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Domestic Crises, International Opportunities: Trends and Preoccupations in New Venezuelan Cinema*

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Introduction

Crisis is the new global norm, or so it would seem at the arthouse cinema. In recent years, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela has become synonymous with catastrophe. Its struggles with violence, hyperinflation, polarization and authoritarianism have been well documented in Anglophone media.¹ From Venezuela, films such as *Desde allá* (Lorenzo Vigas, 2015) and *La*

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1 On international coverage of Venezuelan affairs, see Alan MacLeod, *Bad News from Venezuela: Twenty Years of Fake News and Misreporting* (London: Routledge, 2018).

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familia (Gustavo Rondón, 2016) have attracted much attention with their manifestations of this *Zeitgeist*. Shot in Caracas and funded, in part, by the Venezuelan State, these are both products and depictions of the crises that have converged on this oil-exporting nation. They respond to the development of the Bolivarian Revolution, the socialist movement that rose to power under Hugo Chávez. Set in the domestic sphere, they plot intergenerational tensions and paternal-filial conflicts. Thematically, *Desde allá* and *La familia* are concerned with the invasion of space, the breakdown of relationships, the repetition of the past and the retraction of the future. Caracas is depicted as a place of mistrust, aggression, anger and solitude, but also, to different degrees, as a place of beauty, affection, reflection and reconciliation. This cinematic treatment of the capital city can also be seen in productions such as *Pelo malo* (Mariana Rondón, 2013) and *La soledad* (Jorge Thielen Armand, 2016), among others. Taken together, these arthouse productions arguably form part of the diverse movement that scholars have dubbed New Venezuelan Cinema.² With this, Venezuelan filmic production has, for the first time in recent history, found exposure on screens across Latin America and Europe.

Given the social, economic and political context in which these films were made, this positive international performance may seem paradoxical. How is it, in such testing circumstances, that contemporary Venezuelan cinema has prospered? This question, variously articulated with reference to the cinemas of other nations, has informed multiple strands of recent research on Latin-American and European cinemas. The situation in Venezuela is singular in many respects, but its dynamics of filmmaking cohere with trends in other national regimes of filmic production. Since the global financial crisis of 2008, much has been published on film and crisis. Read cohesively, this work has typically taken 'crisis' to mean the downturn of domestic economies. This, in turn, has instigated a 'crisis mode' for filmmakers, especially those heavily dependent on state subsidies that, in the context of austerity policies, have been much reduced or entirely retracted.³ For the most part, these publications have focused on the national cinemas that have traditionally enjoyed wide circulation in international markets. Curiously, however, these studies have noted that the contraction of nations' GDPs has not always hampered their filmic production. Conversely, the economic

2 Patricia Valladares-Ruiz, 'Subjetividades en crisis y conflicto social en el cine venezolano contemporáneo: *Desde allá* (2015), *La familia* (2017) y *La Soledad* (2016)', *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, 54:2 (2020), 409–29 (p. 410).

3 Núria Triana-Toribio, 'Spanish Cinema of the 2010s: Back to Punk and Other Lessons from the Crisis', in *Contemporary Spanish Screen Media and Responses to Crisis and Aftermath*, ed. Chris Perriam & Tom Whittaker, *Hispanic Research Journal*, 20:1 (2019), 10–25 (p. 11).

recessions of the twenty-first century have been accompanied by a growth in creativity and cultural output.

Such was the case in Argentina, where the financial crash of 2001 was followed by a steep rise in the release of Argentine films, numbering fourteen in 1994 and sixty-six a decade later. Many of these made ‘aesthetic virtue out of economic necessity’ and were celebrated for their ‘rough stylistics’.⁴ Likewise, in cash-strapped Portugal, the trend was growth after financial strife. Although box-office sales stagnated around 2010, more Portuguese films were released in 2011 and 2012 and national cinema found larger audiences on subscription services.⁵ This pattern was replicated in Greece, a country that has enjoyed new-found visibility at international festivals, and where distribution networks have proved resilient.⁶ In post-crash Spain, governmental cuts did not reduce the amount of films being made, but, instead, could be perceived in production quality and the lack of job security for filmmakers.⁷ The year 2017 was a record-breaking one for Brazilian cinema, even as the economy imploded. Viewers could choose from 160 Brazilian films—the most ever to be released *per annum*—while ‘domestic production had its lowest market participation in ten years’, attracting less than ten per cent of cinema audiences.⁸ The decline of cinema ticket sales has proved to be a global trend, although Mexico is generally an exception; there, the production of private and public films, and the sale of cinema tickets, has risen year-on-year for many decades.⁹ It remains to be seen how the 2020 closure of state-funded film commissions will affect takings at Mexican cinemas.

4 Joanna Page, *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema* (Durham, NC/London: Duke U.P., 2009), 1–2. See also Jens Andermann, *New Argentine Cinema* (London/New York: I. B. Tauris, 2012); and Santiago Oyarzabal, *Nation, Culture and Class in Argentine Cinema: Crisis and Representation 1998–2005* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2020).

5 Olga Kourelou, Mariana Liz & Belén Vidal, ‘Crisis and Creativity: The New Cinemas of Portugal, Greece and Spain’, *New Cinemas Journal of Contemporary Film*, 12:1–2 (2014), 133–51 (p. 136).

6 Kourelou, Liz & Vidal, ‘Crisis and Creativity’. See also Lydia Papadimitriou, ‘Film Distribution in Greece: Formal and Informal Networks of Circulation Since the Financial Crisis’, *Screen*, 59:4 (2018), 484–505.

7 Spanish institutional support for all manner of cultural productions fell dramatically between 2007 and 2017. Filmmaking budgets were slashed and the price of cinema tickets went up with the increase of VAT. See Chris Perriam & Tom Whittaker, ‘Introduction: Contemporary Spanish Screen Media and Responses to Crisis and Aftermath’, in *Contemporary Spanish Screen Media and Responses to Crisis and Aftermath*, ed. Perriam & Whittaker, 2–9 (p. 3); and Triana-Toribio, ‘Spanish Cinema of the 2010s’, 11.

8 Stephanie Dennison, *Remapping Brazilian Film Culture in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2019), 17.

9 See *Anuario Estadístico de Cine Mexicano 2019/Statistical Yearbook of Mexican Cinema* (México D.F.: Secretaría de Cultura/Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, 2019), 24 & 59; available online at <<https://www.imcine.gob.mx/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Anuario-2019.pdf>> (accessed 17 October 2022). This is not to say, of course, that, prior to

This ‘crisis mode’ of filmmaking, set against the worldwide closure of cinemas and the migration of audiences to streaming services, has resulted in shared preoccupations among internationally mobile directors. Brought into contact at film schools, festivals and creative laboratories across the world, filmmakers have developed a collective idiom with which to treat the present moment. If the production of contemporary cinema is determined, first and foremost, by hostile political environments and adverse material conditions, its content is concerned with the loss of place, struggles for identity and the collapse of relationships. Many of these stories take place in the family home, which ‘functions as the site of a wider moral societal crisis’.¹⁰ Protagonists are often young, and enter into conflict with older characters. The camera is drawn to detritus and ruins, confronting audiences with a crumbling future. At the centre of these deteriorating worlds are the plights of individuals and small social units. These are shaped, in turn, by forces that are expansive in their origin and outreach. Audiences are exposed to scenes of rising inequality, unfettered privilege, exploitation, financialization and de-industrialization, environmental destruction, mass migration and enforced labour. Eschewing the ideological, many arthouse directors adopt the conventions of social realism to examine these issues from a humanist perspective.¹¹ Some gesture backwards to postwar Italian cinema to negotiate these tectonic shifts in political leanings and economic structures. Others borrow tropes and techniques from the genres of melodrama, crime, fantasy and horror in gestures towards *auteur* cinema.¹²

It is on this stage that new cinema from Venezuela has made a sweeping entrance, presenting its own national brand of crisis cinema that has proved highly popular. After the decade of dormancy that followed the 1980s, which was itself a golden age for Venezuelan cinema, the reform of film legislation in

2020, Mexico, or the Mexican audio-visual industry, was devoid of problems. On the twenty-first-century commodification of narco-violence, the encroaching privatization of the sector and the decline of spectators per production (even as net spectatorship was rising), see Misha MacLaird, *Aesthetics and Politics in the Mexican Film Industry* (London/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

10 Kourelou, Liz & Vidal, ‘Crisis and Creativity’, 141. See also Paul Merchant, Geoffrey Maguire & Rachel Randall, ‘Introduction. House or Home? Domestic Spaces in Contemporary Latin American Cinema’, in *House or Home? Domestic Spaces in Contemporary Latin American Cinema*, ed. Paul Merchant, Geoffrey Maguire & Rachel Randall, *Journal of Romance Studies*, 18:2 (2018), 143–57.

11 For an overview of social realism in contemporary European arthouse cinema, see *Cinema of Crisis: Film and Contemporary Europe*, ed. Thomas Austin & Angelos Koutsourakis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U. P., 2020).

12 Crime thrillers are especially prevalent in contemporary Argentina, see Page, *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema*, 84; and Yannis Tzioumakis, ‘Conning All Over the World: Latin American Variations of an American Film Genre’, *Screen*, 59:3 (2018), 350–71.

2005 galvanized national filmic production. In 2010, Diego Velasco's *La hora cero* became the third most-viewed Venezuelan film in history, surpassed only by *Homicidio culposo* (César Bolívar, 1984) and *Macu. La mujer del policía* (Solveig Hoogensteijn, 1987).¹³ Earlier that year, *Hermano* (Marcel Rasquin, 2010) became only the third twenty-first-century entry on a list of the twenty Venezuelan films with the highest cinema audience numbers, dominated by the classics of the previous generation. So began a trajectory of success that went beyond the Venezuelan domestic market. In 2013, Mariana Rondón became the first Latin-American woman to win the Festival de San Sebastián's Concha de Oro for her third film, *Pelo malo*. In 2014, Miguel Ferrari received the first Premio Goya awarded for a Venezuelan film for his debut, *Azul y no tan rosa*. In 2015, with *Desde allá*, Lorenzo Vigas was awarded the Leone d'Oro at the Venice International Film Festival, becoming its first Latin-American recipient. The film, according to eminent critic Carlos Caridad Montero, was perhaps 'la mejor película del cine venezolano'.¹⁴ Starring Chilean acting heavyweight, Alfredo Castro, for many it represented the moment at which the Venezuelan cinema industry broke out internationally. Major commendations like those of Caridad Montero were accompanied by worldwide screenings at festivals and nominations for important prizes. In 2016, Gustavo Rondón's *La familia* and Rober Calzadilla's *El Amparo* both competed for Cannes' Camera d'Or.¹⁵ Jorge Thielen Armand's first two films, *La soledad* (2016) and *La fortaleza* (2020) won a total of twenty international prizes.¹⁶ Just a decade earlier, such global visibility for Venezuelan cinema was unthinkable.

What, then, are the historical conditions that have prompted this trend? How can these films be regarded as the cohesive movement of New Venezuelan Cinema and how does this movement dialogue with other international arthouse forms of crisis cinema? Building on research on world cinema and crisis, I begin with these interrogations and, in doing so, contribute to the burgeoning field of Venezuelan film studies. In its approach, this article departs from the publications that have critiqued the politicization of state-sponsored films under the Bolivarian Revolution, which,

13 Francisco Pellegrino, 'Cifras sobre el mercado del cine en Venezuela', *Comunicación. Estudios Venezolanos de Comunicación*, 157 (2012), 36–42 (p. 40).

14 Carlos Caridad Montero, 'Desde allá de Lorenzo Vigas, ensayo filmico sobre el distanciamiento', *Blogacine*, 5 September 2016; available at <<https://www.blogacine.com/2016/09/05/desde-alla-ensayo-cinematografico-sobre-el-distanciamiento/>> (accessed 13 August 2021).

15 Humberto Sánchez Amaya, 'Una década de cine venezolano: festivales, crisis, documentales y censura', *El Estímulo*, 28 December 2019; available at <<https://elestimulo.com/climax/una-decada-de-cine-venezolano-festivales-crisis-documentales-y-censura/>> (accessed 13 August 2021).

16 See the film's information page at <<https://www.lafaenafilms.com/films/lafortaleza-es>> (accessed 17 October 2021).

while making valuable contributions to the study of Venezuelan film, have tended to focus more on the ideologies conveyed by such productions, and less on the material contexts in which they were created.¹⁷ To address this critical lacuna, and to provide foundations for further study in this area, the first part of this article periodizes the politics of contemporary Venezuelan film, analysing how the film industry negotiated between capitalist models and socialist principles during a period when conflict raged between government and business. In the second part, I identify how the crises that have gathered motion in Venezuela, especially since Chávez's untimely death in 2013, have determined the production, content and reception of films made for foreign audiences. Although I consider a range of examples, I take *Desde allá* and *La familia*—two important films largely overlooked in Anglophone scholarship—as my primary case studies for analysis. Part three examines the thematic preoccupations of these productions, probing their shared concerns with paternity and patriarchy in crisis. My arguments draw on original research conducted in conversation with key figures from the industry, including the former president of the Comisión Nacional Autónoma del Cine (CNAC), Juan Lossada, the directors of *Desde allá* and *La familia*, Vigas and Rondón and their lead actors José Luis Silva and Giovanni García. I also collate findings from interviews with Venezuelan producers, casting managers and European programmers and use these to buffer my analyses of legislation, distribution, reception and discourse.¹⁸

The Politics of Film

According to the Ley de la Cinematografía Nacional of 2005, Venezuelan cinema can be defined as 'todas aquellas actividades vinculadas con la producción, realización, exhibición y difusión de obras cinematográficas en el territorio nacional'.¹⁹ At an administrative level, the institution

17 See Luisela Alvaray, 'Claiming the Past: Venezuelan Historical Films and Public Politics', *Cultural Dynamics*, 25:3 (2013), 291–306; Jordi Macarro, 'Cine venezolano: construcción, invención y adaptación de la "Historia Patria"', *Fuera de Campo*, 2:3 (2018), 54–68; and Patricia Valladares-Ruiz, 'Memoria histórica y lucha de clases en el nuevo cine venezolano', *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, 66:1 (2013), 57–72.

18 All interviews were conducted online between 2020 and 2021. In total, in addition to Juan Lossada, I interviewed directors Gustavo Rondón, Jorge Thielen and Lorenzo Vigas; producers Rodolfo Cova (RH Producciones), Claudia Lepage (TRES), Natalia Machado (Pandilla) and Rodrigo Michelangeli (La Faena); actors Giovanni García and Luis Silva; casting agent Beto Benites; and programmer and curator Maria Delgado (Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London). Repeated requests to interview the current directorship of CNAC went unanswered.

19 Ley de la Cinematografía Nacional 2005, Gaceta Oficial 5789, 26 October 2005, 9–15 (p. 9), Título I, §2; available online at <https://pandectasdigital.blogspot.com/2017/09/gaceta-oficial-de-la-republica_763.html> (accessed 18 October 2022).

tasked with managing these activities was CNAC. Its work has been fundamental in determining the direction of contemporary Venezuelan cinema. CNAC was established in 1993, to replace the Fondo de Fomento Cinematográfico (FONCINE).²⁰ It was to address the steep decline in national cinematic production that had taken place since the late 1980s, and had access to a modest budget that was designed to prop up the industry.²¹ Twelve years later, in 2005, the law was reformed under the Bolivarian Revolution that was led by leftist military leader Hugo Chávez. His election in 1998, under the banner of the Movimiento Quinta República (MVR) party, hinged on his promises to break with the neoliberal policies of the late Fourth Republic (1958–1998). Manoeuvring a sharp turn to the political left, MVR oversaw a frenzy of activity that was fuelled by astronomical oil prices and a buoyant domestic market. National sovereignty was a priority for the socialist State that, at least in its rhetoric, was highly suspicious of international investment. During his first administration, Chávez expropriated key industries and channelled spending into social programmes, promoting co-operatives, urban land committees, grassroots activism and local, self-governing organizations.²² The business unions that had once wielded so much influence were excluded from the mechanisms of governance. The president ruled by executive order to dismantle the existing juridical structure.²³ Such a vigorous form of State-making ignited anger and

20 Lisa Shaw, Luis Duno-Gottberg, Joanna Page & Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, 'National Cinemas (Re)Ignited: Film and the State', in *The Routledge Companion to Latin American Cinema*, ed. Marvin D'Lugo, Ana M. López & Laura Podalksy (London/New York: Routledge, 2018), 44–61 (p. 52).

21 The 1980s represented a golden era for Venezuelan film: an average of ten Venezuelan films were released each year in that decade, compared to an average of five *per annum* in the 1990s. It was a time when audiences demonstrated marked preferences for film and television made in Venezuela. In 1984 and 1985, five of the ten bestselling films at the box office were Venezuelan. This is remarkable for a country with a relatively small audiovisual industry and one that, historically, has struggled to compete with the popularity of Hollywood productions. See CNAC, *Obras cinematográficas nacionales estrenadas desde el año 1976 al año 2005* (unpublished).

22 See Kirk A. Hawkins, 'Who Mobilizes? Participatory Democracy in Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 52:3 (2010), 31–66; Kirk A. Hawkins, Guillermo Rosas & Michael E. Johnson, 'The Misiones of the Chávez Government', in *Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy: Participation, Politics, and Culture under Chávez*, ed. David Smilde & Daniel Hellinger (Durham, NC/London: Duke U. P., 2011), 186–218; and María Pilar García-Guadilla, 'Urban Land Committees: Co-optation, Autonomy, and Protagonism', in *Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy*, ed. Smilde & Hellinger, 80–103.

23 See Ryan Brading, 'From Passive to Radical Revolution in Venezuela's Populist Project', *Latin American Perspectives*, 41:6 (2014), 48–64; Steve Ellner, 'Hugo Chávez's First Decade in Office: Breakthroughs and Shortcomings', *Latin American Perspectives*, 37:1 (2010), 77–96; and Leslie C. Gates, *Electing Chávez: The Business of Anti-Neoliberal Politics in Venezuela* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).

deepened polarization.²⁴ Simmering resentments soon boiled over with the 2001 business strike, the attempted 2002 *coup d'état*, the 2002–2003 strike among oil workers, a sixty-two-day general strike, and the recall referendum that resulted in 2004. It is notable, then, that the proposals to reform the 1993 Ley de la Cinematografía, which were initiated in 2003, were approved unanimously, by all parties, in a divided Asamblea Nacional that had largely proved unable, or unwilling, to reach consensus on other matters. Equally remarkable is the fact that, as I will go on to explain, this legislation reified collaborations between the private and public sectors at a time when dialogue was strained, if not non-existent, with a few notable exceptions.²⁵

The stated objectives of the 2005 law, drafted in lengthy consultations between stakeholders and legislators, were ‘el desarrollo, fomento, difusión y protección de la cinematografía nacional y las obras cinematográficas’.²⁶ Replicating French protectionist models, the law set in motion the creation of the FONPROCINE, a fund for national cinema that was generated by new taxes. Film companies and television channels would pay between 0.5

24 I subscribe to María Pilar García-Guadilla and Ana Mallén’s definition of polarization as ‘a state of heightened tension between citizens, whose very subjectivity is subsumed under their perceived political affiliation’ (María Pilar García-Guadilla & Ana L. Mallén, *Venezuela’s Polarized Politics: The Paradox of Direct Democracy under Chávez* [Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2017], 4). Elsewhere, they argue that polarization in Venezuela materialized with Chávez’s rise to power, and that it is ‘associated with the ambiguous constitutional definition of democracy, with the relationship between representative and participatory democracy and the singular, rather than plural, concept of the people as the constitutional authority (the “sovereign”)’ (María Pilar García-Guadilla & Ana Mallén, ‘Polarization, Participatory Democracy, and Democratic Erosion in Venezuela’s Twenty-First Century Socialism’, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681:1 [2019], 62–77 [p. 64]). To this I would add that polarization is bound up with persistent structural inequalities, the legacies of colonialism and slavery, and the othering of social groups based on intersectional markers including class, race, ethnicity, genealogy, religion and place of residence. See David Smilde, ‘From Partial to Full Conflict Theory: A Neo-Weberian Portrait of the Battle for Venezuela’, in *Latin America Since the Left Turn*, ed. Tulia G. Falleti & Emilio A. Parrado (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 138–64.

25 See Ellner, ‘Hugo Chávez’s First Decade in Office’, 85–89. Co-operation between leaders in the film industry and the ruling party was consistent with the select alliances that were formed during Chávez’s election campaign between the would-be president and certain factions of the media (Gates, *Electing Chávez*, 93). For some, this allegiance between the Bolivarian State and the left-leaning media posed a challenge to the logic of profit-driven content that had dominated in the 1990s; for others, it amounted to a *quid pro quo* of patronage for sympathetic coverage. For discussions of the debates surrounding the politics of the audio-visual industry during the Chávez administration, from the grassroots to governmental institutions, see Andrés Cañizález, *Hugo Chávez: la presidencia mediática* (Caracas: Alfa, 2016); and Sujatha Fernandes, *Who Can Stop the Drums? Urban Social Movements in Chávez’s Venezuela* (Durham, NC/London: Duke U. P., 2010); Naomi Schiller, *Channeling the State: Community Media and Popular Politics in Venezuela* (Durham, NC/London: Duke U. P., 2018).

26 Ley de la Cinematografía Nacional 2005, 9, Título I, §1.

and one per cent of their income to FONPROCINE; box office ticket sales were taxed at between three to five per cent, and distributors, video/DVD rentals and copyright bodies at five per cent upwards.²⁷ This money was to be reinvested in the production of national film, the distribution of national, Latin-American and Iberian features, the construction and maintenance of cinemas and studios, and in facilitating post-production processes. A portion was also to be directed towards publications, research, scholarships and employee benefits. The legal framework meant that all Venezuelan films were guaranteed at least two weeks at the box office. Cinemas were required to screen a quota of Venezuelan films or, if insufficient were available, films from the rest of Latin America. The responsibilities for preserving national cinematic heritage, in collating data and populating archives, were to be shared by commercial firms and governmental institutions. The reform of the cinema law also saw the creation of state-funded studios, such as Villa del Cine, along with distributor Amazonia films, that, working in tandem (and autonomously from CNAC), would create decolonial cinema and pose a challenge to what Chávez called the 'dictatorship of Hollywood'.²⁸ While Villa del Cine received its budget directly from state coffers, and specialized in the big-budget retelling of Venezuelan independence as promoted in Bolivarian ideology, the mixed origins of CNAC funding sustained multisectoral dialogue and a diverse ideological agenda.²⁹

As is frequently the case with policy, the application of the legislation was somewhat haphazard and achieved mixed results. The obligation that cinemas screen Venezuelan films that were less popular than Hollywood blockbusters arguably led to the closure of smaller, family-run screens to the benefit of larger, profit-driven outfits.³⁰ Some of the producers whom I interviewed negotiated directly with corporate sponsors and international funding bodies, without recourse to CNAC. Still, more than any other aspect of the legislation, the creation of FONPROCINE left a tangible legacy for Venezuelan cinema. Directed by an independent board of trustees, CNAC was tasked with managing the FONPROCINE budget. This ranged from an annual rate of US \$200,000–\$300,000, in its early years, to a peak of US \$20–25 million. Under the directorship of Juan Carlos Lossada (2005–2015), who graduated with a BA in International

27 Ley de la Cinematografía Nacional 2005, 13, Título VIII, §50.

28 Alvaray, 'Claiming the Past', 296.

29 For a nuanced analysis of the development of Villa del Cine, and its interactions with the other state film agencies, see Michelle Leigh Farrell, 'A Close-Up on National Venezuelan Film Support During the Chávez Years: Between Revolution and Continuity', *The Latin Americanist*, 60:3 (2016), 371–89.

30 Valladares-Ruiz, 'Memoria histórica y lucha de clases en el nuevo cine venezolano', 58–59.

Relations from the Universidad Central de Venezuela, Venezuelan's highest-ranking University, and pursued postgraduate studies in Business from leading institutions in Spain and Australia, this led to a dramatic increase in filmic production. Between 2000 and 2005, an average of four Venezuelan films were released each year.³¹ Between 2006 and 2010, this went up to sixteen; between 2011 and 2014, to seventeen; and between 2015 to 2018, to twenty-three annual features.³² In this, Lossada applied his studies to the development of the CNAC franchise and its penetration of international markets.

As well as bankrolling new films, FONPROCINE funds were used to generate the conditions that would support the sustainable growth of national cinema. Between 2005 and 2017, the CNAC awarded 1,138 scholarships: 749 recipients studied at national film schools and 389 at institutions abroad. Propelled by cheap travel and access to the fixed-rate dollar, aspiring Venezuelan filmmakers also profited from new opportunities in the global industry: they attended international festivals, networking events, summer schools and conferences. Domestically, CNAC created a programme of community cinema and oversaw around 600 productions.³³ Between 2010 and 2015, Venezuelan film attracted larger audiences, reaching a maximum of almost 2.5 million annually.³⁴ For debutant filmmakers, CNAC ran free workshops, film clubs and script competitions that were subject to rigorous review by independent panels. This, alongside the critical political positioning of the CNAC films that I discuss below, goes some way to allaying concerns that all sectors of the media which did not fully champion the Bolivarian Revolution were subject to systematic censorship or starved of funding.³⁵ After 2002, the arenas of literature, music and the visual arts were effectively splintered

31 CNAC, *Obras cinematográficas nacionales estrenadas desde el año 1976 al año 2005*.

32 CNAC, *Obras cinematográficas de largometraje venezolanas estrenadas 2010–2014*; CNAC, *Obras cinematográficas de largometraje venezolanas exhibidas 2015*; CNAC, *Obras cinematográficas de largometraje venezolanas exhibidas 2016*; CNAC, *Obras cinematográficas de largometraje venezolanas exhibidas 2017*; and CNAC, *Obras cinematográficas de largometraje venezolanas exhibidas 2018* (all unpublished).

33 'El Centro Nacional Autónomo de Cinematografía celebra 24 años', *Alba ciudad 96.3 FM*, 2 August 2018, <<https://albaciedad.org/2018/08/el-centro-nacional-autonomo-de-cinematografia-celebra-24-anos/>> (accessed 18 October 2022).

34 CNAC, *Obras cinematográficas de largometraje venezolanas estrenadas 2010–2014*.

35 This is not to say that there were no instances of state-endorsed repression, or suppression, of narratives that challenged or contradicted the Bolivarian ideology during the Chávez administrations. Rather, I would like to suggest that parallels may be drawn with the Franco regime in Spain, where 'an unreflective and self-satisfied celebration of freedom of expression camouflaged the prolongation—and, in some cases, intensification—of non-democratic practices' (Duncan Wheeler, *Following Franco: Spanish Culture and Politics in Transition* [Manchester: Manchester U. P., 2020], 90).

in two, so that public and private initiatives operated in parallel.³⁶ Meanwhile, the world of cinema still gravitated towards the principles of compromise, collaboration and negotiation, as the private and public sectors continued to co-operate.

Indeed, the films that were financed by CNAC sought to cater for all preferences, seeking spectators among supporters of both the government and the opposition, while experimenting with style and genre. Before creating arthouse features that targeted international audiences, CNAC began by catering principally for domestic spectators, working with the genres that had proved historically popular in Venezuela. A great deal of political fanfare, and academic scrutiny, has been afforded to the historical films that were made by long-standing directors, including *Zamora: tierra y hombres libres* (Román Chalbaud, 2009), *Bolívar, el hombre de las dificultades* (Luis Alberto Lamata, 2013), *Miranda regresa* (Luis Alberto Lamata, 2007) and *Taita Boves* (Luis Alberto Lamata, 2010).³⁷ These glorified the lives of the founding fathers, racked up astronomical production costs, starred big names like Edgar Ramírez and typically alienated viewers aligned with the Venezuelan opposition by framing the Bolivarian Revolution as the logical continuation of the independence movement. But this was just one mode of making New Venezuelan Cinema, and not one that was especially popular among national spectators. For Rodolfo Cova, one of Venezuela's foremost producers, among CNAC's main aims was to ensure that the general public reconnected with Venezuelan film by promoting projects that embraced diversity in form and content. Some of the most successful films of the early 2010s, like *Hermano* (produced with Villa del Cine) and *La hora cero*, were written in the vein of the crime thrillers that were fashionable in 1980s Venezuela, and starred gangster figures who were socially conscious. Comedy and melodrama also did exceptionally well among ticket-buying audiences.

To wit, the highest-grossing Venezuelan film of all time, *Papita, maní, tostón* (Luis Carlos Hueck, 2013), is a romantic comedy about baseball. It attracted 1,977,969 spectators, according to CNAC figures, and spent forty-six weeks in cinemas.³⁸ In the year before its release, Chávez had been elected for a fourth term before succumbing to prostate cancer. The economy was performing poorly, political tensions were running high and polarization was deeply normalized. Against this backdrop, *Papita, maní, tostón* championed the cause of national unity in its affectedly cute

36 On the fragmentation of the cultural sphere, see Manuel Silva-Ferrer, *El cuerpo dócil de la cultura: poder, cultura y comunicación en la Venezuela de Chávez* (Madrid: Iberoamericana/Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert, 2014).

37 See Alvaray, 'Claiming the Past'; Macarro, 'Cine venezolano'; and Valladares-Ruiz, 'Memoria histórica y lucha e clases en el nuevo cine venezolano'.

38 CNAC, *Obras cinematográficas de largometraje venezolanas estrenadas 2010–2014*.

depiction of the on/off relationship between die-hard fans of rival teams Magallanes and Los Leones de Caracas. Eventually, the star-crossed couple choose love over their different sporting allegiances. Much of the film's sponsorship came from national banks and brands such as Polar, the food giant whose basic goods feed millions of Venezuelans. The use of product placement celebrated a shared passion for food, drink, sport and music. This was one of the tactics adopted by Polar, and other select businesses, in appealing to customers across party lines.³⁹ To an extent, national branding cut through political segregation. Similarly, *Papita, maní, tostón* represents the film industry's most profitable attempt, of many, to use allegory as a form of mediation between two halves of the population. Its success indicated an appetite for reconciliation among Venezuelan viewers, even as it obfuscated the cause of conflict with the rise of the Bolivarian Revolution.

While seeking to regenerate Venezuelan cinema, and to negotiate internal divisions, CNAC also had international ambitions that were not new to the twenty-first century. If, prior to this, Venezuela was not known regionally for its films, it was recognized internationally for its cinematic policies and politics. In 1968, the country hosted the inaugural festival of Latin-American documentary film, the event at which the movement known as New Latin American Cinema was consolidated.⁴⁰ In 1989, three years after the creation of the Cuban Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión (EICTV), Caracas hosted the Foro Iberoamericano de Integración Cinematográfica, a major conference for authorities in Hispanic culture. EICTV president Gabriel García Márquez attended as the guest of honour.⁴¹ Representatives from thirteen governments drafted a set of

39 Historically, Polar has attempted to shy away from political polemics, instead promoting its brand as one that unifies Venezuelans. Despite this, its director, Lorenzo Mendoza, has proved an immensely popular public figure to the point that, in 2015, rumours abounded as to his potential as a presidential candidate. See Anon., 'Venezuela: ¿Quién es Lorenzo Mendoza, el magnate en la mira del chavismo?', *BBC Mundo*, 22 October 2015; available at <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/10/151021_venezuela_perfil_lorenzo_mendoza_polar_dp> (accessed 13 August 2021).

40 Its attendees included major figures in Latin-American cinema such as Eliseo Subiela, Jorge Sanjinés, Raymundo Glezier, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino. It was the first time that Solanas and Getino's groundbreaking film, *La hora de los hornos*, was screened outside Argentina, and led directly to the creation of a dedicated Department of Film at the Universidad de Los Andes in Mérida (Gabriela Bustos, 'Cuatro razones para reactivar el Comité de Cineastas de América Latina. Entrevista a Edmundo Aray', *Revista Digital del Comité de Cineastas de América Latina*, 1:1 [2016], 35–70 [p. 37]; available online at <https://issuu.com/bibliotecadigitaldelcnac-venezuela/docs/revista_digital_del_comit__de_cine> [accessed 18 October 2022]).

41 The resulting agreement was the *Convenio de Integración Cinematográfica Iberoamericana 1989*; available at <https://www.recam.org/_files/documents/convenio_integr_cine_al.pdf> (accessed 13 August 2021). See also Juan Carlos Lossada, '30 años de la Fundación

policies that sought to benefit its signatories in the financing, production and distribution of Ibero-American cinema. The result, in the longer term, was the creation in 1997 of transcontinental funding giant, Ibermedia, which drew on subscriptions from fourteen member nations.⁴² This paved the way for CNAC's transition from the production of domestic to international cinema, which prioritized arthouse films. With recourse to FONPROCINE, after 2005, CNAC implemented a strategy that had been tried and tested elsewhere on the continent, using Ibermedia as a broker. Typically, it would offer Venezuelan filmmakers up to seventy per cent of their budget before filming began. Prospective *auteurs* were then to pursue international collaborations to secure the remainder of their funding.

It is interesting to note that this strategy took hold even as Bolivarian discourse rejected the premise of foreign investment. It began to pay off in the early 2010s: 2013 was a bumper year for Venezuelan cinema. In addition to Rondón's Concha de Oro for *Pelo malo*, Venezuelan directors won sixty-nine international accolades for twenty-eight films across 180 worldwide festivals.⁴³ This was largely the result of CNAC policies that, given the time, capital and labour required to produce high-quality film, took nearly a decade to materialize. Some of these awards were also thinly veiled political statements, as liberal juries prized resistance to increasingly undemocratic forms of governance.⁴⁴ It is likely that, as shortages, protests and police repression picked up apace, so audiences abroad went to the cinema as a means of seeing behind the headlines that were emanating from Venezuela.⁴⁵ Writing in another context, Susan Sontag is unforgiving in her description of such spectators of calamity as '[c]itizens of modernity,

del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano (FNCL)', *Revista Digital del Comité de Cineastas de América Latina*, 1:1 (2016), 73–78; available online at <https://issuu.com/bibliotecadigitaldelcnac-venezuela/docs/revista_digital_del_comit_de_cine> (accessed 18 October 2022).

42 On Ibermedia and its impacts on Latin-American cinema and international co-productions, see Luisela Alvaray, 'National, Regional, and Global: New Waves of Latin American Cinema', *Cinema Journal*, 47:3 (2008), 48–65; and also her 'Transnational Networks of Financing and Distribution: International Co-Productions', in *The Routledge Companion to Latin American Cinema*, ed. D'Lugo, López & Podalsky, 251–65.

43 Juan Carlos Lossada, 'Los logros del cine venezolano. Primera parte', *Programa Ibermedia*, n.d., <<https://www.programaibermedia.com/pt-pt/los-logros-del-cine-venezolano-primera-parte/>> (accessed 13 August 2021).

44 The San Sebastián Film Festival, for example, which awarded Mariana Rondón with the Concha de Oro, has its own antagonistic history with the State. See Wheeler, *Following Franco*, 241.

45 For an overview of developments in the political sphere after the death of Chávez, see Javier Corrales, 'The Authoritarian Resurgence: Autocratic Legalism in Venezuela', *Journal of Democracy*, 26:2 (2015), 37–51; and Jairo Lugo-Ocando, Alexander Hernandez & Monica Marchesi, 'Social Media and Virality in the 2014 Student Protests in Venezuela: Rethinking Engagement and Dialogue in Times of Imitation', *International Journal of Communication*, 9 (2015), 3782–802 (available online at <<https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3416>> [accessed 18 October 2022]).

consumers of violence as spectacle, adepts of proximity without risk'.⁴⁶ This is magnified in the case of Venezuela, especially among those who oppose Bolivarian Socialism and revel in its failure to create a more equal society, even when such spectacles are rendered sensitively by directors who do not necessarily seek to profit from the fetishization of crisis. The popularity of Venezuelan arthouse cannot be divorced from the morbid curiosity of urbanite cinephiles and festival regulars.

There is a sad irony, then, in the observation that CNAC investments paid dividends precisely as the country entered into a painful period of decline, so that the creativity financed by an oil bonanza depicts a country in ruins. Factors in Venezuela's collapse under the incumbent president Nicolás Maduro include a plunge in the price of oil, a reduction in accessible reserves, the impacts of foreign sanctions, the legacies of a fixed exchange rate, and the consequences of unfettered spending. The annual decrease in GDP has long been in double figures.⁴⁷ Hyperinflation means that workers on minimum wage can expect to take home US \$2 a month, enough for one bag of rice or cornmeal. Concomitantly, the capital accumulated by FONPROCINE has been all but entirely decimated. The CNAC has not paid its dues to Ibermedia since 2016, and has accrued debts that run into seven figures.⁴⁸ Massive power outages have meant that many cinemas have ceased to function.

Faced with this fate, Lossada resigned from his CNAC presidency in 2015. He was replaced by deputy culture minister Aracelis García, despite CNAC's putative autonomy from government.⁴⁹ Under García, between 2015 and 2018, audience numbers in Venezuelan cinemas declined annually by around thirty-five per cent.⁵⁰ Only twelve Venezuelan films were released

46 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2004), 99.

47 Patricia Laya & Alez Vasquez, 'Maduro Embraces Capitalism and Venezuelan Emigres are Returning', *Bloomberg*, 7 February 2020, <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-02-07/maduro-embraces-capitalism-and-venezuelan-emigres-are-returning>> (accessed 9 March 2021).

48 Valladares-Ruiz, 'Subjetividades en crisis y conflicto social en el cine venezolano contemporáneo', 411.

49 It was under García's directorship that *El Inca* (Ignacio Castillo Cottin, 2016), a film about the late controversial boxer, Edwin Valero, and a close acquaintance of Hugo Chávez, was pulled from the box office by orders of a Supreme Court judge at the petition of Valero's estate. The order, delivered by a Child Protection tribunal, cited concerns that the well-being of Valero's children would be negatively affected by his depiction in the film. See 'Tribunal Supremo de Justicia suspende película "El Inca" en Venezuela', *CNN Español*, 16 June 2017, <<https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2017/06/16/tribunal-supremo-de-justicia-suspende-proyeccion-de-pelicula-el-inca-en-venezuela/>> (accessed 13 August 2021).

50 See Yenderson Parra, 'El cine nacional vivió uno de sus peores años', *El Nacional*, 26 December 2019, <<https://www.elnacional.com/entretenimiento/el-cine-nacional-vivio-en-el-ano-2019-uno-de-sus-peores-periodos/>> (accessed 13 August 2021); and Anna Marie de la Fuente, 'With Even Popcorn Scarce, Venezuela Works to Keep Entertainment Business Running', *Variety*, 14 July 2017, <<https://variety.com/2017/film/features/venezuela-film-industry-struggles-1202496093/>> (accessed 13 August 2021).

in 2019, down from twenty-one the previous year.⁵¹ Between 2019 and 2020, the CNAC presidency was held by actor and militant *chavista*, Roque Valero Pérez, who played the leading role in Lamata's *Bolívar, el hombre de dificultades*, and who caused much controversy in his suppression of *Infección* (Flavio Pedota, 2019), a zombie film depicting an apocalyptic Caracas that was denied permission to screen in Venezuela.⁵² Upon his election to the Asamblea Nacional in December 2020, Valero passed the baton to Vladimir Sosa Sarabia, who at the time of writing also presided over the National Cinematheque and the audio-visual collection at the Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela.⁵³ The most recent CNAC vision statement, taken from its website, is to

[e]stimular y fomentar las políticas cinematográficas del Estado venezolano [...], constituyendo un factor estratégico para el fortalecimiento del poder popular y la construcción de una sociedad socialista, democrática, participativa y protagónica.⁵⁴

In reality, its role has become predominantly bureaucratic: it oversees the certification process, by which a film is approved as a Venezuelan production, and little else, in its restricted daily functions.

Debut Features

The labour of filmmakers like Lorenzo Vigas and Gustavo Rondón spans these periods of CNAC activity. As such, they make ideal case studies of the politics of Venezuelan cinema as this has evolved during different phases of the Bolivarian Revolution. *Desde allá* and *La familia* represent Vigas' and Rondón's first feature-length productions. They are regarded, among film professionals, as two of the last films to benefit from sustained CNAC support before its change in direction and administration. Prior to making these films, both directors produced CNAC-sponsored shorts that can be seen as prequels to their main features (Vigas with *Los elefantes nunca se olvidan* [2004] and Rondón with *Nostalgia* [2012]). In the early stages of their careers, then, both directors benefitted directly from the mechanisms set in motion by the

51 See Parra, 'El cine nacional vivió uno de sus peores años'.

52 See Florantonia Singer, 'El cine venezolano resiste en medio de la ruina', *El País*, 24 October 2019, <https://elpais.com/cultura/2019/10/23/actualidad/1571799863_301201.html> (accessed 13 August 2021).

53 See 'Vladimir Sosa Sarabia es el nuevo presidente del CNAC', *El Nacional*, 17 September 2020, <<https://www.elnacional.com/entretenimiento/vladimir-sosa-sarabia-es-el-nuevo-presidente-del-cnac/>> (accessed 13 August 2021).

54 'Misión y visión', *CNAC. Centro Nacional Autónomo de Cinematografía*, n.d., <http://www.cnac.gob.ve/?page_id=1388> (accessed 13 August 2021).

2005 legislation.⁵⁵ *Desde allá* and *La familia* were written between 2010 and 2014, and were released after 2015, by which point, as I detail above, the Venezuelan film industry was in freefall. Both films received most of their funding from CNAC, which, in seeking to foment the development of arthouse films for global cinemas, would make a point of supporting the work of debut directors.

I use the term ‘arthouse’, in the vein of Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, to mean ‘narrative films at the margins of mainstream cinema, located somewhere between fully experimental films and overtly commercial products’.⁵⁶ Its cohesion as a category ‘first emerges with the popularity of Italian neorealism’, and, still today, ‘art films continue to grant priority to the downtrodden, the underdog, and the abjected members of human communities. They take as a moral prerogative the representation of the underrepresented’.⁵⁷ In keeping with this tenor, *Desde allá* and *La familia* also resonated with the principles of the Bolivarian Revolution and had an appeal to CNAC authorities, some of whom had links with the founders of New Latin American Cinema.⁵⁸

55 In interview, many filmmakers and actors have described their experiences of shooting on location in Venezuela which regularly involves finding creative solutions to problems that seem terminal, including (but by no means limited to): the navigation of transport during a fourteen-month oil strike; securing a replacement camera where only one other is available in the entire country; working with an indeterminate number of extras who change on a daily basis; being intimidated by members of gangs and the national army; dealing with actors’ egos when certain luxuries (like milk) are unavailable; negotiating three different official prices for the dollar and more on the black market; and finding insurance for work in Venezuela.

56 Rosalind Galt & Karl Schoonover, ‘Introduction: The Impurity of Art Cinema’, in *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories*, ed. Rosalind Galt & Karl Schoonover (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2010), 3–30 (p. 6).

57 Galt & Schoonover, ‘Introduction: The Impurity of Art Cinema’, 15.

58 Such an interest in tackling the challenges of inequality was not confined to the realm of fictional feature-length filmmaking. In this, CNAC was aligned with the Equipos Comunitarios de Producción Audiovisual Independiente (ECPAI), many of which ran autonomous television channels that were funded by the Chávez government. ‘In conversation with the philosophy of Paolo Freire and media theory first elaborated in the 1970s under the broad aegis of the New Latin American Cinema Movement’, these groups drew on ‘a blend of Marxist and Gramscian ideas’ to embrace ‘the notion that in order to produce socialist men and women, they needed to create television—and culture industries more broadly—capable of generating socialist hearts and minds’ (Schiller, *Channeling the State*, 91–92). It also worked closely with the EICTV—the Cuban cinema school founded in 1986 by Gabriel García Márquez, Julio García Espinosa, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Fernando Birri—which sought to institutionalize the legacies of New Latin American Cinema. Testament to this allegiance is CNAC’s 2016 resurrection of *CCAL*, the magazine published by the Comité de Cineastas de América Latina, an organization created at the IV Encuentro de Cineastas Latinoamericanas in Caracas in 1974, that unified Latin-American filmmakers in response to the Pinochet coup, and that, by establishing a strong regional alliance among directors, pledged to raise the flag to ‘ese proyecto bolivariano y martiano, todavía

Intimately familiar with the work of the Italian neorealists, this was a decolonial, anti-capitalist movement that, in its engagement with the dispossessed, resolved 'to use film as a tool for social change', and 'to oppose the dominance of Hollywood models of production and reception'.⁵⁹ Interestingly, then, films like *Desde allá* and *La familia* were shaped by the human interests of New Latin American Cinema and the socialist ethos of the Bolivarian Revolution, even as they were marketed to commercial distributors and middle-class audiences in Europe with dramatic *denouements* and certain stylistic pretensions.

The narratives of both productions place outcasts in the spotlight. Co-written with Guillermo Arriaga (*Amores perros* [2000], *21 Grams* [2003] and *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* [2005]), *Desde allá* is contiguous with the rest of Vigas' work in examining masculinity, violence and paternal absence.⁶⁰ It tells the story of Armando (Alfredo Castro), a solitary, middle-aged dental technician, who has a habit of propositioning young, working-class men and paying them to strip in his apartment. One of these men is Elder (José Luis Silva), a twenty-something mechanic of no fixed abode and a tendency to explode in violent outbursts. Armando and Elder develop a tense, manipulative and sometimes tender relationship that rarely evolves into verbal dialogue. Each character has a complicated paternal history, which seems, in part, to explain their emotional dysfunction. We are led to suspect that, as a child, Armando was abused by his father, who has recently returned to Caracas from exile. Elder's father meanwhile, is imprisoned on numerous counts of murder. Eventually, and somewhat inevitably, history comes full circle. At the end of the film, Elder shoots Armando Senior and, in a Hitchcockian twist, Armando informs the police of Elder's crime and his whereabouts. This final betrayal creates deliberate ambiguity about Armando's intentions in courting Elder. Did he manipulate his lover, knowing that he would be predisposed to kill, or did Elder fail to grasp the symbolic nature of Armando's patricidal fantasies?

incumplido' ('Introducción [1974], reproduced in *Revista Digital del Comité de Cineastas de América Latina*, 1:1 [2016], 9–10 [p. 10]; <https://issuu.com/bibliotecadigitaldelcncac-venezuela/docs/revista_digital_del_comit__de_cine> [accessed 19 October 2022]). The first rebranded issue of *CCAL* contained: an article authored by Fidel Castro (originally published in *Granma*); an open letter that protested the coup against Dilma Rousseff, signed by Wagner Moura and Kleber Mendoca Filho, among others; and recapitulated historic dates in the evolution of New Latin American Cinema.

⁵⁹ Zuzana Pick, *The New Latin American Cinema: A Continental Project* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1993), 4. See also *The Social Documentary in Latin America*, ed. Julia Burton (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1990).

⁶⁰ In 2016, Vigas made *El vendedor de orquídeas*, a documentary about his father, a prominent Venezuelan painter, which follows his journey to recover a lost artwork. Although made in a tone that contrasts with his fictional work, the film suggests an interest in patriarchal heritage. The themes of paternal inheritance, violence, vengeance and masculinity are also prominent in *Los elefantes nunca se olvidan*.

La familia, meanwhile, is also concerned with patriarchal lineage and filial relations. So, too, can *La familia* be seen as the second instalment of a series, resuming the storyline of *Nostalgia*. Written as part of the 2014 Berlinale Talent Project Market, the film follows the lives of father and son, Andrés (Giovanny García) and Pedro (Reggie Reyes). Andrés is a rural migrant who has lost his wife, possibly in childbirth. Having relocated to Caracas, he struggles to raise the unruly Pedro in a violent, unforgiving neighbourhood. The streetwise twelve-year-old fends for himself during his father's lengthy absences. Suddenly, they are brought into close proximity after Pedro and a friend are mugged by a boy from another *barrio*. Pedro retaliates with a broken bottle, leaving the child to die on the pavement. Discovering this scene, Andrés panics about the prospect that the boy's family will seek revenge, and flees with Pedro from their tower-block apartment. Moving across the city from motels to hideouts, Pedro accompanies Andrés on his jobs in catering and decoration and, slowly, they begin to communicate. Ultimately, they both accept that they cannot return to their home and move, instead, to a rural village. Their fate, after their departure from the capital, is left to the viewer's imagination.

Desde allá and *La familia* co-exist with many other CNAC films that are set in the *barrios*, that feature cross-class encounters, and that dramatize conflict.⁶¹ None the less, neither film was conceived to appeal to a national spectatorship. The arthouse genre to which the films belong, even as they gesture to more popular genres like the thriller and melodrama, has never performed well in Venezuela. *Desde allá* and *La familia* screened at home after touring abroad, attracting some 18,000 and 10,000 viewers respectively. These figures represent a fraction of the tickets sold for CNAC hits of around five years earlier. Their lacklustre performance was due largely to the economic crisis at a time when cinema-going was simply no longer affordable for the majority of Venezuelans. The queer content of *Desde allá* was also thought to have limited its appeal in a country where homophobia is rampant. This supposition proved correct in the experience of lead actor Silva. After the film's limited commercial release, Silva received abuse upon being recognized in public. He explains that he took a big risk in making that film, because it exposed him to the real threat of homophobic violence. Inspired by the understated plots and pace of the Dardenne brothers, *La familia* was criticized by some Venezuelan viewers for its pretences and lack of action. This also contributed to limiting the film's dissemination in Venezuela.

61 Salient examples include: *Cyrano Fernández* (Alberto Arvelo, 2007); *El rumor de las piedras* (Alejandro Bellame Palacios, 2011); *Piedra, papel, o tijera* (Hernán Jabes, 2012); *Hermano*, *La hora cero* and *Secuestro Express* (Jonathan Jakubowicz, 2005).

Both films, then, can be taken as examples of productions that received initial backing from CNAC, which was intended, in turn, to attract further foreign investment and foreign audiences. As the producer of *Desde allá*, an ambitious and costly film, Cova initially found it difficult to secure funding outside of Venezuela. Eventually, the recruitment of Chilean cinematographer Sergio Armstrong, who had worked closely with Pablo Larraín, led to the casting of Castro and, subsequently, to substantial funding from Mexico. *La familia* was made on a much smaller scale.⁶² Rondón received several priming pre-production grants from organizations in France, Mexico and Germany. The film itself was co-produced with sponsors from Norway and Chile. Such cosmopolitan credentials facilitated a positive reception for both productions at the leading events of global cinema. *Desde allá* was programmed for Venice in 2015 and screened worldwide in the subsequent year. *La familia* premiered in the 2017 Semaine de la Critique at Cannes before showing at over fifty international festivals. Together, these films represented global mobility and visibility for New Venezuelan Cinema.

A desire to appeal to international spectators is also perceptible in the cinematic styles of these filmic features. The aesthetics of *Desde allá* and *La familia* depart from the lurid visualizations of *caraqueño* slums that often dominate in domestic crime films. In their stylistics, Vigas and Rondón draw instead on fantasy and horror.⁶³ The bright lights of the city are dimmed, and cast long shadows in an undersaturated palette. Sweeping panoramic views and choppy cuts are replaced with tight framing that centres on the protagonists. This branding of contemporary Caracas built on the vision of Mariana Rondón who, with *Pelo malo*, stylized El 23 de Enero, an iconic complex of 1950s tower blocks, as a looming structure seen from the perspective of its child protagonist.⁶⁴ While Vigas wanted to avoid such recognizable landmarks, still, he too

62 It is difficult to estimate the current value of these productions given the inflation of Venezuelan currency and the co-existence of various exchange rates at the time of their making. However, the producers estimate that *La familia* had a budget of approximately US \$500,000.

63 In this, they join other contemporary filmmakers who choose horror as a genre to mediate civil conflict, authoritarianism, violence and trauma. See Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2005); and Raúl Rodríguez-Hernández & Claudia Schaefer, *The Supernatural Sublime: The Wondrous Ineffability of the Everyday in Films from Mexico and Spain* (Lincoln, NE: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2019). On the characteristics of horror, and its preoccupation with temporality, see *The Horror Film*, ed., with an intro., by Stephen Prince (New Brunswick: Rutgers U. P., 2004).

64 On urban space in *Pelo malo*, see Rebecca Jarman, 'Queering the Barrios: The Politics of Space and Sexuality in Mariana Rondón's Film, *Pelo malo* (2013)', in *The Politics of Culture in the Chávez Era*, ed. Lisa Blackmore, Rebecca Jarman & Penélope Plaza, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 38, Supplement 1 (2019), 158–80.

created a cinematic cityscape that is haunted and is haunting. The faded elegance of Armando's *kitsch* apartment in La Candelaria is set against the eerie postmodern sterility of the gated communities in El Rosal and the glass-fronted high-rises of Altamira. In Armstrong's establishing shots, the city appears as an imposition. Its infrastructure dwarfs its characters, and its soundscape silences their conversations.

If Caracas has a hostile on-screen presence, so too was it assertive in the filming process. *Desde allá* was shot on location during nine weeks between 2013 and 2014, soon before the eruption of widespread protests. The crew captured documentary footage of long queues and supermarket shortages, later incorporated in the final cut as realist snapshots. By the time he commenced filming in 2015, Gustavo Rondón struggled to secure locations for *La familia*. Homeowners expressed fears over the safety of their property that, featuring in widely-viewed films, could become targets of robbery or extradition. In the end, he used the family homes of his personal contacts, located in the upmarket districts of Country Club and La Floresta. Other scenes were shot in Lomas de Urdaneta, a hilltop fortress of social housing, where the film crew would have to negotiate between the municipal authorities and the narco-traffickers that controlled the area.⁶⁵ Rondón incorporated stories that he had heard from *el bloque* into the script, which, like Vigas, he redrafted while on set. In both productions, then, and as in much contemporary urban cinema, the Venezuelan capital itself is reasserted as a leading character.

Another characteristic shared by *Desde allá* and *La familia* is the directors' choice of actors. Like prominent social realists such as Ken Loach and Andrea Arnold, both Vigas and Rondón cast an older actor with extensive training, alongside a younger, so-called 'natural actor' with less experience. This pairing of protagonists proved to be a hallmark of CNAC productions across different genres. To this end, the Commission often ran auditions in low-income neighbourhoods, adhering to the revolutionary impulse to democratize culture. For Beto Benites, a prolific casting director, such a strategy ensured spontaneity for films that rejected pomp and artifice. Although some critics would claim that Silva was plucked out of obscurity, this was not entirely the case.⁶⁶ *Desde allá* was his third feature film, but his first in a leading role; as a child he had played a bit-

65 In choosing his settings, Rondón was forced to adhere to the geopolitics of narco-trafficking: admittance to the roofs of the apartment blocks was disallowed, these being the surveillance sites used to monitor transactions and watch for police, until, eventually, Rondón and the crew earned sufficient trust to gain access in the last few weeks of filming.

66 David Rooney, '“From Afar” (“Desde alla [sic]”): Venice Review', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 10 September 2015, <<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/afar-desde-alla-venice-review-821716>> (accessed 13 August 2021).

role as the younger version of the protagonist in *La hora cero*.⁶⁷ Like many young CNAC stars, he had not formally studied the art of cinema. According to Silva, he honed his skills under the tutelage of Vigas, who offered him an education in film and taught him to channel his personal frustrations into his acting. On set, he observed Castro, who, in his words, taught him that a real actor does not act; a real actor *becomes* that person. Meanwhile, Castro's response to the young actor's physical intimidation became an important facet of Armando's persona.

A similar approach was adopted by Rondón who, in *La familia*, selected Reyes at a school workshop after auditioning some 500 children. Reyes was chosen, in part, because he came from a tight-knit family. Paradoxically, it was his stable home life that would allow him the discipline to play an undisciplined character. Born in the Andean state of Táchira, García had an established career in theatre, and had recently produced and starred in *El Amparo* (Rober Calzadilla, 2016). Like Castro, García, too, was a stranger to Caracas, and drew on his anxieties even as he attempted to establish the character's patriarchal dominance. In this, he channelled the relationship between the *andino* and Caracas, recalling his own arrival in the capital aged eighteen when he found the city to be frightening.⁶⁸ Again, then, the city left its imprint on the production. Both directors minimized contact between their actors in rehearsals and filmed chronologically to allow their relationship to develop over the course of shooting. This, as Rondón observes, coincided with the film's storyline and made visible the evolution of their emotional bond. As we shall see, it also prompted viewers to reflect on the intergenerational conflicts at play in Bolivarian Venezuela.

Intergenerational Strife

Patricia Valladares-Ruiz has astutely remarked that Venezuelan filmmakers of the Maduro era have elaborated 'discourses of hopelessness, individual failure and loss', associated with 'the intimate conflicts experienced by masculine characters'.⁶⁹ This is true of Vigas and Rondón, whose organically artistic portrayals of Caracas, and whose insistence that actors draw on their own lived experiences, make for stories that are complex and

67 Silva was cast in *La hora cero* after appearing in *Por un gallo*, which had exhausted its funding before completion. Silva had not intended to audition for this film, but, rather, as a means of fulfilling a debt owed to a friend, accompanied him to a casting event near his home in the low-income district of Petare where he was spotted by producers.

68 The 'arrival' narrative of rural migrants to the city is one that has a long tradition in Venezuelan cinema. See Rebecca Jarman, 'Melodrama at the Margins: Poverty, Politics and Profits in "Golden Age" Venezuelan Cinema', *Modern Language Review*, 112:3 (2017), 645–65.

69 Valladares-Ruiz, 'Subjetividades en crisis y conflicto social en el cine venezolano contemporáneo', 412.

unique, although they are as much about society as they are about individuals. Vigas and Rondón are not alone in probing interactions between the old and the young at times of historical upheaval. ‘During the 1940s’, remarks Mani Sharpe, ‘a whole generation of Italian directors had already deployed teenage actors to express the despair and hope of the Second World War’.⁷⁰ Writing on Spain’s transition to democracy beginning in the mid 1970s, Duncan Wheeler argues that ‘[t]he discourse of the two Spains (the victorious and the vanquished) can blind us to other divisions operative within the framework of the Transition’.⁷¹ With this, he refers to the differences between parents and their children. Correspondingly, the stories narrated in *Desde allá* and *La familia* have a universal quality that references longstanding traditions in cinema, and that, in gesturing to Oedipal myths, lends them to allegorical interpretation.

Notably since the publication of Fredric Jameson’s polemic on ‘Third-World Literature’, critics have expressed measured disdain at the use of allegory.⁷² For many, this is a narrative device that is reductive, simplistic and prescriptive; and yet, for filmmakers who court global appeal, the use of allegory can be strategic:

If art films are to travel to international audiences, they must make the claim that their forms and stories are comprehensible across languages and cultures. Thus, part of art cinema’s stake in art is an investment in visual legibility and cross-cultural translation.⁷³

Furthermore, Walter Benjamin’s illuminating work on classical allegory has demonstrated how, contrary to received wisdom, it does not necessarily foreclose possibilities of meaning, but, rather, opens up to a higher plane of signification. For Benjamin, the allegory is a device that, when deployed in tragic drama, channels metaphysical forces: the allegory conveys the will of

70 Mani Sharpe, ‘Gazing, Settler Cinema and the Algerian War: *Slanted Kisses*’, *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 15:1 (2021), 67–85.

71 Wheeler, *Following Franco*, 64.

72 Jameson’s polemic statement reads as follows: ‘*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*’ (Fredric Jameson, ‘Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’, *Social Text*, 15 [1986], 65–88 [p. 69; original emphasis]). For a robust critique of this view, see Aijaz Ahmad, ‘Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the “National Allegory”’, *Social Text*, 17 (1987), 3–25; and, in the context of Latin-American film, Ismail Xavier, *Allegories of Underdevelopment: Aesthetics and Politics in Modern Brazilian Cinema* (Minneapolis/London: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997). On a rejection of allegory in Argentine cinema with intellectual pretensions, see Andermann, *New Argentine Cinema*, xi–xii; Sarah O’Brien, ‘Sticky Matter: The Persistence of Animals As Allegory in Lucrecia Martel’s *La Ciénaga* and *La Mujer sin Cabeza*’, *Screen*, 58:4 (2017), 458–76; and Page, *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema*, 184–85.

73 Galt & Schoonover, ‘Introduction: The Impurity of Art Cinema’, 10.

deities, sovereigns, ghosts and spirits. In its gesturing towards a reality other than its own, it can be understood as an attempt to preserve the ethereal and the eternal.⁷⁴ By demarcating that which is invisible, lost or absent, it acts as a vehicle between the abstract and the concrete. As such, the allegory also conjures multiple temporalities, in summoning a distant past for the benefit of a vivacious present. If we define crisis, in its most basic articulation, as a rift in what Émile Durkheim famously called 'social time', then allegory is thus a mode that is appropriate for an exploration of this disjuncture.⁷⁵

In what remains of this article, I argue that, in their stories, Vigas and Rondón make critical use of the paternal allegory to interrogate the Venezuelan crisis, drawing on trends in cinema from Latin America and Europe. They do so not only in a bid to communicate its parameters to global audiences, but, moreover, to examine the interplay between personal and societal disasters. Their recourse to the allegory emphasizes, first, the pervasive nature of the violent patriarchal figure and the destruction that this engenders and, second, the historical ruptures that have been experienced over the past generation in Venezuela. In this, the directors' intentions align with those of Michael Haneke, who states that

[...] the family [is] the germinating cell for all conflicts. [...] [F]or me, the family is the locus of the miniature war, the first site of all warfare. The large political-economic site is what one usually associates with warfare, but the everyday site of war in the family is as murderous in its own way, whether between parents and children or wife and husband.⁷⁶

An examination of patriarchal structures allows Vigas and Rondón to question not only how the Venezuelan crisis affects the lives of millions of Venezuelan citizens. It also permits them to reflect on how the lives of millions of Venezuelan citizens conspire to create a major societal breakdown.

This focus on genealogy is fitting for a mode of filmmaking that is preoccupied with recent Venezuelan history, evolving as it has under the rule of successive strongmen. The incorporation of allegory is appropriate in gesturing towards the perennial reappearance of autocrats on the public stage so that they serve as uncanny substitutes for the fathers who are absent in many households. For Mark Fisher, patriarchy is what he terms

74 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, with an intro. by George Steiner (London/New York: Verso, 1998 [1st German ed. 1928]), 226.

75 Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. J. W. Swain, with an intro. by Robert Nisbet (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976 [1st French ed. 1912]), 10.

76 Christopher Sharrett, 'The World That Is Known: An Interview with Michael Haneke', *Cinéaste*, 28:3 (2003), 28–31 (p. 31).

‘a hauntology’, or a hierarchical structure that hosts repetitive, conflictive encounters between masculine figures.⁷⁷ Sons repeat the behaviours of their fathers who, in turn, are apparitions of their progenitors, in violent, vicious cycles. ‘You don’t have to believe in the supernatural’, Fisher writes, ‘to recognise that the family is a haunted structure’.⁷⁸ Shaped by its ancestry, it is ‘full of presentiments and uncanny repetitions, something that speaks ahead of us, instead of us’.⁷⁹ Indeed, like political patterns, the genealogical rhythms of time do not flow in one continuous, forward-bound direction but, rather, presuppose regressions and reverberations. The early years of the Bolivarian Revolution saw the expansion of the political horizon, stretched between what Fernando Coronil describes as ‘the malleable landscape of utopian imaginaries and the immutable ground of recalcitrant histories’.⁸⁰ ‘On the one hand’, he continues,

[...] the future enters the public stage as an open horizon of expectation, as potentiality, offering a hopeful sense of possibility characteristic of liminal phases or revolutions. On the other, the future imposes its presence as a receding horizon, a future in doubt, inducing a sense of despondency typical of periods of decline or historical depression.⁸¹

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, the founding fathers of Venezuela have been said to be patrons of an immanent future, even as the present is increasingly hostile and social conditions have degenerated.

Desde allá and *La Familia* can readily be approached as cinematic studies of patriarchal violence, whereby anger and resentment is passed to new generations who are haunted by their absent fathers.⁸² If they can be placed in a catalogue of Venezuelan crime films, they also stand out for their nuance and self-reflection. The revelatory thrust of the 1980s classics, which often exposed the workings of structural violence, is, in *Desde allá*, inverted in psychosomatic repression. With Armando, Vigas imagines an afterlife of childhood abuse. As an adult, Armando is prone to self-harm

77 Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), 123.

78 Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 43.

79 Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 43.

80 Fernando Coronil, ‘The Future in Question: History and Utopia in Latin America (1989–2010)’, in *Business As Usual: The Roots of the Global Financial Meltdown*, ed. Craig Calhoun & Georgi Derluigian (New York/London: New York U. P., 2011), 231–64 (p. 235). On utopia in Bolivarian Venezuela, see also Matt Wilde, ‘“To Fill Yourself with Goodness”: Revolutionary Self-Making in Bolivarian Venezuela’, in *Possible Worlds: Imagining Utopia in Latin America*, ed. Sandra Brunnegger, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 37:2 (2018), 130–43.

81 Coronil, ‘The Future in Question’, 235.

82 For more on patriarchal violence in Venezuelan cinema, see Gustavo Subero, ‘La mirada sexodiverso en el cine venezolano reciente’, *BSVS*, II:2 (2018), 285–308.

and is drawn to masochistic forms of pleasure. We cannot help but think, as we watch him masturbate to the sight of exposed buttocks, that Armando is acting out scenes from his adolescence, now occupying the position of his tormentor. Armando is initially attracted by Elder's anger and aggression. His drive for revenge may be read as an attempt to process his childhood trauma. Yet, in pursuing this goal, Armando repeats his father's predatory behaviour. The victim has become the perpetrator. The camera trails behind him as he hunts his prey, stalking young men down empty streets and on crowded buses. Armando lies in wait for his father, concealed in the bushes outside his home and in the urban jungle around his workplace. His pursuit of Elder is calculating and relentless: he breaks into his mother's apartment, lingering there, unseen, almost without reflection. He has become a vampire.

Elder, meanwhile, is intrigued by this strange, older man who suddenly pays him undue attention. His responses to Armando's unsolicited advances oscillate between anger, intrigue and affection. Elder, like his own father, 'mata como si nada'. He lashes out after sexual contact. As the film progresses, he becomes the target of homophobic attacks from his mother. Expelled from the family home, he sleeps in the old, battered car that Armando has bought him. Even as Elder and Armando's lives become messily entwined, they are separated by a shared emotional detachment. The wads of cash that pass between them, as the focal points of sequences inspired by Robert Bresson, suggests that their relationship is principally transactional. There are moments though, if fleeting, when their mutual affection seems heartfelt. Both seem to long for more meaningful interaction. In the final scene, when Elder is detained by police just as he has left the apartment to buy breakfast, Armando's steely demeanour briefly exhibits a trace of sadness. It is as if they want a change from the past, but are unable to break the patriarchal cycles that circumscribe their freedom and that restrict their future.

If Vigas is primarily concerned with the behavioural prototypes that persist across generations, Rondón is drawn to the generational and geographical shifts that take place within patriarchal frameworks. Often hovering at the edge of the frame, the young protagonist Pedro seems lost between adolescence and adulthood. In the absence of Andrés, he seeks role models outside the home. He runs errands for small-time *narcos* and seeks the favour of local kingpins. Compared with these cash-flush, arms-bearing, muscular men on motorbikes, Andrés' authority—his masculinity—is deficient. Pedro is a child of the city and, for him, Andrés is a naïve outsider. He sees his father as cowardly and servile. His work in the services of the rich is exploitative and callous, and, in any case, does not provide enough. Short on money, Andrés struggles to buy food for Pedro when he is hungry. Andrés, meanwhile, is deeply disturbed by his son's unrepentant act of murder. The evening of their escape, as Andrés

contemplates his young son's tiny sleeping frame in a prison-like motel, he seems confused as to how he has raised a boy who is capable of homicide. Might the corruptive forces of the city, or the unforgiving nature of the present moment, instead be responsible for his behaviour? The father's dismay represents a reversal of the adolescent repulsion at Nazi terror in post-1945 European art cinema. Now an older generation is horrified by the future.

In mediating these differences, Rondón points towards intergenerational cultural shifts: between 1998 and 2016, the rates of violent crime among young Venezuelan men reached historic peaks.⁸³ Some commentators have attributed this spike to *anomie*, resentment and a loss of family values.⁸⁴ Pedro's unremorseful attitude to murder speaks to the normalization of violence among young children. At the same time, however, Rondón avoids romanticizing the past. While Andrés finds murder to be reprehensible, he commits other kinds of crime on a regular basis. Like Pedro's killing, these are also acts of survival and desperation. He lies to his employers and steals from his patrons. He sells bootleg bottles of whiskey to the man who runs the kiosk on the corner as a means of keeping the household afloat. Interestingly, it is only after Andrés is caught stealing that relations improve between him and Pedro. Driven perhaps by a newfound respect for his rebellious father, Pedro asks what he is doing when he is not in the apartment. This is the first time that they have shared personal information. Slowly, their perspectives begin to align, indicated in shots in which their postures are mirrored, until they leave the city to begin a new life together. It is as though the Venezuelan capital cannot sustain productive paternal relationships, trapped as they are in spirals of patriarchal violence.

To a certain extent, *Desde allá* and *La familia* are allegories for polarization. No reference is made to partisan subscriptions or voting

83 Andrés Antillano & Keymer Ávila, '¿La mano dura disminuye los homicidios? El caso de Venezuela', in *Reducción de los homicidios y de la violencia armada: una mirada a América Latina*, ed. Ignacio Cano & Emiliano Rojido, *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals*, 116 (2017), 77–100. On homicide and violent crime, see Rebecca Hanson *et al.*, 'Protecting the Right to Life in Venezuela', in *Prisons, Punishment, and Policing in the Americas. Across the Region, Violence Continues to Spiral. What Can Be Done?*, ed. Laura Weiss & Alejandro Velasco, *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 49:3 (2017), 309–14. On extrajudicial executions in Caracas, see AMR 53/3632/2021 'Venezuela: Impunity in the Face of Lethal Policy of Social Control', *Amnesty International*, 18 February 2021 (available online at <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr53/3632/2021/en/>> [accessed 20 October 2022]); and Adrian Bergmann *et al.*, *Monitor del uso de la fuerza letal en América Latina: un estudio comparativo de Brasil, Colombia, El Salvador, México y Venezuela (2019)* (Aguascalientes: Monitor Fuerza Letal, 2019).

84 For one example of many, see Fernando Tineo, 'Crímenes horrendos exponen pérdida de valores en Venezuela', *El Estímulo*, 9 February 2021, <<https://elestimulo.com/crimenes-horrendos-exponen-perdida-de-valores-en-venezuela/>> (accessed 13 August 2021).

tendencias, although, as identified by scholars, the divide between the *bolivarianos* and the political opposition often supersedes ideological affiliation.⁸⁵ The differences between Armando and Elder in their class and race might be equated with electoral demographics, as *bolivarianos* are often perceived as poor and Brown or Black, and the opposition as White and wealthy. In both films, the age gaps between their main characters mean that they were raised either before or after the coming of the Bolivarian Revolution. Their outlooks are shaped by the political contexts of their childhoods. The Fourth Republic was renowned for its corruption and embezzlement, so Armando commits bribery and Andrés, theft. The heavy-handed *caudillo* rule of the Bolivarian Revolution has made unthinking killers of Pedro and Elder. By the end of the film, for Elder, the future is bleak; for Pedro, it is nebulous. It is difficult not to interpret this as a commentary on the country's prospects. That both films are interested in the site of contact between antagonistic forces is in keeping with CNAC's role as a mediator between sectors in conflict. Read in this grain, the directors take opposing stances on hopes for reconciliation. The finale of *Desde allá* implies that rapprochement is not possible, as Elder is taken away by the police. In *La familia*, Andrés and Pedro's resettlement in the countryside at least indicates the possibility of renewal and dialogue.

In this sense, the films can be understood as allegories of Venezuelan history: they are commentaries on the ways that the past weighs down on the present crisis. But to understand the films purely as symbolic statements would be a discredit to the artistic vision of their directors. Vigas and Rondón are careful to remind their audiences that their stories are microscopic, not microcosmic: they offer a granular vision of twenty-first-century Venezuela. Their shared focus on the troubled family nucleus allows them to tell stories that are both specific and universal. These films are thus best appreciated as allegorical works, in the Benjaminian sense, whereby '[a]llegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things' and that, in allegory, 'the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape'.⁸⁶ The worlds that are created in *Desde allá* and *La familia* are populated by objects that are deathly and petrified. Scenes of Armando at his workplace, surrounded by disembodied dentures, are mirrored by shots of Elder among skeletal car frames and the wreckages of violent collisions. Andrés and Pedro move between the ruinous rooms of buildings that are falling apart, and the rudimentary shelter of exposed, towering buildings that are under construction. Conceived as allegories, these films make reference to a specific historical moment in Venezuela when time feels burdensome, and

85 García-Guadilla & Mallén, *Venezuela's Polarized Politics*, 4.

86 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. Osborne, 177–78.

space constricted. The films can also be understood as artefacts of this period, which defer, in turn, to ahistorical myths of violent, conflicted filial love, and to the dogged pursuit of power that engenders disasters. In these films, History, itself, is rendered allegorical, inasmuch as it reifies false hopes of progress.

Conclusion

Often, New Venezuelan Cinema is a term applied to arthouse productions that have found success abroad such as *Desde allá* and *La familia*, but I would like to conclude by suggesting that it can be used more broadly to categorize all the films that were made after the 2005 legislative reform. The themes that are addressed in *Desde allá* and *La familia*—patriarchy, conflict, reconciliation, betrayal, alienation, polarization, despair—and their directors' concerns with hostile cities and historical regressions, are recurrent features in New Venezuelan Cinema. Such preoccupations cut across genres, so that, with different approaches and to different ends, they are explored in romantic comedies and melodramas like *Papita, maní, tostón* and *Azul y no tan rosa*, in crime thrillers like *Hermano* and *La hora cero*, in historical reproductions like *Bolívar, el hombre de las dificultades* and *Zamora* as well as in the arthouse dramas that include *Desde allá* and *La familia* alongside *Pelo malo*, *La soledad* and *La fortaleza*. As such, New Venezuelan Cinema is a term that can be aptly used to categorize films made in, or about, Bolivarian Venezuela, after 2005, without presupposing its ideological positioning or political content.

This is not to say, however, that this is a holistic or homogeneous cinematic movement. Arthouse productions can be distinguished from other forms of New Venezuelan Cinema by some of the following features: a sustained and stylized contemplation of the urban fabric; the prominence of non-verbal interactions over scripted dialogue; a nuanced interrogation of patriarchal power and its legacies; a consideration of violence and miscommunication as this persists over generations; and the use of allegory in reflecting on interactions between the personal and the political. Scrutinizing the uneasy co-existence between peers, parents and children, these directors suggest that the Venezuelan crisis interferes in family life, inasmuch as it inheres in patriarchal conflicts. While these films share similarities in discourse, so too do their makers adopt shared strategies in production: many of these films star newcomers alongside recognizable actors, are shot on location in Caracas and are made by first-time or upcoming directors as international collaborations. The reform of the Ley de la Cinematografía Nacional in 2005, the implementation of taxes used to fund a designated film budget and the simultaneous growth of the Venezuelan economy, allowed CNAC authorities to fund an increasing

number of such films that would be promoted on the global market. Such investments came to fruition just as this boom turned to bust, as the State took an authoritarian turn, as the rate of violent crimes reached a peak and as polarization erupted into protests. Foreign audiences have thus been drawn to the arthouse productions of New Venezuelan Cinema as visual relics of a country in crisis.

National specificities notwithstanding, this turn towards the catastrophic is in keeping with global trends in contemporary arthouse cinema. Once having enjoyed substantial support and subsidies from the State, over the past two decades, at different moments, filmmakers in countries like Argentina, Spain, Brazil and Mexico have been confronted with the contraction of public spending and policies that are unamenable to the creative sectors. In many instances, the rise of populist, paternalist and demagogic leaders has been accompanied by the decline of those institutions that do not cohere with their ideological agendas. In Venezuela, CNAC no longer stimulates filmic production. Data for the number of CNAC films released in the year of writing is currently unavailable. Anecdotally, it has offered internal funding for feature-length productions that, at black market rates, is equivalent to some US \$50. The debts owed by CNAC to Ibermedia mean that directors whose films are certified as Venezuelan are effectively sanctioned, in so far as their applications for funding are automatically rejected. Most of the authorities that oversaw the growth of CNAC after 2005 have now left Venezuela. The 2005 legislation remains in operation, but has largely been annulled in practice. Meanwhile, the state-funded studio Villa del Cine, which no longer operates under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture, but, instead, of the Ministry of Communication, continues to work with substantial budgets.⁸⁷ In 2020, the prolific director of historical dramas, Lamata, was commissioned to make *Carabobo: caminos de libertad*, a series about the historical battle of Carabobo in the Wars of Independence. Its budget approximates US \$4,000,000.⁸⁸ The political panorama for filmmakers in Venezuela is replicated, albeit in less extreme terms, for directors in neighbouring countries.⁸⁹

87 For Farrell, this jurisdictional restructuring raises questions about 'the distinction between film as a cultural art form or a means of propaganda' (Farrell, 'A Close-Up on National Venezuelan Film Support During the Chávez Years', 385).

88 See 'Luis Alberto Lamata: Serie "Carabobo, caminos de libertad", atrapa una circunstancia histórica desde el primer momento', *Alba Ciudad 96.3FM*, 14 February 2021, <<https://albaciudad.org/2021/02/luis-lamata-serie-carabobo-caminos-de-libertad-atrapa-y-cautiva-una-circunstancia-historica-desde-el-primer-momento/>> (accessed 13 August 2021).

89 By way of a recent example from Brazil, under Jair Bolsonaro, ANCINE, the national film agency, has been relocated to the Ministry of Citizenship. The move was swiftly followed by a block on all film investments, and the restructuring of the Conselho Superior de Cinema (the Higher Film Council), 'a consultative body that makes recommendations on film policy,

Despite these challenges, Venezuelan cinema is still performing well on the global market. In this, it joins the smaller national cinemas of countries such as Greece and Portugal. During the past decade, these have prospered from better access to broader distribution networks, online streaming platforms, commercial funding opportunities and transnational collaborations. Venezuelan film has thus evolved in dialogue with international trends, as directors have been drawn into conversations about frugality, precarity and creativity during times of crisis. Resulting from this is a wave of Latin-American and European cinema that is concerned with dislocation, isolation, polarization and violence which attracts a polyglottal spectatorship. New streaming services that showcase the work of Venezuelan directors, such as Cine Mestizo, have attracted thousands of viewers both within and beyond Venezuela. Venezuelan film networks, as they have migrated abroad with the diaspora, remain highly productive. Lossada, Cova, Rondón, Machado and many others are now running production companies in Spain and Mexico. Most of the actors, producers, and directors whom I interviewed for this article are directly involved in new films that are being made independently in, or about, Venezuela. The existence of these initiatives, which have been undertaken in near-impossible circumstances, belies the impulse to bear witness to the Venezuelan crisis. In the words of Lossada, this is ‘un cine de reconstrucción’ that ultimately strengthens the bonds between Venezuelans. This sentiment may feel more optimistic than the perspectives adopted by Vigas and Rondón. But in their documentation of a nation in decline, they, too, are the architects of New Venezuelan Cinema.*

which now controversially includes representatives of Netflix, Google, Facebook and the US Majors’ (Dennison, *Remapping Brazilian Film Culture in the Twenty-First Century*, 196–97).

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