In the photograph, José Zúñiga Pérez strides down a Mexico City sidewalk near the Zócalo. It is 1954. Filled out in middle age, he cuts a gallant figure in his fashionable cashmere suit this master tailor has sewn for himself (see figure 4.1). The Tardan hat and crocodile skin shoes he has purchased and treated with great care. He has modeled himself after those tall, dark, and handsome icons of film—Clark Gable, Errol Flynn, and Tyrone Power. He has watched how they move, gesture, smile, and seduce on screen. In his demeanor he exudes confidence. Erect and proud, he knows he is a participant in the creation of a new mass public in the teeming city.

In the 1920s, a bon vivant like José Zúñiga Sr. would have been derisively called a “fifi,” an effeminate, frivolous man, because of his attention to appearance and his love for entertainment, but in the 1950s, with the increased strength of the media, the markets, and the leisure industry, he was simply fashionable.1 Behind his public persona was a modern respect for the body. As noted, he brushed his teeth after he ate and bathed regularly. He took special care with his mustache and silkiened his hair with the famous cream Glostora advertised on the radio and in the newspapers. “Glostora exalts the personality,” ran the ad. “It reveals good taste and distinction.”2 He appreciated modern medicine, particularly after being cured of a nasty bout of syphilis. For him as for many, pleasure came to be linked—sometimes through bitter experiences—to new forms of discipline. Medicine and commerce, cinema, music, and radio pro-
grams promoted notions of health and beauty that melded into a general thrust toward a tempering of violent masculinity after decades of revolution and social turmoil. The romantic boleros he loved—of María Luisa Landín and Agustín Lara—consecrated feeling over physical conquest. The movies he watched suggested to him how much sexier was sexuality when artfully concealed and touched with affection, although one could sense—and José surely did—the violent sexuality that seethed within the characters played by Gable and Flynn.

Born in 1914, he had had a sad childhood—without a father, going barefoot and in tattered clothing, subject to a willful mother who apprenticed him at the age of twelve to a tailor. Later in life, he loved telling his sons how he and his friends had discovered the movies. As young boys, they had sacrificed the centavos they had for candy to buy the tickets, cheaply priced to attract a public. José sharpened his scant reading skills deciphering the subtitles of the silent films. More than the words, the images, effects, and action enthralled the children. They went to laugh,
tremble, and scream. Fixed on the oft-repeated “chase” animated by live band music from the pit, they shouted instructions to the beleaguered hero, “Watch out! They’re gonna shoot you! No, don’t go that way! Go that way!” They howled with laughter and froze in suspense as Billy the Kid sought to outmaneuver the sheriff who pursued him. The eerie scenes and mechanical wonders of German expressionist films terrified them: Siegfried’s battle with the huge dragon Fafnir the Great in Fritz Lang’s Die Nibelungen; the spooky sleepwalker Cesare’s kidnapping of the beautiful Jane in Robert Wiene’s Cabinet of Dr. Caligari; in Murnau’s Nosferatu the sight of the ship tossing at sea, driven only by the breath of the vampire after rats had infected the crew with the plague. When the diva tore off the mask of the Phantom of the Opera revealing a deformed monster, José and his friends flew out of their seats and ran screaming into the streets. The Man Who Laughs, Paul Leni’s 1928 adaptation of a Victor Hugo story set in seventeenth-century England, made them cry as they saw Gwynplain’s lip cut and frozen into a smile. The tears flowed down Gwynplain’s cheeks like the tears of the clowns the boys had seen in the circus. The endless ways Charlie Chaplin maneuvered his body enchanted them and so did his person, his humble origins and demeanor, his generosity and sense of justice. The Kid filled their hearts as Charlie the Tramp rescued an abandoned infant and raised him. Would that they had had such fathers!

The friends’ fascination shifted as their hormones surged. Rudolph Valentino and Ramón Novarro seduced them. The swarthy good looks of these romantic Latin heroes infused confidence and opened new possibilities for the poor, dark-skinned boys from remote Indian Oaxaca. The young tailors cut and sewed Valentino’s tight pants and gaucho shirts. They bought short black boots and curved their sideburns. They purchased the wildly popular Valentino sombreros put out by the Tardan Hat Company.

When in the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Valentino danced the tango, the young men picked up the dance. José learned to whistle ragtime, jazz, and other tunes he heard at the movies. His musician friends transposed his whistling into notes and played the tunes at the fiestas the boys organized. Dressed like Valentino, perfumed and combed, they performed the tango, Charleston, and foxtrot with barrio girls no more materially endowed than they but wearing their hair short and wavy and their dresses loose and flowing so that their bodies moved freely to the music. It was at these dances that José renewed his acquaintance with his childhood friend and future wife, Guadalupe Delgado.

The major political movements of the Mexican Revolution did not in-
fluence José. These engaged, benefited, and organized campesinos, service, and industrial workers. He was an artisan. A devout Catholic, he had no interest in the revolution’s campaign against the church. But neither was he a political Catholic. As noted, he paid no attention to the church’s censorship of popular entertainment. Although he did not share the intense dislike his sister Antonia expressed for the anticlerical Benito Juárez, neither did he revere the hero’s anticlericalism so central to the Revolution’s ideology. He respected him as a fellow Oaxaqueño and defender of the patria. But most of all, he adored Porfirio Díaz, the dictator overthrown by the Revolution and demonized by its rhetoric. For José, Díaz was a staunch patriot, the architect of national progress, and an illustrious Oaxaqueño.

Distant from the Revolution’s redemptive political mobilizations, José was nonetheless swept up in the energy of his times. If social, economic, and political turmoil led to movements of despair, anger, and militarization in other parts of the world, Mexico at the end of the 1930s entered an extended period of social and political pacification and demilitarization fueled by expanding economic opportunity. José Zúñiga imagined this opportunity. Like Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer*, he wanted to break out of his provincial and familial confines, follow his dreams, and improve his life. For this, he had come to Mexico City along with thousands of others. José lived in an authoritarian regime where elections were controlled, laws often arbitrarily applied and the police corrupted, independent political action discouraged, and censorship and repression common. Yet he did not consider himself unfree or his aspirations trounced. In Mexico City he never belonged to a union, where so many of the period’s political battles were fought. He remained a quasi-independent artisan, sewing men’s and later women’s clothing from his home workshop on contract from tailors and later small companies higher up on the chain of production and marketing in this complex, burgeoning industry. His notion of freedom had deep artisanal roots in Mexican history that translated well into Hollywood paradigms. For José, Hollywood modernized an old idea of freedom, introducing the notion of individual struggle for “success,” which meant “moving up.” José identified with Clark Gable as Rhett Butler in *Gone with the Wind* because he saw him fighting for his personal liberty against the chaos and wreckage of civil war and the capricious whims of a selfish, aristocratic woman. But he also admired that woman, Scarlett O’Hara, for her indomitable will and tenacity in navigating the same conditions of adversity and rapid change. He liked Joan Crawford because she was tough, beautiful, and hardworking in her rags-to-riches roles. And could she dance!
He loved *Scarface*, that first and most violent of Hollywood gangster films, in which Paul Muni played the intrepid Tony Camonte, modeled after Al Capone. The gangster fought his way from the bottom to the top of the Chicago crime rackets through personal charisma, manipulation, and endless gunfire. These were all—*Scarface*, Rhett Butler, Scarlett O’Hara, Joan Crawford’s many characters—successful conquerors, rebels against society, full of energy, often fighting outside and against law and convention. “It depressed him,” Pepe remembered, “when Scarface turned coward and surrendered himself to the police.” On the other hand, José loved Paul Muni when he played noble heroes who advanced “civilization”: the steadfast Juárez defending the patria against foreign invaders in William Dieterle’s *Juárez* (1938), Frédéric Chopin’s mentor in *A Song to Remember* (1945), and Émile Zola in *La vida de Émile Zola* (1937). These were all propagandistic antifascist productions of the Second World War. Muni fascinated him because of his versatility as an actor. What a feat of talent and superb makeup was Muni’s transformation from a struggling young writer to an aged bourgeois *hombre ilustre* in *The Life of Émile Zola!* And his character! His brave defense of a man (Alfred Dreyfus) wrongly convicted of a crime! Years later, Pepe told his father that Muni himself had been a committed democrat who stood up for freedom. “Maybe that’s why I liked him so much,” he replied.

José Zúñiga’s personal quest for liberty and plenitude unfolded in the context of the war and the years of opportunity that followed in Mexico City despite the problems of scarcity, censorship, and mounting Cold War paranoia. Ironically, wartime productions of films like *Juárez* and *A Song to Remember* strengthened his resolve and deepened his secular faith as a Mexican: they were stories of steadfast small nations resisting foreign conquest. He followed the events of the war in newsreels shown in Mexico City theaters, he had lived through the city’s blackouts, and he admired the Mexican Air Squadron 201 that flew in the Philippines. Probably, the Allied struggle for “democracy” moderated hostility he might have harbored against the United States as a perpetual invader of Mexico. In any case, he did not recognize the propagandistic intent of *Los Tres Caballeros*, the film Walt Disney made to strengthen Latin American support for the Allied cause. He considered it a “tribute to Latin America,” with its shots of Patagonia, the gaucho of the pampa, and the samba dancers in Bahia. He learned from it. “Mostly it pleased my father to see Mexico there—the beach at Acapulco, the canals of Xochimilco, the island of Janitzio in Lake Pátzcuaro, and the Tehuana beauty of his native Oaxaca singing the Sandunga he knew so well.” Pepe remembered,
“He told me what a pleasure it was to hear Dora Luz sing Agustín Lara’s “Solamente una vez,” so popular on the radio.”

Although the Zúñiga family’s living quarters in the Colonia Guerrero were dark and cramped and money was scarce in the 1940s, José knew well how to tap into the entertainment that was everywhere in the central city: movie theaters, radio stations, parks, boxing and bull rings, wrestling arenas, gyms, live theaters, nightclubs. He embraced its pleasures and its messages, and many of these he shared eagerly with his family. It was José’s cultural capital that made life for the family not just tolerable but exciting, enchanting, and promising. Every year he took the family to see *Holiday on Ice* at the auditorium in the upscale Colonia Roma. Here Disney stories and other Hollywood movies came alive in graceful skating, spectacular side effects of changing colors, smoke, fire, and snow, and the music of Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hammerstein, and Jerome Kern. In his son Pepe’s opinion, “These were exquisite moving paintings.” The family went regularly to the *lucha libre* matches. Although sectors of the middle and upper classes and even many in the popular barrios thought *lucha libre* violent, the Zúñiga family (like thousands of others) found it an immensely engaging art form.

Founded in Mexico City in 1933, the Empresa Mexicana de Lucha Libre commercialized an ancient sport, drawing thousands to the Coliseo and small arenas. In 1954, the Director of Physical Education of the Secretaría de Educación Pública, together with the president of the Confederación de Deportes Mexicanos, inaugurated the Nueva Arena, which could accommodate 20,000 fans. Although more liberal than Greco-Roman wrestling or jujitsu, *lucha libre* had its rules, holds, and maneuvers perfected by the best *técnicos* or *limpios*. These rules were made to be broken by the outrageous *rudos*, like the famous Cavernario Galindo, who moved in the ring like a caged panther and delighted in biting the foreheads of his opponents. The public supported the técnicos or the rudos, replicating metaphorically a real struggle in their daily lives between their sympathy for the rule of law and convention and their impulse to subvert and mock them in order to survive, enjoy, or push ahead. Técnicos like Tarzán López, Wolf Ruvinskis, and El Santo—well appointed in their elegant capes, agile, spectacularly prepared, and stoic in the face of crude abuse—fought off rudos like Murcielago Velázquez, who opened his cape to let loose a storm of bats. Once he climbed into the ring with a viper, killed it with his teeth, and then hurled its corpse into the stands. The rudo Gardenia Davis appeared dressed in a luxurious robe and with his valet, who combed his hair, sprayed him with perfume, and delicately
removed the robe. As the public screamed “¡Puto! ¡Joto!” Davis, with an arrogant smile and a gardenia in hand, exhibited his perfect musculature. “Then he would enter the ring and fight like a tiger,” Pepe laughed.

The Zúñiga family rooted for the técnicos, none more ardently than Lupe, who would jump to her feet waving her arms and hands, denouncing the umpire for bad rulings and shouting instructions to the wrestlers. “Hit him in the eye!” she screamed. Fans in the seats above shouted at her to sit down and shut up—and on one occasion dumped cups of urine on her head. Furious with his wife, José got up, grabbed the family, and snarled, “Let’s get out of here.” In these years, as new publics created themselves in interaction with the spectacle and with each other, the participants took measures to contain spectator involvement when it got out of hand. Traditionally, popular entertainment in Mexico City had been a rowdy space for attacking and mocking authority. Lucha libre, violent and raucous as it seemed to many, was by comparison a space of modern discipline that still left room for subversion; the audience regulated itself in its avid participation, while the wrestlers’ rules of engagement were as clear to all as the rudos’ attractive and hilariously outrageous negation of those rules.

The Zúñiga family returned many times to the matches. José Zúñiga bought the boys a scrapbook in which they pasted the wrestlers’ pictures. Its introduction instructed the children: “Thus, Mexican youth can follow the moves of la Lucha illustrated here and staying clear of bad inclinations, dedicate the majority of its time outside of study to practicing sports; only then will we forge a strong patria of which you will be very proud.” The boys could identify every wrestler and every move.

With strong support from his father and his mother, Chucho took up swimming and boxing. He swam at nearby pools and trained at a local gym. As an adolescent, he participated in the city’s golden gloves competition. He pursued sports in order to discipline himself, to please his parents, and to not turn out like his mother’s brother, the violent assassin Manuel. Pepe learned to swim and with his friends frequented the pools in the east of the city that were all the fashion with the young. But he never pursued sports. He did not accompany his father to the Friday night boxing matches at the Arena Coliseo. “Once in a while I would go to the bullfights with him,” Pepe noted. “I liked the candy, the popsicles, and the soft drinks. But, really, I found the spectacle brutal and boring.”

José took the whole family to the nearby Follies Bergere to watch the sensual dancing of the scantily clad Tongolele, whose picture he displayed in the apartment. Born Yolanda Ivonne Montes Farrington in Spokane,
Washington, she was, as noted, the first of the city’s “exotic dancers.” Combining mythic notions of Africa and Tahiti, she took the name Tongolele and, to Caribbean drums and the Hawaiian ukulele, she danced in a bikini, sometimes embellished with sleek, long gloves, sometimes with a sweeping tale of frilly feathers (see figure 4.2). Tongolele did not pull Lupe to her feet like the lucha libre wrestlers. Rather, she simply hung her head in shame. The children stared openmouthed. José was enraptured.

What Pepe liked most to do with his father was go to the movies. José Zúñiga was not a formally educated man. He had left school after third grade. But for José, as likely for many others, a sense of empowerment and dignity came from learning through accessible, noncondescending media and from teaching others through them. José saw the radio as one such medium. The movies were another. He was a true connoisseur of film and an enthusiastic teacher. As Lupe and Chucho fell asleep in the
movies, José Zúñiga took Pepe two or three times a week to one of the many theaters within walking distance of their vecindad: the Odeón, the Briseño, the Isabel, the Monumental, and the Capitolio. Often they would go afterward to one of the Chinese cafés on Santa María la Redonda Street or San Juan de Letrán Avenue, where they talked about the show over biscuits and café con leche.

José shared with Pepe his fascination with and understanding of cinematic techniques used to elicit fright, suspense, and wonder. At the Ciné Isabel, they watched the horrors of Frankenstein, Phantom of the Opera, Dracula, and the Wolf Man. Bela Lugosi’s gruesomely made-up Dracula terrified Pepe as the count morphed into a bat. The scariest was Frankenstein. As Pepe watched the huge monster come alive with fireworks of electricity exploding from his neck, the boy could not look. He buried his face in his hands.

Of course, these terrifying monsters were similar to those, like the Serpent Lady, he had seen at the fair in Oaxaca, but cinema created them with innovative techniques and performances that provoked stronger, new sensations mixing fright with pleasure. José explained to his son how Frankenstein had been put together. He talked of Lon Chaney’s laboriously applied makeup as the werewolf who prowled the dark Welsh countryside in The Wolf Man. Both father and son came to sympathize with some of these freaks—above all, the grotesque Quasimodo, who leapt from the tower of Notre Dame to save the beautiful Esmeralda from the gallows.

José saw cinema as a work of art—a study in plasticity, movement, and emotion—based on evolving technology. He talked to Pepe of the shift from silent film to sound. He admired Greta Garbo for her talent in making the transition. He quoted her famous line, “I just want to be alone,” which they heard her speak in Grand Hotel. José loved Garbo’s gorgeous and expressive face; he took Pepe to see Anna Karenina, Camille, and Ninotschka. He transferred to his son his awe at cinema’s ability to display, expand, deepen, enhance—rather than violate—the physicality and emotion of the human face and body.

Father and son loved Hollywood musicals for their sheer exuberance. They saw Show Boat and Rose Marie—Jeanette MacDonald’s singing reminded them of Lupe’s. They took in the extraordinarily choreographed dances featuring big bands, huge choruses, and endless, curving art deco staircases to tap up and down on—the many Busby Berkeley films in which the overhead camera captured the shifting squadrons of dancers, as marching soldiers, as buds opening into full flower—creating kaleido-
scopes of changing, glittering forms. Most of all, they loved Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, whom they first saw in the *Gay Divorcee* and *Top Hat*. Astaire was about “letting go”—bursting into tap anywhere and anytime—on a ferryboat, in a park kiosk, on the walls and ceilings of a hotel room, on a nightclub dance floor. When he danced with Rogers—to “The Continental,” to “Cheek to Cheek”—they were sublime. In his tails and top hat, he beckoned to her—a shimmering jewel of organdy, satin, ostrich feathers, and pearls. As he swept her into his arms, they moved with an aristocratic elegance in a conventional manner, although their bodies were more closely and loosely intertwined and their smiles spoke an intimate joy. Then they would burst out on their own over terraces of sleek glass. Their athletic bodies seemed to fly across the floor, gliding low, leaping high, circling round each other, his tails flying, her skirt twirling—every graceful movement captured by the traveling camera. Astaire and Rogers showed, writes historian Morris Dickstein, that class was not a question of birth or money but of style—a coming together of motion, energy, pleasure, and skill. In dance, they effected a transformation similar to that wrought by Agustín Lara in Mexican popular music. Like Lara’s boleros. the music Astaire and Rogers danced to—the compositions of Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, Cole Porter, and Irving Berlin—and the very tap dance at which Astaire excelled—owed their vitality to a once despised popular culture—in the case of the United States, to the African Americans and vaudeville, and in the case of Lara, to the brothels nestled in the city’s popular barrios like Guerrero and to the Afro-Cubans who had created the *danzón* and brought it to Mexico in modern ships, old boats, and the new recording industry at the end of the nineteenth century.

At the Ciné Mina, father and son watched Tarzan with Johnny Weissmuller and musicals like the *Glenn Miller Story*, *Rhapsody in Blue*, and the *Al Jolson Story* that inevitably repeated the tale of the immigrant or poor boy coming up from nothing and struggling to become somebody, usually a performing artist. These films were the equivalent for José Zúñiga and his son of the nineteenth-century bildungsroman, the bourgeois novel of male self-construction. They served as guides, models, and inspiration in their desire to mold themselves: to “become” and to “move up.” The George Gershwin story, *Rhapsody in Blue*, particularly touched Pepe: “The neighborhood in New York City where he grew up had even more people—poor people—than the Colonia Guerrero. The vitality of New York City, the traffic coming and going, the horns honking, the spectacle after spectacle of music—‘Swanee’! How my father loved Al Jolson!
All those Gershwin songs were in the film—‘S Wonderful,’ ‘Fascinating Rhythm,’ ‘Embraceable You,’ ‘I Got Rhythm.’ Then came the best—‘Rhapsody in Blue’ performed in the huge concert hall with the largest orchestra I’d ever seen. It began with that big, elegant swoop—then solos of the jazz instruments, the clarinets, the saxophones, trombones. There was even a banjo. Then Gershwin on the piano with that beautiful theme, I can only call it one of the most romantic pieces I have ever heard. The audience had been bored and skeptical, but by the end of the piece, they were clapping like mad and jumping to their feet. Then I wanted to hear more classical music. I wanted to be a pianist. Gershwin’s parents had helped him a lot even though they were poor. My parents would not have been able to pay for my lessons, but even so, I was just eight years old, and I wanted to be a pianist!”

There would be no piano lessons. There would be more movies. Father and son loved Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boyer in Gaslight, Humphrey Bogart in Casablanca and the Treasure of the Sierra Madre, and Norma Shearer in Marie Antoinette. They watched the adventure stories of imperial conquest of the world’s “lower orders,” full of deceit, black terror, magic, animal revenge, and occasional loyalty to their new white masters: Gary Cooper in Bengal Lancers, Robert Mitchum in White Witch Doctor, Cary Grant and Douglas Fairbanks Jr. in Gunga Din. “To view cinema,” said José to Pepe, “is to know more and more about life. More and more about the world.”

But what world? More than primary school and more than Cri-Cri, the movies created an ideological, historical world for Pepe—a romantic Eurocentric world. Hollywood films of dance, verve, and struggle in the United States did not create a sense of awe about the society to the north. Any admiration for the United States was tempered by films like the Mexican Las espaldas mojadas (The Wetbacks), which portrayed the miserable treatment of the Mexicans who migrated north. Hollywood film represented U.S. society as the present and future of an expansive “body and soul.” For viewers in many parts of the world, it created an encounter with a capacious, promising modernity. According to Hollywood film itself, the United States had little history and less “culture”—defined in modernist terms as art, literature, and refinement. If José Zúñiga Sr. had cut his teeth on German film, Hollywood movies continued to portray Europe as the center of history and culture, interpreting its literature and celebrating its heroes and heroines—The Hunchback of Notre Dame, Frankenstein, Camille, Anna Karenina, Marie Antoinette, Wuthering Heights, and others. The rest of the world existed for Europe’s conquest
(Africa and India); pleasure, intrigue, and subversion (Rio, Buenos Aires, and Acapulco); or as an example of exotic backwardness and tyranny (the Middle East and China).

Years later, Pepe would send his father endless postcards describing the old movies he was seeing in Paris and the places he visited that reminded him of the movies they had seen and conversation they had shared. “Knowing you like history,” he wrote in 1972, “I am sending you this postcard of the tomb of Napoleon. It gave me goose bumps to approach it and to remember this great man.” “Notre Dame reminded me of Charles Laughton and Maureen O’Hara in Victor Hugo’s novel,” he wrote in another.11 From Vienna, he sent him a postcard of Johann Strauss and wrote of their seeing together *The Great Waltz*, the 1938 film of the composer’s life. He also sent one with the portrait of the Empress Elizabeth, wife of Franz Joseph II, immortalized for Pepe in the movie *Sissi*, with Romy Schneider. He told his father he had trekked five hours through the Vienna woods to see the chapel where they married. He reminded his father that Franz Joseph was the brother of Maximilian, who had ruled Mexico. He noted the portraits he had seen of Elizabeth and Franz Joseph: “One cannot help but compare them with those of the archduke and his wife that hang in our Chapultepec Castle and form part of our history.”12

However, Pepe’s father exposed himself and his son to greater complexity rendered in film. A connoisseur of the medium as an art form, his taste was eclectic and ecumenical. Characterization fascinated him—the complex psychology of love, jealousy, vengeance, of surrender to love or to raw passion. He was as much interested in the adverse and the perverse as in the melodramas of glamour, success, and conquest. Not that these psychic aspects of human experience were new. Rather, cinema made them public and visible, open to the spectator’s exploration and reflection. José introduced Pepe to film noir and to Italian neorealist cinema. The noirs—films like *Dillinger*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*, *Laura*, *Murder, My Sweet*, *Crossfire*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*—were set in Los Angeles or San Francisco, sometimes Chicago or New York, on dark, slick streets lit by flashing neon signs, in smoky nightclubs, short-order restaurants, one-room walk-up apartments in cheap hotels with pull-down beds and hotplates, police headquarters, bleak train stations, or else in lonely beach houses, highway diners, and Lake Tahoe mansions stranded in dark woods. Noir characters were drifters and grifters, private eyes, femmes fatales, criminal gangs, crooked authorities—the police, the district attorney, the judge. Their props were guns, cigarettes,
trench coats, whiskey, molls, and strapless dresses. Their complicated plot structures captivated audiences as they emerged through flashbacks and the multiple narratives told by characters who knew, forgot, imagined, and lied. Tortuous dances of violence and sexuality in a world of betrayal and deceit, they were hard-boiled, hypermasculine films—brimming with misogyny, homophobia, and homosexuality muted by the censors. Their heroes, played by Humphrey Bogart, Fred MacMurray, Ray Milland, Dick Powell, Robert Ryan, and Robert Mitchum, were antiheroes—mature, not handsome, often passive, anguished, alone, alcoholic. Noir films brought tough, evil women to the screen—not just jaded prostitutes and gun molls but icy middle-class women ready to kill their husbands or lovers in order to move up, women who turned the conventional housewife upside down—like Lana Turner in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*. These films fascinated Pepe and his father.

Noir films were deliberately subversive, intended to challenge bourgeois ideology, particularly as this ideology was rendered in the Hollywood melodrama of “happy endings,” the triumph of good over evil, of sentimental humanism, and didactic moralizing. They were, according to James Naremore, popularly accessible expressions of high modernism: of surrealism’s attack on bourgeois convention, existentialism’s preoccupation with alienation, ennui, and gratuitous violence, of German expressionist cinematography; of modernism’s fascination with the primitive and its deprecation of the New Woman. European émigrés made many of the films and influenced their development—Murnau, Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, and Alfred Hitchcock. Pepe would study noir films much more carefully when he saw them in Paris, after sixties’ youth had turned them into art films in their redemption and canonization of popular culture.14

There were no children in noir films, just scheming adults looking for a way out of their traps, a way to game the system, or the opportunity to act out their rage. By contrast the Italian neorealist films José and Pepe saw were about children—De Sica’s *Bicycle Thief* (*Ladri de biciclette*), *Shoeshine* (*Sciuscià Ragazzi*)—caught with or without their parents in the grips of desolate poverty and an amoral struggle for survival in postwar Italy. These films were more explicitly focused on the poor, committed to the use of nonprofessional actors and to ethnographic documentation, in the spirit of Marxoid art after the Russian revolution. They captured the poor’s cannibalistic preying on each other and the indifference and brutality of the law and social institutions. When a youth steals Antonio’s bicycle, indispensable for the job he has finally managed to secure, he and
his son Bruno set out through the streets of Rome to find it, only to be har- 
assed and defeated by people like them and the police. In *Shoeshine*, an 
older brother and partner trick two innocent shoeshine boys, Giuseppe 
and Pasquale, into taking part in a robbery. Arrested and sent to a youth 
detention center, the boys’ fast friendship is broken by police manipula-
tion. Pasquale accidentally kills Giuseppe. Both films end in tears that 
reaffirm human love in the midst of moral and material squalor. In these 
films, as in those of the early Fellini and the work of Pier Paolo Pasolini—
all of which Pepe would enthusiastically see many times over—stories of 
abject tragedy are tinged with Christian humanism totally absent from 
film noir. In noir, there was no redemption.

Scenes, settings, and characters from these films could have been 
transposed to the Colonia Guerrero, with its undercurrent of violence, 
abusive sexuality, hustling, and illegality. Guerrero’s streets bred delin-
quency. The *vecindades* bred quarrels between and within families. Like 
Antonio’s wife in *The Bicycle Thief*, Guadalupe Zúñiga pawned precious 
belongings so the family could survive, and like Giuseppe and Antonio 
in *Shoeshine*, Nicolás was sent to reform school. In a conversation about 
these foreign films, a friend asked Pepe why he preferred them to Mexican 
films of poverty. Pepe responded: “If it’s what you see every day around 
you and you don’t like it, why would you want to see it in the movies? 
Why would you pay for that?” Then he complicated his response. He did 
not much like the series of Ismael Rodríguez, *Nosotros los pobres* and 
*Ustedes los ricos*, two iconic films of Mexican cinema in its Golden Age. 
These melodramas romanticized poverty in a corny way. Rodríguez, said 
Pepe, wanted to inflate the virtues of poverty according to his own fanta-
sies. “Pure fantasies! Why should a rich woman want to abandon all her 
comforts to go and live in a *vecindad* with the ‘virtuous’ poor as Mimi 
Derba’s character did in *Ustedes los ricos*? Maybe some people identified 
with Rodríguez’s films because they made them feel less screwed. But not 
me.” He continued, “For me living in a poor neighborhood like the Guer-
rero where they filmed a lot of movies, I didn’t want to see the poverty 
that surrounded us. I just didn’t want to see it. There were movies like 
*Prisión de Sueños* and *El Quinto Patio* filmed just behind our *vecindad*. 
Some people want to think there is dignity in poverty, but not me. In this 
period, I was entering adolescence and I wanted to continue studying. I 
wanted a career, I wanted to progress.” But despite his desire to “pro-
gress,” perhaps even because of it, he liked Buñuel’s classic film *Los olvi-
dados*, a brutal, quasi-neorealist representation of violence, betrayal, and 
abuse in the Cinturón de la Miseria (the belt of misery) near the Nonoalco
bridge, just a few blocks to the north of his home. He saw the film in 1952, when he was fifteen years old and was forming some critical judgment. His father disliked the film. “This cruelty cannot exist,” his father commented. “Yes,” responded Pepe. “This cruelty can and does exist.”

Father and son also differed in their opinions about Mexican actors. José Zúñiga Sr. admired the elegant and aristocratic Jorge Negrete, with his well-trained baritone voice. He thought that Negrete, like Fred Astaire, had “style.” But he had not much patience with Pedro Infante, a man of more humble origins and demeanor. Pepe liked Infante’s less theatrical, less academic, and less pretentious voice, as well as his versatility as an actor—he played the role of carpenter, boxer, policeman, vagabond, cowboy, priest, and the great composer of waltzes, Juventino Rosas. If Pepe disagreed with the message of *Nosotros los pobres*, he liked the music sung by its star Pedro Infante. Every Friday with Margarita, the then wife of his Tío Manuel, he went to the newsstand of Doña Inez to buy the weekly publication that carried the words of the songs then playing over the radio and in the movies. They learned all the songs of Pedro Infante and sang them in the vecindad for whoever would listen. One day they even saw Pedro Infante at XEW studios. He was there dressed in the uniform of the transit police to promote his latest film, *Atm*!

Negrete and Infante were macho men, always conquering women, but there was a difference between the proud, patriotic, sonorous bellowing of Negrete:

I am Mexican, my land is brave,  
Word of the macho, there’s no other land  
More beautiful and brave than my land.15

And the sweeter, more tender, and democratic song “Amorcito Corazón” that Pedro Infante sang as Pepe the carpenter in his overalls, T-shirt, and gymnast’s muscles, to his girlfriend Celia (Blanca Estela Pavón) in *Nosotros los pobres*:

Sweetheart,  
I want to kiss you,  
Lost in the warmth  
Of our great love,  
I want to be, just be with you,  
I want to see you in love  
To dream in the sweet sensation of your kiss,
Infante represented a masculinity in transition: superior to and conquering women but at the same time tender in his relations with them, with children, and with babies; proud and hard at times but capable of torrents of tears of grief; agile with horses but enamored of men’s modern technologies—the train, the motorcycle, the airplane.17

Pepe saw more cinema than his father, and he saw much of it differently. The sheer explosion of production, Technicolor, sound, special effects, and animation dazzled the boy and his cousin Nicolás. As they grew up, more and more cinema, above all from Hollywood, was made for children. Every Sunday after mass, the boys ran off to the matinees at the Odeón, Briseño, and Isabel theaters. At the Briseño, they saw the serial adventures of Flash Gordon, Tarzan, King Kong, Daughter of the Jungle, and Captain Wonder. Packed with children, the theater shook with their screams and the banging of their feet on the balconies’ wooden floors. An incredible energy drew all into the experience. They followed the escapades out loud as their fathers had. They helped the hero along, “Dale, dale . . .”—“Give it to him!” Children who had seen the film would narrate what was going to happen next. Some liked this information, and others told them to shut up. They would see the films in episodes that always ended on a note of suspense and danger that would bring them back to the theater the following Sunday. Then when the episodes concluded, the cinema would show them again as a single movie. The Flash Gordon episodes went on for three hours. “If you hadn’t eaten breakfast,” Pepe commented, “You went home with a big headache.”

Flash Gordon (Buster Crabbe) became Pepe’s hero. White and handsome, he captivated Pepe as he struggled valiantly against the elements, slaying a dragon, withstanding a shower of flaming meteors, escaping a flood, and always defending his girlfriend Dale (Dahlia to Mexican children) from the forces of nature and the evil emperor Ming from the planet Mongo. When Flash and his allies, zapping their flash guns, hurling their fists, and drawing their swords, took on the enemy, the children stamped their feet wildly. As the enormous spaceship, spewing fire into space, rose toward the stars to music from Tchaikovsky’s Romeo and Juliet, Pepe watched awestruck. The spaceship fascinated him. Its command center with its telephones for interplanetary communication and
its screens that showed the battles going on in space anticipated television long before Pepe saw one. With all its electronic fixtures, he found the ship more fascinating than a car. Flash Gordon inspired his childhood art. He fashioned a spaceship from a piece of aluminum. He drew the landscapes of the planets, filling them with rocks, seas, and castle, much as these were depicted in Flash Gordon’s adventures. “Flash motivated me to learn the position of all the planets at school. I learned them by drawing them. Saturn was my favorite,” Pepe recalled.

He would not have noticed at the time how these films were wartime (both hot and cold wartime) depictions of the defense of the West against foreign invaders. The evil Ming was an Oriental despot with slanting eyes who sat on a high throne watching undulating belly dancers. He commanded an advanced scientific establishment that experimented with mind-altering drugs aimed at exterminating intelligent humans held in concentration camps. Flash Gordon, the American, aimed to liberate the good people of Mongo—a motley assortment of European-looking soldiers, nobility, and damsels out of scenes stretching in historical time from Robin Hood’s Sherwood Forest to the near present.

From the time Pepe first heard the radio and saw a movie, the technology of sound and image enchanted him. He thought he was witnessing magic as he listened to the voices and music come out of the Philco box. He turned it around and saw the flashing bulbs. Maybe, like the genie coming out of Abu’s bottle in The Thief of Bagdad, the sound came from the bubbling bulbs. Entranced by the magical effects of The Thief of Bagdad and Abu’s genie, in Oaxaca Pepe had made himself a cape and pretended to fly while projecting candlelight against the wall that captured his shadow in flight. In Mexico City, he delighted in the mystifying figure of the Phantom, particularly his costume, his flowing black cape, and the beautiful green mask with slits for his eyes and eyebrows. From his father’s cutting scraps, Pepe made several masks and climbed up to the roof in the night. Donning a mask, he transformed his world into one of total mystery, looking up at the moon and down on the immense cityscape glittering with lights and sounds. Like the spaceship he crafted from a piece of aluminum or dancing dolls he made from cardboard paper and cloth in imitation of those he had seen in The Gay Divorcee, the movies triggered flights of his imagination and built his artistic and mechanical skills.

Pepe began to view cinema with a sensibility distinct from his father’s. His reading was not necessarily intended by the filmmakers. The children laughed hard at the films of María Félix as a wild woman challenging
machismo. The story inevitably ended with the transgressive woman’s domestication and subordination to patriarchal authority. This lesson was lost on the children, who instead identified with her rebellion. Like his other friends, Pepe had seen his father strike his mother, insult her for her cooking, and abandon her at night to philander. Pepe’s father showed little affection toward Guadalupe, who was deeply in love with him. The children identified with their mothers’ suffering—in part because it was their own suffering. Despite the deep love and admiration he had for his father, he thought him too strict and hard. The punishments he meted out often seemed excessive. When against his father’s wishes he had gone to play on a set of swings in the park at Desierto de los Leones, he fell off the swing, and his father found him with blood and tears running down his face. Rather than respond to his pain, his father beat him so hard another man tried to stop him. “He’s my son, you bastard, don’t interfere,” responded José.

The very presence of women and children in film and the focus on them seemed to promote a new appreciation for their rights to dignity, love, and selfhood. Children sobbed and sniffled in the theater when Cachita’s mother died and the little seven-year-old girl, so sad and alone, had to sing in the school festival. Pepe and Nico felt Pedro Infante’s overwhelming grief in Ustedes los ricos when he embraced the body of his baby, burned up in a fire. As he sobbed in desolation, Nico and Pepe cried with him. “What love from a father! What an unjust tragedy!” The children saw all of the Disney films many times over—Snow White, Bambi, Pinocchio, Dumbo. Snow White was the child who touched Pepe most deeply: this beautiful little girl, abandoned and cast into the forest by her wicked stepmother, taken in and cared for by a band of dwarfs, and finally rescued by the prince to the unforgettable tune of “Someday My Prince Will Come.” He loved as well the child stars Shirley Temple, Judy Garland, and particularly Elizabeth Taylor, whom he watched in National Velvet, Lassie, and Little Women. He remembers Elizabeth Taylor in one of her less noted films, Jane Eyre. Seven or eight years old, she lived in an orphanage: the authorities punished her by making her stand for hours in the patio with heavy irons in her hands. She caught pneumonia and died. “What abuse!” remembers Pepe, “What cruelty to that little girl! The scene really affected me.”

Of course, Pepe and Nico saw more than foreign films. They saw dozens of Mexican Golden Age movies: the romantic dramas of Pedro Armendariz, the classical ranchero films of Jorge Negrete, the comedies of Joaquín Pardavé—and Pedro Infante in all of these genres. They
watched the superfeminine and delicate Dolores del Río, the voracious, outrageous María Félix, and the beautiful, talented Marga Lopez. They took in many didactic melodramas in which a rebellion against authority threatened the integrity of the patriarchal family inevitably restored by the commanding, distant father or the loving, sacrificing mother or grandmother. A film like Cuando los hijos se van, with Fernando Soler and Sara García, reminded them that if modern children wanted to pursue new careers far from home, they should not forget their obligation to their parents. But if these films sought to nurture correct virtues in youth, there were other scandalous ones children could see in the 1940s before the ferocious campaigns of the Liga de Decencia, promoted by Ernesto Uruchurtu, the city’s mayor from 1952. Pepe and Nico especially relished the sexy “rumba” films of Juan Orol, with the voluptuous dancers he had brought from Cuba: María Antonieta Pons and Rosa Carmina.

But the film that touched Pepe most deeply as he moved into adolescence was Shane. It came out in 1953, when he was sixteen years old. It was the only Western Pepe had ever liked, perhaps because it was an anti-Western. In the movie, a career gunslinger (Alan Ladd) comes to town to reform his life and finds lodging with a family of peace-loving,
law-abiding farmers. The young son (Brandon de Wilde) worships him for his bravery, skills, honesty, and good looks; he contrasts him with his own father, whom he finds conventional, timid, and passive. Ultimately drawn into the local struggle between ranchers and farmers, Shane shoots all the bad guys and is forced to leave. The young boy runs after him, imploring him, “Shane, come back, come back, Shane!” Pepe heard Shane tell the boy, “No, I tried to become what I was not. You can’t escape who you are. I will always be a fighter. But you, you grow up honorable. You take care of your parents.” Pepe drew this moment of paternal tenderness (see figure 4.3). He copied it from a poster he had taken from the Ciné Briseño.

Shane reminded Pepe of the words of his cousin Alfonso, blond, tall, sensitive. He was, Pepe recalled, “fashionably dressed, very clean, handsome, and full of personality.” Pepe was thirteen and Alfonso twenty-three when they bonded during Alfonso’s visits from Oaxaca. They went to the movies often. They saw Moulin Rouge. The story of the deformed artist Toulouse-Lautrec moved Pepe deeply. He remembered Alfonso telling him after the movie, “In life you have to be what you are. You can be a taxi driver, or a tailor, or anything, but you have to be yourself. Don’t let anyone tell you what you can and cannot be.”

Pepe loved Alfonso very much. For Alfonso, he would make his pilgrimage to Juquila. Alfonso died of a heart murmur at the age of twenty-seven. The family received a telegram from Oaxaca. At seventeen, Pepe was devastated. He retreated to a corner and cried. His father asked him what was wrong. Pepe brushed him away. Then his father took him in his arms and said to him, “Son, don’t think I do not understand why you are crying. You think I, who created you, don’t know how you are, who you are?” His father bought him a bus ticket so he could go to Oaxaca to Alfonso’s funeral. Over the years many differences would fray the bond between father and son, but they shared an understanding of the emotional complexity that lay outside and beyond the limits of convention—an understanding they had woven together in large part through their shared experience of cinema.