Failed Democratic Transitions: Clientelism and Hand-Kissing in Contemporary Mexican Film.

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Abstract

Clients of corrupt patrons experience a process of moral disintegration, but more importantly, they are instrumental in perpetuating the lack of accountability and corruption. The two film adaptations analyzed here, as well as Luis Estrada's dark comedies, *La ley de Herodes* (1999), *Un mundo maravilloso* (2006), *El infierno* (2010), and *Dictadura perfecta* (2014), visualize these informal practices of moral and political submission as hand-kissing, exposing their ritualistic and physical nature. The two film adaptations I study here radically change their literary sources to portray sympathetic characters who submit themselves enthusiastically to a corrupt patron: *Arráncame la vida* (2008) and *El crimen del padre Amaro* (2002). The protagonists seek out patrons in order to get access to power and its benefits. The changes that filmmakers

made illuminate the practice of clientelism: political subordination in exchange for material advantages, perceived as friendship or fictive kinship.

Keywords: Mexico; democratic transition; deference to authority; clientelism; *La ley de Herodes*; *Infierno*; *Un mundo maravilloso*; *Dictadura perfecta*; *Arráncame la vida*; *El crimen del padre Amaro*

Resumen

Los clientes de patrones corruptos no solo se descomponen moralmente sino también imposibilitan la rendición de cuentas por parte de los gobernantes. Las dos adaptaciones que examino en este artículo y las comedias negras dirigidas por Luis Estrada, *La ley de Herodes* (1999), *Un mundo maravilloso* (2006), *El infierno* (2010), y *Dictadura perfecta* (2014), visualizan estas prácticas informales de sumisión político-moral en el ritual físico del besamanos. Las películas *Arráncame la vida* (2008) y *El crimen del padre Amaro* (2002) cambian de manera radical el mensaje de las novelas que las inspiran. Los personajes se someten con entusiasmo a un patrón corrupto, buscando poder y sus beneficios, y, sin embargo, parecen simpáticos y dignos de compasión. Estos cambios iluminan la práctica del clientelismo, la subordinación política a cambio de ventajas materiales que se percibe sin embargo como amistad o parentesco ficticio.

Palabras clave: México; transición democrática; deferencia hacia la autoridad; clientelismo; *La ley de Herodes*; *El infierno*; *Un mundo maravilloso*; *Dictadura perfecta*; *Arráncame la vida*; *El crimen del padre Amaro*

This article identifies a strong focus on clientelism in Mexican films made after the year 2000, when the PRI party lost the elections for the first time in seven decades. I look at the dark comedies directed by Luis Estrada which feature well-intentioned people actively seeking out patrons and enthusiastically fulfilling their ever more immoral requests. I also focus on two film adaptations in which characters submit to a cruel and corrupt patron in exchange for favors. In *El crimen del padre Amaro* (2002) a young priest follows the example of a senior priest and seduces a young woman. She becomes pregnant and he brings her to a clandestine abortion clinic, causing her death. Obeying another patron, a corrupt bishop, he pressures a newspaper to withdraw the article about priests colluding with drug lords, and censures an honest priest, his friend. The hero expects to move up the ladder and become a patron in his turn. In *Arráncame la vida* (2008) a wife keeps quiet about the crimes of her husband, a corrupt political boss and even helps him, in return for wealth and status. I show that the film adaptations of these stories alter their literary sources to accentuate and criticize the practice of clientelism in Mexico. While patrons like to dominate, their clients appear to like to submit to that domination. These informal hierarchical power relations are physically performed, with clients kissing the patron's hand as part of their dramatized act of subservience. The films visualize these rituals of obedience as physical, intimate, and absolutely at odds with the values of a democracy.

Mario Vargas Llosa famously called the nearly seven-decades long rule of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) "a perfect dictatorship." The ruling party lost the presidency for the first time in 2000, which was hailed in Mexico and abroad as the long-awaited transition to democracy. The demand for change had been germinating for a few decades before the PRI lost the presidency in 2000. The Tlatelolco massacre of 1968, the national bankruptcy of 1982, the Mexico City earthquake of 1985, and the alleged massive fraud during the 1988 presidential elections in which the PRI candidate Carlos Salinas

defeated the opposition candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas are described as main catalysts of the transition. Grassroots activists created the awareness of the abuse of human rights during protest demonstrations and government incapacity to manage situations of crisis (Preston and Dillon, Tuckman). Levitsky and Way note that the governing class was also ready for change. The high technocratic association with the US was a major factor – 50% of Mexico's "power elite" who were born after 1945 had studied in the US (151). Carlos Salinas, a Yale PhD, was determined to include Mexico in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which opened the country to international investors and pressured the power elites to liberalize the system. To gain international credibility, the ruling party decreased coercion. Ernesto Zedillo, also a Yale PhD, Salinas's successor and the last pre-transition PRI president, filled his cabinet with US-trained technocrats and created an independent electoral authority to ensure clean elections (Levitsky and Way 154). These technocratic PRI policymakers began the process of streamlining the state and reducing government spending, causing the party to lose the support of workers' and peasants' organizations (Teichman 73). Vincente Fox, a Harvard Business School graduate, was elected in 2000 on the National Action Party ticket, putting an end to the PRI rule. Although with Enrique Peña Nieto the PRI returned to power again in 2012, it did not regain its exclusive grip on Mexican politics. In 2018 Andrés Manuel López Obrador, center-left politician from the MORENA party became president.

All films examined here were made after the 2000 transition and they focus on the informal networks of obedience to a powerful figure in exchange for favors, known as clientelism. The protagonists of these films not only go along with everything an authority figure tells them to do but they also show a surprising alacrity to run before the carriage, so to speak. Clientelism takes root in the Spanish America's feudal colonial system of *encomiendas*, grants of Indian labor to conquistadores and missionaries in return for Christian

tutelage. After the Spanish Crown banned the enslaving of indigenous people, *repartimientos* were introduced, where Indians received a symbolic salary but could not refuse to work for the patron or abandon him. After independence, this *de facto* servitude of indigenous populations took a new shape – debt peonage, a legally codified, lifelong, and hereditary indebtedness of the peons to the patron. Debt was a ploy to entrap entire families to work for the master for free: wives were locked up in textile workshops to "pay off" the husband's debt, children were signed up as peons by their fathers or signed themselves up to stay together as a family. When haciendas were sold or inherited, peons went with the haciendas. Peons could not be sold but their debt could, and they "went with it" to work for the new master. As Yucatán planters explained to an American journalist posing as a buyer, "We don't keep much account of the debt, because it doesn't matter after you've got possession of the man." Peons were sold together with their photographs and identification papers, because "if your man runs away, the papers are all the authorities require for you to get him back again," explained the planter (Reséndez 240). Debt was passed on to the children. As owners of businesses and haciendas required more and more workers, a new legislature was introduced to define everyone not in possession of a large income as vagrants and obligate them to work for a patron. "Vagrants" were rounded up and kept in prison with the costs of capture and detention added to the debt, until a white patron came and took them to work (Reséndez 264; Dore 117). This servitude was coerced but also to a large degree consensual, perceived by peons as necessary for survival. Elizabeth Dore showed that peons continued to pawn their labor to a patron even when they no longer had a material need to do so. They believed that it was necessary to be able to have recourse to a patron's vaguely defined "socorro" ("benevolence") in times of need (Dore 112). The practice of debt peonage continued well into the early 20th century and was one of the key underlying social motives for the Mexican Revolution (1910-1921) (McLynn 35).

During its seventy years rule, the PRI established itself as a patron by distributing personalized supplies and favors to loyal and active supporters. In turn, people felt dependent on and indebted to the government and to group leaders for material benefits they received (Holzner, "End of Clientelism" 6). Axel Weingrod defined patronage as a relationship between persons of unequal authority who manipulate their relationship in order to attain their ends (Ayuero and Benzecry 189). In the context of competitive politics, clients trade participation in campaign rallies and votes for favors and resources provided by the party's broker, including credit, services, crops, land titles, jobs for the municipality, the party office, or a state company, and basic supplies, such as "food, medicine, clothes, shoes, coffins, school materials, appliances, bricks, zinc sheets, cash," and even "marihuana and other illegal drugs" (Zarazaga 33).

Sociologists and political scientists identify clientelism as a system of political domination with far-reaching consequences. Jobs and promotions are given to loyal but incompetent people and resources are distributed unequally. What is more important, the people embedded in clientelistic networks do not view the state and its functionaries as obligated to act in an accountable and fair manner (Shefner 46). The ruling party enforces loyalty by patrimonializing the state, monitoring and punishing attempts to venture outside of clientelist networks, for instance, by collecting photocopies of voting credentials to make voters believe their votes will be monitored. The other strategy is to restrict voters' access to information. Because the state continues to control the media, voters are kept unaware of available opportunities, alternate political candidates, and news of corruption and mismanagement by incumbent officials (Holzner, "End of Clientelism" 232).

Other scholars understand clientelism as a worldview and a way for the poor to pressure politicians to take note of their needs. Clientelism engages the logic of reciprocity, *toma y daca* (take and give): clients locate

promising political candidates and give them their support *first*, obligating them to reciprocate and return the favor (Tosoni 56). From this perspective, clientelism is a problem-solving network. At the same time, clientelism goes beyond the practical and rational and enters the domain of affection. The parties understand their mutual obligation in terms of friendship and kinship and speak about the relationship in terms of "given word," not "failing one's promise," "integrity," "nourishing and not abusing one's contacts" (Roniger 37). This is possible because politicians employ a network of agents (brokers, as they are called in studies of clientelism) who live in the neighborhood, work at the grassroots party office, and use their connections in the municipality to provide solutions to the clients' specific needs. "El Estado no se percibe como el agente distribuidor de bienes, sino que son Matilde o Juancito. Y al ser *ellos* los que distribuyen los bienes, se piensa que no tienen ninguna obligación de hacerlo; lo hacen porque quieren, porque les importa, porque 'se sacrifican por la gente'" (Auyero 44, original italics). Since this party agent is perceived as helping out of pure goodness, the clients do not feel they have the right to formulate their needs as demands, and they do not hold the state responsible for not providing for them. Auyero and Benzecry describe clientelism as a worldview. Patrons and clients do not think of their relationship in terms of rational exchange, because the favor and the return favor are spaced out in time, and there is never a mention of price. The relationship is perceived as friendship or kinship (*compadrazgo*), and is a "cognitive and affective disposition," "the product of shared understandings learned in and through daily interactions" (190), accompanying individuals throughout their lifetime, never questioned or rationalized. Disgruntled clients may abandon a patron who does not deliver favors for a new one, but never the practice itself. Clientelism is a way to make sense of the world, "ingrained in the fabric of life from the get-go," necessary to "obtain an ID for a baby or register in a program that guarantees the provision of powdered milk, or be able to participate in

the cash transfer program for young mothers" (Auyero and Benzecry 192).

Clientelist organization of power based on personal loyalty to the patron is the opposite of the impersonal, bureaucratic, and rational organization of power in a democratic society. Although some scholars hoped clientelism would disappear after the electoral defeat of the PRI in 2000 (Holzner, *Poverty of Democracy* 224), it remains alive and well in the atmosphere of competitive politics. Clientelist distribution of resources is "help," "social work," and "support," unless your opponent is doing it—then it is decried as vote-buying (Hagene 156). Despite many efforts to reorganize power structures and establish agencies that track corrupt exchanges, clientelism prevails. Officials continue to seek rents to finance clientelism because it requires that parties have resources to distribute (Singer 3). We will see this in Estrada's first film *La ley de Herodes*: when the new mayor finds the public-funds coffer empty, the regional party boss gives him a copy of the constitution and a gun to fill it. Clientelism fosters impunity for rent-seeking officials because punishing them would weaken the political group as a whole—indeed, impunity as a direct consequence of patronage networks is the topic of all the films I examine here. Politicians resist reforms that would increase transparency and accountability and strengthen the rule of the law (Singer 4). "In Mexico law enforcement and politics are not about public service. There is no culture among bureaucrats and politicians that they owe their loyalty to the public," writes Tony Payan (20), bringing to mind a scene from *El crimen del padre Amaro* where a city mayor sternly says to his compadres: "Yo no gobierno por mi partido, gobierno para mi gente." "No jodas," responds one of them, and all burst into merry laughter (47:46). Former president Enrique Peña Nieto is currently being investigated for corruption and bribery (Rama). In general, despite numerous allegations of corruption, no former Mexican president has been formally charged with corruption before. In the Mexican public administration, "informal practices such as corruption, fraud, bureaucratic patrimonialism, and clientelism have

become part of the rules of the game, as meaningful, if not more so, than the many laws and regulations" (Sabet 27). The same informal rules govern the interaction of police with the citizens—police officers solicit bribes and leak information to the perpetrators (Sabet 27). According to the UN Special Rapporteur, 98% of crimes go unresolved (Martínez-Fernández 6) because Mexicans fear retaliation from criminals allied with the police. Corrupt security officials enter into clientelist relationships with drug cartels. Genaro García Luna, who oversaw Mexican federal police from 2006 to 2012, was considered a key force in the fight against drug cartels but in effect he diverted military operations from them in exchange for bribes. Another high-security official, General Salvador Cienfuegos, who oversaw the Mexican army and air force from 2012 to 2018, was identified as The Godfather (El Padrino) of the Sinaloa cartel (Martínez-Fernández 9). He was arrested and charged in the US. However, when Mexico asked to extradite and investigate him, he was cleared of charges after less than two months, with current president Andrés Manuel López Obrador calling the US investigation "unprofessional" ("Mexico President Backs Dropping of Drug Case"). During the rule of the current president, who positioned himself as the crusader against "the mafia of power," 80% of state contracts in 2020 were awarded directly, without public bidding, and many went to the president's known associates. Relatives and associates of the president were implicated in corruption scandals, but no one was sanctioned (Loret de Mola).

Writers, politicians, journalists, and performers interviewed for the 2016 book *El priista que todos llevamos dentro* agree that clientelism established by the PRI continues to remain the dominant pattern of political and social relationships. Journalists María Scherer Ibarra y Nacho Lozano asked interviewees whether they agree with the phrase "todos llevamos un pequeño priista dentro," coined by journalist Carlos Castillo Peraza, and what their own inner *priista* looks like. The ingenious maxim called for introspective and

frank answers. Most said that the PRI mindset is very much alive and identify complicity, aversion to conflict, and the pyramidal structure of power in Mexico as the blueprint of politics and society. To stop the post-revolutionary murderous fight between the caudillos, the PRI valued consensus over all else. Over the decades, this aversion to conflict led to unconditional complicity with authority. "Tenemos una amabilidad social que deriva no de la necesidad de expresarnos con cortesía, sino de la necesidad de mantener relaciones sociales bien aceitadas," says writer Juan Villoro, "la búsqueda de un consenso, no entendido como llegar a acuerdos para una causa común, sino como pactos de beneficio mutuo entre grupos rivales" (13). Aversion to conflict grows into complicity and servility, "obediencia que lleva a niveles de cortesanía, servilismo y corrupción cada vez mayores. El jefe nunca se equivoca y hay que agradar al jefe como sea," says politician Marcelo Ebrard, ex head of government of Mexico City (18). "Tampoco es obediencia; es sumisión. De ahí el: '¿Qué hora es? La que usted diga, Señor Presidente.' Es sumisión disfrazada de disciplina," opines journalist Joaquín López-Dóriga (167).

The interviewees conceptualize political practices in Mexico with many symbolic comparisons, such as the chain of complicities, chain of corruption, mafia, and the army. Roberto Gil Zuarth, the president of the Senate (2015-2016), explains them as a food chain: "Es como una suerte de cadena alimenticia, en la que hoy eres charalito, creces, asciendes, te disciplinas y quizá mañana te toque algo, pero si te indisciplinas, es casi seguro que no te toque mañana" (30). Writer Sabina Berman compared corrupt authority with a drinking and cheating father, which the mother scolds but welcomes when he shows up: "el padre mujeriego, borracho, que tiene otras familias, que se ausenta de la casa y se va de juerga y todo mundo en casa se queda muy enojado. Después regresa y entonces la mamá dice 'no vayan a ofender a su papá porque es el dador de todo', y se le recibe sonriente. Ése es nuestro sistema político y ésa es la correspondencia entre los ciudadanos y ese padre

corrupto" (186). There is a common feeling that the practices of complicity permeated society and became a "código político pragmático, de entender al servicio público como un espacio de enriquecimiento" (144), "códigos de reglas no escritas" (78), "un código muy priista sobre qué se puede decir y qué no" (104), "práctica legitimada en el ejercicio del poder" (139), "práctica aceptada" (190), "práctica cultural cotidiana" (122), "ciertos modos y comportamientos propios del partido permear[on] en el resto de la sociedad" (189).

In the next section, I examine several Mexican films in which clients eagerly kiss the hands of the powerful patrons to symbolically adhere to the system of corrupt loyalties.

Clientelism in Luis Estrada's films

Luis Estrada's four mordant dark comedies chronicling the 2000 transition to democracy attracted enormous audiences in Mexico (the fifth film, *Que viva México*, will be released in 2023). *Dictadura perfecta* (2014) was the highest grossing Mexican film of the year and the third-highest grossing film of all time in Mexico. In the film, a national TV channel shows security camera footage in which a corrupt governor sniffs with delight wads of banknotes from a briefcase presented to him by a friendly criminal. The program anchor sternly declares that no matter to what party corrupt politicians belong, the channel will reveal their true colors. However, this is all just a ploy to establish a patron-client relationship with the corrupt governor. When he comes to the capital to demand explanations, the executive sternly restates the channel's "único compromiso con el televidente y sobre todo, con la verdad." The governor knows what this means and opens a briefcase full of dollars with sly smile, saying "¡No me diga que no hay otra manera de hacer las cosas!" (20:49) The executive sternly asks whether the money is offered as a bribe or as a donation to the channel's foundation. "¡Claro que estos dineros son para la fundación!" exclaims the governor, delighted to learn this new name for a

bribe (22:08). The executive then recalls the channel's second *compromiso*, this time meaning a commitment to "entregar las mejores cuentas a nuestros accionistas," and sells the governor the channel's "premium package" of public image improvement for some twenty million dollars. The executive's commitment to democratic transparency is just a ploy: he seeks to establish a patron-client relationship with corrupt and rich politicians for the mutual benefit of both parties.

The executive's young apprentice Carlos is instrumental in perpetuating this system. He will do anything to please his patrons, the channel's executive and the corrupt governor, in order to become patron in his turn. He organizes a kidnapping of two twin girls from an upper-middle-class family with the help of an army general. The channel crew turns this news story into a sensational telenovela, in which the corrupt governor plays the part of the children's rescuer. The charismatic Damián Alcázar portrays the governor and relishes the depravity of his character who bribes, plots, murders, and delivers campaign lines such as "Si me dan su confianza y trabajamos juntos, en el futuro no muy lejano nuestro México puede cambiar!" with the same bright big smile on his face (2:05:20). Carlos hands over to the governor the leader of the opposition, an honest man who turns to him for help and pays with his life for trusting in democracy. At the film's conclusion, the corrupt governor becomes president of Mexico. He accepts the presidential sash from his predecessor (who looks very much like Enrique Peña Nieto). The parents of the girls are happy too, because the channel offered their girls parts in a telenovela. The running caption congratulates the nation that this important step towards the new Mexico took place, again, in such remarkable "paz y harmonía" (2:17:16) The message of this concluding scene is that democracy in Mexico is a simulacrum, just as it was during the seven-decade rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The "perfect dictatorship" of the title signifies the patron-client relationship between the media and the politicians which superseded the PRI.

In fig. 1 the corrupt governor is accepting congratulations from his henchmen, the police chiefs. The governor's aid who calls him "Padrino" kisses his hand, while the officials seem to be standing in line to do the same, like peons, but also like members of organized crime.

Fig 1. Still from *La dictadura perfecta*, henchman kisses the hand of the Padrino (1:19:49)

Estrada pioneered the theme of apprenticing with a corrupt patron in the first film of the tetralogy, *La ley de Herodes* (1999), before the elections of 2000. The attempts of the PRI and of the right wing of the PAN to sabotage the film had the opposite effect of attracting viewers to theaters. The director said that the film foreshadowed "una sensación colectiva de un enorme malestar, de un hartazgo" of the priista culture (Estrada, "Todos llevamos un priista adentro" 107). The hero, a good-natured janitor, is surprised to find out he is appointed interim mayor of a rural community in 1949. He arrives there brimming with enthusiasm and ideas, to discover that the box with the funds for the municipality is empty. His patron, the party boss, explains that it is up to him to find the funds and provides him with the party badge, a gun, and a copy of the Constitution. The new mayor rewrites laws to extort money from

the townsfolk until they rebel and try to lynch him, like they had done with his predecessor. The protagonist narrowly escapes. He is promoted in the party hierarchy and becomes a patron in his turn. In his speech at the Congress, he declares that the PRI must remain in power forever.

Estrada's next film, *Un mundo maravilloso* (2006) was released six years after the beginning of the transition. Democratization and frequent anti-corruption campaigns did not decrease corruption. On the contrary, the disintegration of old networks of domination and neoliberal reforms coupled with privatization of state companies and services created opportunities for rent-seeking officials. The film satirizes the cynical neoliberal policymakers of Vicente Fox's government and marvels at the readiness of the people they impoverished to please them. The new head of the Department for the Economy cuts subsidies and public sector jobs and argues that to fight poverty one should simply wait until the poor starve. A good-natured homeless man (Damián Alcázar) becomes the symbol of opposition to neoliberalism, much to his surprise. One night, he climbs on the rooftop of the Mexico City's World Trade Center building to sneak into a hotel room below to spend the night there but is discovered by the police and the media. When the journalists pressure him to confirm that he was protesting the new austerity measures, the hero answers with a sly smile, "Si usted dice que sí, pues sí; si usted dice que no, pues no" (28:51). Government officials promise him money and a house, so he declares his support of the government reforms. After that, the hero is thrown in jail. His new cheaply built house collapses on itself. The film ends with an oneiric sequence: the hero and his other homeless friends kill a nice family who were kind to them and are shown eating and enjoying themselves in its comfort and décor in slow motion, with dreamy faces. Sayak Valencia has explained this dynamic in *Gore Capitalism*. Neoliberalism and globalization made many people redundant and convinced them that they should look for happiness in consuming more and more things. This is when people become what she calls

"endriago subjects" – they entrepreneurially engage in crime and killing, to be not a victim but a successful subject (26). What they seek cannot be obtained by working because there is no more honest well-paying work, so "endriago subjects" have recourse to necroempowerment (crime and killing), just like the characters of *Un mundo maravilloso*.

Another good-natured person who enlists to serve a corrupt patron is the protagonist of *El infierno* (2010). After having been deported back to Mexico from the US, the hero discovers that drugs are now his town's sole business. The city mayor, the chief of police, and top antinarcotics agents and officers run errands for the local drug lord. The hero begins working as a mechanic but cannot say no when his childhood friend recruits him to work for the drug cartel with him. In fig. 2 the mayor promises that he and his *compadre* the police chief that will do everything to make the drug lord happy, after which they take turns to kiss his hand to take their leave. Earlier, when the hero (Damián Alcázar) was presented to the drug lord, he also kissed his hand, thus

Fig. 2. Still from *El infierno*, police chief and city mayor kiss the drug lord's hand (1:29:42).

sealing his employment contract. The *compadres* call the drug boss Don José, but his workforce call him *patrón*, and if referring to him, his wife, and his son, *patrones*. In other words, in the film, the drug business is run like a hacienda of old, a patriarchal institution with a clear chain of command. All characters are bonded to the patron's household, like peons.

All Estrada's films feature a protagonist who cannot say no to a corrupt patron and who gradually assents to his ever more immoral requests. He is willing to tweak and disregard laws and moral rules for the sake of this patron to get ahead in life, but he either ends up losing everything or he becomes a new boss thus perpetuating the system of corrupt loyalties. The filmmaker argues that nothing will change as long as clientelism remains an accepted practice. Clientelism fosters collusion, nepotism, and obstruction of justice and impairs the rule of law and government accountability. The popularity of Estrada's comedies suggests that the audiences too came to question clientelism as acceptable form of social interaction. In an interview Estrada says he is surprised to be the first filmmaker to look at the power structures in Mexico with the expectation that they must be transparent and accountable:

> It's a curious thing: *Herod's Law* was the first film in the history of Mexican cinema that spoke about the PRI and the corruption and impunity that surrounded its reign for 70 years. *Dictadura perfecta* is the first film in the history of Mexican cinema that satirizes the president. This sounds weird. Because in any real democracy – and we'll talk about whether this country is really a dictatorship or a democracy or what – this is something common, everyday (Estrada, interview by Partlow).

Estrada explains that democracy in his view means holding the powerful accountable rather than seeking favors. Estrada says, "I'm not a political scientist, I'm not an analyst, I'm not a politician. I'm a film director, a screenwriter, who works with fiction, who works with satire... I'm also a

citizen. I'm also a person who has been worrying about this country and trying to understand it for many years. I'm passionate about history" (interview by Partlow). Framed as a story, Estrada's criticism of clientelistic practices reaches wide audiences, as Álvaro Cueva points out: "No es lo mismo ver a un intelectual con voz engolada atacar a una televisora en un programa de un canal universitario que ver a un actor interpretando al conductor del noticiario nocturno más importante de México manipulando a sus fuentes" (Cueva). Estrada lamented that corruption "se ha vuelto parte no nada más de nuestra cultura, sino de nuestra idiosincrasia, de nuestra manera de entender la realidad" and said he made *Dictadura perfecta* because he had become a father and felt a responsability towards future generations ("Unos llevan un priista en el corazón" 107). The ritual of obedience and hand-kissing reveals that clients experience their submission to a powerful figure viscerally and intimately, without thinking, but also as an act of loyalty and submission that needs to be physically performed. I will now focus on this physical submission in the two film adaptations of novels written many years before the transition.

El crimen del padre Amaro (1875; 2002)

This film was nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar in 2002. It was the biggest box office draw ever in Mexico, attracting over 800,000 viewers on the first weekend. It met with fierce criticism from Roman Catholic groups in Mexico who called it "una obra cargada de odio hacia nuestra Santa Iglesia, [que] ofende y agrede al Papa, al sacerdocio," and from the conservative PAN government (Aznárez). Interestingly, unlike the brutish hypocrite of the original Portuguese novel, the film's protagonist is a weak-willed youth with good intentions. Although he commits all the heinous crimes of his novel counterpart and more, he does it because he cannot say no to corrupt patrons. Carlos Carrera, who directed the film, wanted a likable Amaro and looked for an actor "que proyectara bondad." Gael García Bernal too looked for ways to

love the priest who broke most of the commandments he was to play: "fue buscar la forma de querer a su personaje para identificarse con él... Gael es un buen tipo en la vida real, y necesitaba por lo menos alguna justificación para vivir su personaje" (Carrera, interview by Fernández). Father Amaro became a relatable and ordinary person in this film, because the director "just wanted to portray the moral descent of a character, which is something that could happen to any of us" (Carrera quoted in Rodríguez 62). Critic Luis García Orso empathized with the hero and found his missteps relatable and common. People like Father Amaro "nos reflejan a todos algo de nuestro propio itinerario humano... hombres con ilusiones y con tentaciones, con las alegrías de su ministerio y las tristezas de sus errores, que sienten el dolor de los otros, la enfermedad, la soledad, la atracción sexual, la confusión, la ceguera del poder y la ambición" (Orso 101). But critic Stanley Kauffmann is indignant that the character gets away with his crimes: "And for all these aberrant actions, what does he suffer? Nothing. Hawthorne's Dimmesdale ends with exposure and death. Father Amaro just goes on being a priest, apparently in the belief that expiation lies in priestly service, as before" (24). The film gives clientelism a human, sympathetic face through its main character, and shows that it leads to moral perdition, of both the hero and the community.

Eça de Queirós, the Portuguese author of the 1875 novel, did not intend for his readers to feel any sympathy for his hero. Amaro is a violent and hypocritical scoundrel from beginning to end. He joins other corrupt priests who masquerade as Portugal's spiritual leaders and make sure the country lags behind its more progressive neighbors Spain and France. After graduating from the seminary, Amaro arrives in Leiria, a town in central Portugal. Amaro realizes that as a priest, he is important and powerful. Rich widows generously reward the attention he gives to their perverse religious fantasies. Violent and lustful, often compared to a raging bull, Amaro finds priestly duties and abstinence morbid. Realizing that his mentor canon Dias lives with his

widowed landlady, Amaro quickly seduces the landlady's teenage daughter, Amalia. When she gets pregnant and threatens to tell everyone to convince him to marry her and keep the baby, he gives her a beating. He sends her away to give birth in secret and takes his newborn son to a sham foster mother who regularly kills her charges. Amalia soon dies from grief. Amaro does not attend her funeral and moves to the capital. He jokes with canon Dias that he now only has affairs with married women. Amaro and Dias lead the entire nation to moral and intellectual degradation, as showed in the ending, when they meet a nobleman and politician who thanks them for keeping Portugal out of trouble, away from "the dirty rabble of freemasons, republicans, socialists" (351). "Look at this peace, this prosperity, this contentment! Other countries envy us while we have respectable clergymen like you," and both priests reply, "Without doubt" (351). The author of the novel, Eça de Queirós, had worked in the town of Leiria as a municipal councilor while he was writing his novel, and was under the influence of French realists: "politicians sickened him; priests were repellent; the bourgeoisie, uncouth" (Mónica 53). At the time of writing the novel, Eça de Queirós believed that his country lagged behind its neighbors, with such events as the Commune of Paris in France in 1871 and the overthrow of the monarchy in Spain in 1873.

So we are all the more puzzled to see Father Amaro become such a complex human being, seeking love and friendship in Carrera's Mexican adaptation a hundred years later. Gael García Bernal plays him with his trademark ambiguity (Iñárritu said about him that he has "una cara de niño bueno que podía ser un hijo de la chingada"). His Amaro is likable and disarming in his selfish weakness. The opening scene shows that he means well and intends to help people as a good priest should. As he rides the bus to his new parish, he listens compassionately as an old man next to him tells him about his plan to open a business with his savings. When the bus is held up by robbers who take the old man's savings, Amaro gives him some of his money. Additionally, Amaro

genuinely admires the film's only good priest, Natalio (Damián Alcázar), and even tears up when he takes leave of him to return to his corrupt but powerful patron the bishop. He thus appears to be a man with high values and moral ideals. Amaro also appears to really love his Amelia (played by Ana Claudia Talancón). He frantically drives the bleeding girlfriend to the hospital after the back-alley abortion (which he made her undergo) and weeps disconsolately when she dies on the way. In the last scene, a transfixed and trembling Amaro, with tears streaming down his face, begins the burial service for Amelia with a contrite expression of grief: "I confess before God and before you, brethren, that I have sinned greatly" (1:52). The congregation intone Amaro's prayer. They have no idea that Amaro is confessing to having caused Amelia to die and is asking for their forgiveness. Amaro appears frightened and profoundly repentant. But it is also he who spread the rumors that Amelia's pregnancy was her former boyfriend's doing, and that he tried to save her.

Unlike his novel counterpart, Amaro is a weak man who intended to be a good priest to his parish. The director explained that this was his purpose: "En la novela ya tiene el alma corrupta... En la película nos interesó plantear la caída moral del personaje. Amaro llega con buenas intenciones," "se convierte en un sobreviviente de las estructuras del poder, y pues hace todo lo que hace con tal de mantener su posición," "a la primera tentación sucumbe" (Carrera, "El conflicto"). Indeed, Amaro cannot say "no" to his desires or to a corrupt patron. Each time he chooses something that is wrong, he knows it, and his face expresses an almost physical discomfort. He sees that his mentor, Father Benito, lives with a woman, but instead of confronting him, he starts his own affair with that woman's daughter. Amaro knows that Father Benito attends parties given by the local drug lord and is building his dream top-of-the-line community hospital with the drug money. But when this information appears in the local newspaper and the bishop asks him to make them publish a retraction, Amaro cannot say "no" to the bishop (Ernesto Gómez

Cruz, who played another corrupt patron, the drug boss, in *El infierno*). The bishop also sends Amaro to threaten the good priest, Father Natalio, with excommunication because he supports his parishioners who they fight off drug traffickers. The bishop, who receives money from the traffickers, casts the peasants and Natalio as anti-government guerrillas. Amaro tells him, "¡Es la orden de tu obispo! ¡Le debes obediencia!" and is amazed to see Natalio laugh in his face and say, "Le debo obediencia a Dios y a mi gente" (49:38). Amaro knows that Natalio is the only good priest he has ever met. He even makes a half-hearted attempt to defend Natalio before the bishop. But when the bishop hints that he picked him as his successor, Amaro cannot say "no" to such an enticing offer and such a powerful patron. In fig. 3 we see Amaro kiss bishop's hand, and in fig. 4 Amelia kisses his.

Fig. 3. Still from *The Crime of Father Amaro*, Amaro kisses the bishop's hand (44:29).

Fig. 4. Still from *The Crime of Father Amaro*, Amelia and Amaro (17:50).

Amaro's mentor Father Benito is also earnest and sympathetic unlike his Portuguese predecessor, the cynical canon Dias. He wants his parishioners to have a hospital and sees no ethical problem in accepting drug money for this noble objective. This plot line is based on facts. In 2005, when the Pope expressed concern over reports that the Mexican Church accepted money from drug traffickers, bishop Ramón Godínez Flores objected that Jesus did not ask Mary Magdalene where she got the money to purchase the expensive perfume with which she washed his feet. A noble purpose can transform money, said the bishop: "No porque el origen del dinero sea malo hay que quemarlo. Hay que transformarlo, más bien. Todo dinero puede ser transformado, como una persona corrompida se puede transformar" (Bañuelos). Unlike his Portuguese counterpart, Father Benito genuinely loves the woman he lives with, Amelia's mother. Amelia is his daughter, and he tries, unsuccessfully, to protect her from Amaro. At Amelia's funeral, Benito is the only person who knows that

Amaro is the cause of his daughter's death. In a wheelchair from a heart attack caused by suffering, he storms out of the church unable to watch Amaro hold a service for her. Benito, like Amaro, started with good intentions, but associating with corrupt patrons he accomplished the opposite of what he wanted to do. Compare this remorseful and suffering character to his callous novel counterpart, canon Dias, who begins hitting on Amalia after learning about her affair with Amaro.

Novelist and playwright Vicente Leñero who wrote the script of this adaptation (and also for Estrada's *La ley de Herodes* discussed above) often criticized clientelistic relationships during the PRI rule. Newspapers were clients of the government because "el gobierno era dueño hasta del papel. No se podía hacer un periódico si no te daban el papel. Entonces el periodismo hacía ciertas concesiones, algunas muy corruptas, como el vender por un tanto las ocho columnas de un periódico" (interview with Day 19). In order to get access to paper and resources, newspapers published pro-government content for a fee, "como si fueran anuncios." Business owners were also clients of the government, and if the government punished a newspaper by withdrawing its paid content, so did business advertisers: "en ese entonces el gobierno y la sociedad empresarial estaban muy unidos. Cuando el gobierno dice 'le voy a quitar la publicidad,' yo no me voy a enemistar con el gobierno. Los que anunciaban el whisky fulano no querían enemistad. Si el gobierno quitó sus anuncios del *Proceso*, yo también voy a quitar los míos" (interview with Day 20). Note the amicable, routine, it-goes-without-saying nature of these relationships, which the writer calls "pequeñas traiciones, pequeñas compras ideológicas o mentales o personales que es muy difícil calibrar o valorar" (interview with Day 20). Leñero pointed out that the Mexican Catholic Church met the film with such hostility precisely for showing that it is structured as a clientelistic pyramid: "Lo que enojó a la jerarquía eclesiástica y a sus acólitos fue la denuncia del crimen del mentado poder, que convierte a un sacerdote

leal en párroco, a un párroco leal en obispo, a un obispo leal en cardenal…" (interview with Cherem 18).

The director who likes to make films about very "ordinarios y comunes" people (Carrera, interview by Fernández), and the scriptwriter, incensed by corrupt relationships, came together to show clientelism as understandable but unacceptable. Submitting to corrupt patrons does help avoid conflicts and achieve goals but also insidiously corrupts the individual and the community. This is what Father Benito realizes – too late, at the end of his life, as he watches Amaro, the younger version of himself, repeat every mistake he had made and worse. The despair in Benito's eyes indicates that Amaro's apprenticeship is complete. Amaro became a bad father for his congregation, and with him in charge, they are probably even worse off. He too is a "sujeto endriago," like the characters of Estrada's films: he does not make mistakes in choosing the right patron. Now he is kissing the bishop's hand, soon many other people will have to kiss his.

***Arráncame la vida* (1985; 2008)**

This adaptation offers a more positive outlook on the prospects of democracy and resistance to patronage networks in Mexico. In this film, the heroine confronts her corrupt patron with the agency and resolve that her novel counterpart entirely lacks and makes resolute attempts to push away the hand she is supposed to keep kissing. The book heroine, Catalina, was only fifteen when she met and married Andrés, a man twice her age, the governor and cacique of the state of Puebla. The husband treats Catalina like a child, takes many mistresses, manipulates elections, and has his opponents killed. Then he arranges an attack on the man Catalina falls in love with, musician Carlos. Carlos, a childhood friend of Andrés, tells him that caciques like him should stop rigging elections and let people choose freely who they really want. Andrés has Carlos killed and hypocritically announces at his funeral that

he fell victim to "los que no quieren que nuestra sociedad camine por los fructíferos senderos de la paz y la concordia" (229)—peace and harmony is the PRI's signature line. Catalina does not dare to openly mourn Carlos. She has never confronted her husband before because she found submission to be more rewarding. Instead, she lashes out at the dead lover: "¿Por qué se metía en política? ¿Por qué no se dedicaba a dirigir su orquesta, a componer música rara, a platicar con sus amigos poetas y a coger conmigo? ¿Por qué la fiebre idiota de la política?" (216) She has his tomb filled with the flowers her lover admired when they made love in the field the day before, and she throws some in herself, snapping, "Ya tienes tu tumba de flores, imbécil" (229).

Catalina was too young to understand who Andrés was when she married him, but she does not leave him when she gradually discovers how cruel and corrupt he is. She chooses subordination and in return, has access to wealth and social status. When she finds out Andrés ordered the massacre of indigenous peasants to seize their lands, she demands an expensive horse; when she moves to Mexico City, she demands a historic building to remind her of her hometown; when her daughter's boyfriend is found dead because Andrés wants her to marry someone else, both the daughter and Catalina demand a Ferrari. She makes one half-hearted effort to leave him. She boards the bus to return to her parents' house but does not like to be surrounded by uncouth peasants carrying chickens; she gets off the bus and returns home, feeling relieved (55). She pities herself, but she is a dutiful client. She even composes speeches for her husband, portraying him as a caring leader, with lines such as "Estaré siempre al servicio de todos ustedes, aquí y fuera de aquí, como funcionario y como simple ciudadano. ... con el deseo de velar por la tranquilidad y el progreso de nuestro querido estado" (273).

The Catalina of the novel would do anything to avoid confronting her husband and she slowly decomposes under his corrupting influence. He dissimulates, and she does too. He takes mistresses, she takes lovers. He neglects

the children, and so does she. Some critics interpreted her abandoning the children as a sign of feminist resistance (Lavery 204; Bailey 140; Bodevin 166), but I believe that this abandonment comes with the clientelistic relinquishing personal responsibility and agency. After the death of Carlos, Catalina drifts in depression and lethargy, and indifferently takes another lover. It is only a coincidence that she comes into possession of a means of liberating herself of Andrés. A wife of a peasant Andrés had killed seeks revenge and brings her leaves of a poisonous plant which cures headaches but kills if taken for too long. But Catalina does not act until she sees that Andrés is down on his luck. His corrupt dealings were leaked to the public, the current president of Mexico picks someone else to succeed him, and he begins suffering from headaches. This is when Catalina begins serving him the poisonous tea. She watches him getting weaker and weaker every month, all the while sharing her bed with him and writing his speeches. The night of his death, she lays down at his side, reassuring him that he will get better soon, while mumbling under her breath, "Ya muérete" (281).

Ángeles Mastretta said that the film's scriptwriter found it difficult to understand Catalina's clinging to such a corrupt and cruel patron:

> La mujer que estaba haciendo el guion venía y me decía: "Pero es que yo no comprendo que esta mujer pueda seguir viviendo con este hombre que ella cree que mató a su amante, ¿cómo puede seguir con él?" Yo le digo, pero es que si no entiendes eso, no has entendido a este personaje. Este personaje no soy yo. Yo no me hubiera podido quedar a vivir allí, pero ella no soy yo. Ella no tenía más remedio que vivir allí y ella sabía eso desde el principio del libro porque ella se va de su casa y se regresa. No aguanta un día fuera, o sea, ella se sube a un camión y ve que no y se dice: "¿qué vida es ésta?" y se regresa. Ella no tiene fuerzas para irse ni para luchar en contra y ella lo sabe. (Mastretta, "La escritura" 332)

Mastretta portrayed the corrupt patron, Andrés, as "charismatic, enchanting, funny, and full of life" (Mastretta, "Women" 37). She described Andrés "como cualquier cacique y como cualquier dictador," as a magnet of everyone's irrational affection, "a pesar de ser así de arbitrario y de devastador con otros, la gente lo quería y a la gente le gustaba" (Mastretta, "La escritura" 332). Andrés stands for the long rule of the PRI in Mexico, and Catalina represents the people's readiness to submit to a powerful patron, even when he treats them cruelly. Mastretta said that the novel is about "los malos hábitos de hacer política que aún padecemos" (Mastretta, "Entre la aventura"). The director and the actor also understand the story as a metaphor of Mexico's recent history. Daniel Cacho, the actor who played Andrés, pointed out that these corrupt practices shaped today's Mexicans: "se ve el nacimiento de cómo se forja nuestro sistema y cómo se van sembrando las semillas de la degradación que vivimos actualmente," "somos hijos del fraude, de la simulación, de la impunidad" (Caballero). Roberto Sneider, who directed the adaptation, added that Catalina "ama los beneficios que le trae el poder que sustenta" – she enjoys the favors she receives in exchange for her complicity. Sneider states that this practice endures: "nos reconocemos en esos personajes y terminamos por descubrir de qué forma somos cómplices de que ese tipo de relaciones exista hasta nuestros días, tanto en el terreno amoroso como el político" (Sneider). Just like Carlos Carrera, the director of *The Crime of Father Amaro*, Roberto Sneider insists that this behavior is deeply ingrained, completely understandable, and entirely damnable.

In the film, Catalina (Ana Claudia Talancón) also falls under the physical spell of her husband. Andrés (Daniel Cacho) forces himself on her with kisses and jokey slaps on her buttocks (fig. 5) which she interprets at first as love. Catalina also loves her privilege and wealth: just like Amaro and the characters of Estrada's films she is another "sujeto endriago," an entrepreneurial woman determined to rise in society, no matter the cost. She does not want to live her

Fig 5. Still from *Arráncame la vida.* Andrés slaps Catalina to speed her up (15:23).

life like the rest of the regular poblanos and agrees with Andrés that they are all "pendejos" (3). But in the film, she actually becomes confrontational much sooner. She remains with her husband out of fear because he threatens to kill her if she leaves him. In the scene where she boards the bus to leave Andrés, his murderous bodyguard compels her to return. This is not at all the situation in the novel, where Catalina is free to leave at any time, but has no desire or resolve to leave. In comparison, Catalina is not the same materialistic character in the film: we do not see her demanding horses, Ferraris, or other luxury items in exchange for subordination. And of course, she never takes another lover after Carlos dies, a marked departure from the original novel. She is unafraid and openly weeps over the body of Carlos, kicks Andrés out of her bedroom, and does not sleep with him ever again. This Catalina is so resolved that she seeks out poisonous herbs to avenge Carlos and she personally exerts justice. She poisons Andrés at the apogee of his might, as he prepares to assume the presidency, thus relieving herself and the entire nation from this corrupt man. Sánchez Prado has argued that this film is "uninteresting" and that it "erases Mastretta's subtle critique of the PRI regime" (111). And yet, is it not of the

utmost interest that the heroine of the film adaptation no longer wants to kiss the hated hand?

The films examined here show a binding physical rapport with a powerful patron, a performance of subservience and power hierarchies masked as friendship and kinship. This rapport is modeled on the feudal bondage of peons to a paternalistic patron from the not-so-remote times of debt servitude, where peons obeyed and worked for the patron in exchange for "protection." Socialized into the contemporary version of this social practice, known as clientelism, people find it natural to have a patron and give over to them their political agency. It is the clients' eagerness or perceived need to comply with a corrupt patron and enlist in his service that all these films expose and show as immoral. As we watch the films, we feel a desire to tell these people "Stop, don't do that!" as they prepare to comply with their patron's next dishonest request. The films instill a visceral repudiation not only of the cordial and cruel patron, but also of his unreasonably servile clients as show the viewer's comments on the popular Internet Movie Data Base (IMDB). People who saw *La dictadura perfecta* found it difficult to laugh because it felt "too real," so that they felt "stuck" and "hurt." "I can't explain how I felt while watching the movie. Every single detail is so real that [it] hurts. I could simply replace the names of the characters with the names of real politicians. Our countries in South America [sic] are experiencing everything that is shown in the movie," says one viewer. "Too real," "too realistic," "a realistic window into Mexico," agree other viewers. Another impressed viewer opines that "every Latino person MUST watch this movie, and it should be watched in colleges" (*The Perfect Dictatorship*: User Reviews). *Arráncame la vida* also "feels so accurate" that the viewer thinks that "nothing has ever changed really." One viewer writes that at its packed premiere in Puebla, where the events in the film take place, "some nervous laughter could be heard" from "the members of the finest families of the region. You do guess what they thought of this portrait"

(*Tear This Life Out*: User Reviews). *El crimen del padre Amaro* compelled more than a hundred viewers to express how they felt. They say the film shows "how Mexico really is," "just the way it is in the real Mexico," "so realistic that it scares." The film has a physical impact –"disturbing," "powerful," "hard to watch," "shocking," "stuck in my mind," "wow," "everyone was walking out of the theater with a 'wow' face," "makes you think, makes you experience, like good movies do." The audience understands that these films are not about a corrupt governor, a wife oppressed by her husband, or a priest who fell in love—they understand these stories as metaphors for a society built on misplaced loyalties. The viewers come to understand that clients, too eager to accept the domination, are also to blame because their moral weakness perpetuates a corrupt system. Therefore, the viewers find it difficult "to know who to root for," the predatory husband or his complicit wife in *Arráncame la vida*, and cannot pity Amaro, because going along with the bad patron's requests "damages you until the day you lay to rest." "The so-called 'abused' are no better," sentences one viewer, "probably equally corrupt and greedy if they get the chance to be so" (*The Crime of Padre Amaro*: User Reviews). The films analyzed here offer a stern assessment of the post-PRI transition to democracy and the survival of patronage and clientelism in the neoliberal market framework. They instill a rejection of both the patrons *and* the clients –they compel us to imagine and occupy a higher moral ground and reject the corrupt system of patronage and its feudal practices as a whole.

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