speech continues, saying that his father used to say that if the world is a train station, poets are not the ones coming and going, but the ones who stay behind watching the trains leave, and that he, Epigmenio, is one of those poets who watches the trains leave. After that he slides over his cassette for him to sign, but Epigmenio does not react; they think he might be dead, but he is only sleeping.

In light of this speech, we may ask, what is it exactly that Sombra has come to understand? What is it that turned him from a shadow of himself back into Federico? Given the run-up to the encounter, we would think that, whatever it is, it would be the film’s proposed solution to the political paralysis afflicting Mexican society, and an answer to the question regarding the relationship of today’s political activism with the activism of 1968. But Sombra’s speech sounds a lot more poetic than political. It is more about witnessing than doing, about protecting an inner part of ourselves from what is going on outside.

So, in the end, is *Güeros* just another neoliberal conservative film that prompts us into retreating from collective action and into personal growth? A fatalistic exhortation to stay at the train station and poetically and passively observe as the country and the world go down the drain? It certainly is not a revolutionary film pointing the way toward a specific social movement, but I would like to think that it is not conservative either, just very modest –perhaps justifiably so– in its progressive political ambitions. The way I see it, despite appearances to the contrary, Sombra’s speech is political. It is aimed at those who do recognize the tragic consequences of neoliberalism, and it is an exhortation not to despair; or to despair, but not fall into paralysis because no solution seems to be in sight. So, if *Güeros* is not a revolutionary film, it at least defends the value of witnessing; if it is not a recipe for political revolution, at least it is an exhortation to not give up completely. Perhaps this answer had already been given to us, much earlier, when Sombra asks Tomás why they should go and look for Epigmenio, to which he replied, “Because no one else will.” The end of the film seems to validate this reading. In the car ride back to Mexico City, Sombra and Ana start to kiss, a personal reward for Sombra’s re-activation; but when they suddenly find themselves in the middle of a student protest, Ana gets out of the car and joins it without hesitation or even a pause for Sombra to join her. Sombra hesitates, but finally joins the march as well. The message is clear, romantic love was never the ultimate goal of Sombra’s journey; regaining his political mobility was.

GÜEROS AS A META-CINEMATIC COMMENTARY ON THE MEXICAN FILM INDUSTRY

As I mentioned above, *Güeros* engages neoliberalism in two ways. The first is by representing its paralyzing effects on political agency; and the second, to which I now turn, is through a series of self-referential episodes that aim at commenting on the current state of Mexican film industry and on *Güeros*'s own place within it. In what follows, I will try to show that this self-referentiality is not gratuitous, but is closely linked to *Güeros*'s political ambitions. A film that wants to address social fragmentation but is only going to be watched by one of those fragments has a basic problem. *Güeros* is –as it had to be in order to exist– a film aimed at the social elites, and so, in a certain way, it is part of the problem. As such, it faced the need to talk about itself, about the audience watching it, and about the film industry that it is part of. This is achieved partly through a couple of self-referential episodes, and partly through a constant interplay with some of the genres that have become typical of neoliberal Mexican cinema.

This interplay begins in the very first scene. The first character to appear on camera is a hysterical woman, pleading with her baby to stop crying. As the phone keeps ringing, she is frantically putting clothes inside a suitcase and getting ready to leave. As she hits the street, we can see she has a black eye. But, as we –the audience– start to get ready for what seems to be an intense domestic-violence melodrama, a water-filled balloon falls from the sky and hits the baby right on the head. The point of view of the camera then switches, and we watch from above as Tomás is dismayed by having hit the baby. We then follow Tomás as he tries to get away, and the mother and baby are never heard from again in the film, except for a brief moment, when Sombra asks him what happened to the baby, to which he dismissingly replies, “He’s fine.”

With this switch, the film tells us, right from the beginning, that there is something it doesn’t want to be. By doing so, it manages two things: first, to insert itself as a film into the universe of topics that it wants to address, and second, it launches what will be a constant dialogue with film genres, through which it will manage to talk about the Mexican film industry and its recent vices. In this first episode of this dialogue, it is not important what exactly it is that it doesn’t want to be –domestic violence melodramas are not the most typical of recent Mexican films–; what matters is the typicality of the situation portrayed: the crying baby, the battered mother, the hysteria of the situation accentuated by the ringing phone. This typicality seems formulaic, just as Mexican cinema –and neoliberal cinema in general– has become.

A second episode of this interplay deals with the citizenship of fear, mentioned above. It begins when, during their road trip, they take a wrong turn and quickly end up in a bad neighborhood. When they come to a dead end and want to back up, a group of lower-class youngsters who had been playing football on the street block their way. Sombra immediately mutters, “Nooo,” in a fatalistic tone of voice that conveys that this was to be expected –a typical situation. But what ensues is not really typical. One of the youngsters “offers” to help them find the main road if they give him a lift, but before they have a chance to answer he unlocks the door and gets in the car. Throughout the ride, the camera focuses closely on Sombra’s nervous face, with the youngster blurred in the background. In a sardonic tone of voice, the youngster asks Tomás: “What is it *giierito* [diminutive for *giiero*], are you really afraid of me?” and laughs. He then tells them that his friends were going to kill them, adding, “What do you think about that?” But, despite the veiled violence in his tone, he only asks them to buy a round of beers. As he forces them to drink, he watches somewhat incredulously and giggles, as if surprised by his own power over them. As they finish the first round, and he goes to the store to get the second, Sombra, Santos, and Tomás frantically escape, leaving him behind. Afterwards, Tomás is upset and needs to vomit, so Sombra tries to calm him down by telling him that the youngster was only trying to make friends. When Tomás stares at him in disbelief, Sombra shrugs and says, “Well, maybe.”

The truth is that we are not sure what to make of this whole episode. The lower class youngster obviously was not trying to make friends, but he was not that menacing either; he was quite skinny and had no kind of weapon. The real force at play here was middle-class fear of the lower classes. The film is careful not to interpret the violence encountered, cleverly creating a contrast with the recent sub-genre of films that exploit the politics of fear, thus pointing a finger, once again, at the social fragmentation that is behind these formulaic expressions of fear. A similar effect is achieved by Tomás’s encounter with a migrant from Central America. Tomás –and we with him– listens to his story, but never offers a reply. Another reminder for the film’s audience that Mexico is a very diverse place, and we do not get to experience or understand most of it.

Then there are two explicitly self-referential moments. First, when they go to the university for the student assembly, as they are talking to Oso, one of their fellow students, Santos –or maybe I should say, the actor playing Santos– suddenly asks him, “What do you think about the script of the movie?” We then see the clacker and film crew as he replies, “Frankly I don’t like it, as I’ve told you many times before. It’s just a chase movie, and what I don’t understand is how it is that you guys are the heroes.” Later, at a very posh party full of very hip, pretentious, and affluent young

people, apparently artists, we overhear conversations about film festivals and complaints about how Mexico is viewed abroad. Ana is welcomed by her fellow upper-class people, but Sombra, Santos, and Tomás are ignored and decide to step outside. Once outside, Sombra rants about Mexican cinema: "Fucking Mexican cinema. They grab a bunch of beggars, shoot in black and white, and say they're making art films. And the fucking directors, not satisfied with the humiliation of the Spanish Conquest, now go to the Old World and tell French critics that our country is full of pigs, derelicts, diabetics, sellouts, thieves, frauds, traitors, drunks, and whoremongers with inferiority complexes." Santos replies that Mexico is full of all that, and Sombra agrees, but complains that if they are going to humiliate us, they should do it with their own money and not with public funds. Tomás then asks, "Have you seen the film?", clearly referring to *Güeros* itself.

These two episodes serve the purpose of destroying the illusion created by the film's plot, and getting the audience to think about *Güeros* from outside its fictive world, as a film in itself and a product of the Mexican film industry. Sombra's rant serves as a complaint about an industry seemingly dominated by rich hipsters who use Mexico as a commodity to be packaged and sold to European audiences –in other words, about neo-Mexicanism. But the rant is not meant to put *Güeros* above the fray; on the contrary, the reference to shooting in black and white, as *Güeros* is, is there to make sure it is included as a film that uses public funds and premieres at international film festivals.¹³ Moreover, Oso's stated displeasure with the script, and particularly with its choice of heroes, points to the unfairness of an industry that invariably sanctions the middle class as the privileged witnesses of our times, even when they are represented by a couple of lazy youngsters who steal electricity from their neighbors and a mischievous balloon thrower.

But more important than putting down the film industry –or the film itself as part of it– is what the mere presence of these references –hopefully– achieves: getting the audience to think of itself as part of the problem, maybe even as its root. Sombra, Santos, Tomás, and Ana are very likeable characters with whom the audience is meant to identify, and despite the contrast established with the hipsters at the posh party, they are repeatedly –to their dismay– called "*güeros*." On one occasion, when a security guard (a member of the lower class) calls them "*güeros*," Santos gets agitated and complains to him about this designation, pointing at Sombra, who is very dark skinned, and asks him if he is a *güero*. Very matter-of-factly, the guard answers, "Yes, he is." And he is right; socially and culturally speaking, if we are inside a cinema or projected on the screen, we all are; and, as long as that is the case,

¹³ Of course, it could be argued that precisely by acknowledging this, *Güeros* is claiming to be above the fray, but that is another issue.

neoliberalism will succeed in its reduction of cinema to one more consumer good, utterly incapable of articulating any kind of cultural expression that could seriously challenge it.

CONCLUSIONS

More than just a set of policies, neoliberalism is an ideology that affects the subjectivity of those living under it. After almost 40 years of neoliberal hegemony, a growing minority has begun to realize that its market “equilibriums” are not really optimal for the majority of the people. Its conflation of citizen and consumer has fragmented society and done away with any kind of collective ethos, leaving people in a state of extreme precariousness and political isolation. And yet, reversing course away from neoliberalism is a difficult proposition, as neoliberal ideology has made any alternative hard to even imagine.

The case of the Mexican film industry is a prime example of this. From 1988 to 1994, it underwent a complete overhaul to comply with NAFTA’s neoliberal dictums. Formerly state owned and operated, it underwent a process of privatization and deregulation that saw its ticket prices double, its cinemas gentrify, and its audiences shift from the lower to the upper classes, with a content shift to match. The effective exclusion of 72 percent of the Mexican people from its cinemas is one more element contributing to the further stratification of society, by extending the marginalization of the lower classes from the economic realm to the cultural and political. And yet, despite some discordant voices, the material conditions of the industry prevent any real change, as production and exhibition of films hinges upon them being financially approved by the market.

Güeros is a good illustration of this situation. Anti-neoliberal in spirit, it had no choice but to conform to the neoliberal market and adopt its strategies. Forced to elaborate its critique from within a neoliberal shell, the result is an interesting paradox that uses self-reference to comment on the Mexican film industry and on itself, in an attempt to recognize its own limits as a neoliberal film and to point the finger at the deficiencies of the film industry. Definitely not a revolutionary film, *Güeros* is, at best, a sign of a growing consciousness about the ill effects of neoliberalism on Mexican society and its film industry, and at worst, an illustration of the very effective limits that neoliberalism and its free market imposes on any kind of expression of dissension.

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