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# Abstract

Tracing the ‘**Golden Age**’ collaborations between Mexican, Argentine and Venezuelan film studios, this article analyses *La Balandra Isabel llegó esta tarde* (Carlos Hugo Christensen, 1949) and *Caín adolescente* (Román Chalbaud, 1959) as the fruits of early efforts to establish a film industry in Caracas. Bookending the 1948-1958 military dictatorship, each film mediates local anxieties surrounding **urbanization** within the framework of **melodrama** that was predominant in 1940s Latin American **cinema**. Focusing on the film’s distinct mediations of intersections between race, class and gender, I argue that *La Balandra Isabel* and *Caín adolescente* negotiate the rise of the popular according to the conflicting ideologies that shaped their production in **Venezuela**.

# **Melodrama at the Margins: Poverty, Politics and Profits in ‘Golden Age’ Venezuelan Cinema**

In recent years, scholars of Latin American cinema have revisited the so-called ‘Golden Age’ of melodrama, used to denote the boom of cinematic production between the 1930s and 50s, as a previously underestimated site of transnational contact among filmmakers, actors and consumers. Against understandings of Golden Age productions as ‘imitative of Hollywood, unrealistic, alienating and sentimental’,<sup>1</sup> made in isolation from an emerging global filmic industry, more recent research has suggested the international collaborations that took place during the Golden Age between studios in Mexico, the US and, to a lesser extent, Argentina, laid the ground for future cross-border alliances that would bridge the Río Grande and draw mass audiences from across the region.<sup>2</sup> This, in turn, contributed to a complex and dynamic cinematic movement, notwithstanding charges of simplistic plot lines and moralistic judgements, that signalled the emergence of mass-produced culture in the context of modernisation. Although highly valuable in evaluating the origins of a multinational industry driven by efforts to universalise cinematic production and maximise its appeal among a growing body of spectators, this focus unintentionally obscures some of the post-War collaborative work undertaken in areas lacking structural and financial support for local filmmakers, where ambitious interregional productions were not always mediated by Hollywood studios.

One such location is Venezuela, where, in the 1940s and 50s, aspiring entrepreneurs and

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<sup>1</sup> Ana María López, “‘Tears and Desire’: Women and Melodrama in the “Old” Mexican Cinema’ in *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*, ed. by John King (London: BFI Publications, 1993), pp. 147–63, (p.148).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Dolores Tierney, ‘Emilio Fernández ‘in Hollywood’: Mexico’s postwar Inter-American cinema, ‘La perla/The Pearl’ (1946) and ‘The Fugitive’ (1948)’, *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas*, 7 (2010) 81-100; Seth Fein, ‘Transnationalization and cultural collaboration: Mexican Film propaganda during Word War II’, *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 17 (1998), 105-28; and Jorge Finkelstein, *The Film Industry in Argentina: An Illustrated Cultural History* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland, 2004).

artists looked beyond national frontiers, not to Los Angeles but to Buenos Aires and Mexico DF, in attempts to nurture home-grown melodramas that would compete with the major Golden Age productions that had proved highly popular among expanding caraqueño audiences.<sup>3</sup> At the time, however, the Venezuelan film industry received a limited amount of state investment, unlike in Mexico, where the governments of Manuel Ávila Camacho and Miguel Alemán Valdés ‘saw film as an instrument of constructing hegemony during the rapid modernization of the peasantry’,<sup>4</sup> and Argentina, where the Perón government ‘committed to supporting the expansion of all domestic industrial production’,<sup>5</sup> and thus channeled funding into the cinematic enterprises of local commercial studios. In 1938, the Eleazer López Contreras military government dissolved the short-lived Laboratorio Cinematográfico Nacional, one of two state-funded studios managed by the Ministry of Public Services, which was replaced by the privately run Estudios Ávila under the ownership of literary heavyweight Rómulo Gallegos.<sup>6</sup> This marked the beginning of a boom and bust cycle that, approximately once every five years, saw the studio and its equipment pass from hand to hand, while, equally, state power passed from régimen to régimen.<sup>7</sup> In the absence of a grounded tradition in Venezuelan filmmaking or, indeed, a stable government that might support such an initiative, those who wanted to uncover the rewards of the ‘gold rush’ of 1950s melodrama turned towards the opportunities proffered by the prospect of transnational co-productions.

Although this placed restrictions on the possibilities available to Venezuelan filmmakers that have

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<sup>3</sup> During the first half of the 1930s, silent Hollywood productions accounted for some 91% of all screenings in Venezuelan cinemas. With the introduction of sound, however, ticket sales were dominated by Mexican and Argentine productions. Films from Hollywood took over the box office again in the 1960s, after the popularity of Golden Age cinema waned with the introduction of television. See Alfredo Roffé, ‘Políticas y espectáculo cinematográfico en Venezuela’ in *Panorama histórico del cine en Venezuela, 1896-1993*, ed. by Rodolfo Izaguirre, Francisco Rodríguez, and Ambretta Marrosu (Caracas: Fundación Cinemateca Nacional, 1997), pp.245–68.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Kantaris, ‘The Cinematic Labor of Affect: Urbanity and Sentimental Education in *El Bruto* and *Ensayo de un crimen*’ in *A Companion to Luis Buñuel*, ed. by Rob Stone and Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), pp.302-33 (p.304).

<sup>5</sup> Jorge Schnitman, *Film Industries in Latin America: Dependency and Development* (New Jersey: Ablex, 1984), p.46.

<sup>6</sup> The Laboratorio Cinematográfico Nacional was founded in 1927 in the last decade of the Juan Vicente Gómez dictatorship. Although it mainly produced news bulletins and advertisements, it was also commissioned to create short documentaries about the emerging industries of the moment, including *Lactuario Maracay* and *Ganadería industrial*, both of which belonged to Gómez and his brothers. See José Miguel Acosta in Izaguirre et al (eds), ‘Bajo el signo del Estado’, *Panorama histórico del cine en Venezuela 1896-1993*, p.182.

<sup>7</sup> After the death of Juan Vicente Gómez in 1935, the country saw two periods of military governance, a brief spate of democracy, three golpes de estado and, in 1958, a transition to the so-called ‘Fourth Republic’.

been lamented by film historians for causing stagnation in industrial development, it also produced a cinematic movement that was self-consciously interregional from the moment of its inception.<sup>8</sup>

In order to map out these early interactions between Mexican, Argentine and Venezuelan studios, this article analyses *La Balandra Isabel llegó esta tarde* (Carlos Hugo Christensen, 1949), commissioned by Bolívar Films under the direction of prolific Argentine Christensen, and *Caín adolescente* (Román Chalbaud, 1959), the first feature-length film by Chalbaud, Venezuela's foremost auteur who has been lauded for his lifelong commitment to social justice.<sup>9</sup> I begin by tracing the interregional elements that informed the respective production process of both films, before discussing the ways in which each takes a different approach to its subject matter and target audience, shoring up the notion that family melodrama is, in the words of Thomas Elsaesser, 'a particular, historically and socially conditioned mode of experience'.<sup>10</sup> In the style of *cine de arrabal*, both *La Balandra Isabel* and *Caín adolescente* take the urban shantytowns as their protagonist, at a time when Caracas, like many other major cities in the region, had grown to accommodate groups of different classes, races, sexualities, religions, and political persuasions in spatially compact communities.<sup>11</sup> Such rapid changes to the demography and topography of the

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<sup>8</sup> Some historians of Venezuelan cinema claim that the national film industry did not truly exist until 1975, the year when President Carlos Andrés Pérez, elected on the crest of an oil boom, passed a series of laws that committed to protecting national cinematic production. John King writes: 'Between 1975 and 1980, the state financed twenty-nine feature films, beginning with Chalbaud's *Sagrado y obscuro*. It was also stipulated, during this period, that exhibitors should show at least twelve Venezuelan films a year. For once, exhibitors needed little encouragement when it was found that these films created their own public' (John King, *Magical Reels: A History of Cinema in Latin America* (London: Verso, 2000 [1990]), p.219).

<sup>9</sup> The authors of *Román Chalbaud*, commissioned by the state-run Cinemateca Nacional, celebrate Chalbaud's work for foregrounding issues including poverty, crime, corruption, and exploitation, particularly as these are felt at the urban margins. The retrospective begins with an analysis of his first film, *Caín adolescente*, that portrays the barrios in a state of historic suspension, awaiting salvation from a messianic figure who, it is implied, materialises half a century later in the guise of Hugo Chávez: 'Muestra a la propia gente del barrio: sus esperanzas, delusiones, iras, frustraciones, traiciones, sus deseos de volver a creer en algo o alguien que les saque del estado del infortunio en el que viven' (Irida Garcia de Molero and Aminor Méndez, *Román Chalbaud, Cuadernos Cineastas venezolanos* (Caracas: Fundación Cinemateca Nacional, 2006), p.17).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama' in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (London: BFI Publications, 1987), pp. 43-69 (p.49, emphasis in original).

<sup>11</sup> Urban historian Arturo Almandoz attributes this process of urbanization to the development of Venezuela's oil industry in the first half of the twentieth century, transforming Caracas into an administrative centre for foreign firms while raising capital that the state invested in urban regeneration: 'Los importantes cambios experimentados por la economía venezolana, como resultado de la actividad petrolera, jugaron un papel decisivo en este proceso de urbanización. [...] El aumento sustancial de los ingresos fiscales aceleró las posibilidades del Estado venezolano para

country caused conflict between antagonistic social groups that, significantly, found expression in Golden Age cinema, as demonstrated at a continental level by Carlos Monsiváis and Jesús Martín-Barbero.<sup>12</sup> Drawing on their work, I argue that *La Balandra Isabel* displayed an ambivalent approach towards the shantytowns, thus failing to profit from an important new group of cinema-goers, and simultaneously recoiled from the multiple challenges posed to hegemonic power structures by the poorer sectors of the urban population. A decade later, *Caín adolescente* drew on the visual tropes and cinematic techniques characteristic of a socially conscious cinema from Mexico and Italy in an attempt to nuance visions of the barrios that would engage with the rise of the urban poor as an historical protagonist during the twilight years of the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship.<sup>13</sup> Notwithstanding Chalbaud's sympathy with the plights of the impoverished, this attempt is limited by an underlying anti-urban sentiment that informs the film's narrative development, as the director curbs the political potential of the slums as a collective.

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desempeñar un papel relevante en el proceso de desarrollo nacional' (Arturo Almandoz, *La ciudad en el imaginario venezolano: de 1936 a los pequeños seres* (Caracas: Fundación para la Cultura Urbana, 2004), pp.106-7).

<sup>12</sup> In their re-evaluations of melodrama from the 1940s and 50s, Carlos Monsiváis and Jesús Martín-Barbero have identified a set of conflicting interests that often informed the plots and aesthetics of Golden Age productions. Broadly, these correspond to different strands of discourse that might be conceptualized as popular, nationalist, and commercial agendas at work in local and international contexts. See Carlos Monsiváis, 'Mexican Cinema: Of Myths and Demythifications' in King (ed), *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*, pp.139-46 and Jesús Martín-Barbero, *De los medios a las mediaciones: comunicación, cultura y hegemonía* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 2010), I (1987).

<sup>13</sup> For a history of the development of the barrios as a political identity, see George Ciccariello-Maher's *We Created Chávez: A People's History of the Venezuelan Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013). According to Ciccariello-Maher, the mechanisms of the petro-state that, historically, privileged business interests, monopolized formal politics, and excluded the urban masses from integration into monetized sectors, meant that the answer to class conflict in Caracas lay not in broad-based unionist organization but in geographically rooted collectives. As the majority of these groups worked in the informal industry, they had no access to trade unions and were largely marginalized by formal politics. As such they turned to community activism and congealed in local grassroots movements peripheral to the administrative centre of Caracas. In this sense, Ciccariello-Maher writes, 'class demands have been subsumed to territorial, neighbourhood demands that manifest, above all, politically' (p.227, emphasis in original), with the barrios functioning as their barracks.

## **La Balandra Isabel llegó esta tarde (1949)**

Bolívar Films was founded in 1942 by entrepreneur and journalist, Luis Guillermo Villegas Blanco, incorporating the spaces and equipment of Estudios Ávila that had declared bankruptcy after the making of *Juan de la calle* (Rómulo Gallegos, 1941). Villegas had spent the previous three years researching the ‘Golden Age’ market, making trips to Mexico and Argentina in a bid to garner financial support for the development of a parallel industry in Caracas.<sup>14</sup> Between its establishment and its closure just over a decade later, the studio made nine feature films, all by foreign directors, alongside a number of news reels and advertisements sponsored by the López Contreras government.<sup>15</sup> Of these, *La Balandra Isabel* was the most costly production, and was based on an eponymous short story written by Venezuelan folk writer Guillermo Meneses.<sup>16</sup> Set in Muchinga, a poor port district on the outskirts of Caracas, the film featured a cast of stock figures to tell the tale of star-crossed lovers, Segundo Mendosa and Esperanza. Segundo, a sea-bound salesman, is tempted away from his wife Isabel by prostitute Esperanza, a tropical femme fatale who performs as a cabaretera. Fearful that Segundo is soon to return home to Isabel on the island of Margarita, known as ‘La perla del Caribe’, Esperanza calls on the services of the Afro-Cuban brujo Bocú to cast a spell that will ensnare her lover. The ploy fails, however: persuaded by his young and principled son, who acts as first mate and moral compass, Segundo eventually abandons the barrio for the more temperate shores of Margarita.

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<sup>14</sup> Oscar Lucien, ‘La balandra Isabel llegó esta tarde’ in *South American Cinema: A Critical Filmography 1915-1994*, ed. by Timothy Barnard and Peter Rist (London: Routledge, 2011) II (1996), pp.307-9 (p.307)

<sup>15</sup> Ambretta Marrosu claims that the studio’s initial ventures in advertising and publicity later facilitated the production of their feature-length films that followed a universal model of mass production: ‘La franca apertura del campo publicitario, que justificaba las inversiones en infraestructura técnica y prometía crecientes ganancias agradables a las producidas por los encargos propagandísticos gubernamentales, creó una confianza que reforzaba la idea de buscar un cine de acuerdo al modelo universal, entendiendo por tal, más que uno u otro esquema de forma o género cinematográfico, la modalidad organizativa más aparente’ (Ambretta Marrosu, ‘Periodización para una historia del cine venezolano (una hipótesis)’ *Anuario Ininco*, 1 (1988), 5–45 (pp.35-6)).

<sup>16</sup> Guillermo Meneses, *La balandra “Isabel” llegó esta tarde* (Caracas: Editorial Élite, 1938).

Emulating the ‘star system’<sup>17</sup> that had sustained commercial cinema in 1940s Mexico, Bolívar Films set out to capitalise on the talent and charisma of big names in show business. *La Balandra* featured Mexicans Arturo de Córdova and Virginia Luque as Segundo and Esperanza respectively: Córdova’s delayed arrival in Caracas made headlines in *El Nacional*, Venezuela’s most important daily newspaper,<sup>18</sup> while the specialist magazine *Mi Film* published a series of exclusive photo shoots with the celebrities.<sup>19</sup> The production also brought together a host of Caracas’ cultural elites, including the poet, Alquiles Nazoa, who adapted Meneses’ text to screen, and anthropologist-cum-choreographer and set designer Juan Liscano,<sup>20</sup> thus injecting ‘local color and themes’<sup>21</sup> into the universal formula of melodrama. Journalists applauded the award of Best International Photographer to Spanish-born José María Beltrán Ausejos at Cannes in 1950, and the fact that *La Balandra* shipped to twenty-eight countries including Russia, the United States, France, Mexico, Czechoslovakia, Argentina, and Cuba.<sup>22</sup>

Alongside the widespread distribution campaign, one of the more remarkable marketing strategies was the commission of a large-scale replica of the *Balandra* that cruised on the back of a pick-up truck around the middle-class neighbourhood of Altamira.<sup>23</sup> Beyond its artistic credentials, the film was celebrated for its potential to capture the profits necessary to establish an ‘autochthonous’ Venezuelan cinema: it was publicised as ‘La película que consagra a “Bolívar Films” como una de las productoras más famosas de América’<sup>24</sup> and ‘La película que sin duda

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<sup>17</sup> Carl Mora, *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1989) II (1986), p.75.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Arturo de Córdova llegó con retraso’, *El Nacional*, Caracas, 17 October 1949, p.1.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Primeros flashes de “La Balandra Isabel”: el director y sus estrellas en el puerto!’, *Mi Film*, Caracas, 12 January 1950, p.13; Rodolfo Wellish, ‘Crónica del estreno de “La Balandra Isabel”’, *Mi Film*, Caracas, 29 June 1950, p.9.

<sup>20</sup> Rodolfo Izaguirre, ‘Del infortunio recurrente al acto promisor: 1940-1958’, in Izaguirre et al (eds), *Panorama histórico del cine en Venezuela, 1896-1993*, pp.115–28 (p.125).

<sup>21</sup> Luisela Alvaray, ‘Melodrama and the Emergence of Venezuelan Cinema’ in *Latin American Melodrama: Pathos, Passion and Entertainment*, ed. by Darlene Sadlier (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2009), pp.33–50 (p.38).

<sup>22</sup> ‘Venezuela en el festival cinematográfico de Cannes con “La Balandra Isabel”’, *El Nacional*, Caracas, 12 April 1951, p.1; ‘Cine venezolano’, *El Nacional*, Caracas, 20 April 1951, p.8.

<sup>23</sup> María Gabriela Colmenares, ‘Industria e imitación: los géneros cinematográficos en los largometrajes de Bolívar Films’, *Archivos de la filmoteca*, 31 (1999), 122–35 (p.122).

<sup>24</sup> ‘La Balandra Isabel llegó esta tarde’, *El Nacional*, Caracas, 23 June 1950, p.8.



afianza la gran industria cinematográfica en Venezuela'.<sup>25</sup>

Yet while the hype surrounding its release played out to a success at the box office, it was not sufficient to fulfil Villegas' promise of establishing a production line capable of rivalling Venezuela's neighbours. As profits from *La Balandra Isabel* failed to keep the enterprise afloat, Bolívar Films went into administration, later ceding its equipment to Roman Chalbaud for the making of *Caín adolescente*. According to Venezuelan film historian María Gabriela Colmenares, an important factor that contributed towards the collapse of Bolívar Films was its failure to engage with the multifaceted belief systems that found credence among migrants in the barrios. In her reading of *La Balandra Isabel*, she centres this critique on its demonisation of Bocú and his 'outmoded' practices of sorcery, although, as we will see, this might be extended to apply more broadly to its unforgiving portrayal of the urban poor in their different guises.<sup>26</sup>

Colmenares' explanation for the demise of Bolívar Films chimes with Monsiváis' claim that the success of 1940s Mexican melodrama hinged on its attraction for a diverse set of consumers who frequented the *cines de barrio* as 'the social clubs of the town or the district'.<sup>27</sup> In Caracas, the 'cines de barrio' were mostly built the 1940s 'en los desarrollos populares más densos, respondiendo al crecimiento de [la ciudad]', replacing churches and community centres at the urban margins.<sup>28</sup> With their use of Biblical tropes, predictable storylines and 'ordinary' characters as messianic figures, the melodramas that were screened there replaced conventional catechism in providing instruction for popular spectators on how to navigate modernity, incorporating uneven

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<sup>25</sup> 'La Balandra Isabel llegó esta tarde', *El Nacional*, Caracas, 27 June 1950, p.9

<sup>26</sup> For Colmenares, this simplistic approach towards race and popular religion limited the success of *La Balandra Isabel* with the viewing public in Venezuelan cinemas. She writes: 'Este tratamiento, a tono con el género melodramático, niega la forma en que la sociedad y la cultura venezolanas asumen las creencias religiosas populares, que se han difundido ampliamente, en un radio que abarca casi la totalidad del espectro social, sin entrar en conflicto con los preceptos cristianos dominantes' (Colmenares, 'Industria e imitación: los géneros cinematográficos en los largometrajes de Bolívar Films', pp.133-4).

<sup>27</sup> Monsiváis claims that the most successful films allowed viewers 'to understand the changes that affected them; the destruction or abandonment of agricultural life, the decline of customs once considered eternal, [and] the oppressions that [came] with industrialisation' (Monsiváis, 'Mexican Cinema: Of Myths and Demythifications', pp.142-3).

<sup>28</sup> Nicolás Sidorkovs, *Los cines de Caracas en el tiempo de los cines* (Caracas: Armitano Editores, 1994), p.151.

socio-economic fluxes and hybrid cultural references into a pedagogical filmic exercise.<sup>29</sup> In so doing, argues Martín-Barbero, they created ‘una imagen unificada de lo popular, primera figura de la masa’<sup>30</sup> that projected the urban poor as a socio-cultural protagonist, not only on-screen but also among the spectatorship.

In *La Balandra*, this ‘imagen unificada’ does not extend between character and audience, but, rather casts the disenfranchised as a specular source of entertainment that would appeal to viewers from Caracas’ upmarket neighbourhoods. In spite of Villegas’ efforts to establish a filmic tradition that would meet viewers’ demands in Caracas, Bolívar Films overlooked the city’s low-income inhabitants as a crucial demographic. Although the international circulation of *La Balandra Isabel* was wide-reaching, Villegas’ domestic distribution strategy was limited to exclusive theatres in prosperous areas of the Venezuelan capital.<sup>31</sup> The publicity drive that led up to the premiere at grand cinemas such as the Bayaca and the Ludo marketed urban poverty for the viewing pleasure of the wealthy, promising unfettered access to marginal areas beyond the everyday horizons of metropolitan citizens. The following is an advertisement taken from the daily newspaper, *El Nacional*, that equates poverty with passion and eroticism to be enjoyed from the comfort of downtown cinemas, branded here as a potential threat while also being held at a safe distance:

¡UNA GRANDIOSA PELICULA DE PASIONES VIOLENTAS DONDE TRIUNFA EL AMOR DEL HOGAR...! “MUCHINGA” un barrio lleno de misterio, vicio, tragedia, dolor y hechizo que se levanta más arriba del mar... ¡ESE ES MUCHINGA...! “LA BALANDRA ISABEL” va cargada con el Folklore de nuestras regiones costeñas, la intrepidez de sus marinos y la canción sensual de esperanza...!<sup>32</sup>

This discursive construct of Muchinga as synonymous with sexuality, depravity and lasciviousness recalls the rhetoric of the advertisements for ‘slumming parties’ in Victorian London, where the wealthy were offered sightseeing tours of the labyrinthine streets of the East End working-class

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<sup>29</sup> Monsiváis, ‘Mexican Cinema: Of Myths and Demythifications’, p.143.

<sup>30</sup> Martín-Barbero, *De los medios a las mediaciones: comunicación, cultura y hegemonía*, p.129 (emphasis in original).

<sup>31</sup> For comprehensive studies of the architectural and historical features of Caracas’ early cinemas, see Guillermo Barrios, *Inventario del olvido: la sala del cine y la transformación metropolitana de Caracas* (Caracas: Fundación Cinemateca Nacional, 1992) and Sidorkovs, *Los cines de Caracas en el tiempo de los cines*.

<sup>32</sup> ‘La Balandra Isabel llegó esta tarde’, *El Nacional*, Caracas, 25 June 1950, p.9.

sectors. Here, the putative promiscuity that took place at the urban peripheries was branded as selling-point for thrill-seeking visitors, at once exposed to the spectacle of salaciousness and kept at arm's length from the 'real' moral dangers posed by impoverishment.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, La Balandra offered its spectators a whistle-stop tour of the port-side barrio, made up of '[c]allejuelas tortuosas, escaleras lóbregas, casuchos de cuartos increíbles, hundidos en la tierra'<sup>34</sup> that gave way to 'casas vergonzantes que se agazapan por callejuelas en montículos que miran al mar y de los cuales brotan gritos y coplas que sincronizan con la incesante protesta de un oleaje que jamás enmudece'.<sup>35</sup> Differentiating Muchinga from the built-up areas of the city, the advertisement campaign for La Balandra summoned poverty as an enchantment, an arousal and an affliction based on a binary of familiarity and otherness. Instead of approaching the issue of urban poverty with the sensitivity that would mediate such differences, Villegas' publicity commodified the barrios to pique the interests of select spectators, assumed to be an homogeneous group of economically privileged White male subjects.

This 'othering' approach that informed the promotion of La Balandra Isabel in textual form extends to its dualistic vision of the stock figures who inhabit Muchinga. By starring archetypes including the self-made businessman, the Black occultist and the fallen woman within an aesthetic mode that is highly stylized but devoid of self-reflection, La Balandra Isabel obscures the complex nature of the identity constructs that underpinned characterization in Golden Age cinema. For Homi Bhabha, the stereotype is 'phobia and fetish' that '[gives] access to an "identity" which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of

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<sup>33</sup> 'The slums apparently strongly provoked the dirty fantasies of London's bourgeoisie, its 'belief' in moral standards notwithstanding. From the middle-class point of view, poverty and slums have stood not only for misery and disease, but also for eroticism, licentiousness and sexual savagery. Little wonder, then, that the slums, in the eyes of London's society, which was shaped by rigid moral expectations and inflexible social rules, were areas of both gloomy threat and erotic curiosity: slums were places of moral decay and places of libidinal liberty' (Malte Steinbrik, "'We did the Slum!' - Urban Poverty Tourism in Historical Perspective', *Tourism Geographies* 14 (2012), 212-34 (p.222)).

<sup>34</sup> 'La Balandra Isabel llegó esta tarde', *El Nacional*, Caracas, 25 June 1950, p.9.

<sup>35</sup> 'Cine venezolano', *El Nacional*, Caracas, 21 December 1950, p.10. Luis Caropresso Ponce's description of Muchinga also places emphasis on the moral and physical darkness of the place: 'Esta barriada hoy desaparecida estuvo enclavada en los cerros de La Guaira, de este sumidero humano "callejuelas tortuosas y escalones lóbregos" como también ranchos infectos plagados de ramerías deseosas de entregarle las fáciles caricias a todos los marineros que llegaban al puerto' (Luis Caropresso Ponce, *Breve historia del cine nacional 1909-1964* (Caracas: Consejo Nacional de la Cultura, 1993) p.26).

multiple and contradictory beliefs in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it'.<sup>36</sup> In his elaboration of this theory, Bhabha draws on the Freudian notion of sexual repression, according to which the ego cloaks primal, pre-social fantasies with a tight-woven fabric of disguises and allusions. This disavowal, in turn, can be interpreted by the process of 'decoding' that reveals repressed desires and points towards an 'unknown' or 'unknowable' at the threshold of understanding: for Freud, this was an incestuous regime of desire; for Bhabha, it was racial difference within a structure of postcolonial relations.<sup>37</sup> In *La Balandra Isabel*, the stereotypes are not filmed or scripted to allow for such decoding, but instead are symbols that reflect and deflect cultural differences that obscures the structural causes of unequal social relations.

In particular, the film's female characters are fetishised to embody misgivings towards increasing numbers of ranchos that, in Caracas of 1950, amounted to some 19,000, prompted largely by the nation's insertion into a global order of post-War capitalism with an increasing exploitation of the country's vast oil reserves.<sup>38</sup> Writing on the use of archetypal female figures in Mexican melodrama, Joanne Hershfield states that 'woman, as an already existing sign of ambiguity in Mexican culture [...] served as a ready-made symbol of the instability of social and sexual relations'.<sup>39</sup> in many films, nostalgia for a receding rural sphere became synonymous with bucolic maternity, while anxieties towards modernisation were expressed in the figure of the city-savvy *devoradora*.

*La Balandra Isabel* replicated this custom by casting Isabel as the embodiment of a pre-industrial nationalism while Esperanza allegorised the city's margins and their inhabitants as both a threat and a temptation. Precisely because Isabel embodies the virtues of the good wife, her on-screen presence is restricted to two brief and subdued appearances that parenthesise Segundo's

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<sup>36</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004) II (1994) p.104.

<sup>37</sup> The main premise of this idea was first presented in Freud's *Interpreting Dreams*. Freud writes: 'to "interpret" a dream is to indicate its "meaning", substituting for it something that forms a link in the chain of our mental actions, a link possessing the same importance as any other' (Sigmund Freud, *Interpreting Dreams*, trans. by J. Underwood, (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2006), II (1899), p.110.

<sup>38</sup> Federico Villanueva Brandt, 'Apuntes para una historia de la urbanización de la ciudad' in *Caracas: memorias para el futuro*, ed. by Giuseppe Imbesi (Rome: Cuadernos IILA, 1995), pp.63–76 (p.64).

<sup>39</sup> Joanne Hershfield, *Mexican Cinema/Mexican Woman, 1940-1950* (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1996), p.3.

extra-marital maritime adventures. Although she is (re)presented as an idealised maternal archetype, her figure dressed in dowdy clothing is of little interest to the camera. Esperanza, meanwhile, is played by ‘la tropicamangana Virginia Luque, que es una Viviane Romance del Mar Caribe’,<sup>40</sup> her plunging neckline the focal point of the viewer’s scopic pleasure. In Meneses’ narrative, she is punished for her attempts to use sexuality and witchcraft to transcend her marginal position, ultimately obstructed from the socio-economic mobility sought by rural migrants. In Christensen’s work, she is both condemned and exploited as one of the film’s main attractions, as her character is made to fulfill conflictive commercial and ideological purposes. If *La Balandra Isabel* restored reproductive power to the conservative values represented by Isabel, it also capitalised on Esperanza as an object of desire that would increase ticket sales while remaining inaccessible as a site of procreation: like the archetypal prostitute in literature, she is denied the possibility of children. And yet this dualistic function resulted unconvincing to an urbanite Caracas audience that was less receptive than the popular sectors towards offerings of moral instruction.

The film takes a similarly contradictory approach to the figure of Bocú, the Afro-Cuban brujo, who is paid by Esperanza to cast a love spell on Mendosa. Despite Bolívar Film’s emphasis on the inter-American collaborations that were to inform new Venezuelan cinema, Bocú is eroticised and demonised much like Esperanza. Described by one reviewer as ‘una etapa ya superada en nuestros pueblos’,<sup>41</sup> alluding to his ethnicity and his religious practices, Bocú is portrayed throughout the film as a source of unthinking primitiveness and malevolence. Disparaging references are made to his Cuban origin that are revealing of deep-seated racial prejudices ascribed to the stereotype: he is thieving, untrustworthy and mercenary, willing to summon santería forces in order to make a living.<sup>42</sup> His on-screen appearance is always

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<sup>40</sup> ‘Cine venezolano’, *El Nacional*, Caracas, 14 July 1950, n/p.

<sup>41</sup> ‘*La Balandra Isabel* llegó esta tarde’, *El Nacional*, Caracas, 27 June 1950, p.9.

<sup>42</sup> I use santería here as a broad term to mean religious credence and popular practices inherited from African cultures, influenced by indigenous rites and Catholic belief structures. As Gustavo Martín points out, in Venezuela these include candomblé, ñañiguismo, voodoo, yoruba, the cult of María Lionza and other belief systems from the coastal region of Barlavento. See Gustavo Martín, ‘Magia, religión, poder: los cultos afroamericanos’, *Nueva Sociedad*, 82 (1986), 157–70.

accompanied by the ominous beat of beachside tambores, while the camera lingers on his naked torso and the lighting highlights the contours of his muscular figure. Like Esperanza, Bocú is also ejected from the narrative: at the end of the film, his ramshackle home is burnt to the ground, and all his possessions with it.

The production of *La Balandra* coincided with the arrival of large numbers of Afro-Caribbean migrants in Venezuela who sought work in the burgeoning oil fields, in domestic services, and as small-time merchants at the urban outskirts.<sup>43</sup> Regardless of popular myths surrounding racial harmony in Venezuela, deemed a society that had achieved the perfect blend of ‘café con leche’ among its mixed-heritage communities, migrant workers from the Antilles were often the subject of racist xenophobia. Politicians and intellectuals promoted state-led policies of miscegenation to ‘whiten’ the population, responding to wider concerns surrounding the incorporation of a foreign-born labour force into the national economy.<sup>44</sup> By endorsing Segundo’s decision to abandon Muchinga and return to his family home on Margarita, the film buffered an intellectual movement that advocated a retreat to agricultural production. This, argued renowned intellectual Arturo Uslar Pietri, would provide more sustainable returns than the state’s shortsighted investment in the foreign-dominated oil sector that created ‘una Venezuela fingida’ and ‘[una] población artificial’ that betrayed the ‘true’ nature of Venezuela as a pastoral nation.<sup>45</sup> Implicitly,

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<sup>43</sup> For a socio-anthropological history of the development of the Venezuelan oil fields, see Miguel Tinker Salas, *The Enduring Legacy: Oil, Culture, and Society in Venezuela* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> In Venezuela, this was an idea first introduced in the 1930s by intellectuals including Arturo Uslar Pietri, whose 1937 article, ‘Venezuela necesita inmigración’, argued for the economic and cultural benefits of attracting European immigrants to the country while condemning the arrival of Black oilfield workers from the Antilles. Originally published as an op-ed in *El Universal* (Caracas), July 28, 1937, ‘Venezuela necesita inmigración’ was later republished in *Boletín de la Cámara de Comercio de Caracas* and as a political pamphlet. Winthrop Wright notes that: ‘To begin with, [Uslar Pietri] did not think that Venezuelans had the capacity to realize the economic potential of their country because of the indolent nature of their mixed race. He singled out blacks in particular as a negative element and wrote that “the black, for his part, does not constitute a beneficial part of the race.” [...] He believed that to become a modern state, “it is necessary to inject a formidable quantity of new blood into the country, with which a new concept of life, with an aggressive economic mentality, will begin the transformation of our ruinous economic and social structure”’ (Winthrop Wright, *Café con leche: Race, Class and National Image in Venezuela*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), p.102). Such policies were later adopted by the Pérez Jiménez regime that developed an ‘open door’ immigration policy which actively welcomed European migrants to counteract migration from less desirable regions. Froilán José Ramírez Rodríguez, ‘La inmigración en la administración de Pérez Jiménez (1952-1958)’, *Heurística*, 3 (2010), 94–101.

<sup>45</sup> In a series of newspaper articles, Uslar Pietri critiqued the state’s promotion of Venezuelan modernity that fostered ‘artificial’ urban culture in place of ‘organic’ rural traditions. The most famous of these was ‘Sembrar el petróleo’, an

this national ideal presupposed an imagined community that was White and propertied, promoting an agenda that was both anti-urban and anti-popular. Offshoring the happy ending far away from the urban peripheries, *La Balandra Isabel* coincided with Pietri's vision of a retroactive rural future while appropriating the city as a site of entertainment and arousal.

### **Caín adolescente (1959)**

If, at the end of the 1940s, Villegas possessed the influence and economic resources that could be channeled into his ambitions of creating an international studio in Caracas, Chalbaud's situation, a decade later, was somewhat more precarious. In 1957, he began filming *Caín adolescente* with his company, Allegro Films, after having worked for Bolívar Films alongside Mexican director Víctor Urruchúa. Using the studio facilities that had once belonged to Villegas, Chalbaud depended on a voluntary crew and paid for publicity on a shoestring budget, supplemented largely by his personal savings.<sup>46</sup> Despite these differences, however, the thematic concerns explored in *La Balandra Isabel* and *Caín adolescente* are, at first glance, remarkably similar, while their plots play out to seemingly parallel conclusions. Set at the beginning of the decade, *Caín* narrates the arrival of Juana and her son Juan from an unnamed rural village to the outskirts of Caracas, and follows their difficulties in adapting to their new surroundings. Juan takes on an unsalaried apprenticeship with his cousin Matías, and begins a tumultuous relationship with his pregnant ex-girlfriend Carmen. Juana, meanwhile, becomes romantically entangled with self-made businessman Antonio Salinas, though is also seduced by Encarnación, an Afro-Venezuelan witch doctor who is, in part, responsible for her nervous breakdown. For most of the characters, the film is ultimately driven by heartbreak: Juan loses his job, Encarnación is put in prison, and Juana is killed alongside Matías in a stampede that, in Easter Week of 1952, killed almost fifty members of the Santa Teresa church

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economic manifesto that advocated the channelling of oil funds into the development and expansion of industrial agriculture in place of urban regeneration. See Arturo Uslar Pietri, *De una a otra Venezuela* (Caracas: Ediciones Mesa Redonda, 1950), p.38; p.44.

<sup>46</sup> Álvaro Naranjo, *Román Chalbaud: un cine de autor* (Caracas: Fundación Cinemateca Nacional, 1984) pp.43-49.

congregation. As the credits roll, only Salinas remains unscathed, returning in the final scene to offer Juan some parting words of wisdom.

Filming for *Caín* began on June 3rd, 1957, lasting some 59 days between set and location, and yet the production process took over eighteen months to finalise due to a number of external factors. The film was produced during the last throes of a decade-long military dictatorship that was led, in its latter years, by General Marcos Pérez Jiménez. Like other statesmen of the region, Pérez Jiménez pursued the economic strategies set out by Raul Prebisch that promoted increases in domestic investment and public spending to stimulate national development.<sup>47</sup> From 1952, the president poured millions of dollars into projects designed to modernise the cityscape, including the mass construction of Courbousian high-rises designed by renowned architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva.<sup>48</sup> This went hand-in-hand with the ‘Plan Extraordinario de Despeje de los Cerros,’ which set out to bulldoze the shantytowns that teetered precariously along river banks, beneath viaducts and on hillsides.<sup>49</sup> While the state prescribed infrastructural treatment for the social symptoms of disenfranchisement, it also used grand architectural visions to overshadow the root causes of deeply ingrained economic inequalities.<sup>50</sup> As the President stated in a speech to inaugurate

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<sup>47</sup> According to historian Fernando Coronil, ‘Many countries accepted ECLA’s evaluation of Latin America’s basic structural problems – unequal terms of trade, domestic unemployment, and external dependence – and endorsed its conception of “inner-directed growth” as a way of countering them. ECLA assigned a central role to the state as the agent responsible for planning and promoting the development of integrated and relatively independent economies of Latin American nations. According to ECLA, by promoting the growth of domestic industry and agriculture through import substitution, the state would simulate as well the formation of the modern social classes associated with modernity – the bourgeoisie and the wage-earning working class’ (Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1997) p.174).

<sup>48</sup> In 1955 alone, Pérez Jiménez inaugurated 14 ‘superbloques’ and 17 ‘bloques’, with two thousand, one hundred and five hundred apartments respectively. Interestingly, not all residents of the ranchos agreed to move from their homes on the outskirts into the urban centre peacefully. In a speech made during the ‘Semana de la Patria’, Pérez Jiménez claimed ‘El año pasado, valiéndose de cuantos medios estuvieron a su alcance, trataron de convencer a los habitantes de los ranchos en los cerros para que no ocuparan los superbloques. Afortunadamente, nos alienta saber que tal propaganda no caló en la conciencia de ese sector del pueblo venezolano, pues así lo pone de relieve del hecho de que en la actualidad sea superior la demanda de habitaciones al crecido número de las que se están construyendo para satisfacerla’ (Marcos Pérez Jiménez, *Cinco discursos del general Marcos Pérez Jiménez, presidente de la República, pronunciados durante el año 1955 y obras realizados por el gobierno en 1955* (Caracas: Imprenta Nacional, 1955) pp.105-106).

<sup>49</sup> Almandoz, *La ciudad en el imaginario venezolano*, p.122.

<sup>50</sup> In an interview following the collapse of the his regime, Pérez Jiménez justified his policy of bulldozing the barrios in the following terms: ‘Nos surgió como necesidad primera la de extirpar el rancho porque el rancho es foco de una serie de vicios. De los ranchos salen clientes para las cárceles, para los prostíbulos, etc. El rancho es una lacra’ (Oscar Tenreiro, ‘Conversación con el general (R) Marcos Pérez Jiménez, en su residencia en Madrid, el día 5 de febrero de 1995’, *Cuidad*, (Caracas: Dirección de Gestión Urbana, 1995)), pp.23-24).



the project, ‘para llegar a la estabilidad institucional y política es menester que haya las obras materiales en que se traduzcan los principios y la doctrina de una nación organizada, y que aprendamos a conservar y a defender, junto con los principios y la doctrina, la obra tangible en que ellos se concretan’.<sup>51</sup> In this sense, the lower classes were figuratively inserted into the state’s ideals of modern-day living, with less thought given to social integration in terms of schooling, healthcare, and employment.<sup>52</sup>

Because *Caín adolescente* subverted the official image of Venezuela making a smooth transition to modernity, it was not well received by the perezjimenista authorities. Towards the end of the regime, just after filming had finished, Chalbaud was arrested by the National Security Agency. During his detention, state officials also attempted – and failed – to seize the film reel that had been hidden by Villegas in the National Television Centre, Chalbaud’s former workplace.<sup>53</sup> This meant that *Caín adolescente* did not premier until 1959, after the joint civilian-military coup against Pérez Jiménez and the nation was transitioning to the so-called puntofijista period of two-party politics.<sup>54</sup> While the production of *Caín adolescente* was, for all purposes, completed before the transition to democracy, its release coincided with a surge of positive sentiment towards the popular sectors among the business elites and the anti-perezjimenistas. Although ‘the fall of Pérez Jiménez took place because there was general opposition to the regime’, writes historian Fernando Coronil,

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<sup>51</sup> Pérez Jiménez, *Cinco discursos del general Marcos Pérez Jiménez, presidente de la República, pronunciados durante el año 1955 y obras realizados por el gobierno en 1955*, p.24.

<sup>52</sup> ‘While the democratic regime had sought to uplift the people by encouraging yet directing their political participation’, writes Coronil of the Trienio period prior to the military regime, ‘the dictatorship attempted to shape them by restricting their activity and modifying their physical environment’ in Coronil, *The Magical State*, p.172.

<sup>53</sup> ‘Hemos podido ver en estos días los primeros diez rollos de la copia del trabajo del “Caín Adolescente”’; los mismos rollos que con tanto “cariño” buscaba hace dos años la Seguridad Nacional’, began one review of the film in Caracas daily *El Nacional* (Antonio Pasquali, ‘Caín adolescente’, *El Nacional*, Caracas, 7 May 1959, C, p.2). Venezuelan film historian Luis Caropresso Ponce writes that ‘[la película] se salvó milagrosamente, debido a que el presidente de Bolívar Films, Luis Guillermo Villegas Blanco, cambió sus envases por otros que tenían, otros membretes y los agentes no pudieron localizarla’ (Caropresso Ponce, *Breve historia del cine nacional 1909-1964*, (p.38)).

<sup>54</sup> The coup against Pérez Jiménez took place on 23 January 1958, when the military leader was deposed from office and escaped to the Dominican Republic, hosted by his ally General Domingo Trujillo, before moving to Miami and then Madrid. In 1968, Pérez Jiménez was sentenced to four years, one month and 15 days’ imprisonment for ‘delitos comunes contra la cosa pública, la libertad de las personas, la fe pública y los Poderes Nacionales’, though was released on the account of the fact that he had already served this time when held in Caracas (José Catalá and Oswald Barreto, *Las máscaras del dictador Pérez Jiménez* (Caracas, Ediciones Centauro, 1984), p.7).

it was quickly interpreted to be a direct consequence of massive popular resistance – as if the overthrow were not a military coup but the collective triumph of a united people who rose up in unison against a tyrant [...]. The united collectivity, the people, was depicted as having reemerged as the active subject of the nation's history, acting with a single will to free itself from oppression.<sup>55</sup>

As such, critics aligned *Caín* with new beginnings for national creativity, the transition to democracy, and renegotiations of a national identity, while celebrating the popular content of the film as being 'de raigambre muy nuestra'.<sup>56</sup> This, in turn, spoke to broader sentiments of a renewed sense of national unity as the 'differences among social groups [...] were subsumed ideologically within a common identity'<sup>57</sup> based largely on a shared opposition to the perennially unpopular dictator, while perhaps accounting for later understandings of Chalbaud as the country's national auteur, celebrated incessantly in left-leaning circles since the rise of *chavismo*.<sup>58</sup>

This shift in Venezuelan politics permitted Chalbaud to target lower-class audiences with the first screenings of *Caín adolescente*, while profiting from a national re-evaluation of the political value of the popular sectors. Correspondingly, the film was shown in the *Metropolitano* – 'el cine más lujoso de todos los tiempos'<sup>59</sup> – though also screened more widely in the 'cines de barrio' housed in ramshackle buildings and urban wastelands in the far-flung neighbourhoods on the city's outskirts.<sup>60</sup> The unusual decision for *Caín* to premiere in Caracas' lower-income districts suggests that Chalbaud sought, or was coerced by circumstance, to engage with a different set of spectators to Villegas. This, in turn, is played out in the film's depiction of working-class characters with recourse to stylistic techniques that represented a bid to destabilise dominant socio-cultural

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<sup>55</sup> Coronil, *The Magical State*, pp.212-3.

<sup>56</sup> Álvarez Marcano, "En torno a "Caín adolescente"" *El Nacional*, Caracas, 29 August 1959, p.22.

<sup>57</sup> Coronil, *The Magical State*, p.212.

<sup>58</sup> Many publications that celebrate the life and work of Román Chalbaud, particularly those of the past ten years, evaluate his output strictly within the confines of national cinema, without necessarily recognizing his collaborations with, and inspiration from, international filmmakers (e.g. García de Molero and Méndez, *Román Chalbaud*; Írida García de Molero, *Semióticas de cine: el cine venezolano de Román Chalbaud* (Maracaibo: Universidad de Zulia, 2007); Álvaro Naranjo, *Román Chalbaud: un cine de autor*).

<sup>59</sup> Sidorkovs, *Los cines de Caracas en el tiempo de los cines*, p.260.

<sup>60</sup> Writing in a Mexican context, Carlos Monsiváis and Carlos Bonfil describe local cinemas throughout 1920-60 as 'el eje de 'la identidad del barrio', inasmuch as they brought together the community as the social role of the Church was declining (Carlos Monsiváis and Carlos Bonfil, *A través del espejo: el cine mexicano y su público* (Mexico D.F.: Ediciones El Milagro, 1994) p.60).

constructs of the barrios, such as the director's use of cinematic self-reflexivity in its negotiation of stereotypes, to be explored in greater detail in the paragraphs that follow. By framing the subaltern classes as both the spectacle and the spectators with the use of filmic metalanguage, Chalbaud paid homage to Luis Buñuel's injection of surrealist tropes into his interpretations of Mexican melodrama commissioned in the 1940s.<sup>61</sup> The use of documentary inserts, reportage photography, and a cyclical temporal framework in *Caín adolescente* gestures to the stylistics of neorealism in an effort to reveal the norms structuring reality from the perspective of a sympathetic but dispassionate observer, while drawing attention to the commodification of poverty that often made money for commercial studios.<sup>62</sup> In this sense, Chalbaud went beyond the push to contract international filmmakers a decade earlier that was spearheaded by Villegas. Instead, he assumed a transnational artistic perspective towards urban disenfranchisement that tentatively prefigured some of the stylistic strategies and political purposes of the socially conscious 'Third Cinema'.<sup>63</sup>

In *Caín adolescente*, then, the filmic mediation of the barrios demonstrates awareness of the changing attitudes towards an increasingly important urban collective, as well as thinking critically about the socio-political role of 1950s cinema. Ostensibly, Chalbaud instrumentalises stereotypes similar to those of *La Balandra Isabel*, but he also employs cinematic strategies that deconstruct class-inflected archetypes to comment on the relationship between performance and spectatorship.

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<sup>61</sup> While many critics have dismissed Buñuel's early commercial melodramas as artistically vapid productions in comparison with some of his more experimental productions, Geoffrey Kantaris elucidates the ways in which these subverted some of the more rigid norms of Golden Age cinema. See Kantaris, 'The Cinematic Labor of Affect: Urbanity and Sentimental Education in *El Bruto* and *Ensayo de un crimen*'.

<sup>62</sup> Millicent Marcus' comprehensive definition of neorealism highlights the movement as 'first and foremost a moral statement [...] whose purpose was to promote a true objectivity - one that would force viewers to abandon the limitations of a strictly personal perspective and to embrace the reality of the "others," be they persons or things, with all the ethical responsibility that such a vision entails' (Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p.23).

<sup>63</sup> Chalbaud cites both Luis Buñuel and Roberto Rossellini as influences, among others: 'Cuando yo estaba chiquito pensaba que el cine era para escapar de la realidad; en la década del cincuenta, tenía 20 años cuando fui a ver *Roma*, ciudad abierta de Roberto Rossellini en el cine Continental; ese filme y *Los olvidados* de Buñuel me cambiaron el sentido del cine, me enseñaron que el cine no sólo servía para escapar de la realidad, sino también para enfrentarla'. See interview with Lavinia González (25th October, 2013) <<http://www.lasverdadesdemiguel.net/edicion-459-roman-chalbaud-cineasta-quiero-otro-como-chavez/>> [accessed August 2015]. In addition, Alvaray quotes Chalbaud in an interview: "At that time... I felt overwhelmed by the naturalism of Mexican cinema - a cinema close to the feuilleton, to dialogue and to simplistic situations that were, nonetheless, a reflection of the Latino spirit" ('Apuntes de un cineasta', *El Nacional*, Caracas, 12 December 1979 (p.4), cited in Alvaray, 'Melodrama and the Emergence of Venezuelan Cinema', p.45).

For example, the middle-aged character of Juana nominally blurs the boundaries between Isabel's pastoral maternity and Esperanza's urban promiscuity when she undergoes a sexual awakening following her arrival in Caracas. Encouraged by her 'comadre' Petra, who finds her counterpart in La Balandra Isabel's 'loca' María, Juana visits the theme park 'Coney Island' to explore the possibilities of erotic desire made accessible through light entertainment. Lit up at night, the bustling fairground of carousels and spinning tops is visually charged with libidinal energy; on stage, a curvaceous woman in a tight-buttoned suit delivers a seductive performance of the Venezuelan merengue, 'El porteño'. The chorus delivers instructions to an imaginary partner unfamiliar with embrace dancing ('Así no me gusta (corazón)/ Mueve la cintura (como es)/ No te me atraveses (con los pies)/ Que me estás poniendo (cabezón)') thus offering what Geoffrey Kantaris has termed 'a sentimental education.'<sup>64</sup> Deep-focus shots of the performance are spliced with close-ups of an enthralled Juana, who gazes back and forth between the merengue singer and a handsome stranger in the audience, later revealed to be well-to-do businessman Salinas. As the performer gyrates alone in 'un "coito unipersonal,"'<sup>65</sup> Juana and Antonio embrace the beginnings of their brief but ill-fated flirtation. By interacting with the performer and mimicking her movements, Juana as spectator is taught the art of seduction, thus transcending the constraints that might contain her within the domestic sphere as a homely maternal figure.<sup>66</sup>

Yet what seems to be a moment of sexual empowerment that reflects on the political role of cinematic mechanisms also marks the beginning of Juana's long and painful downward spiral.

Juana's budding relationship with Antonio is cut short with his impromptu departure from the city;

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<sup>64</sup> Kantaris, 'The Cinematic Labor of Affect: Urbanity and Sentimental Education in *El Bruto* and *Ensayo de un crimen*', p.302. Kantaris draws on Monsiváis' argument that one of the roles of Golden Age melodrama, especially that created in state-run studios, was to offer guidance and provide instruction on socially appropriate behaviour as concepts of sexuality nominally became more open in Latin America: 'En el universo del melodrama, las estrellas del Firmamento Fílmico impulsaban en los hombres el frenesí imaginativo y en las mujeres los proyectos de libertad condicionada. Erotismo y modelos del comportamiento, sexo y curriculum' (Monsiváis and Bonfil, *A través del espejo*, p.196).

<sup>65</sup> Monsiváis and Bonfil, *A través del espejo*, p.191.

<sup>66</sup> In an Argentine context, Laura Podalsky notes that, as freer sexual mores contested Catholic tradition, '[n]ew sexual attitudes and practices represented another trend that signalled an opening of desire that fostered consumerism' (Laura Podalsky, *Specular City: Transforming Culture, Consumption and Space in Buenos Aires, 1955-1973* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004) p.69). The relationship here between the propagation of certain sexualities in popular culture and sexual practices among audiences and consumers is conceived as symbiotic.

soon afterwards, she meets Encarnación when he visits her makeshift home to cure her illness. Though never revealed to the camera, we learn that her right hand is swollen and disfigured, perhaps representing what Slavoj Žižek understands as a signifier of lack, ‘a kind of transcendental stain, irreducible and irreplaceable in its very contingent singularity’.<sup>67</sup> The wound can be read as a mark of modernity that bears the symbolism of a vaginal opening: Juana casts Juan forth into the city, in her words, ‘para que se haga hombre’. Simultaneously, the mark gestures towards an underlying sense of foreboding surrounding sexual liberation that recalls some of the concerns in *La Balandra Isabel llegó esta tarde*. As Juana pursues a relationship with Encarnación, a man of colour who is wanted for murder, she is brandished like the Biblical Cain of the film’s title with a sign of difference and disobedience.<sup>68</sup> As the film progresses, the wound is associated with a series of images that reveal misgivings about the historical impacts of modernising processes, including a shrill-sounding dysfunctional alarm clock that sounds an interruption to the slow-paced campesino temporality, and a slab of meat that foreshadows Juana’s death and accompanies her objectification. In an explicit gesture towards *Los olvidados* (Luis Buñuel, 1950), Chalbaud makes use of filmic metonymy to destabilise fixed hierarchies of meaning in summoning a generalised anxiety towards the changes wrought by modernization.<sup>69</sup>

A similar approach is afforded to Chalbaud’s representation of afro-Venezuelan culture that both upholds and undermines the simplistic racial stereotypes that mask intricate social structures as

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<sup>67</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), p.500.

<sup>68</sup> In a fit of jealousy, Cain, son of Adam, murders his brother; for this crime he is cast into exile, his forehead branded, before he proceeds to found Enoch, the first Biblical city. Referencing the story in its title, *Caín* foreshadows the narrative trajectory that sees Juan and Juana cast from a rural paradise into a hellish modernity; viewers familiar with the Old Testament would be well placed to comprehend the implications of the story. For political theorist Hannah Arendt, the fable binds together the phenomena of origin and rupture to suggest that the concept of the polis depends on fratricide and state-sanctioned illegality. She writes: ‘Cain slew Abel, and Romulus slew Remus; violence was the beginning, and by the same token, no beginning could be made without using violence, without violating’ (Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1990) XVII (1963), p.20.

<sup>69</sup> For example, the butcher scene recalls the nightmare sequence of *Los olvidados*, which sees Marta, a ghastly/ghostly mother figure, present handfuls of raw, bloody flesh to her son, Pedro, the child protagonist. For Jean Franco, the scene is symbolic of the female figure as an object of desire and the threat of castration. ‘Buñuel reproduces here the patriarchal representation of Woman, but [...] this representation is not shown only in its idealized aspect, for the alignment of Woman with nature also means that she must represent death. Buñuel offers no explicit criticism but rather takes to the limit the consequence of patriarchal gender differences’ (Jean Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (London: Verso, 1989), p.158).

we have seen in *La Balandra*. Summoned to cure Juana's disfigured hand, Encarnación performs a lengthy santería ritual that is framed in such a way as to emphasise the epidermal contrast between Juana's symbolic wholesomeness and Encarnación's malignant objectives. The ceremony is elaborate: to the sound of beating drums, Encarnación dresses the wound and casts out the devil, while close-up shots focus on Juana's bandaged hand that covers Encarnación's lips as he speaks the words of the enchantment. Here, Encarnación momentarily becomes a metonym for the 'stain' at the threshold of understanding, recalling Bhabha's theorisation of the scopic power dynamics that arise from the conflict of 'pleasure/unpleasure, mastery/defence, knowledge/disavowal, absence/presence'.<sup>70</sup> This dichotomy comes to mind in a later *mise en scène* that depicts the doomed couple's first intimate encounter, incorporating concealment and blindness as a seminal component that Stephen Hart identifies in *Los olvidados*.<sup>71</sup> At first Juana resists Encarnación's advances, before eventually – and indulgently – relinquishing to his embrace and, in preparation for their encounter, hangs up a sheet that obscures the bedroom from the audience. From behind the screen, Encarnación's silhouette is illuminated by a single light bulb as Juana tells him 'me gusta tu color,' and pleads with him to leave the light on. In a move that mimics the technical process of cinematic projection, Encarnación defies her wishes and extinguishes the spectacle that fetishises his appearance. This statement invites contemplation of the camera's complicity in the propagation of racist constructs, pointing towards 'the objective signification of the social network which entrapped the characters and strictly determined their range of physical and emotional mobility' identified in 1950s melodrama by film theorist David Rodowick.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Bhabha, *On the Location of Culture*, p.107.

<sup>71</sup> On Buñuel's treatment of the subaltern Hart writes: 'The extensive motif of concealment alerts us to the fact that this film does not offer untrammelled access to the Mexican criminal mind; the consciousness of the subaltern is, as we shall see, 'ever fully recoverable' for it is 'effaced even as it is disclosed' (Stephen Hart, 'Buñuel's Box of Subaltern Tricks: Technique in *Los olvidados*' in *Luis Buñuel: New Readings*, ed. by Peter William Evens and Isabel Santaolalla (London: BFI and Routledge, 2004), pp.65-79 (pp.72-3). He goes on: '[*Los olvidados*] draws attention to the ways in which, as viewers of films or as spectators of the social fabric, we sometimes cannot see what we are/were looking at. *Los olvidados* hints at the idea that we are often blind to what we do not want to see (for example, the physically deformed, the mentally deformed, the subaltern' (p.75).

<sup>72</sup> David Rodowick, 'Madness, Authority and Ideology: The Domestic Melodrama of the 1950s' in Gledhill (ed), *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, pp. 260-80 (p.274).

Such sequences are not merely a comment on the racist aesthetics of cinematic discourse, but also imply that the increasing mobility of afro-Venezuelan communities posed an important threat to the economic hegemony of the White-majority middle classes. Significantly, Encarnación's 'black magic' is portrayed not just as a set of religious beliefs and rituals enacted within the realm of the personal, but moreover as a business that allows him to profit from his witchcraft. Encarnación charges twenty bolívares for his treatment of Juana – a substantial sum that covers 'casi el pago de un mes del rancho', or a month's rent in the barrios - suggestive of convergences between santería practices, political performance and economic transactions. In his study of the María Lionza cult on the coast of Venezuela, anthropologist Michael Taussig notes the ways in which religious rituals, like the capitalist economy and the performance of state power, profit from 'the metamorphosis of the object or service exchanged – that value lies in transformation' (emphasis in original).<sup>73</sup> Cashing in on his Afro-Venezuelan heritage, Encarnación transforms spectacle into liquid capital with a high degree of business acumen, while also securing an influential role in the barrio community. For his White-skinned counterpart, Salinas, this entrepreneurial drive is an attribute that earns him good financial grounding, allowing him to survive the waves of violence and persecution that accompany the growth of Caracas. For Encarnación, meanwhile, this ambition to scale the precarious structure of social mobility is punished with demonisation and a prison sentence.

An apprehension towards the increasing visibility of the urban margins extends to the final scenes of *Caín adolescente* that return to the beginning of the narrative. During the opening credits of the film, we learnt about the so-called 'Tragedia de Santa Teresa,' when, we are told by an extra-diegetic narrator: 'el miércoles santo de 1952 en la Basílica de Santa Teresa en Caracas, una voz

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<sup>73</sup> 'A crucial feature of this theatre of spirit-possession is that the circulation of spirits of the dead through live human bodies is a movement parallel to the circulation of the ghostly magic of the Nation-State through the "body" of the society' (Michael Taussig, *The Magic of the State*, (New York; London: Routledge, 1997), p.139). In addition, Taussig draws attention to the alchemistic references that characterize Marx's discussion of capital and circulation. Famously, in *Capital*, Karl Marx talked of capital in chimerical terms, arguing that the accumulation of surplus profits seemed to be a magical process of conjuring money from nothing (Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy*, 3 vols, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London; New York: Penguin Classics, 1990), XII, (1845)).

gritó fuego. Fue una falsa alarma. En el pánico perecieron 42 personas. Dos de los personajes de este drama murieron ese día'.<sup>74</sup> Estranged from her son, Juana seeks repentance for her relationship with Encarnación and is accompanied by Matías to the Easter service. As Juana and Matías enter the church arm-in-arm, the camera cuts abruptly to the scene of their funeral. Here, Juan is pictured flanked by their two coffins, while, in the background, a domesticated Carmen in demure black clothing sees attentively to the mourners. Read symbolically, the film's final scene at the site of the stampede might serve to critique the state's developmentalist policies that caused overpopulation at the urban margins; indeed, such was the conclusion of one journalist for *El Nacional* who compared the crowd's unthinking response to that of an audience at the theatre, seduced in this instance by the spectacle of overcrowding.<sup>75</sup>

Caín adolescente, like *La Balandra Isabel*, then, rids its fictional world of its troublesome characters. Chalbauld kills off Juana and Matías, imprisons Encarnación, and transforms Carmen into Juan's domesticated wife whose bastard child will now have a father. In the final sequence, Juan is approached at his mother's graveside by a smartly dressed Salinas, who advises him to leave Caracas and return to his rural village. Echoing Uslar Pietri's advocacy of a regression to a pastoral nation, Salinas inadvertently promotes the expulsion of the popular classes from the city's margins. Beyond the specificities of a Venezuelan nostalgia for pastoralism, the arbitrary resolution of Caín adolescente underlines the formal difficulties faced by the makers of melodrama to reconcile conservative nationalist values with the liberalism of cinematic conventions. Unable to

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<sup>74</sup> The cause of the 'Tragedia de Santa Teresa' remains unclear. The newly inaugurated Pérez Jiménez regime claimed that it was linked to the 'Bogotazo' riots that had taken place four years earlier, though had little evidence for the case. State-aligned daily *La Esfera* ran the headline, 'Terrorismo internacional provocó la tragedia del templo de Santa Teresa' (*La Esfera*, Caracas, 12 April 1952), while a headline from a special edition of *El Nacional* ran 'Imputa a un acto criminal el origen del catástrofe', *El Nacional*, Caracas, 12 April 1952, p.24. This is referenced in passing in the film, when one of Matías' friends is said to have links with one of the 'terrorist groups' from Colombia.

<sup>75</sup> 'Quien advierta con serenidad cómo en el teatro la gente aplaude y ríe y a veces llora para después preguntar qué fue lo que dijo el actor o lo que recitó la dama joven, podrá darse cuenta de la fuerza y la profundidad del elemento contagioso de la emoción como fenómeno violento'. J. F. Reyes Gatena, 'Nueva Tragedia Nacional', *El Nacional*, Caracas, 12 April 1952, p.4.



synthesise the demands of globalised mass audiences and nationalist belief structures, such films were characterised by crises in their narrative trajectory, and would often end in in madness.<sup>76</sup>

By disavowing the rising socio-economic significance of communities at the urban peripheries, *La Balandra Isabel* glossed over the social antagonisms that shaped its production, confining misfortune and hysteria to the hermetic realm of Muchinga as a fleeting site of instant gratification. *Caín adolescente*, meanwhile, integrated a more complex storyline with reflexive cinematic techniques in an attempt to deconstruct dominant depictions of the barrios yet, ultimately, was not able to address the anxieties surrounding urbanisation without at least partially marginalising its target audience of lower-class consumers. These differences in approach are, to an extent, reflective of the respective politics of Bolívar Films and Román Chalbaud, the latter later becoming one of Venezuela's most successful filmmakers.<sup>77</sup> Indicative, perhaps, of the fortuitous timing of the release of *Caín adolescente* with the 1958 transition to democracy, or Chalbaud's appreciation of the barrios as home to large numbers of cinema-goers, this film marked the tentative beginnings of a commercial film industry in Caracas that looked beyond national borders for financial support and inspiration.

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<sup>76</sup> 'In a Hollywood context, Rodowick notes that 'this contradiction was structurally reproduced in the inability of the melodramatic text to evolve as either a fully affirmative or fully subversive form' (Rodowick, 'Madness, Authority and Ideology: The Domestic Melodrama of the 1950s', p.278).

<sup>77</sup> With a total of twenty-one films currently to his name, Chalbaud has also secured unparalleled financial backing from the Bolivarian government. It is no secret that Chalbaud and his cinema have enjoyed special promotion from the Venezuelan state, and that he had a particularly friendly relationship with Hugo Chávez. Chávez attended an exclusive premier of Chalbaud's historical drama, *El Caracazo* (2005), and later praised the film as 'una de las grandes películas de la historia del cine venezolano' (Alessandra Perdomo Velásquez, 'Presidente Chávez: 'El Caracazo es ya una de las grandes películas venezolanas' (29th November 2005) <<http://www.aporrea.org/actualidad/n69319.html>> [accessed June 2016]). Though it did little to boost paltry ticket sales, Chávez's endorsement of the film spoke to state preoccupation with the funding and managing of film production, particularly as *El caracazo* was distributed by state organ CONAC (Consejo Nacional de Cultura) and had received a record-breaking US\$1.5 million from the government. For Alvaray, the film forms part of a wider trend in state-funded cinema and academia that revisits history from a chavista perspective. This, in turn, corresponds to 'a new way of looking at history – a novel culture that intensely relates the past of the nation to the present and to a preordained future – in the contemporary political environment in Venezuela' (Alvaray, 'Claiming the Past: Venezuelan Historical Films and Public Politics', *Cultural Dynamics*, 25 (2013) 291-306 (p.294)).