

**Review / Reseña**

Luna, Ilana Dann. *Adapting Gender: Mexican Feminisms from Literature to Film*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2018.

**Katelyn Smith**

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

This book explores the representation of women in Mexican film and literature in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century by questioning its reflection or translation onto the lived experiences of women. Over the course of five chapters, Luna carries out a substantial investigation of both literary and cinematographic productions while balancing socioeconomic and artistic questions regarding the construction and significance of the characters from the selected films and literary works. Luna proposes film adaptation as a feminist tool to translate the meaning of literary sources to new audiences through feminist distortions and subaltern inversions of genre. She does this in order to construct alternative political subjects and thus, destabilize stifling the national imaginary with respect to gender.

Luna connects Luce Irigaray's notion that a singular critique cannot reshape the way of being of men nor adjust the status of women, Linda Hutcheon's concept of adaptation as repetition, and Judith Butler's concept of performativity to envisage the adaptation of film as a vehicle for the subversion and reconditioning of preconceived notions of gender. Furthermore, the critic clearly underlines the significance of the dichotomous depiction of woman—the Virgen of Guadalupe and La Malinche—that was used as the metaphor for the nation during the Golden Age of film in Mexico. As Luna aptly suggests, the representation of women in mass media was translated in the

everyday experiences of women during that time period, and the ramifications of this metaphor still persist in present-day Mexican culture.

The films selected for her investigation are products of women filmmakers in Mexico whose works began to circulate through the Mexican film industry during the 1990s, also known as the “Decade of Change” (xv). For the purpose of her analysis, Luna “chose to examine films that in some way actively critiqued the particularly *Mexican* way of relating and the institutional structures of power that were in place” (xvii). The films and the literary works that Luna considers in her study auspiciously reveal a multiplicity of female representations through deliberate shifts in viewpoints and discourse. The polyphony of Luna’s analysis of the films supports her proposal that the repetition of alternative subjectivities through the widespread dissemination of these films helps in the reversal or deconstruction of coded behaviors in Mexico, with respect to gender, by reinscribing women into the national narrative from which they were previously misrepresented or omitted altogether.

For the purpose of her study, Luna analyzes the cineastes’ process of adaptation of literary works by female Mexican authors to orchestrate their films. Although the selected films—such as *El secreto de Romelia* (1988), *Entre Pancho Villa y una mujer desnuda* (1996), *Novia que te vea* (1993), and *De noche vienes, Esmeralda* (1997)—have what Luna defines as a clearly feminist agenda, she highlights the dissonance that exists for some of the women creators in their passion for producing films based on feminist ideals, as well as their hesitation in identifying as feminist. Luna alludes to an interview with Sabina Berman as an example of this phenomenon, and consequently illuminates Berman’s “very keen consciousness of gender constructedness and inequity that many feminists have systematically tried to eradicate” (31). This example allows Luna to appropriately raise the question: “Does one need to assume a ‘feminist identity’ for her (or his) work to be read as or considered feminist?” (32) To answer this question, Luna proposes that feminist thought “should be seen more as a multiplicity of gender-conscious positions that engage critically with the given culture that surrounds them” (32), stating that any form of mass media that gives an individual or a marginalized group the ability to self-represent can undermine “institutionally imposed regulations on who or how they *should* be” (36). This definition of feminist thought aptly includes the feminist work of cineastes who grapple with the characterization of feminist in the Mexican film industry.

Luna begins her analysis of film adaptation in the second chapter with Busi Cortés’s *El secreto de Romelia* (1988), an adaptation of *El viudo Román* (1964), a short novel

by Rosario Castellanos. To describe the importance of Castellanos's literary work, Luna notes Castellanos's use of autobiographical elements to deconstruct Octavio Paz's affirmations about women's symbolic value and the general character of the Mexican subject. Correspondingly, *El secreto de Romelia* utilizes the topic of lives and desires of individuals to ascribe value to lived experiences previously excluded from the national imaginary. The critic emphasizes the importance of this film adaptation stating that "by making evident the subjectivity of subaltern characters, so too films like Cortes's *El secreto de Romelia* questioned the political and cultural hegemony of a paternalistic government that had long controlled cultural production and the projections of its model (if imaginary) acquiescent citizens" (51). Luna points out that the film adaptation's change in title marks a shift in focus from that of the male to the female characters' perspective, which parallels with corresponding relocations of feminist thought and expansion of female agency through political engagement in Mexico.

In the following chapter, Luna analyzes Sabina Berman and Isabelle Tardán's film *Entre Pancho Villa y una mujer desnuda* (1996), an adaptation of Berman's 1992 play bearing the same title. The intertextuality and multiple cultural registers of the film adaptation, Luna argues, creates a new and larger audience that takes part in the construction of polyphonic meaning through its diverse cultural knowledge, which contributes to the demythification of history and cultural identity. In chapter 4, Luna further explores how film adaptations can expand the notion of what it means to be "Mexican" through her analysis of Guita Schyfter's *Novia que te vea* (1993), an adaptation of Rosa Nissán's eponymous novel (1992). This film explores how the visibility of discrimination that women face through the performance of "otherness," the matrilineality of oppression through the expression of inner dialogue of female characters, and the conversations between them all work together to push the limits of the dominant construct of a monolithic Mexican identity.

The final film analyzed in Luna's work is Jaime Humberto Hermosillo's *De noche vienes, Esmeralda* (1997), an adaptation of Elena Poniatowska's short story "De noche vienes" (1979). Luna underscores the significance of the differences found in the film and the short story are connected to the redefinition of women's political presence in Mexico, which had developed from the time after the short story's publication up until the film's production. She emphasizes that during this time "the Mexican family" itself was being revised at the governmental level, recognizing the diverse reality that had been lived for quite some time" (179). The alteration of Poniatowska's short story, Luna reiterates, demonstrates how Hermosillo used film adaptation as a feminist tool

to construct characters that redefine the narrow legal and social definition of the Mexican family.

Luna's work adds to the limited body of academic research that specifically addresses the theory of filmic adaptation in the Mexican industry. It successfully highlights the use of film adaptation as a point of departure for social critique, striving to chisel away at the social constructions that have excluded women and nuanced men from the national dialogue throughout the hegemonic history of Mexico and its heteronormative, masculine-focused cultural norms. Luna's closing statement—"the dialogue continues" (226)—invites readers to continue studying film adaptation as both a product and a process that can create serious social change.