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VILLA DEL CINE (CINEMA CITY): CONSTRUCTING BOLIVARIAN CITIZENS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

While not the only means of producing cinema in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the Villa del Cine (Cinema City) Foundation, part of the Ministry of Popular Power for Culture and the Venezuelan Filmmaking and Audiovisual Platform, provides local and high-profile filmmakers with the opportunity to produce animation, documentaries and television programs. The 2,400 square-meter-wide, state-of-the-art film studio opened on June 3, 2006 with much fanfare as a component of the National Autonomous Center of Cinematography (CNAC), the institutional audiovisual system that is part of the Ministry of Power for Culture and is affiliated with Venezuela's Filmmaking and Audiovisual Platform.¹ The CNAC was created by the National Law of Cinematography by the Social Christian Party of Venezuela (COPEI) government of Rafael Caldera (1994-1999) with a goal being to develop a cinema for the turn of the twenty-first century and to "create audiovisual works that foster the development of the industry through the arrangement of a physical, technological, personal and professional infrastructure that contributes to the development of cultural policies and the democratization of cultural goods."² Villa del Cine, as social media scholar Carlos Delgado Flores explains, was modeled on other government-sponsored cinema projects such as the Italian Cinecittá (founded in 1937 under Mussolini) and the Mexican Estudios Churubusco Azteca (founded in 1945 as an agreement between the Manuel Ávila Camacho PRI government, RKO and Televisa). Like Cinecittá and Churubusco Azteca, Villa del Cine functions alongside a state film institution, in this case the CNAC. Although since the 1930s, Venezuela has had a handful of commercially successful directors and producers, notably filmmakers associated with the studio Bolívar Films, such as Rafael Rivero and Carlos Hugo Christensen, as a national cinema, the country has lacked the lucrative tradition that characterizes other Latin American

¹ The Cinemateca Nacional is also associated with the platform.

² Villa del Cine, "Sobre la Villa," <<http://www.villadelcine.gob.ve/index.php/quienes-somos/sobre-la-villa/la-villa>>, accessed 2 October 2010.

countries, notably Brazil, Argentina and Mexico. This vacuum gives the current Venezuelan state considerable leverage with which it can invent a national cinematic tradition.

Thus, Villa del Cine, described on its website as a “child of the [Bolivarian] revolution,”³ controls all aspects of production, while Amazonia Films, another state-run company, distributes its films. As filmmaker Carlos Caridad-Montero explains, prior to the creation of Amazonia, there had been two major Venezuela-based distributors directly or indirectly in the hands of transnational corporations with links to Hollywood.⁴ Thus, Amazonia Films has been designed as a counterweight to the commercial networks that hitherto dominated distribution.⁵ As of June 2010, Villa del Cine has produced twenty-six features, both fiction films and documentaries, as well as thirty co-productions.⁶

The Bolivarian Revolution is a civic process, proclaimed by the Chávez administration upon its ascendance to power in 1998. Often called “socialism for the twenty-first century,” the Bolivarian Revolution refers to ongoing democratic socialist processes aimed at creating a hemispheric project in Latin America and the Caribbean, central to which is a mixed economy. In 2004, the Venezuelan state began expanding the Bolivarian Revolution beyond its borders by signing the anti-neoliberal Bolivarian Alternative Alliance for the Americas (ALBA) accord, which at the time only included Cuba, but is now comprised of Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Nicaragua, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Bolivia. As an alternative to the U.S.-backed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) agreement, ALBA’s grand objective is to build hemispheric economies and cultural exchanges that rival privatized economies and to contest structural adjustment policies that have exacerbated social inequalities in the region.

As with cinema, the Chávez administration has been nationalistic in its cultural policies towards the other arts, especially music—in January 2003 it

³ Ibid.

⁴ Elizabeth Fuentes and Bocaranda, “Cine socialista, capitalista y el prejuicio contra el cine venezolano,” *Blogacine* 4 January 2009 <<http://www.blogacine.com/2009/04/01/elizabeth-fuentes-y-bocaranda-cine-socialista-capitalista-y-el-prejuicio-contra-el-cine-venezolano/>>, accessed 19 October 2010.

⁵ Nikolas Kozloff, “Danny Glover, Haiti, and the Politics of Revolutionary Cinema in Venezuela,” *Venezuelanalysis* 14 August 2008 <<http://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/3719>>, accessed 2 October 2010.

⁶ Floáangel Gómez and Miguel Romero, “En 2011 la Villa del Cine estará al 100% de su capacidad,” *Correo del Orinoco* 15 August 2010, p. 14.

passed the Law of Social Responsibility,⁷ which stipulates that fifty percent of what deejays play must be considered “folkloric” Venezuelan music, namely llanero and gaita.⁸ The latter genre, which comes from the oil-rich state of Zulia, merges African, indigenous and Spanish styles. As Venezuelan sociologist Light Carruyo explains, gaita has traditionally been used as a vehicle to express dissatisfaction with the government, such as the administrations of Carlos Andrés Pérez (1974-1979 and 1989-1993) and Rafael Caldera (1994-1999). Similarly, llanero music is best known for its protest songs.

To forge a national cinema, the Venezuelan state has passed a series of laws. Villa del Cine’s first director Lorena Almarza⁹ explains that Venezuela has “developed an entire legal and protectionist framework related to production.”¹⁰ In January 2008, the government passed the Film Law,¹¹ for example, which mandates that twenty percent of films shown in cinemas must be Venezuelan, and institutes a new fund that goes toward domestic film production.¹² Multiplexes are required to donate a percentage of the revenue from tickets to a special fund for public theaters.

This article argues that in thinking about creating new citizens, Villa del Cine articulates an ethical paradigm in order to legitimate the cinema as a national project. In 2008, Almarza said about Villa del Cine, “[i]t’s all about the transformation of the state and how people might become participants in the development of film through their own art.”¹³ The new Venezuelan studio, which claims it is aspiring to compete with Hollywood,¹⁴ has opened up a space in which overlapping and competing definitions of “Bolivarian,” national and pan-national, cultural identities are mediated and negotiated. A perusal of its feature films such as *The Class* (José Antonio Varela, 2007), *Miranda Returns* (Varela, 2007) and *Liberator Morales: The Justice Maker* (Efterpi Charalambidis, 2009), all analyzed later in this article,

⁷ Venezuela Information Office, “Venezuela’s Law of Social Responsibility in Radio and Television,” <www.rethinkvenezuela.com/downloads/medialaw.htm>, accessed 2 March 2009.

⁸ Sara Miller Llana, “Backstory: Venezuela’s cultural revolution,” *Christian Science Monitor* 17 January 2007. qtd. in Kozloff, *Revolution! South America and the Rise of the New Left* (New York: Macmillan, 2009), 96.

⁹ *Ibid.* 101.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 101.

¹¹ John Hecht, “Venezuela takes on Hollywood with message movies,” *Reuters* 9 Jan. 2008, <www.reuters.com/article/filmNews/idUSN0955540620080109>, accessed 2 October 2010.

¹² *Ibid.* Theaters are required to donate a percentage of the revenue from tickets to a special fund. Likewise, distributors must contribute to it.

¹³ Kozloff, “Danny Glover, Haiti, and the Politics of Revolutionary Cinema in Venezuela.”

¹⁴ Almarza, interview with Nikolas Kozloff, “Lights! Camera! Chávez!” *Counterpunch* 9-11 March 2007, <<http://www.counterpunch.org/kozloff03092007.html>>, accessed 1 March 2010.

illustrate the ways in which the Venezuelan state projects a “Bolivarian” nationalism. These films reflect and refract a unique Venezuelan species of nationalism, one rooted in a collectivistic rather than an individualistic sensibility.¹⁵ Thus, as film scholar Mercedes Vásquez points out, many of these films, particularly *The Class*, deal with class politics in the barrios of Caracas¹⁶ a theme largely ignored by mainstream US films that many Venezuelans tend to see in commercial cinemas.¹⁷

By exhibiting such national films in Venezuelan multiplexes—they are also shown in art-house cinemas—alongside Hollywood blockbusters, the Chavista government is continuing what it sees as a war of position. Indeed, many of the class struggles in Venezuela are about access to the state. As Fernandes explains, Gramscian theory is concerned with hegemony in the negative sense, as in domination, but also in the positive sense, as in how oppressed populations can employ “wars of position” in order to “remake their material and social worlds.”¹⁸ In contrast to Leninist theory, in which a vanguard party is seen as necessary to liberate the masses, Gramsci argues that the main struggles today are those of the rank and file and are fought in everyday contexts. These quotidian battles for hegemony, Fernandes explains, are especially played out in sites of civil society, culture and media. Thus, a media institution such as Villa del Cine, comprised of both cultural state bureaucrats and grass-roots artists, magnifies these state–society dynamics specific to Venezuela.

At the same time, some scholars, such as Venezuelan social media historian Marcelino Bisbal, have argued that the Chavista media revolution is a hegemonic rather than a counter-hegemonic process. Prior to realizing state power, the Chavistas in the 1990s were part of the urban social movements. But now the Venezuelan state, Bisbal explains, has actually reversed the Gramscian concept of hegemony, which implies that civil society is to appropriate the state in order to abolish it. “But here,” Bisbal writes, “the public is relegated to a secondary role, while the state remains predomi-

¹⁵ See Jonathan Eastwood, *The Rise of Nationalism in Venezuela* (Miami: University of Florida Press, 2006).

¹⁶ Mercedes Vásquez, “Secuestro Express and La clase: politics of realism in contemporary Venezuelan filmmaking,” *Jump Cut* 52 (summer 2010), <<http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/vasquezVenezuela/index.html>>, accessed 2 October 2010.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Sujatha Fernandes, *Who Can Stop the Drums?: Urban Social Movements in Chávez's Venezuela* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 24.

nant.¹⁹ Thus, in addition to its films exemplifying the Bolivarian national imaginary, as an apparatus, Villa del Cine exposes this contestation for and against hegemony. Using a historical discourse, mainly of nineteenth-century independence leaders, Villa del Cine is making large-scale biopics such as *Miranda Returns* that merge the Bolivarian Revolution with older historical narratives of independence.

Perhaps the best way to understand hegemony in Venezuela is through popular culture itself. Colombian anthropologist Jesús Martín-Barbero argues in his 1987 book *Communication, Culture and Hegemony* that hegemony is constantly being reconstituted through mass culture. In the 1920s, for example, with the rise of new roads, telegraphy, telephony and radio, a new nationalism arose, one, he writes, “based on the idea of a national culture which would be the synthesis of different cultural realities and a political unity bringing together cultural, ethnic and regional differences.”²⁰ This notion of overcoming the tensions of nineteenth-century nationalism was attempted through these circuits of modernity.²¹ Martín-Barbero, writing before the digital era, depicted a globalized media landscape in which communication, culture and hegemony comprised complex conjunctures that could generate spaces for counter-hegemony. In twenty-first-century Latin America, these national/transnational conflicts not only remain, but are exacerbated by digital technologies and the institutions of global capitalism.

Thus, the Chávez administration depicts the ALBA-born, digitally based Villa del Cine as a bulwark against the “dictatorship of Hollywood” that dominates many Venezuelan screens. Chávez often rails against “dictatorial” Hollywood studios, declaring “[t]hey inoculate us with messages that have nothing to do with our traditions.” While some films are enjoyable, Chávez added, most Indians and Latin Americans in them are portrayed as people who are “savage and dangerous, who have to be eliminated.”²² Beneath Chávez’s anti-imperialist rhetoric, however, is a series of concrete media industry policies through which a Hollywood-Washington nexus has realized global rule. As film theorist Toby Miller explains, Hollywood’s hegemonic status, while a work in progress since the 1920s when the Motion

¹⁹ “Hegemonía comunicacional sigue su curso arrollador,” 31 January 2010, <http://boletin.uc.edu.ve/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=32624:hegemonia-comunicacional-sigue-su-curso-arrollador-&catid=16:entrevistas&Itemid=6>, accessed 2 October 2010.

²⁰ Jesús Martín-Barbero, *Communication, Culture and Hegemony* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 45.

²¹ *Ibid.* 153.

²² Nikolas Kozloff, “Danny Glover, Haiti, and the Politics of Revolutionary Cinema in Venezuela.”

Picture Export Agency strong-armed foreign governments to accept its quotas, is a direct product of Washington's post-World War II trade agreements, such as GATT. The global economic restructuring after 1945 enabled film studios to consolidate their power through what Miller calls the New International Division of Cultural Labor. As was the case in the automobile and electronics industries, Hollywood, under GATT, began a new phase of trade that was truly global, increasingly relying on nonunion overseas labor pools for its runaway productions.

Villa del Cine, though, is inseparable from the networks of Hollywood and global capitalism. It has prospered in part due to digital film technologies, which have revolutionized filmmaking. Since its inception, Villa del Cine has produced a variety of features, shorts, animated works, and documentaries, all of which are exhibited in Venezuelan shopping malls alongside blockbusters from the United States.²³ Cultural bureaucrats allege that the competition between the upstart film studio and Tinseltown is not only economic—this is Hollywood after all—but also cultural. “We’re attending to the necessity of encouraging other types of film for the big screen,” Almarza said in 2008.²⁴ As an example of this contestation, one of the goals of Villa del Cine is to get Venezuelan filmmakers to stay in their home country for postproduction rather than go to Hollywood editing suites.²⁵ Therefore, unlike twentieth-century revolutionary cinemas, which emerged in the era of monopoly capitalism, Villa del Cine began in the era of post-Fordist capitalism and thus its war of position must be fought on an informational, digital front.

While the Chavista government depicts its studio as a breakthrough in counter-hegemonic cinema, in many ways it is also drawing on the tradition of Revolutionary Cuban cinema. Much of the inspiration for Villa del Cine comes from the cinema propelling the Cuban Revolution of 1959. A few months after the overthrow of Batista, the Fidelista regime passed a cultural law and launched the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art (ICAIC), whose aim was, as described by Fidel Castro, to “develop culture into the true heritage of the people.”²⁶ The Castro Government nationalized the film industry, creating centralized departments for financing, technical

²³ Ibid. “The idea,” Almarza says, “is to diversify the big screen...For us, globalization is homogenization. I think we need to give people the option to choose.”

²⁴ Nikolas Kozloff, “Danny Glover, Haiti, and the Politics of Revolutionary Cinema in Venezuela.”

²⁵ Kozloff, *Revolution!* 103.

²⁶ Michael Chanan, *Cuban Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 140.

processes and programming. Villa del Cine, like the ICAIC before it, has created a system in which Revolutionary ethical paradigm films are produced. Such works comport with the principles of the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela of 1999, such as participatory democracy, the need to create a multi-polar world, and resistance against economic empires. The ICAIC worked prodigiously at creating a national film culture, both on screen and on the streets, with its poster art that accorded with the tenets of the Revolution. As North American film scholar Ann Marie Stock explains in *On Location in Cuba: Street Filmmaking in Times of Transition*, during the Cuban Special Period, many filmmakers worked outside of ICAIC.²⁷ Today, the Bolivarian Revolution relies on Internet social networks such as Facebook and Twitter.²⁸ But Venezuela maintains twentieth-century forms of street art with the Ministry of Culture sponsoring graffiti.²⁹

The principal difference, however, between the mid-twentieth-century period of decolonization, when Cuba created the ICAIC, and the current conjuncture of competing global capital forces is apparent in the social relations that underpin the Bolivarian Revolution. As Venezuelan anthropologist Cristóbal Valencia Ramírez argues, in the case of Venezuela, “the state is no longer the sector that hegemony favors, and those favored by hegemony—the dominant bloc—do not control the formal apparatus of the state.”³⁰ This departure from Gramscian understandings of hegemony, in which the state is the main arena of struggle, has still undetermined implications for Venezuela where the dominant bloc is composed not of state forces but the Catholic Church, the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers, and national and transnational private media companies. The Venezuelan state, though, has become the dominant bloc insofar as it controls the petroleum, which comprises more than 50 percent of the country’s economy. In 2001, the Chávez administration passed the Organic Hydrocarbons Law, which set up major state ownership of all oil businesses.³¹

²⁷ Ann Marie Stock, *On Location in Cuba: Street Filmmaking During Times of Transition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

²⁸ Agencia Venezolana de Noticias, “Redes sociales: De espacio para la conspiración a trinchera de la revolución,” 4 April 2010, <<http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=103504>>, accessed 4 April 2010.

²⁹ Villa del Cine, “Vision,” <<http://www.villadelcine.gob.ve/index.php/quienes-somos/sobre-la-villa/vision>>, accessed 2 June 2010.

³⁰ Cristóbal Valencia Ramírez, “Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution: Who Are the Chavistas?” *Latin American Perspectives* 142.32 (May 2005), 80.

³¹ Fernandes, *Who Can Stop the Drums?* 81.

The Chávez government is forging a Bolivarian film heritage in a unique political and economic climate. In contrast to globalization struggles of the 1990s, most notably the Zapatista efforts against the Mexican government's neoliberal policies, the Bolivarian Revolution, along with its cultural media productions, is to be situated in a dynamic unique to Venezuela in the twenty-first century. Sociologist Sujatha Fernandes argues that a core part of what she calls the post-neoliberal order, is a

“hybrid state formation that has mounted certain challenges to the neoliberal paradigm but which remains subject to the internal and external constraints of global capital. Some might argue instead that the Chávez government is ‘neo-neoliberal’ [...] The Venezuelan case contains both continuities and ruptures with the past. For the most part, new policies and orientations are being fashioned from within neoliberal state institutions, bounded by but also reshaping these institutions.”³²

By contrast, as Venezuelan cultural anthropologist Fernando Coronil argues, the modern Venezuelan national imaginary was formed in the early twentieth century, the epoch of liberal capitalism, when the state's role was mediator between foreign petroleum companies and the nation. Coronil explains that Venezuela's early-twentieth-century manufacturing of statehood is concomitant with its creation of a lucrative national petrol economy. National leaders, starting with the dictator Juan Vicente Gómez (1908-1935), have used what Venezuelan philosopher José Ignacio Cabrujas terms the “magic” of oil to create myths, including the myth of national unity. For Coronil, “black gold” has enabled regimes—authoritarian and liberal-democratic governments alike—to perform development projects out of nature—hence, the “magic” metaphor.

In the twenty-first century epoch of global capitalism, petroleum remains central to the national imaginary. However, as Coronil writes, “[w]hile as the sovereign owner of the subsoil the state has sought to obtain ever-larger rents by increasing oil prices and regulating supply, as a capitalist, it must seek to obtain profits through productive investments in the global market.”³³ Fernandes adds, “[t]he insertion of Venezuela into a global order requires certain policy adjustments and concessions that do not always fit with the anti-neo-liberal rhetoric of Chávez.”³⁴ Principally the Venezuelan

³² *Ibid.* 23-25.

³³ *Ibid.* 25.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 21-22.

economy remains reliant on fluctuating oil rents, overall an export-oriented model of development, which makes the Chávez administration beholden to global capitalism.³⁵ For example, in October 2004, shortly after signing the anti-neoliberal ALBA agreement with Cuba, the Venezuelan state announced its plans to increase coal mining in the state of Zulia.³⁶ One of the ways that the Chávez government negotiates these inherent contradictions within the post-neoliberal order is through film and media, although David Rodríguez, Villa del Cine's second director, insists that Villa del Cine's aim is not to ideologize.³⁷ Nonetheless, if Venezuelans are supplied with easily graspable narratives, they might not be so quick to critique these contradictions. The Venezuelan state is using the "magic" of communication image and media, of which Villa del Cine is a central part, to produce its "Bolivarian" citizen. That is not to say that all media institutions are beholden to the Bolivarian Government. As Fernandes explains, urban movements, such as the community station Catia TVe, have been able to maintain some autonomy, insofar as they predate the Chávez government, in order to "successfully [bargain] for resources from the state and [influence] officials at the highest levels."³⁸ As Fernandes explains, the Chávez government has passed legislation to authorize low-power radio as an alternative to big media. Subsequently, it continued to subsidize grass-roots media collectives.³⁹ Since then media has played an important role in civil society. After the 2002 coup, community radio helped disseminate the news that brought Chávez to power.

Villa del Cine, located in the working-class city of Guarenas, thirty miles west of Caracas, is among the many ambitious state audiovisual programs started by the Revolutionary government since the country's election of the democratic socialist president Hugo Chávez Frías. The Bolivarian government needs an elaborate media apparatus in order to circumnavigate its way through the post-neo-liberal order. It has made Venezolana de Televisión (VTV), whose slogan is "the channel of all Venezuelans," one of its main national agenda-setting outlets. Indeed, in 2005, a year before Villa del Cine

³⁵ Sujatha Fernandes, "Social Policy in Chávez's Venezuela: A Radical Alternative or More of the Same?" *Revista* Fall 2008,

<<http://www.drclas.harvard.edu/revista/articles/view/1101>>, accessed 12 October 2010.

³⁶ Fernandes, *Who Can Stop the Drums?* 90.

³⁷ *El Universal*, interview with David Rodríguez, 8 June 2009,

<http://espectaculos.eluniversal.com/2009/06/08/ti_art_no-hemos-parido-nue_1422683.shtml>, accessed 15 October 2010.

³⁸ Fernandes, *Who Can Stop the Drums?* 2.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 2.

began operation, the Venezuelan state launched TeleSUR (Television of the South), the Venezuela-based, pan-national TV initiative. Unlike the commercial CNN network and the privately owned “independent” Al-Jazeera network, TeleSUR is comprised of multiple states, including the governments of Argentina, Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Uruguay, all of which receive its signal. The same year that it launched TeleSUR, the Chávez Government created Asamblea Nacional Televisión (ANTV), an outlet that gives citizens access to the proceedings of the National Assembly. ANTV claims that one of its goals is to enable the participation of citizens in government debates.⁴⁰

Like ANTV, Villa del Cine deploys a populist strategy, which is evident in the introductory remarks of government representatives during the film studio’s inauguration in 2006. Lorena Almarza, the studio’s first president, announced Villa del Cine’s commitment to making films that reflect the “values that are expressed in the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the fundamental values that permit us to construct a new citizen.”⁴¹ Rodríguez said “...culture is the national expression of the country, not groups or figures: We emphasize the artistic value and that’s an achievement that has bestowed recognition on the institution. [Because of] the culture we place in your universe, the people now receive better education and have greater space for cultural activities. To say otherwise is nothing but meanness.”⁴²

The studio invites writers to submit their scripts. Francisco de Asis (“Farruco”) Sesto, the current minister of culture, now serving his second term (Villa del Cine was created during his first term), advocates the creation of audiovisual cooperatives to coordinate with Villa del Cine.⁴³ These groups bring proposals to the table, and Villa del Cine decides if the government would be interested in promoting the project. Conversely, the studio employs the talents of veteran Venezuelan directors, famous nationally but

⁴⁰ See <<http://www.vtv.gob.ve/>>.

⁴¹ “Próceres, petróleo y desaparidos en el ‘Hollywood bolivariano,’” *Correo Canadiense* 4 September 2006, <http://www.elcorreo.ca/elcorreo/story.php?story_id=862>, accessed 1 June 2010.

⁴² Alexis Castro Blandín, “Aquí se hace desde Guaremas el mejor cine latinoamericano,” *La Voz* 31 January 2010, <<http://www.diariolavoz.net/seccion.asp?pid=18&sid=1755¬id=319955&fecha=01/31/2010>>, accessed 2 October 2010. Original: “La cultura es la expresión nacional del país, no de grupos o figuras; nosotros resaltamos los valores artísticos y eso es un logro que ha tenido sus reconocimientos para la institución; la cultura la ubicamos dentro de su universo, el pueblo hoy en día recibe mejor educación y tiene mejores espacios para su quehacer cultural. Decir lo contrario no es sino mezquindad.”

⁴³ Kozloff, “Danny Glover, Haiti, and the Politics of Revolutionary Cinema in Venezuela.”

not well known outside of Venezuela. These include Román Chalbaud, perhaps best known for *The Smoking Fish* (1977), one of the most famous Venezuelan films, about a brothel in the city La Guaira; Luís Alberto Lamata, currently president of Villa del Cine, is famous for his films about the key figures behind the foundation of the Venezuelan nation, including *Jericó* (1990), *Mirana regresa* (2007) and *Taita Boves* (2010); and Fina Torres, well known for her art-house hit *Oriana* (1985), a gothic novel-like narrative about a young woman who learns in a remote hacienda about her family's past. However, according to Delgado Flores, there is not much transparency when it comes to the processes of financing cinematic projects.⁴⁴

At present, Hollywood releases 110 films a year in Venezuela; in contrast, only about two Venezuelan-produced movies are released.⁴⁵ However, at the time of this writing, there were four national films in the multiplexes of Caracas: *Taita Boves*, *Havana Eva* (Fina Torres, 2010), *Hermano* (Marcel Rasquin, 2010) and *Cheila, una casa pa' Maíta*. (Eduardo Barberena, 2010). The CNAC administers 1 percent of total box office for financing the national cinema, supports scripts, gives technical and financial assistance and administers public funds.⁴⁶ Unlike Cuba after the Revolution, then, in which North American commodities were excluded due to the blockade, Hollywood's presence in the Venezuelan multiplexes, which are controlled by the Cine Unidos and Cinex companies, is strong.

Villa del Cine's ethical paradigm must be situated in the context of the unique tradition of Venezuelan nationalism. In *The Rise of Venezuelan Nationalism*, sociologist Jonathan Eastwood repudiates Benedict Anderson's famous thesis in *Imagined Communities* that nineteenth-century nationalism's emergence can be found in Latin America by way of the technologies of "print capitalism." He contends, instead, that there are particularities of Venezuelan nationalism, traceable to early-nineteenth-century Spain, where, following Napoleon's Spanish invasion in 1808, Bourbon intellectuals began accepting one of the cardinal principles put forward by French Revolutionary thinkers—namely the idea that nationalism is comprised of collectivity. The French Revolution's definition of nationalism as a shared identity is in marked contrast to the individualistic nationalism that arose in England during the sixteenth century, which is the basis for the model of nationalism adapted in the United States two centuries later. Only after the

⁴⁴ Email to the author, 23 September 2010.

⁴⁵ Nikolas Kozloff, *Revolution!* 104.

⁴⁶ Email to the author, 23 September 2010.

abdications of Carlos IV and Fernando VII, following the Napoleonic invasion of Spain, did the idea of a nation began to spread via periodicals. The colonial ruling elites expressed what Weber calls status-inconsistency, or the psychological discontent, among people in power at a moment of crisis; in this case, the status inconsistency gave way to a collectivized nationalism.

One can find projections of such collectivistic nationalism in the movies of Villa del Cine. *Miranda Returns*, *The Class*, and *Liberator Morales* are understandable and accessible narratives in mass culture. Masses have a distinct meaning in the Bolivarian Revolution—they are dialectically linked to the Chávez administration. And well before the Bolivarian Revolution, the popular classes were integrated into the state apparatus. As Fernandes writes, “As in the case of Peronist Argentina of the 1940s, the urban working-class masses in Venezuela were to be incorporated into the polity as a recognized social force.”⁴⁷ Thus, Chávez inherited a tradition in which the masses are closely affiliated with the state. These films offer Venezuelans familiar points of reference—cognitive mapping for twenty-first century socialism—through which they can make sense of their post-neoliberal realities.

Miranda Returns, which was produced in Cuba and the Czech Republic, deals with important historical events in Venezuelan history. It is one in a series of films that mark the two hundredth anniversary of Venezuela’s independence. Other period works include *Zamora* (Román Chalbaud, 2009), about Ezequiel Zamora (1817-1860) and *Taita Boves*, about José Tomás Boves (1782-1814). For many Venezuelans, Francisco de Miranda (1750-1816) is the forerunner to Simón Bolívar. Miranda, who fought in both the American and French Revolutions, played a central role in the events leading to Venezuela’s independence from Spain. He was a well-read cosmopolitan who advanced the idea of Gran Colombia, a vision of Latin American unity. After being captured by Spanish forces, he died in a prison in Cadíz, Spain. *Miranda Returns* was released a year after *Francisco de Miranda* (Diego Rísquez, 2006), a film that came out during the two hundredth anniversary of Miranda’s return to Venezuela. The film is set in 1816, when Miranda is in a prison. According to the English-language progressive news site *Venezuelanalysis*, the 2006 biopic did so well at the Venezuelan box office it ended up surpassing the Hollywood hit *Superman Returns* (Bryan Singer, 2006).⁴⁸ Like the 2006 film, *Miranda Returns*, Villa del Cine’s first big-screen

⁴⁷ Fernandes, *Who Can Stop the Drums?* 47.

⁴⁸ Nikolas Kozloff, “Danny Glover, Haiti, and the Politics of Revolutionary Cinema in Venezuela.”

release, was a large-scale production. It is significant that Villa del Cine chose this biopic for its first major production. By going back so far in history, *Miranda Returns* provides a mental map for the Bolivarian citizen of another revolutionary time. As Venezuelan writer David Javier Medina notes, the film allows the viewer to “rethink the country. [Its] simple cinematography allows one to forget the present, to share the universal utopia of a Creole who was present at the revolutions that changed the world.”⁴⁹

The Chávez government also used *Miranda Returns* to celebrate the bicentennial of neighboring countries’ independence. In April 2010, the Miranda film was screened in the Paraguayan capital La Asunción.⁵⁰ The Chavista state connects the ALBA nations’ struggles against the economic superpowers with history. Miranda himself was an international figure in that he fought in struggles in multiple countries—he is an ALBA prototype. As Lamata says, “The independence across this continent owes much to this man,”⁵¹

The Class, based on a novel by Sesto, the minister of culture, is an accessible love story set in the late 1980s. In the film, Tita (Carolina Riveros), a young woman from a barrio must choose between two men from different social strata: Yuri (Laureano Olivares), a young worker also from the slums and Anselmo (Dario Soto), who was born into privilege. Tita dreams of playing first violin in a symphony orchestra, alongside the clarinetist Anselmo, but there is conflict in that she is unable to find privacy to practice in her home. In Venezuela, classical music is highly significant for urban youth. The country is famous for its publicly funded music education program, the National Network of Youth and Children’s Orchestra (called “el sistema” as shorthand in Venezuela.) In the film, it is likely that Yuri plays for one of el sistema’s orchestras. Tita is a virtuous character. In her spare time, she teaches music to young children in a church. However, law-enforcement authorities abuse their power. The Metropolitan Police, a notoriously corrupt law enforcement organization, shoot an innocent young man named Edwin. A priest uses the police brutality as a way to talk about social inequalities.

⁴⁹ David Javier Medina, “Miranda regresa y tienes que verlo.” *Aporrea* 14 October 2007, <<http://www.aporrea.org/actualidad/a42573.html>>, accessed 14 October 2010.

⁵⁰ *Correo del Orinico*, “Proyectan película Mirand Regresa en Paraguay por Bicentenario del 19 de Abril,” <<http://www.aporrea.org/venezuelaexterior/n155598.html>>, accessed 2 October 2010.

⁵¹ “Director de ‘Miranda regresa’ considera que la cinta sirvió de aprendizaje para el cine venezolano.” *TeleSUR* 23 October 2007, <<http://www.telesurtv.net/secciones/noticias/nota/19550/director-de-miranda-regresa-considera-que-la-cinta-sirvio-de-aprendizaje-para-el-cine-venezolano/>>, accessed 16 October 2010.

The backdrop of the story is one of the most important dates in the history of Venezuelan class struggle. *The Class*, which was shot in Guarenas and Caracas, ends with the eruption of the Caracazo, which refers to a series of riots, protests and looting on 27 February 1989 (called “27-F” in Venezuela) in Caracas and its neighboring towns in response to the neo-liberal market reforms which the International Monetary Fund (IMF) implemented under the Carlos Andrés Pérez Democratic Action (AD) administration.⁵² At the end of the film, Tita chooses to be with Yuri whom she joins in protesting the structures of neo-liberal capital. *The Class* concludes by emphasizing the importance of collective actions. The final sequence provides an important reference point for contemporary audiences, reminding them of the moment in which Venezuela transitioned from a protectionist to a neo-liberal state.⁵³ At a time when Venezuela under Chávez is undergoing a transition to neo-neo-liberalism, *The Class* looks back at an earlier epochal shift. Significantly the film is narrated from the perspective of Tita, herself at a crossroads. But while *The Class* is set in the past, *Morales* is very much about the present.

Charalambidis’ *Liberator Morales*, a comedic urban crime film, and Venezuela’s selection for the 2009 Academy Awards Best Foreign Film category, is about a Caraqueño motorcycle taxi driver, ex-cop (Rafael Gil) who embraces the ideals of Simón Bolívar (the historical figure Bolívar is referred to as “The Liberator;” Morales’ son’s name is Simón), often quoting the Liberator in the context of present-day Caracas. After dark, Morales secretly becomes a black-clad superhero who takes on a local street gang who run a local parroquia through the help of a local pauper. “This film has to do with the value of honesty, respect for civic norms, and the value of justice,” Charalambidis said.⁵⁴ The film is heavy-handed and didactic in its message that taxi drivers must be responsible citizens. Morales espouses the tenets of justice, solidarity and honesty in a city dominated by chaos, individualism and the lack of transparency,⁵⁵ which is a central aspect of the plot.⁵⁶ As Venezuelan film critic Alfonso Molina points out, the dramatic core of the

⁵² “Largometraje en Competencia: La Clase,” 15 November 2008, <<http://www.cinevina.cl/noticias/91-largometraje-en-competencia-la-clase.html>>, accessed 18 October 2010.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 69.

⁵⁴ Eferpi Charalambidis, “Libertador Morales es una película sobre la honestidad del venezolano,” 19 October 2009, *Abrebrecha* <http://www.abrebrecha.com/32335_Libertador-Morales-es-una-pel%C3%ADcula-sobre-la-honestidad-del-venezolano.html>, accessed 16 October 2010.

⁵⁵ Alfonso Molina, “Cine Libertador Morales, El Justiciero,” 7 August 2009, *Noticiero Digital* <<http://blogs.noticierodigital.com/alfonso/?p=894>>, accessed 20 October 2010.

⁵⁶ Molina, “Un héroe de la justicia popular,” 7 August 2009, <<http://ideasdebabel.wordpress.com/2009/08/07/cine-un-heroe-de-la-justicia-popular/>>, accessed 18 October 2010.

plot concerns not only the perils of the underworld, but also the need for civic values.⁵⁷ Indeed, Morales is almost a caricature of the incorruptible citizen. One of the film's central conflicts arises when Morales realizes that not only do the local police do nothing to stop the robbers, they are also complicit in their crimes. The film urges both individual and collective forms of action when public institutions do not work.

Liberator Morales, then, is the perfect film for post-neo-liberal Venezuela. The Chávez administration has not been able to rebuild all of the state institutions which decades of neo-liberalism destroyed. Moreover, well into the Bolivarian Revolution, the Metropolitan Police of Caracas are seen by many as corrupt and coercive rather than a protective law-enforcement body.⁵⁸ Instead, *Liberator Morales* gives them hope. As Venezuelan writer Álvaro Rafael points out, insofar as police state policies fail, a superhero who does what the state should but cannot do, and in doing so often deviates from the law, would be welcome by many.⁵⁹ The film's Manichean-like depiction of good and evil lends itself to allegorizing. Morales could be a projection of Chávez insofar as both the mototaxista and the president are fond of quoting Bolívar. And as a neo-neo-liberal film, it slightly rewrites the Hollywood superhero, which retaining many of its characteristics for nationalistic purposes. The film's multicultural cast make it symptomatic of Venezuela under global capitalism.

CONCLUSION

The present time is propitious for Venezuelan filmmakers. Perhaps in no other time in the 113 years the cinema has been around have there been so many opportunities for Venezuelan filmmakers.⁶⁰ Villa del Cine, Amazonia Films, CNAC, the newly renovated Cinemateca Nacional and the proliferation of community theaters have revitalized Venezuelan "national" cinema culture for the twenty-first century.⁶¹ By placing films such as *Morales*,

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Jonah Gindin, "Venezuelan Street Vendors in Violent Clash with Metropolitan Police," *Venezuelanalysis* 11 December 2004, <<http://venezuelanalysis.com/news/833?page=35>>, accessed 20 October 2010.

⁵⁹ Álvaro Rafael, "Libertador Morales," *Planeta en Fuego* 28 June 2009, <<http://www.planetaenfuego.net/archivos/libertador-morales/>>, accessed 20 October 2010.

⁶⁰ "La Villa del Cine impulsa la identidad venezolana," 2 January 2010, <<http://encontrarte.aporrea.org/noticias/n14413.html>>, accessed 2 October 2010

⁶¹ Maria Mercedes Cobo, "Venezuela: La tarea de la Villa del Cine es impulsar el cine venezolano," <http://www.tiwy.com/pais/venezuela/materiales/villa_del_cine.phtml>, accessed 2 October 2010

Miranda and *The Class* in Cine Unidos and Cinex commercial theaters, the Bolivarian government is making a statement that Global Hollywood Cinema is not the only imaginary. While Venezuela's newly constructed national film industry is inextricable from the New International Division of Cultural Labor, in the final analysis, it remains important to understand it neither as "neo-liberal" nor as "anti-neo-liberal." Rather, it is important to consider civil society, as in grass-roots filmmakers, and state functionaries dialectically. Héctor Soto, vice minister of Culture for Human Development, explains that it has been difficult for the Ministry of Culture to build regional film libraries and community theaters. Soto calls for a front for state-society filmmaking, consisting of the National Assembly, local filmmakers, and grassroots organizations to collaborate on the task of building a Venezuelan film infrastructure.⁶² Already there are at least sixteen film libraries in sixteen of the Venezuelan states. Likewise, there are now 180 community theaters in neighborhoods around the country, most of them managed by community councils and other social organizations. While these institutions might be described as "grassroots," they have to be recognized as state born. As Fernandes writes, "To see Chávez as an independent figure pontificating from above, or popular movements as originating in autonomous spaces from below, would be to deny the interdependencies between them that both constrain and make possible each other's field of action."⁶³ Thus, the construction of Bolivarian citizenship is as much the work of the state as it is of society.

62 Héctor Soto, "¡Liberemos al cine!"

<http://www.ministeriodelacultura.gob.ve/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=7275&Itemid=90>, accessed 20 October 2010.

63 Fernandes 5.

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