

## Introduction

# Tastemakers and Tastemaking

### *Questions of Taste, Violence, and Gender*

Taste is a nebulous word. Without a qualifier it is meaningless, and with the standard qualifiers of good or bad, it is an unstable and shifting signifier. Premised on its instability through looking at those who make film and television and create value and the systems in which they operate, *Tastemakers and Tastemaking: Mexico and Curated Screen Violence* examines how taste retains its potency. Tastemakers and tastemaking are terms that draw on a long theoretical trajectory on taste, and simultaneously signal toward a curatorial agency and the cultural context within which tastemakers and tastemaking operate. Professional curatorial practices are not a precondition of tastemaking. Instead, I use the term *tastemakers* to encompass a wide range of influential or indicative individuals who are both determining and reflective of wider patterns and trends.

Questions of taste and value are attached to works determining their inclusion on syllabi, their success in the marketplace, and their duration through critical reflection. Within this framing, a high/low dyad persists, setting one against the other as if they lie in stark contrast rather than recognizing a slippage between them and ignoring the power structures that uphold both the object and those who decide its value. To forgo the persistent oppositional binary and signal its failings, *Tastemakers and Tastemaking: Mexico and Curated Screen Violence* considers tastemaking and tastemakers. That is, who decides what is of value and how creatives in film and television produce work that intervenes in questions of taste.

The tastemakers being examined in this book are individuals involved in the creation or selection of film and television works in which gender and violence intersect. Violence has particular salience because it falls outside of the usual considerations of taste as a consequence of being

inherently aberrant. To enact violence is to break with social or legal codes, which has to be justified through specific framing. There are parameters and guidelines to these that fit within national or international codes, but none are concerned with taste. Violence is innately excessive because it exceeds normative behavior and its screening is about provoking an affective response, all of which often indicate bad taste. Nonetheless, screen cultures have participated in the validation of violence, often ascribing it high value, but also interrogating its meanings. This leads to slippages that are not easily mapped and require mixed methodologies to unpack. Violence is enacted upon and by gendered bodies; therefore, to comprehend violence it is important to reflect on the ways the gender of the agent or victim can modify or amplify the violent act and how it is read. I propose tastemaking and tastemakers as a productive way of looking at gender and violence, by looking at who and what informs taste through the patterns and anomalies that are evidenced through the case studies.

Tastemakers are not merely gatekeepers, they are also engaging with and building upon ideas, histories, and traditions established by others. To operate in such a contested and complex field is to be bound by preceding norms and expectations of what should be valued and how particular media and forms can be appropriately deployed. Tastemaking as a verb encompasses the action of a tastemaker and the consequences of these actions. The case studies in this book reveal the outcome of the tastemakers' decisions and the cultural context they inhabit. *Tastemakers and Tastemaking: Mexico and Curated Screen Violence* explores how curation, prestige cinema, adaptation, and star and celebrity performances are all acts of tastemaking.

### Screen Violence: Reimagining the Past, Understanding the Present

Violence is a centrifugal theme in Mexican cinema and television whose recurrence allows for significant patterns and themes to emerge. Audiovisual violence is not indelibly attached to specific genres or styles, and yet it both disturbs and is an indicator of a rupture with normative behaviors. Tastemaking such disruptive events requires careful selection and an applied knowledge of prior patterns of creativity and an understanding of the signification of the violence within and beyond Mexico. The focus of *Tastemakers and Tastemaking: Mexico and Curated Screen Violence* is on

three key moments that foreground the intersection of violence and its representation: the decadelong commemoration of the Mexican Revolution (1910–20) launched in 2010; the gendered violence that has taken place in northern Mexico since the late 1990s, specifically, the assaults on and murders of women; and the separate, but contiguous, violence linked to the illegal drug trade that escalated in the early 2000s and continues up to the time of writing.

The Mexican Revolution is the foundational narrative of the contemporary state reimagined according to the vagaries of the political period (see O'Malley 1986 and Benjamin 2000). The Revolution as political project originally functioned as a means of uniting a nation traumatized by violent combat and loss. Written using uppercase and imagined through multiple cultural texts including film and television, the Revolution has become more myth than reality, monumentalized, and, repeatedly, commemorated. The multiple versions of the Revolution have been ever evolving, navigating national and cultural shifts, and reimagined in tandem with political changes as oppositional or harmonizing articulations.

While the Revolution continues to inspire creative responses, reflections on the significance of past violence on the present take on different meanings when considered in the light of the more recent violence against women and those living with the consequences of the illegal drug trade. These bring the national and the transnational into question. Such violence is not unique to Mexico, although it has been heightened because of how the transnational illegal drug trade has dominated economic and political life in the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries. Therefore, to portray Mexico's problems requires a transnational perspective and involves transnational interests. To tell these stories of violence requires ethical tastemakers aware of the cultural landscape at a national and transnational level. But it often involves tastemakers who draw on a long history of missteps and false moves.

Irrespective of where it takes place, violence brings into relief how aesthetics can be a weak measure of value. Violence is a serious subject that presupposes clear demarcations of what is tolerable. Yet what is acceptable and deemed significant in its representation is ever evolving. Assessing violence as aesthetically pleasing is always difficult as it sits uncomfortably within questions of taste. The challenge in representing violence is that it can still fall at the edge of what is "good" taste, and yet representations that fall short of prestige productions can be deemed as diminishing to the experience of violence. "Quality" productions centered on violence

can prove divisive because they can be hyperrealist and deemed excessive; generic representations can fall short of critical approval because they fail to convey realist violence, but they can prove popular. Violence is a useful way into thinking about tastemaking because despite its often high-value seriousness its appeal is situated and culturally determined.

Choosing to look at screened violence is to consider the spectacle of death and what it says about life. Violence proves a useful tool in considering tastemaking because it is the spectacle of humanity engaged in brutal behavior through inflicting pain or death on another. These are not acts where taste should figure, nonetheless taste predominates because inherent to tastemaking are ethical concerns. When lives are devalued in the representation of pain or death it diminishes life itself. Examining tastemakers and tastemaking violence is to consider who chooses to legitimate that which is often uncomfortable to legitimate and sits at the edges of taste.

### Audiovisual Violence, Death, and the Value of Life

The focus on violence in this book allows for the uncomfortable intersection of personal, political, and social concerns that require thoughtful, careful, and ethical considerations that already come heavily mediated because of the prevalence of the representation of violence on film and television. The consideration of violence through the perspective of tastemaking provides a new way into understanding cultural production and those who create and curate it.

Tastemaking violence supposes a series of choices that merit interrogation. This is particularly the case when the violence represented is of national and transnational salience that renders its audio-visualization and circulation potent and resonant for other national contexts. Violence comes with a complex intersection of the trauma of embodied experiences when these are events that are marked by questions of value and taste. Violence is associated with the worst impulses of humanity, yet it can be represented in a multitude of modes, genres, styles, and intentions. From early periods to the present day, there is a long history of audiovisual violence and an ever-expanding catalogue to be found in Mexican film and television that encompasses a wide gamut of genres, styles, and significant events.

While concurrent with the conflict, the earliest inceptions of audio-visual violence, such as *El automóvil gris/The Gray Car* (Enrique Rosas, 1919), drew on nonrealist genre cinema. This continued with few exceptions through to the Golden Age from the 1930s through the 1950s, with melodrama and romances as the most popular choices for films of the Revolution. Although they are numerous, few of these films have been deemed high value. As scholarly writing on film has developed and films have been included in a canon, violence and its representation on-screen attracts most critical attention when real or realist violence erupts in lived or mediated experience. One of these moments occurred in the late 1960s and into the 1970s when at several locations around the world the violent suppression of student protests, worker unrest, and civil rights marches resulted in citizens taking up arms. As a consequence, revolutionary, insurgent, paramilitary, and military incursions led to key conflicts that impacted within and across national boundaries. Firsthand and mediated experiences of violence and its aftermath put into relief the question of how to consider its representation. Violence in the cinema of filmmakers, such as the Westerns of Sam Peckinpah in the US or the documentaries of the Third Cinema filmmakers, brought the question to the fore for scholars and filmmakers of how and why violence should be screened (see, for example, Prince 1998 and 2003 and Chanan 2009). Of concern to many theorists are two separate and interrelated issues: how mediated violence can capture the actuality of violence and the subjectivity of those experiencing and inflicting the violence. Underpinning these reflections are the ethics of filming violence.

Filming violence approximates what it means to experience pain and death, both of which defy representation. Writing on death as a contemporary taboo, Vivian Sobchack (1984, 286) describes it as “a sign that ends all signs . . . always original, unconventional, and shocking, its event always simultaneously representing both the process of sign production and the end of representation.” Sobchack’s article is about documentary films, but her reflections are a fitting measure of ethical approaches to fiction film, in particular when based on real events. Integral to her approach is an ethical engagement with death on-screen, centered on issues related to the inscription of the body experiencing death, the slippery cultural codes attached to its meaning, the impossibility of its representation, and the act of seeing and looking at death as viewer and filmmaker.

There are equivalences in the dilemmas and questions that documentary and fiction film confront when screening violence. Unlike other

aspects of life experiences, there is always value attached to the ethical representation of death because we are confronting our own mortality by observing death made “often excessively visible” (and audible) (Sobchack 1984, 287). Therefore, to represent violence is to attempt to represent that which “is experienced as confounding representation, as exceeding visibility” (Sobchack 1984, 287). Death is both impossible to represent and is inherently excessive, which has proven compelling for filmmakers, in part because of its elemental nature and, also, because it provides ample opportunity to dramatize excess and to experience living more intensely through confronting our own or others’ obliteration. Tastemaking violence and death, because of its excessive qualities, throws into relief questions of taste and foregrounds how life itself is valued.

Clearly, then, evaluating violence defies clear and objective thought. Slavoj Žižek (2008, 3) suggests that “the overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims inexorably function as a lure which prevents us from thinking” and leads to an affective response clouding judgment because violence is “inherently mystifying.” The challenge of understanding violence carries with it the vulnerability of life itself because we are confronted with death or its possibility through focusing on the body in pain.

The excess associated with violent death pushes it into the realm of bad taste. A recurrent motif in scholarly work on the representation of violence is the impossibility of conveying its signification because death is unknowable and inspires an affective response. These scholars touch on questions of taste related to violence and draw on our discomfort at witnessing death. Susan Sontag (2003) argues that carefully contextualized images can convince, change minds, and have a propagandistic role, but by themselves change nothing. What they have is a moral value that can be found in the excess and beauty of the image, which should focus and give subjectivity to the bodies in pain and suffering. As a theorist who grappled with the meaning of the surface and where to find its depths, Sontag (2003) considers the long tradition of war artists and photographers and their attempts to convey the horrors of war made more acute at a media-saturated moment when reality for those experiencing conflict or violence can feel already mediated. The morality or ethics lies in that violence is itself spectacular, as elucidated by Paul Virilio (1989 and 2005), that through mediation becomes spectacular. This doubling of the spectacular that becomes more spectacular makes violence difficult to apprehend and often excessive. As a way of understanding taste and

violence, I consider how excess is integral to tastemaking violence in both prestige and genre films. Tastemaking violence means to intervene in a visual frame that has a long history and in an audiovisual field that is about creating an unsettling and uncomfortable spectacle of the experiences of pain and suffering.

Although not addressing Sobchack's (1984) or Sontag's (2003) approaches, Judith Butler (2009) has similar ethical concerns around death, life, and its representation. Butler considers the differential value given to individual lives in the way their deaths are understood as meaningful. She explores how lives are given value through being "apprehended" and "recognized" (Butler 2009, 1–6). Apprehension makes cognition and affect possible and determines why we grieve certain lives or ignore others. Recognition is determined by "'frames' that work to differentiate the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot" and, as a consequence, "subjects are constituted through norms which, in their reiteration, produce and shift the terms through which subjects are 'recognized'" (Butler 2009, 3). She draws on Walter Benjamin's use of the term *framing* to constitute what she calls a grievable life—that is, those lives that sit within the frame. Butler's use of frames builds on how the framing of an image is both a physical and visual delimiter and an allusion to the context in which it is consumed or reproduced. A frame contains both its limit and bears the potential to be undone (Butler 2009, 10). The metaphorical frame is allusive and becomes a specter that "figures the collapsibility of the norm" (Butler 2009, 12).

Butler (2009) plays with and explores the usage of frame to suggest how picture frames can be read as editorial decisions, whereby the frame focuses attention and should be interrogated because this focus provides meaning through selectivity. Framing is like curation. It decontextualizes until the frame becomes visible through stepping back and considering the structures that determine what we are seeing and, in an audiovisual field, hearing. Framing gives lives meanings by choosing whose story matters, which invites "reciprocity" and thereby can "constitute obligations towards others," which leads to grievability and a "presupposition for the life that matters" (Butler 2009, 14). Where Sobchack (1984, 288) writes about the dead as "other" having lost subjectivity, saying that "it confronts us and reminds us of subjectivity and its objective limits," Butler suggests that a figure who is still living also "falls outside the frame furnished by the norm" (2009, 8). Framing is editing, focus, attention, and narrative that can be invisible until you step back to pay attention to the choices

made. Tastemaking is involved in this framing. The living and dead others become objects that exist as “a relentless double whose ontology cannot be secured” (Butler 2009, 8). Their lives cannot be apprehended because they fall beyond a recognizable frame. Framing is tied to tastemaking because it is the result of a series of decisions that draw from preexisting practices as well as proposing original approaches. For an ethical approach to tastemaking, the tastemaker must consider all lives as grievable, or at least those included in the frame. So, too, should any ethical analysis.

Life is made precarious when it is not apprehended and, consequently, does not matter. Combining these insights, a frame is a form of selection, curation, and tastemaking. For a death to matter it must be more than mere spectacle. The living and the dead must have subjectivity and be represented with an ethical approach in the full awareness that death has an affective force and is beyond comprehension. A frame helps to go beyond good/bad evaluations regarding aesthetic approaches and considers the subjectivity afforded those who experience violence in film and television. Butler’s (2009) conceptualization of the frame informs how I am using tastemaking as a way of apprehending how life, violence, and death are given meaning on-screen.

### Gore Capitalism and Framing Grievable Mexican Lives

Value is placed on lives through how they are represented on-screen. To apprehend grievable lives, bodies in pain, and screened violence requires an understanding of the context in which they are produced. While there is a long history of the representation of violence in Mexico since the Revolution, the more than twenty years of violence in twenty-first century Mexico has led to an upsurge in commentary on mediatized violence that articulates the specificities of the local. Sayak Valencia’s *Gore Capitalism* (2018) shares some common ground with Sobchack (1984), Sontag (2003), Žižek (2008), and Butler (2009) in her analysis of whose lives are valued. It is Valencia’s contention that the macroeconomics of global capitalism, which privileges capital over people, collides with the particularities of the Mexican state, which has seen the dominance of the drug trade and resulted in a business that is transnational with experiences of violence that are highly localized.

Valencia finds the recent violence in Mexico to be integral to the current stage of neoliberal capitalism, which she calls “gore capitalism” (2018). She describes gore capitalism as “the price the Third World pays



for adhering to the increasingly demanding logic of capitalism” (2018, 19) that is played out in brutal and violent fashion because “the destruction of the body becomes in itself the product or commodity” (2018, 20). For her, the use of the term *Third World* is intentional and alludes to a South-South shared experience and conveys the continuing North-South (neo) colonial thinking that underpins the lack of subjectivity ascribed to those being tortured and killed. As with other terms she employs throughout the text, it is a deliberate rhetorical conceit to provoke the reader to challenge their own preconceived assumptions and discursive habits.

To convey how central extreme violence is to the late twentieth and early twenty-first century iteration of capitalism, Valencia (2018) takes the word *gore* from the term given to the low-value exploitation movies of the 1960s and 1970s that deploy a form of spectacularized violence as the core element of the narrative. By correlating the spectacle of violence with the current economic system, Valencia (2018) rethinks how the state, precarious labor, and exploitative work practices, alongside a dominant and lucrative drug trade, has led to a population vulnerable to violence either because of their involvement in the trade or as collateral damage. Like Butler (2009), Valencia’s (2018) work demands that we reevaluate whose lives are valued as grievable, whether living or dead.

Valencia is positing that there is something integral to the lived experience under this form of capitalism with its precarious labor conditions, exploitative work practices, and mobile capital that facilitates extreme forms of violence and “extends from the peripheries of the planet to the center and vice versa” (2018, 35). She describes Mexico as a “Narco-state” and traces this back to the 1970s whereby “organized crime was born out of a corrupt, dismantled state that led the population into chaos” (2018, 47–48). This account is not unique to Valencia (2018), but her reading of what is taking place in Mexico is that it is an extreme example of gore capitalism. At the same time, she proposes a reframing of the structural and glocal (global-local) roots of the violence in Mexico that shifts it from a state of exceptionalism and highlights its reticular and interconnected nature.

Integral to how violence is performed is a key figure she calls the *endriago*, an individual who has emerged from the particularities of Mexican masculinity as they intersect with gore capitalism (Valencia 2018, 63–65). Gore capitalism has led to the “transformation of the cartel into multilevel corporation” (Valencia 2018, 146), and the *endriago* serves as a highly skilled employee in a complex chain whose methods “create a reticular and managed terror, transferred from the bodies of the injured

and murdered into the bodies of those who have not yet suffered such violence” (Valencia 2018, 154). Valencia states that gore capitalism means that “violence is converted into a resource for the gangster to manage, produce, and sell; it has become the tool *sine qua non* to carve out a space in the capitalist ladder” (Valencia 2018, 197). Under this model, violence is not an aberration, it is part of a business model and its specularization is integral to that. Bodies are mutilated, tortured, and put on display so that they will be seen and form part of a terrifying spectacle that is a performance of power.

### The Symbolic Power of Language: Cartels, Narcos, and Femicide/Femicide

Language matters when discussing violence. Valencia (2018) is not the only critic to find fault with representations of the illegal drug trade nor to foreground discursive practices. Oswaldo Zavala (2018) puts forward a challenge to academics, journalists, writers, and those involved in the creative industries (such as film and television) to rethink the language used to describe violence and deaths in the first decades of the twenty-first century. He asserts that the language used, such as “cartels” and “narcos,” have their origin in militarized corrupt government activities and that “los ‘cárteles’ son un dispositivo simbólico cuya función principal consiste en ocultar las verdaderas redes del poder oficial” (the “cartels” are a symbolic mechanism whose primary function consists of hiding the true structures of official power) (Zavala 2018, loc 87).<sup>\*</sup> The language used and the representation of those involved in the drug trade and its control reinforce whose lives are valued and grievable. While not explicitly concerned with taste, over the course of his book he unpacks the popular representation of the figure of the drug trafficker with a particular focus on physical tropes and motifs that signal issues of taste. He describes gendered and status-related wardrobes and self-presentation that indicate whose lives are valued. Drug traffickers and cartel leaders are associated with specific musical choices (*narcocorridos*) and a consistent wardrobe of the *charro* (Mexican cowboy), pointed toe boots and broad-brimmed, high-crown cowboy hat, and are thereby marked as belonging to the rural

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<sup>\*</sup>Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

working class with its concomitant denigrated taste (Zavala 2018, loc 11 and loc 375). Zavala ascribes blame for this characterization to novels, films, and television, which draw on the Mexican military's presentation of their imagined "narco" who they project as "todo lo opuesto del soldado: indisciplinado, vulgar, ignorante, violento" (the complete opposite of the soldier: undisciplined, vulgar, ignorant, violent) (Zavala 2018, loc 35). In its audiovisual representation, he has identified a differentiated, performative, and highly stylized presentation of taste in the soldier and drug trafficker's aesthetic, positing that the language used underpins suppositions about whose lives are grievable.

Like Valencia's (2018) assertion of subjectivity and agency when analyzing the specificity of the violence in Mexico, the power in interrogating "narco" for Zavala (2018) is to challenge the rhetoric from above whose discursive strategies condition ways of assessing the causes of, reasons for, and legacy of the violence while apportioning blame for what has happened. As has been asserted about the war on terror instigated under George W. Bush (Hables Gray 1997), the "war on drugs" and the control of the cartels is a war without an actual enemy or possible end: "El Estado fue a detener una Guerra de cartels inexistente porque los cartels no existen" (The State tried to stop an in-existent cartel War because cartels do not exist) (Zavala 2018, loc 178). His critique demands that responsibility be placed on the state for its complicity in the violence and on the creative community (he includes artists, writers, and film and television makers in this) for not taking responsible and ethical approaches to the representation of violence. Similar demands for care in representation can be found in Jean Franco's (2013, 15) analysis of the book-reading criminals who claim to be inspired by the heroic protagonists and the violence they inflict on others, suggesting that there are ethical requirements in language, aesthetics, and storytelling. Franco (2013) and Zavala (2018) are calling for an interrogation of the discursive field and, like Valencia (2018), for an ethical approach to the representation of the recent violence in Mexico so that screen violence does not merely reproduce myths or promulgate official versions that serve the interests of the few.

Another area where language is highly contested is the murder of women in Mexico. In the border town of Juarez, the growth of manufacturing jobs since the 1990s led to a large influx of young women. At about the same time there was an upsurge in the assault and murder of women. Few have been arrested for these crimes and, in the absence of justice, there has yet to be consensus about how to name the deaths of these

women. While some use the term *femicide*, others use the term *feminicide*. While both terms mean the killing of women, feminicide is more politically inflected with a more inclusive understanding of gendered identities and self-presentation (Fregoso and Bejarano 2010, 3–8, and Driver 2015, 9–11). Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano (2010) and Alice Driver (2015) make a strong case for the use of feminicide when discussing cultural production and representations of this gender-based violence. I have chosen to do the same as the journalist Ed Vulliamy, who uses femicide/feminicide interchangeably to mean “the mass slaughter of women” (2011, 160). In following his lead, I am trying to be as inclusive as possible and to account both for the different views on and uses of these terms, not only by scholars but also by activists and families of the victims, and for the broad spectrum of individuals who identify and read as women.

Valencia’s (2018) and Zavala’s (2018) contention that structural violence is at the root of the recent violence in Mexico is consistent with that of Tamar Diana Wilson’s analysis of the working conditions for women and their experiences of “prevailing gender regimes” (2003, 56). Wilson marks out the gendered dynamics of women’s experiences in *maquiladoras*, the large assembly-line factories making tariff-free goods for export that are the most significant employers in the border cities. Wilson finds that women who work in *maquiladoras* have economic independence, which is curtailed by a paternalistic “gender subordination on the shop floor” (2003, 64) that is systemic and foments “a machismo that works in the interests of the class that owns and controls the means of production” (Wilson 2003, 66). Wilson does not discuss femicide/feminicide but does unpack how gendered relations are embedded in the ways women’s labor is integral to the current model of capitalism that “is predicated on exploiting cheap wage labor” with women as “the cheap labor force par excellence” (2003, 56). She concludes that there is a gendered dimension to the lived experiences of women in areas where the prevailing culture is the exploitation of cheap labor. These women are already devalued in their everyday lives and the manner in which they are killed is an extension of that. As Ed Vulliamy notes, their bodies are left “in public places, not even like animals, more like trash” (2011, 160). They are assaulted, murdered, and disposed of as if they and their families did not deserve human dignity.

The women’s devaluation and treatment as if they were disposable further extends to their treatment by the elite and officials after their death. In the absence of justice for the victims, there is a continued sense that proper investigations are not being carried out and the perpetrators are

not being prosecuted. This leads to suspicion of the justice system by the families and locals. As Vulliamy states, there are “either outright denials or silence from the authorities over their [the women’s remains] existence—as if there was something to hide; something worse than ineptitude” (2011, 161). Horrific violence has been committed on men and women in the last twenty years in Mexico, but there is a particularity to the gendered violence that has to do with power and the economic shifts in Juarez that has led to much media and activist attention.

The important work carried out by relatives of murdered women, activists, and their allies draws attention to the specificity of the murders, the impunity with which murderers have operated, and the considerable flaws in the Mexican justice system. Wilson (2003), like Fregoso and Bejarano (2010), Driver (2015), Zavala (2018), and Valencia (2018), signals that these systems are not particular to Mexico, they are just heightened there because of the numbers of *maquiladoras* and the practices inherent to them. Wilson (2003) draws on research carried out in other locations across the Global South where similar patterns are in evidence. The murderers have been able to act with impunity because of the particularities of systemic issues within Mexican justice and policing that have been subject to investigation and political debate in recent decades. What is evident from work by Wilson (2003), Fregoso and Bejarano (2010), Driver (2015), Zavala (2018), and Valencia (2018), and the sometimes highly contestatory discussions surrounding the recent violence—whether drug-related, resource-related, or gendered—is that language should be interrogated for its potential to conceal structural problems and to justify and commit further violence. At the same time, the shorthand that certain language allows facilitates discussion and analysis of the broader ramifications of audiovisual representations of this violence. Where I use such contested language as femicide/feminicide, cartel, and narco-violence, in my own analysis of these representations it is with the caveat that I mean to challenge the power dynamics and structures that enable such violence in the first place.

### Reflexive and Relational: On Good and Bad Taste

Violence sits within and beyond taste because of its power as spectacle. This allows for reflections on the nature of taste. To ascribe violence a value in relation to taste troubles categories that are already fluid. “Good” and

“bad” persist as qualifiers of taste despite their subjectivity and indeterminacy. Both will appear throughout this book to indicate preconceptions of how certain texts are valued. However, prestige, distinction, and value are more useful key words in the analysis of taste. These have emerged from the writings of the French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu (1993 and 2010). Writing about taste and distinction Bourdieu explores how class determines what he calls “cultural competence” because (in France as it is in Mexico) value is linked to access to educational attainment that unlocks the “code, into which it is encoded” (Bourdieu 2010, xxv). The work of art cannot be fully understood without understanding these codes, whereby “the beholder cannot move from primary to secondary meaning” (Bourdieu 2010, xxvi). His is a landmark work that considers how taste is reflexive, because it “classifies, and it classifies the classifier,” and relational, because as social subjects, distinction emerges from understanding the codes and knowing what works are imbued with high-value prestige and merit approval or have low value and, therefore, are dismissed (Bourdieu 2010, xxx). It is clear from Bourdieu’s work that taste is not fixed; instead, it is the product of evolving interpretations by social actors. To remain hidebound by taste is to attach decisions based on indeterminacy.

Although Bourdieu’s work has proven invaluable in exploring taste as a site of privilege that is legitimated by institutions and individuals interested in exclusion and gatekeeping it still has not succeeded in upending rigid ideas about good and bad taste or the ways high and low value are attached to work. Taste—good and bad—is highly situated and historically determined. Good taste is repeatedly validated through cultural institutions, awards and prizes, funding bodies, curricula, and other canonical means. All the shifts, debates, and challenges to what should attain legitimation does not mean that there is consensus about what good taste is, nor, indeed, what taste is. Good taste does not assert itself as such, often validating itself against that which it is not. More illuminating work on bad taste and its links to popular or mass appeal helps to track the shifts in the conceptualizations and challenges to the idea of taste.

To find fuller explorations of the value and significance of how bad taste is attached to work that falls beyond the parameters set out by arbiters of high-value work, it is useful to consider the work being carried out on the concept of kitsch. Upending the idea that kitsch is the “Esperanto of awfulness,” Ruth Holliday and Tracey Potts (2012, 120–27) suggest that kitsch, allied with camp as its cheerleader, is a direct challenge to fixed boundaries between “good/bad” taste. As defined by Sontag (1967), camp

has been aligned with gay (and more latterly queer) culture as outsider alternative aesthetics that embrace 'bad' taste deliberately and, frequently, ironically. Recognizing this self-awareness and extending Sontag (1967), Holliday and Potts (2012, 141) suggest that camp and kitsch aesthetics show that "one must have good taste in order to know what bad taste is." That is, bad taste has a rich encoding that is often unrecognized and can be a form of "good" taste. Their argument further illustrates how low, popular, and vulgar (pace Bourdieu) taste is merely about the classifier rather than the work itself. What such in-depth explorations of "bad" taste tell us is that taste itself as a pervasive concept persists because it validates insider and outside status while, simultaneously, as a fixed concept or classificatory system it does not exist. To dismiss work and who consumes it as lacking the capacity to understand its codes reflects back on the classifier, who I refer to as a tastemaker. *Tastemakers and Tastemaking: Mexico and Curated Screen Violence* repositions the argument by looking more closely at these classifiers.

Despite the widespread adoption of Bourdieu's scholarship, and further work carried out by others, such as Sontag (1967) and Holliday and Potts (2012), and the shift toward the celebration of trash in film studies led by Jeffrey Sconce (1995), there is still resistance to breaking with binary thinking around taste. *Tastemakers and Tastemaking: Mexico and Curated Screen Violence* proposes that individuals and institutions can be tastemakers engaging in the act of tastemaking. By foregrounding tastemakers I highlight the provisional nature of taste and consider tastemaking as an act that is relational, dynamic, and subject to multiple influences.

## The Culture of the National and Public Institutions

Discussions related to value and taste are not new to Mexican cultural scholarship. Jesús Martín-Barbero (1987), Edmundo Paz-Soldan and Debra A. Castillo (2001), Franco (2002), and Paul Julian Smith (2014) have argued for the need for television studies because of television's vitality, circulation, distribution, and significance. Nonetheless, it has yet to take root. While hampered by questions of class, race, and gender, as elaborated by Bourdieu (2010), this lack of wholesale ease with low/bad taste is the result of gatekeeping. In their assessment of the gaps in current scholarship when analyzing Latin American exploitation (Latsploitation) film, Victoria Ruétalo and Dolores Tierney recognize this tendency: "For

a critical elite (those who historically define the parameters of national culture) anxious to emphasize the prestige of their own national cinema, those often badly made, ‘low’-culture genre films (fantasy, horror, wrestling, sexploitation, gore) provide little cultural capital” (2011, 1). Recognizing the connections between national culture and value and building on Sconce (1995), Ruétalo and Tierney’s (2011) work has broken some ground by challenging prior assessments and asserting the value of such films. But a more widespread adoption of a critical position toward gatekeeping is still tentative and slow in Mexican and Latin American scholarship.

Ruétalo and Tierney (2011) are not the first to argue for the need to examine taste, prestige, and value. The work of a number of noteworthy proponents of the importance of understanding noncanonical, populist, low-value work and of examining its cultural significance will inform discussions in this book. A noteworthy figure in Mexico, the journalist, author, and chronicler Carlos Monsiváis (2000, 2004, and 2009), championed popular culture, its consumption, and the representation of gender and class in literature and film. He suggests that kitsch is a Latin American vernacular (Monsiváis 2000, 47). This tells of his nuanced understanding of work that has mass appeal and to which he ascribes encoded depth and richness.

Mexico, as a nation-state with distinct characteristics, has imagined itself into being since and through the Revolution by investing in a lively cultural industry. Integral to this is the film and television industries, and, as Monsiváis (2000) and, more latterly, Ignacio Sánchez Prado (2015) and Smith (2014) have explored, these often deploy forms sitting at the periphery of taste. From such scholarship it is clear that there is much to be gleaned from work that is deemed of low value. Where what has been produced is not fixed to any particular government nor to a consistent agenda, the imagined nation (cf. Anderson 1983) came into being through audiovisual narrative forms. The 2010 commemorations have been an opportunity to reflect on and measure the failures and successes of the Revolution, which make it a productive moment to examine how culture has been employed in tastemaking practices. To do this I look at an institutional curated film cycle (chapter 1) to examine their significance in the face of this commemorative moment and take neglected adaptations as reversionings of narratives of the Revolution (chapter 3).

Mexico has a large number of public institutions dedicated to culture and history. Much important work has been done to understand their significance at a national level and through comparison with other Latin



American countries. While there can be a privileging of prestige, in this field there is a well-established and vital thread of cross-disciplinary research working against rigid categorizations of taste and value. In particular, two notable scholars, Claudio Lomnitz-Adler (1993) and Nestor García-Canclini (1995), have examined the relationship between popular culture and the ways institutions manage articulations of Mexican modernity and nationalism. Lomnitz-Adler (1993) is most interested in the nation as a necessary but tentative category that requires a nuanced understanding. Through his unpacking of top-down articulations that imagine a nation stratified by race and gender, Lomnitz-Adler proposes a new way into understanding the nation as “intimate culture” that is “real, regionally differentiated manifestations of class culture” (1993, 28). The intimate is grounded in intersectionality and rearticulated through lived experiences. Such analysis counters any clear sense that cultural understandings are dictated by a set of institutions, rather that they are a question of negotiation. A single tastemaker does not decide how culture is consumed but is a node in this intimate culture. With a similar focus on consumption and experience, García-Canclini (1995, 5) has championed popular cultures and articulates top-down and bottom-up forms of cultural production that are consumed using “unstable, diverse strategies” by subjects who are simultaneously traditional, modern, and postmodern. Like García-Canclini (1995) and the television and media scholar Martín-Barbero (1987), I use the popular as a broad definitional category that includes a range of public and private actors and institutions and the work that they create, produce, and consume. García-Canclini (1995) has argued that institutions and cultural agents are integral to the construction of value in Mexico, which is tied to how the nation is articulated and inscribed.

*Tastemakers and Tastemaking: Mexico and Curated Screen Violence* builds on this work and analyzes how such institutions play a significant part in the imagined nation, thereby becoming tastemakers. At marked moments, when culture becomes ritualized through commemoration, the “conservation and celebration of the patrimony, its knowledge and its use is basically a visual operation” (García-Canclini 1995, 118) understood through mediated versions. As a consequence, film, television, and related media cultures are helpful ways into comprehending the nation through tastemaking; conversely, tastemaking operates as a means of understanding the nation through the creation and curation of film and television.

There is a recurrent demand for subjectivity, agency, and an ethical approach to the representation of violence in scholarship about mediatized

violence. Taste does not recur as an overt concern, but it is implicit in much of the writing because of the inherently excessive nature of violence as spectacle. In turn, excess is one of the recurrent features of “bad” taste, and yet specularized violence is often highly revered. Violence bears comparison with the realm of kitsch, where knowing what is a “good” or “bad” spectacle is a marker of taste. Tastemaking as a paradigm, and as an analysis of an enactment of taste, sidesteps binary conclusions. For too long the canon of violent films analyzed have been shaped by a singular form of screen violence. Taking on ethical approaches imbued with an intersectional awareness invites reflections on taste as enacted by tastemakers.

### Gendered Tastemaking: Intersectional Situatedness

Like Valencia (2018), my theorization of violence draws on intersectional feminisms informed by the challenges to European and US feminisms proposed by postcolonial theorists. This results in an acknowledgment of “geopolitically-situated systems of knowledge” and recognizes that these pluralized feminisms should be understood “as responses to [the] specific contexts in which they develop” (Valencia 2018, 9). Writing in the first-person plural, Valencia (2018) asserts a pluralistic, reflective, questioning, situated, and intersectional approach. These demands resonate with Butler’s framing of war and its victims and foreground subjectivity, agency, and the question of how lives are valued. As I do not live in any of the locales I discuss, my perspective is as an outsider looking in, which makes the first person singular more appropriate. While acknowledging this outsider status, I aim to understand these works as situated interventions into global discursive and aesthetic patterns. Tastemaking violence involves thinking about how lives are valued through culture and its curation, recognizing that some lives—male, female, and gender nonconforming—are more vulnerable in this regard than others. My assessments of tastemakers and tastemaking practices keeps to the fore the understanding of Sobchack (1984), Sontag (2003), Butler (2009), and Valencia (2018) of how victims of violence should be given agency and be grievable. Discussions of agency—whether that of victim or perpetrator—are central to my analysis and are the focus of discussions in chapters 2 and 4.

Gender is a determining factor in how audiences are conceived. Women-centered stories are assumed to be of primary interest to women,

thus narrowing how they are curated, marketed, and evaluated, whereas male-centered narratives are presumed to be universal. These assumptions come with presuppositions of their value that are further marked when attached to certain generic conventions, star persona, or media. Within this framing, it is easy to ignore masculinity and to read mentions of gender as coterminous with women or those who struggle with normative codes and presentational selfhood. To be male is to struggle with a series of suppositions and traditions that can limit at the same time that they provide privileges and access to certain fields of production. When discussing violence, masculinity is often established through heteronormative codes of strength, domination, skill, and responsibility for home and nation. These are heavy burdens and to be found in select individuals who are often idealized, or sometimes to be feared because their inherent violence can be excessive and needs to be contained.

Violence enacted by and on a gendered body is highly codified on-screen. Sometimes, gender-based violence is an overt concern of the films and television series I examine in this book; at other times, it is so naturalized as to be rendered invisible. Violent women or violence against women is differently understood than violence by men on other men. Central to my analysis is how gendered bodies conform to or deviate from standardized conceptualizations of violence as a person who enacts or has violence inflicted upon them. But, above all, I am concerned with the tastemaking practices that determine whose bodies are valued as grievable when violence is central to the narrative. This is strongly inflected by gender, but also by multiple other intersectional concerns such as class and race, as I will discuss. It also bears noting that the representations of violence I discuss in the following chapters are often quite disturbing. In writing about them, I have chosen to use an intentionally clinical tone, not to diminish the awfulness of the crimes being represented or the historical realities to which they refer. Rather, I mean to focus attention on the filmmakers' techniques in screening these crimes and how they engage practices of tastemaking.

Linked to how gendered bodies are valued is how the culture for and about men and women are valued. Emily Hind (2019) has made this case in relation to literary culture establishing the affiliative, affective, and taste networks that rewards culture by men and overlooks or denigrates culture by women. Despite attempts to upend high/low distinctions through an established pattern of analysis by highly respected scholars and writers' critical reticence with regard to what is deemed low-value culture is still

circumscribed by anxiety about what national culture should be. Underscoring much of the anxiety around value and classification is the necessity for curatorial practices because of the sheer volume of production in Mexico.

### A Curated Selection of Tastemakers and Tastemaking

The tastemakers considered in this book are the result of my curatorial choices. They are rooted in key moments and chosen to exemplify work across the value range, from high to low, as they are conventionally ascribed. Nonetheless, each tastemaker has unique characteristics. The tastemakers and texts chosen are five examples selected to provide a sense of how tastemaking practices vary across the taste range.

Chapter 1 is centered around Nelson Carro, the programmer at the national film institute, the Cineteca Nacional de México in Mexico City, and a film cycle he was tasked to curate in 2010 as part of a centenary commemoration of the Mexican Revolution. It would be easy to assume that as a government employee in a highly centralized state he would conform to a narrowly defined and conservative reading of the Revolution. However, the choices he made belie this and also reveal much about film culture in Mexico. This chapter draws on a 2011 interview I conducted with Carro and the growing field of film festival research to consider curatorship and tastemaking in a structured context. I propose that curatorship and discrete film cycles provide new ways of understanding film festivals.

Chapter 2 looks at questions of prestige filmmaking and considers how the auteur filmmaker Amat Escalante as tastemaker has employed and extended the aesthetic features of the festival film. In doing so, he references national and transnational aesthetics to create work that sits at the hinterland of taste. Escalante is heavily influenced by arthouse and festival film aesthetics, which signal legitimacy, and makes films that challenge audiences because of the duration and the hyperrealism of the violence, which prove difficult to categorize in relation to value. Research into slow cinema, sound studies, and editing informs the analysis of the violence in two of his films, *Los bastardos* (2008) and *Heli* (2013). Using videographic criticism and interviews with the filmmaker, the films are considered in relation to violence that is excessive and prompt ethical questions about perpetrator and victim perspectives and, consequently, Escalante's tastemaking practices.