

**Now Playing:
Redefining Representations of Masculinity
and Mexican Identity
in *Sólo con tu Pareja* (1991)**

Angélica I. Becerra

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Anna Sandoval
Department of Chicano/Latino Studies

Abstract

There is a lack of scholarship that applies Masculinity, Intersectionality and Queer theory within Chicana/o Latina/o film studies. Secondly, there has also been a lack of attention and insufficient understanding of the period of Mexican cinema known as *El Nuevo Cine Mexicano* (The New Mexican Cinema). This period of cinema is crucial in redefining and establishing new ways of looking at Mexican national identity, also known as *Mexicanidad*. This is evidenced specifically by one of several productions within this time period that redefined cultural representation of *Mexicanidad*: Alfonso Cuarón's debut feature *Sólo con tu Pareja* (1991). Through a close reading of the film, analyses of the economic and political climate of Mexico, film reviews and newspaper articles, I demonstrate how Cuarón's directorial debut renegotiates Mexican cultural identity. My research seeks to contribute further the scholarship that implements the lenses of Masculinity, Intersectionality and Queer theory within Chicana/o Latina/o studies, Mexican film, Gender, and Sexuality studies, Cultural studies and Queer studies.

Introduction

In their critical anthology "Mexico's Cinema: A Century of Film and Filmmakers," editors Joanne Hershfield and David R. Maciel attempt to address the lack of English-language scholarship on Mexico's most treasured and intimate art: its cinema. Although a long tradition of film analysis exists within the realm of universities and other commercial spaces in Mexico,

as evidenced by *El Centro de Estudios Cinematográficos* and *Filmoteca* of the *Universidad Autónoma de México* (UNAM), the *Cineteca Nacional*, as well as established film review journals and the work of independent film scholars, there is presently a division in Mexico's film scholarship sphere. A conflict exists between the two principal schools of thought, one which subscribes to the perspectives of Emilio García Riera, and the other, which is modeled after the philosophies of Jorge Ayala Blanco. One favors García Riera's enthusiastic views for state-produced cinema, and thus receives financial and other support from the Mexican government and other established, official institutions. Followers of Ayala Blanco's views favor student-produced and independent cinema, especially that which is produced out of the UNAM. However, these scholars lack the affiliation and financial support of the State. This split in perspectives within the film criticism universe has led to a long and heated rivalry that in present day breeds dissent between both film criticism parties and has thus created a bipartisan climate. This has inflicted severe damage to the long tradition of film scholarship in Mexico.

The body of Mexican film scholarship outside of Mexico shares a similar troubled trajectory. The amount of English-language critical analysis on Mexican cinema, although steadily rising, is insufficient. Currently, there exists one book length survey, Carl J. Mora's third edition of *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896-2004* (2005), which briefly touches upon the emergence of *El Nuevo Cine Mexicano* (The New Mexican Cinema) of which the film *Sólo con tu Pareja* (1991) is a clear example. Other texts that mention this period of Mexican cinema (albeit briefly) are the works *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* by Rosa Linda Fregoso, and the only official translation of the anthology *Mexican Cinema*, edited by Paulo Antonio Paranaguá.

El Nuevo Cine Mexicano, which spans from 1990 to the present, marks a shift in representations and revitalizes Mexico's cinema, delighting audiences in domestic and international markets. However, such a cinema is overshadowed by the academic nostalgia for Mexico's "Golden Age" and its luminaries: María Félix, Pedro Infante and others. In contrast to

the richly supported and celebrated directors and stars of the Golden Age, *El Nuevo Cine Mexicano* was a period of cinema that saw the rising of young, innovative directors and filmmakers who lacked the established reputations and financial backing of the state in the early 1990s. My analysis and research focuses on one such figure, Alfonso Cuarón, whose debut film *Sólo con tu Pareja* (1991) offered Mexico and the world a new reality, a new masculinity.

On the Cusp of NAFTA and Globalization: Early 90s Mexico

In his scholarly article “Ten Reasons to Love or Hate Mexican Cinema,” Paulo Antonio Paranaguá notes that in the year 1990 more than half of Mexico’s population resided within urban spaces. With this growing population, and free trade negotiations between the United States and Mexico (which would later evolve into the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA]), the nation awaited major economic and political change. Paranaguá describes the highly disputed presidential election of 1988, two years prior to these negotiations with the United States: “After an electoral process described by the newspaper *El Universal* as the ‘largest electoral fraud in history’, Salinas is named the winner by the Federal Chamber of Deputies” (56). After such a controversial election, the administration of Salinas de Gortari was not well received by the Mexican people, especially the intellectual circles in which many of the nation’s filmmakers belonged. Seeking approval from the intellectual population, Salinas sought to resume the long tradition of state support for cinema in an effort to legitimize his administration. Thus, he ushered the creation of the *Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes*, which placed the main source of financial support for filmmakers, the *Instituto Mexicano de la Cinematografía* (IMCINE), under its charge. However, the support of Salinas was short-lived; by the year 1991, the amount of film production in Mexico decreased to a dismal amount—only 34 features were produced. The amount of film production in Mexico had not reached such low numbers since the early 1930s.

Furthermore, the establishment of NAFTA and the imminent shadow of globalization reflected itself in the privatization of the film industry. The once state-controlled circuit for exhibition of

film was privatized along with television channels, eliminating national public television in 1992. The final blow to the struggling film industry came with the sale of the largest and most prestigious studio in Mexico, Churubusco Studios, in which the majority of Golden Age cinema was filmed. In the year 1993 there were 274 films released, yet only 47 were Mexican productions. Thus, with the involvement of the United States and the increasing debt and corruption under the Salinas de Gortari administration, the film industry suffered a fatal blow. For Mexico, the early 1990s was a period in which the screens were filled with U.S. made films while up-and-coming directors lacked state support and audiences.

***Sólo con tu Pareja* (1991)**

Despite the fact that the 1990s was a lackluster period for Mexico's cinema, a few notable productions during the time include, *Como Agua para Chocolate* (1991) (Like Water for Chocolate), *La Tarea* (1991) and *Cronos* (1993). With state funding becoming increasingly difficult to attain and government support for non-commercial film quickly banishing, the 1991 debut film of wonder kid TV director Alfonso Cuarón almost didn't happen. When he and his brother Carlos brought their script to IMCINE, the institute had already picked the productions that would be funded for that year. However, a last minute cancellation led *Sólo con tu Pareja* (translated to "Love in the Time of Hysteria" to English-speaking markets) to occupy the last slot on the coveted list of funded projects (Mora, 215). Cuarón's *opera prima* can be digested as a comedy, a drama and a sociopolitical portrait of Mexico City at the brink of modernity all at once.

The plot centers on advertising copy editor Tomás Tomás (Daniel Giménez Cacho), a compulsive and adventurous womanizer whose seductive and manipulative ways lead a scorned lover, nurse Sylvia Silva (Dobrina Liubomirova), to play a cruel practical joke and falsify his HIV/AIDS exam results. Prior to receiving the devastating news of a positive test, Tomás Tomás had already focused his attention on flight attendant and neighbor Clarisa (Claudia Ramírez) with whom he fell in love the same night he was attempting to have sex with two women in

different apartments (nurse Silva and his boss Gloria). Cuarón's knack for framing the political and social realities of his characters through the emotional struggles they face is revealed in Tomás Tomás's journey. After hearing his false AIDS diagnosis, Tomás Tomás plans to commit suicide using a microwave. When this attempt fails, he encounters his neighbor Clarisa, whose pilot fiancé has cheated on her with another attendant, leading her to consider suicide as well. Both agree to jump from Mexico City's highest building, the twentieth floor of the Latin American Tower, and at once, in a rapid comic sequence, Tomás Tomás's best friend and doctor Mateo, his wife Teresa, the nurse Sylvia Silva, Clarisa's ex-fiancé and even two Japanese doctors rush to tell Tomás Tomás the truth about his false diagnosis and convince both him and Clarisa not to jump. Cuarón's dialogue and use of Mozart's symphonies to frame the soundtrack balances the highly comical dialogue and dark subject matter of the film. The elements of music, dialogue and plot development combine to provide the foundation needed to tell a story with a satirical edge and rich character development.

Upon finishing production, however, the distributors found the film too controversial and refused to release it. Thus, the film was shelved (kept from release) until 1991, and screened in limited theatres in Mexico as well as in festival venues internationally, such as the Toronto Film Festival and the Chicago International Film Festival in 1991 and 1992, respectively. Most important to note, however, is the film's wild success in Mexico; it was embraced both by the burgeoning middle class audiences who had given up on attending state cinema due to the flood of *ficheras*¹ and *sexycomedias*² prior to the *Nuevo Cine Mexicano* and the international film festival critics, who recognized Cuarón's fresh take on Mexican cinema. In the journal *Dicine*, founded by legendary film scholar Emilio García Riera, critic Jose Jorge Martinez raved about Cuarón's debut: "*Cuarón rompe con la tradicion y posa su ojo en personajes que hacen suya la ciudad de Mexico, en vez de vivir de sus sobras y en sus inframundos [sic].*" [Cuarón breaks tradition and poses his eye on characters that make Mexico City theirs, instead of living from its scraps and within its netherworlds.]³ Martinez (11).

To conclude its run of success in Mexico, *Sólo con tu Pareja* (1991) obtained four nominations for the prestigious “Mexican Oscar”, the Ariel; the film was nominated for four Silver Ariels: Best Cinematography, Best First Work, Best Screenplay and finally Best Original Story, of which it was the winner. With the film’s critical acclaim steadily rising after it had navigated Mexico and the international film festival circuit, it reached the climax of its success when it was selected to screen at the Cannes International Film Festival in May of 2000. Due in part to the international success of Cuarón’s fourth film, *Y tu Mamá También* (2005), and the screening at Cannes, Cuarón was recognized as one of the most sought after Mexican directors,. Despite this distinction, doors opened for Cuarón not in his homeland but abroad, in Hollywood specifically.

After fifteen years of limited screenings and no DVD release or distribution, in 2006 the Mexican director’s *opera prima* was released and distributed as part of the Criterion Collection⁴ on DVD format as well as in a limited theatre release within the U.S., finally bringing *Sólo con tu Pareja* (1991) to the international stage.

Meet Me at the Intersection of Gender, Class and Sexuality

The fact that the film produced an increase in Mexico’s ticket sales upon its limited release in 1991 is not only a sign of commercial success, but also a consequence of the appearance of the middle class, within the theatre and on its screens. *Sólo con tu Pareja* (1991) provided a representation of identity as complex as its audience. Within my analysis, I will focus on three identity markers: Gender, Class and Sexuality. Furthermore, I will examine how they are constantly (re)negotiated through the theoretical frameworks of Intersectionality and Queer theory, as interpreted by Alexander Doty. In her article titled “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” Linda McCall contends that intersectionality is defined as a methodology of studying "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relationships and subject formations" (1771). Focusing on the characters of Tomás Tomás and the nurse Sylvia Silva, I contend that their social constructions of gender are not only fluid but are (re)negotiated

within the film and through their alternative representations. As Doty contends, “Queer can now point to things that destabilize existing categories—It is something non-straight or non-normatively straight” (206). Such a (re)negotiation for both characters can be seen as inherently Queer in the actions of Sylvia Silva’s character. Her act of intentionally tampering with Tomás Tomás’s AIDS test results represents a signifier of masculinity due to its aggressive nature and the exercise of sexual agency, qualities that are generally ascribed to men within society. In the film’s comedic sequence where Tomás Tomás travels on a ledge between his apartment (where Sylvia is waiting to have sex with him) and his friend Mateo’s apartment (where his boss Gloria is also waiting to have sex), we see a series of events that lead to a lack of sexual performance from Tomás, and the source of Sylvia’s disappointment. Subsequently, when Sylvia learns of Tomás Tomás’s attempt to sleep with both women on the same night, she finds the perfect opportunity to deliver a devastating blow to his sexual ego: she falsifies his HIV/AIDS test results.

Prior representations of women in Mexican cinema depicted submissive and enduring figures, whose characters portrayed a suffering that was expected and hardly problematized. The character of Sylvia, whose masculinity is emphasized, provides a complex and fluid identity for women; her decision is not only informed by Tomás Tomás’s betrayal, but by her sense of self as a sexual being. She maintains her strength even in the face of betrayal and does not display characteristics of emotional weakness. On the other hand, Tomás Tomás’s reaction to his false AIDS diagnosis is characterized by crying, depression, and, finally, the resolution to commit suicide. These actions are socially constructed as feminine and are characteristics attributed to women within society.

This alternative representation of a masculinity that allowed for femininity to reside within the same character allowed for a fluid construction of gender. In the documentary “*Making Sólo con tu Pareja*,” the actor Daniel Giménez Cacho (Tomás Tomás) states, “I don’t think there’s anything specifically Mexican about this character. One of its virtues was the fact that it stepped outside the clichés and archetypes of the day.”⁵ What

differentiates Tomás Tomás from other Mexican representations of masculinity in cinema is his ability to express weakness openly throughout the film. By representing a reality in which masculinity and femininity do not subscribe to the heteronormative standards set by society, the characters, and most importantly, the film itself, fall under Doty's theorizing of Queer: "Queerness in the way this book uses it, is a quality related to any expression that can be marked as contra-, non-, or anti-straight" (15). Going beyond an array of binaries such as male/female or masculine/feminine, the film exemplifies the fluidity between each of these binaries that inform our identities. Ultimately, Queerness suggests that there is a space beyond the binaries of gender, that it is a state of mind and place rooted in fluidity and constant change. As the film poignantly suggests, it is a place where a heterosexual Don Juan can be completely comfortable crying and a nurse has no problem seeking sex and revenge.

Furthermore, the characters' status as working professionals (Tomás as an advertising copy editor and Silva as a nurse) establishes them as part of an urban middle class. Although the occupation of nurse is a highly gendered position, meaning that it is attached to and generally associated with women, the ultimate irony is that as a nurse, Sylvia fails to conduct her primary purpose, which is to provide aid. Instead, she uses her position for revenge, and fails to heal or aid, both literally and figuratively. In contrast, Tomás Tomás finds freedom in his job as a freelance copy editor, and uses his ability to manipulate words as a mechanism to attract the opposite sex. Both characters are citizens in a society in which they are able to enjoy Mexico City and navigate its urban spaces without experiencing severe poverty or superior affluence. They enjoy the nightlife, sexualize the city's famous statue, the "*Angel de la Independencia*," and rush through twenty flights of stairs within the Latin American Tower, all with a comedic flair that is characteristic of Cuarón's direction.

Finally, the sexual agency within the film of both male and female characters provides an alternative representation of sexuality within Mexican film. The amount of sexual content is innovative and opens the conversation of sex early on within the

film. From its opening scene, where Tomás Tomás is having sex with an unknown woman, to the following sequence where Tomás Tomás rushes down the stairs of his apartment building to pick up the daily newspaper, in which he is naked except for his shoes. By placing the male protagonist as a sexual object, as opposed to representations in which generally the female occupied this role, Cuarón provides the viewer with an alternative representation of masculinity. Furthermore, the engagement in sexual behaviors by the characters Sylvia Silva, Clarisa and Gloria depict an autonomous condition. Not only are the women equally capable of engaging in sex and the performance of masculinity and femininity, they are exercising sexual agency. Furthermore, the fact that the film addresses topics previously considered “taboo” within Mexican culture (such as sexual habits of men and women, HIV/AIDS and suicide) also contributes to its innovative representations of sexuality.

During the time of the film’s production, Mexico and the world experienced the devastating effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In Mexico as well as the United States, HIV/AIDS was perceived by society as a homosexual disease and a source of homophobia and panic. Cuarón’s choice to depict the ultimate “playboy” or promiscuous heterosexual male as a potential carrier of the disease was a conscientious choice to bring attention to the fact that HIV/AIDS did not just affect the homosexual community. Through the use of social satire and playful comedy, *Sólo con tu Pareja* manages to provide representations of Gender, Class and Sexuality that intersect and interact with one another constantly. With its ability to find humor in the dark realities and constraints of a patriarchal and heteronormative society in Mexico, *Sólo con tu Pareja* found success in the hearts of critics and the middle class that returned to the theatres with the film’s release.

El Nuevo Cine Mexicano

However, the state did not give its immediate support after the release of the critically acclaimed and commercially successful *Sólo con tu Pareja*. Instead, the film caught the attention of foreign markets such as Hollywood where Cuarón’s debut was

released as “Love in the Time of Hysteria” and brought project proposals in the United States for Cuarón and others. Filmmakers such as Alejandro Gonzales Inarritu with his film *Amores Perros* (2000), Guillermo del Toro, with his debut feature *Cronos* (1993) and later with *The Devil’s Backbone* (2001), and of course Alfonso Cuarón with *A Little Princess* (1995) and *Y tu Mama También* (2005), enjoyed attention and success internationally, yet were neglected nationally. Furthermore, *El Nuevo Cine Mexicano* has not been fully embraced by commercially minded producers and institutions in Mexico, and although some progress has been made politically and socially over the past two decades, film is still poorly supported in Mexico today.

Following his election, current president Felipe Calderon’s agenda has been focused on increasing profit from commerce and globalization, not increasing film production and distribution. The support of international distributors has been slow and scarce for Mexican film. Much like the film’s ambiguous closing scene, where Tomás Tomás purchases condoms from a convenience counter at the airport, and then follows two women who are clearly not his beloved Clarisa, we are left to wonder if Tomás Tomás has changed after his traumatic experience. What this closing scene reveals about the human condition and the humanity of repeating past faults offers a deep insight into the relationship between Mexico’s filmmakers and the state. Such a relationship retains an ambiguous, complex and uncertain nature today. With a struggling economy, and most of its acclaimed directors dissuaded from working within Mexico due to its highly bureaucratic system, producing film from abroad has become a necessary reality for Cuarón and his generation, making this relationship truly a love in the time of hysteria.

Endnotes

¹ A subgenre of Mexican cinema from the 1970s in which the main characters were ‘ficheras’ or women that worked as exotic dancers in clubs and dance venues. Themes of prostitution were common within *fichera* films.

² A genre of Mexican cinema in which the plots centered around drug trafficking and involved elements of comedy as well as excessive nudity.

³ My translation.

⁴ The Criterion Collection is a company based in New York that is dedicated to gathering the greatest films from around the world and publishing them in editions of the highest technical quality with supplemental features that enhance the appreciation of the art of film.

⁵ My translation. Original quote without translation: “No creo que este personaje tenga algo tan típicamente mexicano, y creo que esa fue una de sus virtudes. Salirse un poco de los clichés y arquetipos que había en ese momento”

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