

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

The power of film in Venezuela and Mexico, 1980-2010

Contesting and supporting state power

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Summary

What has been the relationship between the cultural power of film and the political power of the state in Mexico and Venezuela between 1980 and 2010? In a context where the legitimacy of the state was faltering, did films offer ideological support to the state? The thesis answers this question by interrogating 67 of the most popular Mexican and Venezuelan films from the period. Theoretically, it argues that to understand the communicative power of films, they should be studied over time and in some quantity. In order to make sense of the relationship between film and the state, the thesis interrogates dominant trends in how films tell stories about or depict their societies. This approach is grounded in a Gramscian notion of power and the concept of hegemony. Films are a form of communication, and how they partake in ongoing processes of forging or contesting hegemony can be approached with a theory of how communicative texts exert power. The thesis argues for studying films with a methodology normally applied to news media, and proposes that Entman's theory of framing travels well to the study of popular films.

From this starting point, the thesis argues that Venezuelan films between 1980 and 1999 undermined the state's power by depicting the state as oppressive and highlighting the plight of the marginalized poor. Since 2000, Venezuelan cinema has not displayed one dominant trend, though the most common tendency has been films that characterize the country as insecure and state representatives as corrupt. In Mexico, most films between 1980 and 1999 supported the state's legitimacy by voicing few complaints about society or politics. 'Everything is in order' was the impression given by the films. This has changed since 2000, and it has become more common for films to suggest that 'nothing is in order' by focusing on insecurity and social inequality. However, like in Venezuela, Mexican cinema has no longer displayed one dominant trend.

Sammendrag

Hva har forholdet vært mellom filmens kulturelle makt og statens politiske makt i Venezuela og Mexico mellom 1980 og 2010? I en kontekst der staten mistet legitimitet, har filmene gitt ideologisk støtte til staten? Avhandlingen svarer på disse spørsmålene ved å analysere 67 av de mest populære meksikanske og venezuelanske filmene fra perioden. Teoretisk argumenterer den for å forstå filmenes kommunikative makt ved å studere dem over et visst tidsrom og i et visst antall. For å forstå forholdet mellom film og staten analyserer avhandlingen dominante trender i hvordan filmer forteller historier om samfunnene de omhandler. Avhandlingen begrunner denne tilnærmingen i Gramscis begrep om makt og hegemoni. Film er en type kommunikasjon, og hvordan film støtter opp under eller underminerer hegemoni kan bli forstått ved hjelp av en teori om kommunikative teksters makt. Avhandlingen argumenter for å studere film med metodologi normalt brukt på nyhetsmedia, og videre at Entmans teori om 'framing' kan anvendes på populære filmer.

Fra dette utgangspunktet argumenterer avhandlingen for at venezuelanske filmer mellom 1980 og 1999 underminerte statens makt ved å fremstille staten som undertrykkende og ved å framheve situasjonen til landets marginaliserte befolkning. Siden 2000 har ikke dette vært en dominant trend i venezuelansk film, selv om den vanligste tendensen har vært å karakterisere landet som usikkert og statens representanter som korrupte. I Mexico støttet de fleste filmer mellom 1980 og 1999 statens legitimitet ved å gi et inntrykk av at 'alt er i orden'. Dette har forandret seg siden 2000, og det har blitt vanligere at filmer antyder at 'ingenting er i orden' ved å fokusere på usikkerhet og sosial ulikhet. Likevel, og som i Venezuela, så finnes det ikke lenger en dominant trend i meksikansk film.

Introduction

Problem statement

How come state-funded Venezuelan films have traditionally criticized the Venezuelan state whereas privately funded Mexican films have supported the Mexican? This is a question of the relationship between political and cultural power. The present study analyzes the visions of society communicated by the largest blockbusters of Venezuelan and Mexican cinema from 1980 to 2010, a period when both states were in need of the ideological support films could offer. After decades of economic growth and political stability, both Venezuela and Mexico entered into an economic crisis in the 1980s. The 1982 debt crisis crippled the Mexican economy, and was the start of the continent's 'lost decade' where growth figures staggered. Latin American youths lost the belief that they would be better off than their parents' generation (Briceño-León, 1999: 129). The continent's most stable political regime founded after the Mexican 1910 Revolution started to unravel. In Venezuela, a devaluation of the national currency in 1983 and almost two decades of falling oil prices eroded the economic basis for what political scientists had described as a stable and well-functioning democracy. The middle and upper classes accustomed to cheap shopping in Miami could suddenly no longer afford to travel abroad, and the lower classes could no longer realistically dream of ascending to the ranks of the middle or upper classes. The period of Venezuela *saudita*, the oil-financed Latino version of Saudi Arabia, had ended.

In both countries, the economic crises had detrimental consequences for the state's legitimacy. In a context where the states were used to relying on consensual rule thanks to material concessions and negotiated alliances, the economic pillar of the state's power had suffered a heavy blow. In both countries, the regimes attempted a neoliberal recipe to solve their economic troubles, based on the conviction that the earlier economic model of import substitution and the state's heavy presence in the market was part of the problem. In Venezuela, the recipe did not work from the point of view of the ruling regime. The state's legitimacy and ability to rule by consent suffered a series of blows in the coming two decades, and in 1998 Venezuelans voted for a new president who promised he would do everything different than the old regime and to construct a new type of state. Since then, the official rhetoric used to legitimize state power has changed, and is now grounded on a promise to roll back neoliberalism and end social injustices. In Mexico, the important shift in the government's state-legitimizing rhetoric occurred in the 1980s, when the myth of the 1910

Revolution was exchanged for a neoliberal ideology that promises that the American dream is attainable to everyone.

Issues and objective: cultural and political power

How have popular films contributed to this process of ideological change? As a form of communication with a capacity for wide dissemination, films present stories about the societies they depict. Films are long communicative statements, about an hour and a half entertaining stories with implicit or explicit visions of what Mexico and Venezuela are like. How has the state of the nation appeared seen through the lens of the box office successes? Did the films represent their society from a perspective that favored the state? Both governments needed an ideological bolstering, and on a continent where nationally produced films historically have supported nation and state building efforts, the Mexican and Venezuelan regimes could entertain a reasonable hope that they would continue to receive it.

How films narrate their societies is a question of the wider relationship between the state and civil society. An analysis of the films thus speaks to the relationship between two forms of power; political and cultural power. Put simply, if these two forms are at odds with each other as was the case in Venezuela from 1980 to 1999, this is a sign that the state's ability to sustain its legitimacy is weak. However, cultural power supporting political power does not necessarily imply that the state enjoys a high level of legitimacy. The Mexican case is one where the cultural power of films until 2000 supported a state with a deteriorating legitimacy. The support was still significant, although it did not make the state popular.

It is not obvious that fictional visions of Mexico and Venezuela matter politically; that fiction films have anything to do with the state's legitimacy and changes in the state ideology. Part of my purpose is to argue that they do matter. Readers who know little about Venezuela under the late President Hugo Chávez can read my analysis of the social critique in the films between 1980 and 1999 and get a fairly good idea about why he won the elections in 1998. Films offer insight into how an area of popular culture is an agent of political change, and not simply a reflection thereof. Films are not alone in communicating stories about their societies, but they present them in an accessible and entertaining format available to anyone who can afford a ticket to the movie theater or buy a VHS or DVD. Films offer fiction, and as such their force of argument is one of effectively conveying meaning through touching stories and effective metaphors driving home arguments about what *really* defines the Mexican and Venezuelan societies.

I have selected the 67 most seen films in the movie theaters from each country, 34 from Venezuela and 33 from Mexico. By using popularity as a selection criterion and looking at the repetition of how several films narrate social issues, I interrogate what type of stories become popular in a given time period. The literature on the classical epoch in Mexican film history from 1935 to 1955 suggests a historical antecedent where films had played a pivotal role in offering ideological support to the state. In contrast, few studies have researched the dominant trends in films made over the last three decades, and existing scholarship interested in the politics of films typically analyzes one, two, or just a small handful of films. Valuable exceptions that do interrogate trends are Obscura Gutiérrez (2011), Podalsky (2008), Duno-Gottberg (2008), Noble (2005), Hind (2004a, 2004b) Acosta et al. (1997), and Ramírez Berg (1992). While a wealth of literature has turned to Mexican international successes such as *Amores perros* and *Y tu mamá también*, comparatively few studies have analyzed films like *Pelo suelto* or *La primera noche*. This is indicative of a research trend where films that supposedly just aim at entertaining their audiences do not receive scholarly attention. In Venezuela, the secondary literature is scant compared to the large body of studies produced in Mexico and the United States about Mexican films.

Central argument

The present study aims at filling both gaps. I discuss all popular films, whether they at first sight appear as a political critique or as pure entertainment. In the case of Venezuela, my study will be one of the few contributions to the study of Venezuelan cinema published outside the country. I will argue that the relationship between films and the state is historically contingent, and that the nature of the relationship is indicative of what ‘the state’ is in a given context. A study of how films narrate and relate to the state thus gives insight into the state form in question. This argument counters two common assumptions in the scholarship on Mexican and Venezuelan films, where scholars tend to see film either as an ideal arena for resistance to the state or somehow naturally inclined to support the existing dominant ideology. Films are neither, as I will argue with reference to Gramsci’s notion of power and concept of hegemony. Whether and how films support or protest power is a question of how they connect to preexisting beliefs and commonly held perceptions. By bringing Entman’s theory of framing from news media to the study of popular films, I will make three claims.

First, the dominant trend among Venezuelan films between 1980 and 1999 was to criticize the state by exposing the inadequacies of the legal system, abuses of the state’s coercive power, and its absence in the troubled lives of the country’s marginalized that had

been excluded from the oil bonanza of Venezuela *saudita*. These films called for a political project along the lines of the one Chávez represented. Second, in Mexico over the same time period, the films did not call for any changes at all, but instead portrayed a Mexico where everything was in order. By changing their focus from exalting marginalized Mexicans as simple people who prefer to live a simple life to embracing wealth, individualism, and the American dream as the norm, the films partook in the change in state ideology from the 1910 Revolution to neoliberalism. Third, since 2000 the vision of society in films from both countries changed abruptly. This was primarily a change that brought in a greater plurality of voices and perspectives, as more types of films became popular. Unlike the two previous decades, there was no longer one dominant trend in either country. Still, the most common tendency has been to represent each country in a state of crisis marked by violent crime, insecurity, and social injustice. These films present pessimistic and grim visions of Mexican and Venezuelan societies, pouching the legitimacy of the state without calling for an alternative.

The bulk of my study is devoted to providing empirical support for these three claims. These claims, in turn, suggest two types of relationships between the political power of the state and the cultural power of films. The first is symbiotic, where the power of films supports the power of the state. There is a match between the ideology of the films and the state ideology. Films present a vision of society that by and large contains no complaints about the status quo. In this context, I propose that it is helpful to conceive of the state and films as two sides of the same coin. These films are not state-produced propaganda, but the social and economic interests that the films represent, and the worldviews they express, are supportive of the state. My analysis will not say why this is so, but limits itself to establishing that it is the case. For reasons I return to in the introductory chapter, I will focus on the content of the films rather than asking what social actors produce the films or how different audiences interpret them. My aim is to demonstrate that the symbiosis exists, and empirically show what it means to claim that the films present an ideology supportive of the state. The symbiosis speaks to what constitutes the state in a given context. Specifically, a symbiotic relationship between the state and films, between political power and an instance of cultural power, is indicative of a strong state, a state with a resilient power base that is able to muster support from at least one sector of the country's cultural forces. I will make the case that this symbiosis describes the relationship between Mexican films and the Mexican state in the time period from 1980 through 1999.

Antagonism characterizes the second type of relationship. Here, the state and films are not usefully seen as two sides of the same coin, since the films are critical of the state. The films protest the way the state legitimizes its power, and convey the message that society is in a state of disorder, its social fabric is coming apart, and the state is partially responsible for creating the social crisis that the films narrate. In this context, the power of films resists the power of the state by naming and shaming the state as corrupt and incompetent. This resistance is indicative of a weaker state, of a state that does not enjoy the same degree of support from social forces as in the symbiotic relationship. The apparent paradox that this occurs even in a context where the state funds film production illustrates the state's limited reach into civil society.

I will discuss two varieties of the antagonist category. The first is a 'classical' case of how social forces use popular culture to express a political critique against the state. This was the case in Venezuela in the same period Mexican films were embracing the Mexican state. Unlike the Mexican private production companies, Venezuelan state-funded filmmakers were inspired by a leftist political movement that used films as a weapon in a revolutionary struggle. This does not mean that the Venezuelan films of the period were 'revolutionary', but the films presented clearly formulated and explicitly critical visions of their societies. The transparency of the critique was key to the political posture of these films, and the film narratives confirmed existing critiques of the Venezuelan state from a leftist perspective.

The other variant is at odds with the state in a different manner. Where the above films left little doubt about what their political critique was, these films are politically ambivalent. Generally depicting violence and crime, they solicit several possible interpretations, an openness which is central to what makes them political. I make the case that these films represent a culture of fear. They portray a dog-eat-dog world where nobody is trustworthy and insecurity is the primary marker of a society falling apart. There is little hope in these films, and beyond a general call for change by depicting a society in crisis, it is not immediately clear what message the films communicate. This ambivalence has allowed the films to confirm political beliefs of a wider spectrum. This kind of films is found in both Venezuela and Mexico after 2000.

Purpose

The present study enters into a dialogue with extant literature about the political role that Mexican and Venezuelan films have played in their countries. This scholarship is written by historians, film scholars, literary scholars, and sociologists, among others. I do not situate my

analysis in any one of these disciplines, but attempt to enter a debate not defined by disciplinary boundaries. I am trained in international studies and global political economy, and approach the films because I am interested in them as material for a political analysis. Films represent an area of popular culture, and I analyze how they relate to political and ideological changes, at once reflecting and contributing to them. International studies scholars (many of them inspired by Gramsci) have long been interested in the power of ideas and ideology (Cox, 1987; Cox & Sinclair, 1996; Hoogvelt, 2001; Leysens, 2008; Strange, 1988), and it was from this position I initially formulated the need for a state analysis rooted in widely disseminated stories about the state (Solli & Leysens, 2011). The aim of such state analysis is, in Joseph's and Nugent's (1994: 12) formulation, to bring "the state back in without leaving the people out." Film analysis is however beyond the horizon of most international studies scholars, though a number of contributions have pointed to a relationship between popular culture and international politics (Nexon & Neumann, 2006; Weber, 2001; Weldes, 2003). My purpose is to use film as a prism to interrogate how a part of civil society tells stories that weaken or strengthen the state's ability to define common sense. Put simply, I use a political analysis of Venezuelan and Mexican films to analyze the Venezuelan and Mexican states. In the Gramscian terminology I refer to in chapter one, the symbiotic and antagonistic relationships between films and the state exemplify the changing and necessarily negotiated nature of the relation between political and civil society; between the formal state apparatus and the social forces in civil society represented by a cultural product such as film. My analysis is not just about how the state as political society relates to the film sector, or how films portray representatives and institutions of the state. (Of the two, I pay primary attention to how films depict the state.)

Structure

I have organized my study as follows. The introductory chapter presents my theoretical platform. I do this in three steps. First, I present Gramsci's notion of power, and discuss his theory of the relationship between cultural and political power. I also present his concepts of hegemony and the extended state. Second, I propose the theory of framing as a way to apply Gramsci's hegemony concept to mass communication. Third, I make the case that framing theory can be applied to study popular films, and thereby make it travel from an analysis of news media to films. Central to my argument in this section is that a film, like news media, is a form of communication. Referring to the works of Bordwell, Entman, and Castells, I argue

that the intelligibility of a film's narrative rests on the same mechanisms as in other forms of communication.

Chapter two has a dual purpose. I discuss the relevance of the political cinematographic movement *el nuevo cine* [New Latin American Cinema, or *cinema novo* in Brazil] for understanding Mexican and Venezuelan film productions made over the last three decades, and I argue that the movement's ideals came to influence Venezuelan popular films and not Mexican. Further, I present my reading of the scholarship on Mexican and Venezuelan films, and note the importance for understanding how *el nuevo cine* to a large extent has defined the terms of the scholarly debate on the film productions of both countries. I also briefly discuss historical developments of the Mexican and Venezuelan film traditions and the policies of their states towards the film sector. I suggest that these policies, together with the marked presence of private production companies in Mexico and their absence in Venezuela, have created different conditions for the production of films with a mass appeal.

Chapter three discusses the counter-hegemonic strategies of Venezuelan *nuevo cine* films between 1980 and 1999. I maintain that critiquing the state and marginalization were the two most common lines of criticism in the films. Chapter four turns to Venezuelan films screened since 2000. I argue that unlike the two previous decades, there has been no dominant frame, and that instead a variety of films have become popular. Further, there is no explicitly *chavista* film although several contain parts reminiscent of official rhetoric on marginalization. Still, a common narrative repeats elements of an anti-*chavista* critique of the government. This particularly concerns the representation of violent crime, and I discuss this under the rubric of a culture of fear.

In chapter five, I turn to Mexican films and analyze a number of comedies about marginalization in the 1980s and melodramas about Mexico's wealthy in the 1990s. I propose that they provided ideological support to the Mexican state. They did so, I argue, by aiding the state in its attempt to change official state ideology from one based on the 1910 Revolution to a neoliberalist ideology. My last empirical chapter analyzes Mexican films between 2000 and 2010. As in Venezuela, there was no longer one dominant narrative that the films conveyed about Mexico. Still, the most common tendency in Mexico also contributed to a culture of fear.

The conclusion returns to the questions posed in the introduction and chapter one. I ask what my analysis says about the relationship between the cultural power of film and the political power of the state in the cases of Venezuela and Mexico.

Chapter one. Communicating society: the power of popular films

Introduction

This chapter provides the theoretical background to my claim that the relationship between films and the state is historically contingent, and that the nature of the relationship is indicative of what ‘the state’ is in a given context. With reference to the Gramscian concepts of hegemony and the state, I will argue that an analysis of the ideas presented in popular films is a way to analyze how far the state extends into civil society. I propose that analyzing box office successes is a way to access the ideas and beliefs that gain popularity in a given time period. I conceive of popularity as an indicator of what passes as common sense, which in turn speaks to the core of Gramsci’s state concept. As Gamson et al. note about his relevance for understanding ‘media images and the social construction of reality’, Gramsci’s

enduring contribution was to focus our attention beyond explicit beliefs and ideology to see how the routine, taken-for-granted structures of everyday thinking contribute to a structure of dominance. Gramsci urged us to expand our notion of ideology to include the world of common sense (Gamson et al., 1992: 381).

Films contribute to the world of common sense by communicating visions of the societies they depict. In understanding films as communicative statements, I will analyze them with a theory designed to interrogate how communicative texts exercise power. Building on Entman’s theory of framing, I propose that an identification of dominant and contesting frames in popular films is a way to operationalize Gramsci’s hegemony concept and analyze the political bias of the films. In depicting their societies, films speak from a given point of view that supports or resists the sitting regime’s legitimation efforts in defining the state of the nation.

The chapter is organized as follows. I first introduce Gramsci by spelling out how he allows me to think about the complex relationship between political and cultural power. Gramsci’s theory of power is an early statement of how power presented in cultural products matters for the state’s legitimation efforts. I also note the influence of Gramsci on the filmmaking tradition in Latin America and on film scholarship. I then present Gramsci’s central argument and his concepts of hegemony and the state. Second, I argue that films are a form of popular culture, and I discuss my selection criteria and possible weaknesses of the statistical information I use. Third, I make the case for applying frame analysis to a study of popular films. Following Carragee and Roefs (2004), I see the theory of framing as a way to apply an analysis of hegemony while retaining the focus on power in framing theory. To frame social reality is to select and highlight certain elements of it as more important, and to communicate which social issues relate to each other. Frame analysis thus helps me to make

political sense out of how some films narrate crime as an outcome of poverty and as such a societal problem, while others associate it with sadistic acts committed by individuals. I present my use of framing theory, and discuss what happens to frame analysis when the theory is applied to popular films instead of news media. I conclude by providing reasons for why I limit myself to an analysis of the content of the films and not their production or reception.

Introducing Gramsci

Gramsci provides a point of departure for exploring the relationship between political and cultural power. In reading him as a philosopher of power, he invites to a discussion about the politics of the films and to theorize how the cinematographic visions presented of Mexico and Venezuela matter politically for developments of the state and how the states have sought to rule by consent. In this, Gramsci offers a middle way between idealism's overemphasis on ideology and materialism's neglect of consent as a key feature of enduring power relationships. Gramsci's theory thus opens up for an analysis of the power of culture without neglecting the power of the economy. The potential power of the ideological support or resistance that films have offered, I posit, was heightened by the fact that both Venezuela and Mexico in the time period I examine went through economic crises that made the state unable to deliver materially. Their legitimacy consequently suffered, and the official rhetoric used to justify the state's hold on power changed. Beyond briefly describing its central facets, I do not discuss the economic crisis in detail. It motivates my study, as the crisis provides me with a point of departure for claiming that the power of ideas assumed particular importance in this period.

Similarly, I write about the power of the state without focusing on its coercive facets. My focus on the ideas presented in popular films does not mean that other elements of power do not matter. Coercion and physical domination are key attributes of power. As I will return to in later chapters, both the Mexican and the Venezuelan states resorted to physical violence to quell popular uprisings; notably the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico and the 1989 revolt El Caracazo in Venezuela. These were clearly exercises of state power, but not efficient or strategically forward-looking examples thereof. As the literature on the falling legitimacy of both regimes points out, these exercises of power were important moments in the gradual process of their deteriorating ability to govern. The crux of Gramsci's notion of power is that while coercion is always latent and the supremacy of rule never complete, the secret to stable

rule lies in the power of ideas. Rule unaccompanied by convincing a set of ideas that the ruled subjects believe in can work for a while, but it will not endure.

Castells (2009) uses a similar point of departure in *Communication power*. His project is to understand the role of communication processes in the maintenance and production of power relationships in a contemporary global network society. Emphasizing that the possible use of physical force is necessary to the definition of power, Castells posits that enduring power rests on the power of convincing ideas. People resist power when they perceive it as oppression, and they support it when they perceive it as legitimate. The ability to communicate power thus becomes the primary interest for those who possess it: “legitimation largely relies on consent elicited by the construction of shared meaning; for example, belief in representative democracy. Meaning is constructed in society through the process of communicative action” (Castells, 2009: 12). From this starting point, Castells arrives at the following definition of power:

some of the most influential theories of power, in spite of their theoretical and ideological differences, share a similar, multifaceted analysis of the construction of power in society: *violence, the threat to resort to it, disciplinary discourses, the threat to enact discipline, the institutionalization of power relationships as reproducible domination, and the legitimation process by which values and rules are accepted by the subjects of reference, are all interacting elements in the process of producing and reproducing power relationships in social practices and in organizational forms* (Castells, 2009: 13, emphasis in the original).

This definition, as Castells (2009: 13) himself points out, is reminiscent of “Gramsci’s analysis of the relationships between the state and civil society in terms of hegemony” albeit it is not couched in class terms. Scholars interested in Gramsci are attracted by the same basic facets of his theory as Castells: how power is a many-sided process that cannot be reduced to material or ideological factors alone, nor conceived of as an either / or between coercion and consent (Arditi, 2008: 69; Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Cox, 1987, 1996a, 1996b, 2002; Femia, 1981; Gamson et al., 1992; García Canclini, 1984; Harvey, 2005; Jessop, 2003; Landy, 1994; Long, 1999; Said, 2003: 6-7). Specifically for the relationship between political and cultural power, Gramsci was the first Marxist theoretician to conceive of popular culture as indispensable for his analysis of state power (Hall, 2006: 360; Steinmetz, 1999: 14). In Hall’s (2006: 360) words, “Gramsci placed questions of culture, and especially popular culture, at the very center of the state’s sphere of activity.” As Hall proposes, the relationship between the state and popular culture is historically contingent, as neither the state nor popular culture are entities that remain the same (Hall, 2006: 363). By analyzing how cultural forces relate to the dominant state ideology, analysts can detect the specific nature of the type of state in question as indicated by the shifting boundary between the public and the private spheres

(Hall, 2006: 364). The further the state ‘extends’ into society, the more integrated it is with the social forces in power at a given historical time, and the stronger it is (cf. also Cox, 1987: 410, 1996a: 128).

Although the possibility of popular culture as a form of resistance is what ultimately interests Hall, he underscores that the primary relevance of Gramsci’s theory is to understand the endurance of forms of oppression. He pays particular attention to the resilience of racism, not as exercised blatantly and in one’s face, but covertly and through means that are difficult to pinpoint (Hall, 1996). Hall turns to Gramsci for guidance when power relationships are blurred and the complexity of the situation inhibits identification of who does what: “it is precisely in the direction of ‘complexifying existing theories and problems’ that [Gramsci’s] most important theoretical contribution is to be found” (Hall, 1996: 415).

Furthermore, Gramsci occupies an important place in both in the Latin American film tradition and in the secondary literature. As Sommer (2006: 2) observes, Gramsci has long “been something of a patron saint of cultural agency” and has as such inspired social movements who use culture to resist state power. Society is a social structure made up by social groups with different interests and values who contest for supremacy (Castells, 2009: 14), and popular culture in the Gramscian conception is a site where these groups contest for hegemony and present their worldviews to convince other social groups (Landy, 1994: 30-31; Schelling, 2004: 190). As I explain in the next chapter, Gramsci inspired an influential political movement, *el nuevo cine* or *cinema novo* in Brazil [New Latin American Cinema], that came to dominate filmmaking traditions in all Latin American countries except Mexico. This movement wanted to make films that could sow revolutionary germs among its audiences, and its members found reasons to believe its strategy to create political change would work in Gramsci. Wanting to take over the state and having read Gramsci, political activists turned to popular culture as a necessary initial step for creating a political consciousness conducive to a revolution. This strategy follows from Gramsci’s conceptualization of the extended or integral state, which I will return to below.

For political activists wanting to use films as a tool in a political struggle, Gramsci’s outlook is at once positive and emancipatory and a sobering reminder of how slow the process of installing a new dominant ideology can be. The *nuevo cine* filmmakers wanted to make films that would lay bare social injustices, and thus increase the political awareness of people. This awareness about social relations would sow a germ of change, inasmuch as “to be conscious of them [no matter the degree] already modifies them” (Gramsci, 1971: 353). Crucially for Gramsci, this critical self-reflection is something everyone has the capacity to

engage in. He proclaims that “all men are ‘philosophers’” (Gramsci, 1971: 322). He means not philosophy in the abstract, professionalized sense but the “‘spontaneous philosophy’ which is proper to everybody” (Gramsci, 1971: 323). This is a philosophy implicitly expressed by using language, relying on common sense and acting according to what is considered normal. In short, by going about everyday activities according to habit, each individual implicitly participates in or contests a conception of the world.

‘Spontaneous philosophy’ in the Gramscian sense relates to social structures, systems of values and norms. Gramsci’s world is heavily structured by conceptions of the world, inherited from generation to generation and specific to each social group. Importantly, in a given society and within the same social group, there are always several opposing conceptions of the world, a plurality of common senses (Landy, 1994: 12-13). New ideas that arise from critical self-reflection immediately enter into competition with existing belief systems. In this manner, “the active politician is a creator, an initiator, but he neither creates from nothing nor does he move in the turbid void of his own desires and dreams” (Gramsci, 1971: 172). Gramsci employs the metaphor of how working for historical change is akin to plowing agricultural land. The creation of political change requires a process of preparation, of providing “manure” before enacting the change and “ploughing the land” becomes possible (cited in editor’s introduction to Gramsci, 1971: xciii). A social group’s sustainable hegemony is the product of providing manure and plowing the land before reaping the fruit of state control.

If raising consciousness provides an initial step of political change, the second step is to join forces with a political movement (Gramsci, 1971: 324). The purpose of making a revolutionary film, then, is to provide ideas that will be “accepted by the many [...] by becoming a culture, a form of ‘good sense’, a conception of the world with an ethic that conforms to its structure” (Gramsci, 1971: 346). Gramsci considers that new ideas necessarily have strenuous births, since they must compete with and overcome existing beliefs. Here, it is crucial to base the new idea on the material needs of those it addresses, as “any arbitrary constructions are pretty rapidly eliminated by historical competition” (Gramsci, 1971: 341). In any historical period, there is a myriad of belief systems and philosophies. Winning a political struggle rests on creating a new dominant culture, that is, of winning the general acceptance for a new conception of the world.

Having inspired the most influential cinematographic movement on the continent, Gramscian terminology enjoys a prominent place in the secondary literature as well. The scholarship I will refer to in the following chapters abounds with references to the hegemonic

or counter-hegemonic characteristics of films, as well as considerations of film and subalternity. López (1993: 143), for instance, motivates her study on Mexican melodrama in the same way I do by considering that “mass culture serves as an instrument of hegemony and not one of simple mass domination.” The distinction is key to the Gramscian concept of hegemony, but López does not refer to Gramsci. Indeed, several studies employ the term hegemony without specifying if they refer to it in the Gramscian sense as consent or as mere domination (Bruzual, 2004: 7; Delgado Arria, 2004: 34; Duno-Gottberg, 2009: 403, 412, 429; Duno-Gottberg & Hylton, 2008: 150; Galera & Nitrihual Valdebenito, 2009: 104; Guenni Bravo, 2005: 67; León, 2005: 1; Pilcher, 2000: 104; Rodríguez, 2012: 99).

Gramsci’s project

Gramsci’s project is to provide an alternative to two philosophical traditions. On the one hand, he protests what he calls economism or fatalism, which is the view that history moves by the mechanical laws of the inherent contradictions of capitalism and can be studied with the methods of the natural sciences. On the other, he rejects idealism, and insists that ideas would “be individual fancies without the material forces” (Gramsci, 1971: 377). Read individually, quotes from his notebooks at times seem to privilege the material, at others ideas. This is not a contradiction, but a result of his methodology. His writings present a constant back and forth between general theoretical considerations and analysis of concrete historical problems. Thompson (1978: 46) considers the concept of hegemony one of “extreme elasticity” in contrast to more precise concepts such as capitalism or feudalism. As Cox notes, Gramsci’s

concepts cannot usefully be considered in abstraction from their applications, for when they are so abstracted different usages of the same concept appear to contain contradictions or ambiguities. A concept, in Gramsci’s thought, is loose and elastic and attains precision only when brought into contact with a particular situation which it helps to explain, a contact which also develops the meaning of the concepts. This is the strength of Gramsci’s historicism and therein lies its explanatory power (Cox, 1996a: 125).

Gramsci’s key concepts – hegemony, the extended state, civil society – are heuristic devices to make sense out of that complexity. A much-cited definition by Gramsci of hegemony – “the supremacy of social groups manifests itself in two ways, as ‘domination’ and as ‘intellectual and moral leadership’” is explicitly introduced as a “methodological criterion” (1971: 57) and he views the concept of hegemony as a way to “to combat economism” (1971: 165).

Gramscian hegemony

The above section already goes a long way in pointing to elements in the concept of hegemony, which is the cornerstone of Gramsci’s thought (Femia, 1981), though I have

under-emphasized its economic or material facets. In one formulation, Gramsci writes that “for though hegemony is ethical-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading groups in the decisive nucleus of economic activity” (1971: 161). Still, most of the sections in his prison notebooks focus on hegemony as power that creates consent through the effective exercise of leadership. In one much-cited formulation, Gramsci refers to the non-coercive element of hegemony as

the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production (Gramsci, 1971: 12).

Consent-driven leadership is thus not leadership in the top-down fashion that the English word suggests. A hegemonic leader in an organization, a group, or a state does not expect automatic obedience, but provides reasons that those being led accept. Hegemonic power is smooth, almost frictionless, and it blurs conflict lines. It makes those being led so content with the status quo that they see little reason to bother asking critical questions. Hegemonic power is not free of coercion and compulsive measures, as brute force invariably lies latent and ready for employment. Hegemonic power is Janus-faced, and to be effective, it shows its good face. In a formulation highlighting the dialectic nature of the concept, Gramsci sees hegemony as

corresponding to the dual nature of Machiavelli’s Centaur – half-animal and half-human. They are the levels of forces and of consent, authority and hegemony, violence and civilisation, of the individual moment and of the universal moment (‘Church’ and ‘State’) of agitation and of propaganda, of tactics and strategy (Gramsci, 1971: 169-170).

It is difficult to discuss hegemony as an abstract concept isolated from concrete historical situations. Gramsci describes hegemonic relations in different manners, sometimes emphasizing the short-term economic bargaining and other times the most basic elements of conceptions of the world as ‘pillars of politics.’ The complexity of the subject matter makes Gramsci refrain from a narrow definition. He writes that the ‘spontaneity’ in ‘spontaneous philosophy’ and ‘spontaneous consent’ “can be variously defined, for the phenomenon to which it refers is many-sided” (1971: 196). I find it clarifying to view hegemony as a process and a possible outcome of that process (Carragee & Roefs, 2004: 222; Long, 1999: 102; Parker, 2011: 156-157). In Parker’s (2011: 157) formulation, “hegemony is a process, not a classification.”

Thus, hegemony is not an either / or, as there are always degrees of hegemony in the exercise of power. When hegemony works optimally, it is effortless. This is hegemony in the

long term. As Gamson et al. (1992: 382) note, this is the hegemony of ideological beliefs that are so well integrated into common sense that they are uncontested because they “appear as transparent descriptions of reality, not as interpretations, and are apparently devoid of political content.” Inasmuch as people act in accordance with their conceptions of the world, long-term hegemony is incorporated in language, culture, and common sense; all elements in what come naturally to people. Not opposing is enough to support hegemony, as consent is not always conscious.

In the short term, in its less solidified moment, hegemony refers to compromise and to concessions made between groups well aware of the conflicts between them. Referring to common sense would not do, precisely because people view the world through different lenses. Here, the group exercising hegemony plays “a balancing and arbitrating function between the interests of their group and those of other groups, and succeed[s] in securing the development of the group which [it] represent[s] with the consent and assistance of the allied groups...” (Gramsci, 1971: 148). In short-term hegemonic relations, one could say that the more the economic facet is pronounced, the less natural consent comes to the groups being led. However, it is precisely when hegemony is weak that it becomes important to ask who, if anyone, has the power to define common sense.

From his prison cell, Gramsci saw the capitalism of his contemporary world becoming increasingly hegemonic. To explain why people did not contest capitalism, he pointed to the rising importance and numerical expansion of intellectuals. A number of new professions played the crucial “function of intellectuals”, and he mentions bureaucrats, technicians, and experts in law and political economy (1971: 9). These professions function as the more traditional intellectuals of the school and the Church in that they, by the very fact of exercising their profession, spread and uphold ideas and norms favorable to capitalism. Viewed historically, they are “organisers of a new culture” (1971: 5). To Gramsci’s lament, this new culture had managed to keep capitalism strong and alive, and had effectively defeated the communist alternative he worked for.

The state and the loss of hegemonic power

The counting of ‘votes’ is the final ceremony of a long process, in which it is precisely those who devote their best energies to the State and the nation (when such they are) who carry the greatest weight (Gramsci, 1971: 193).

The state is perhaps the most complex and intriguing concept in Gramsci’s thought. He argues that the state in a given society is a function of power. Economic might is one crucial facet thereof, and he notes for instance that it is the “fundamental economic groups which *really* is

the State” (Gramsci, 1971: 16, emphasis in the original) and “the State is the concrete form of a productive world” (Gramsci, 1971: 117). Securing the interests of the economic elites is thus a key function of a state. However, the economic fundament is only one side of the state coin, the importance of ideas and ideology provides the other. The key to understanding how the two sides relate, and thus to Gramsci’s conceptualization of the state, lies in the distinction and relation between political society and civil society. This relationship is historically contingent, with the crucial implication that Gramsci does not present a theory of ‘the state’ as such, but of different forms or types of states (Cox, 2002: 32; Hall, 2006: 363). In general terms, he considers that civil society refers to social organizations outside the formal state apparatus, the organized parts of society. Political society denotes the state bureaucracy and the legal system as the enforcer and implementer of state policy in particular. Again on a general level, he maintains that civil society musters the consensual element of hegemony, and political society is “the apparatus of state coercive power which ‘legally’ enforces discipline on those groups which do not ‘consent’ either actively or passively [in] moments of crisis of command and direction when spontaneous consent has failed“ (Gramsci, 1971: 12).

Outside the moments of crisis, political society extends into civil society so much so that the two become the same. In this vein, Gramsci considers that the free trade movement is based on a “theoretical error” that takes “the distinction between political society and civil society” to be actual when “in fact, it is merely methodological” and “civil society and the State are one and the same (Gramsci, 1971: 159-160). This sameness applies to hegemonic societies, hence the conceptualization of state strength as an integral or extended state. A strong state is an integral part of civil society and conflict lines are blurred and difficult to contest, making resistance against the state more difficult.

Crucially, the concrete nature of the relationship between civil and political society depends on the nature or type of hegemony in a society. At times, Gramsci equates civil and political society. He writes that the state refers to everything the social group in power does to attain consent, that the state is “cultural” and “ethical” in that it seeks to sustain a culture and conception of the world favorable to its own interests (1971: 258). That the concrete activities to that end – he mentions popular novels, news media, the school, theatre, cinema, and radio (Landy, 1994: 10) – are carried out by private initiatives, by civil and not political society does not stop him from labeling them activities of the state. Rather, it proves the point: the less visible the state’s stamp is in the cultural activity, the more effectively it synchronizes culture and civil society with political society. It blurs conflict lines, which posits a challenge to the analyst. As Landy points out, Gramsci considers spoken mass communication the most

effective means of spreading hegemonic ideas: “theatre, cinema, and radio, with its loudspeakers and public squares, beat all forms of written communication, including books, magazines, newspapers and newspapers posted on walls” although only “superficially, not in depth” (cited in Landy, 1994: 10).

Hegemonic power, however, never reaches perfection, which is why and how states change and eventually transform. In short, when people no longer give their consent “a ‘crisis of authority’ is spoken of: this is precisely the crisis of hegemony, or general crisis of the State” (Gramsci, 1971: 210). A hegemonic crisis involves a rearrangement of dominant ideas, traditional conceptions of the world are questioned, and what used to pass as common sense no longer does. Those in power are “no longer ‘leading’ but only ‘dominant’, exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, *and no longer believe what they used to believe*” (Gramsci, 1971: 275-276, own emphasis).

To simplify, one of two things can happen to a state in this context. In the first scenario, the crisis comes about because an alternative social group already has conquered civil society, and redefined common sense. The new group has eliminated the group in control of the old state and has secured the consent and support of other groups. With a new group as leading and the old as dominating, state transformation becomes “historically necessary” (1971: 53), a necessity based on “the iron conviction [that has] formed that a particular solution of the vital problems is necessary”, that is, on a change in common-sense ideas (1971: 153).

The second scenario arises when the “crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born” (1971: 276). This is a “‘revolution’ without a ‘revolution’, [in other words a] ‘passive revolution’” (1971: 59), which is how Gramsci viewed Mussolini’s coming to power. In a passive revolution, there is no hegemonic force. The traditional political forces reach a stalemate, and a strongman with charisma enters the stage, steals the show and the state with it. That is, at least he steals the state apparatus, for the situation is defined precisely by antagonism between civil and political society. There is no long-term hegemony in place, and the strongman must resort to domination and short-term hegemonic strategies such as material concessions to stay in power. As I will return to in my analysis, both Mexico and Venezuela have experienced crises of authority, and the ideology the state employs to legitimize itself has changed over the three decades I analyze. The purpose of my analysis is to interrogate the role of popular films in this process.

As part of civil society, reflections or contestations of state ideology in films speak to the moving boundary between state and social forces, between political and civil society. There is

no one-to-one relationship in the developments in the politics of the films and the state. Gramsci considers the nature of the relationship between political and civil society “to be the most important question of political theory that the post-war period has posed, and the most difficult to resolve correctly” (Gramsci, 1971: 238). For him, the answer to the question determined whether a frontal attack on the state or long-term, patient ideological work in civil society would be the appropriate revolutionary strategy. For me, it informs my approach on how to study the state. As Hall (2006: 364) points out, a Gramscian perspective suggests that the “shifting boundary line between state and civil society tells us a great deal about the changing character of the state.” If a state is an expression of a society’s power relations, and if those power relations in turn can be thought of as the common sense inherent in various conceptions of the world expressed in cultural products, then studying those conceptions offers insight into the state. It offers insight into the type of power the state exercises, and its ability to ‘extend’ into popular films as one of several spheres where cultural power lies.

Film as popular culture

As Parker (2011: 156-157) notes, Gramsci does not offer a definition of popular culture. Observing that popular culture is a ground where opposing definitions of common sense meet says something about what goes on in popular culture, but not what type of cultural products pertain to that ground. Gramsci’s own writings about popular culture interrogated the dominant and contesting expressions of common sense (Landy, 1994: 34). In considering three possible categories of what ‘the popular’ in ‘popular song’ means, Gramsci stresses that popular songs are those songs that people listen to because they resonate with how they are accustomed to seeing the world, that is, to common sense. The three categories are:

(1) songs composed by the people and for the people; (2) songs composed for the people but not by the people; (3) songs composed neither by the people nor for the people that the people have nevertheless adopted because they conform to their way of thinking and feeling. It seems to me that all popular songs could and should be reduced to the third category, since what distinguishes popular song, within the framework of a nation and its culture, is not its artistic element or its historical origin, *but its way of conceiving the world and life*, in contrast with official society; here, and only here, should one look for the ‘collectivity’ of popular song and of the people themselves (in Parker, 2011: 155, own emphasis).

I selected the most popular films in order to interrogate what conceptions of the world they represent. This gave me a selection of different type of films. Some of the films I analyze drew millions of spectators, others only some hundred thousands, and some have been made with the intention of criticizing state power, others just to entertain their audiences. If they are all cases of popular culture, then the category of popular culture must allow for different types of cultural products. Building on Hinds (1990) and in particular on Parker (2011), I propose

popularity and low barriers for consumption as necessary definitional features of a popular cultural product, often but not necessarily accompanied by a non-recognition of the product as quality, serious, or as art.

Throughout this study and as elaborated on in chapter two, I treat popular culture as a type of mass culture. In using success at the box office as my selection criterion, I see popularity as a necessary component of popular culture. As Hinds (1990) argues, popular culture is culture consumed by a significant number of people, no matter the cultural product's ideological content or its relation to 'the people' or 'the elite'. I thereby disagree with an element in the quote from Gramsci above: popular culture does necessarily stand in an antagonistic relationship with 'official society.' That would contradict Gramsci's overall argument about how consent is formed in hegemonic societies, and as I elaborate on in chapter two, the nature of the relationship between popular culture and 'official society' is open to empirical scrutiny.

There are however two potential problems with this definition that makes it insufficient as a definition of popular culture for my purposes. The first problem regards reliable and comparable data. Popularity is a statistical measure, and it demands numbers measuring how many people have consumed the product. Such data exist for the films I analyze, and I present below. However, they are imperfect, and because some figures are box office income and others are spectatorship, it is difficult to compare them. In short, I have sufficient data to give a fair indication of which films have been most popular, but I probably do not have the full picture.

Further, the definition invites to a question not considered by Hinds: how popular? Are the least and the most popular films in my selection all cases of popular culture? Hinds correctly points out the importance of knowing if a cultural phenomenon is enjoyed by one or 90 percent of the population, but he does not say how popular the product must be to qualify as popular culture (see Parker, 2011: 250 for a similar argument). In the context of the films I analyze here, a logical implication of Hind's argument would be that for instance *Homicidio culposo* (1984) with its 1 335 252 spectators is more properly considered part of Venezuelan popular culture than *Caracas amor a muerte* (2000) with 71 028 viewers. I find that view problematic, on the grounds that it does not take into account factors external to film that impact on its popularity. *Caracas amor a muerte* was produced after a decade of meager financing, and several movie theaters had closed down. I return to these factors in chapter two.

Further, if investigating the contesting definitions of common sense is what makes popular culture interesting, then it would be problematic to focus only on periods where the

cinematographic infrastructure favors high spectatorship. Venezuelan films are at any rate not the most popular products among Venezuelan popular culture. Miranda (in Roffé, 1997: 69) reports that what is considered a very successful film with around one million spectators would be seen as a flop for a Venezuelan *telenovela* [soap opera].¹

Popularity is an indicator of market success. The criterion thus privileges cultural products made for profit, which for a study of Venezuelan and Mexican popular films would be problematic. As I elaborate on in the next chapter, Venezuela and Mexico represent two distinct film traditions which partially explain why their popular films in the 1980s and 1990s were so different. In Venezuela, *el nuevo cine* movement was more influential. The aim of this cinematographic movement, at least for some of its members, was to make commercially successful films that would both have a popular appeal and stand in opposition to the dominant culture. However, the Venezuelan films were not products that had to survive without support in a market economy. Films are expensive to produce, and during the otherwise successful 1980s, only the two most popular films managed to make a margin of profit (Lucien, 1989: 21). Because the state only funded a percentage of the production costs, most filmmakers had to assume a personal debt to be able to make a film (Roffé, 1997). Farrell considers that because of the state subsidies, Venezuela does not have a film industry that would be able to survive in a market economy. Indeed, she notes that “it can be argued that the only film industry in Latin American [sic] in economic terms that has continually covered costs and made profits is the Mexican film industry” (Farrell, 2011: 29).

While Venezuelan and Mexican films represent different kinds of popular culture, they are easily accessible and easily understood, for reasons relating to what makes a film intelligible. I return to the question of how films make sense in chapter two with reference to Bordwell’s account of the classical narrational mode in Hollywood. By staying within this mode, they are films with stories that the audiences intuitively comprehend as a normal mainstream movie. As such, they are cultural products “that require only small amounts of cultural capital to consume”, in Parker’s (2011: 162) Bourdieu-inspired terminology.

Parker usefully distinguishes between different types of popular culture, considering that both products that are expensive and cheap to procure can qualify as popular culture. He further proposes that popular culture is culture not recognized or not authorized as high or quality culture: “the distinguishing characteristic of popular culture is that it is *unauthorized* (Parker, 2011: 165, emphasis in the original). This criterion applies to most but not all of the

¹ My translation. Unless otherwise noted, all future translations from Spanish are made by the author.

films I analyze. As I detail in the literature review in the following chapters, scholars tends to ‘deauthorize’ especially the Mexican films as quality or art. The most influential Mexican scholar prefers the term “*basura*” [trash] to describe Mexican film history (Monsiváis, 2001: 153). In Venezuela, scholars are more likely to recognize an intention on part of the filmmaker to produce a ‘serious’ film, but they conclude that because the films aim at commercial success, they typically do not reach the assumed standard of what a serious film looks like.

Selection criteria

As Hinds (1990) points out, popularity is a statistical measure which requires reliable and comparable data. In order to have a selection criterion for popularity that would be reliable and comparable for the time period between 1980 and 2010, I used box office figures on spectatorship and income of nationally produced Mexican and Venezuelan films. To obtain a sample that would be most representative for popularity over time, I divided the 31 years into five five-year periods and one six-year period. With this division as a guiding principle, I proceeded with a pragmatic mind to select the representative films. In some years, the popularity peaked and made certain years stand out. I wanted these peaks to be reflected in my selection, but I also avoided selecting only films from the same year in a given five-year period. Wanting to see developments over time, I deviated from using popularity as the sole selection criterion. In Venezuela, national films were particularly popular in 1984, 1985, 1986, and 1987, with 10 films drawing more than 500 000 viewers. I therefore selected 12 films for the time period between 1984 and 1989, because I wanted to pay particular attention to what have been the most popular films in Venezuelan film history. However, using popularity as the only selection criterion would not have allowed me to investigate changes over time. I therefore decided to include *Cuchillos de fuego* from 1989 with 367 652 viewers instead of *Colt comando* from 1987 with 553 231 viewers or *Ya koo* from 1985 with 527 854 viewers in order not to include only films from the same years. In the preceding five-year period, however, there were no films from 1980 or 1981 that were popular enough to be considered for inclusion. In Mexico, I selected six films from 2000 through 2005 and seven from 2006 through 2010. For pragmatic reasons, I selected more films for this period to reflect their increased popularity compared to the previous decade. I present statistical information for the films I selected in appendix one.

I further analyzed only the films that portray their contemporary societies or very recent history. In Venezuela, this made me exclude only two films: a historical film about the

colonial period (*Manuela Sáenz* 2000) and a film about Colombia (*Sicario* 1995). In Mexico, I excluded seven films: two about the Mexican Revolution (*Como agua para chocolate* 1992 and *El tigre de Santa Julia* 2002), two about Mexico before and after the Second World War (*Salón México* 1996 and *Arráncame la vida* 2008), two cartoons (*Una película de huevos* and *Otra película de huevos y un pollito*), and horror film about a ghost killing people on a road outside Mexico City (*KM 31* 2007).

My argument is not that the excluded films cannot be seen as referring to contemporary Mexico and Venezuela. For example, the characters in the two cartoons are inspired by stereotypes, and it would perhaps be possible to compare the stereotypes in these two cartoons to stereotypes in other films. Similarly, the historical films could be seen as messages about present-day Mexico or Venezuela; *Manuela Sáenz* for instance suggests that it was a pity that Simon Bolívar's dream for a united Latin American did not come true, and in a reference to Chavismo's use of Bolívar as a central ideological inspirational source, the film calls for a continuation of his dream. However, the extrapolation of the indirect manners these films indeed refer to their contemporary societies requires for a theoretical justification for the viability of doing so. This has been beyond the scope of the present study.

Sources and data issues

Tables two and three in appendix one present the statistical information I based the selection of the films on. Here, I want to note that the reliability and comparability of the gathered data varies from decade to decade and between the two countries. The greatest challenge was presented in Mexico. There, it was difficult to find reliable and, in particular, comparable statistical data in Mexico for the entire time period, and the gathering of data required considerable time. The data include box office income, running time in movie theaters, and spectatorship, and the two first decades do not include figures for the whole country. In Venezuela, the task of gathering the data was easier, and I quickly obtained statistics on income and spectatorship for all Venezuelan films since 1976. Between 1980 and 1998, the figures between the two countries are not comparable, and in the Mexican case it is not possible to compare popularity between the three decades. There is an unfortunate bias to the taste of the cinema-going public of Mexico City and the surrounding areas (*área metropolitana*) in my data from 1980 through 1998, which means that I may have excluded genres or types of films that were popular in areas outside the metropolis. In the 1980s, so-called *norteñas* [~northern], action-films about the Mexican-US border, were popular in the northern states of Mexico but unpopular in Mexico City (Carro, 1990: 3). However, Carro

also points out that while the *norteñas* and sexually charged comedies (such as *Tres mexicanos ardientes*) were the most *common* genres of the 1980s, the largest blockbusters were other types of comedies.

To my knowledge, there exists no overview of the popularity of Mexican films over its long film history. The country's cinematographic institutional infrastructure is complex, which may have contributed to overlapping and confusing responsibilities. When I was in Mexico to obtain the data and the films, the two most likely candidates to provide statistical overviews, Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (IMCINE) and Cámara Nacional de la Industria Cinematográfica (CANACINE), referred me to each other. I therefore collected material from the best available sources, and I believe that the result is reasonably reliable. There are however several possible areas of error, as I will note below.

From 1980 through 1984, I consulted the journal *Cámara. Organo informativo de la Cámara Nacional de la Industria Cinematográfica* published by CANACINE (1981, 1982, 1983a, 1983b, 1985). *Cámara* published box office income figures for Mexico City and its surrounding areas.² The period between 1985 and 1986 period was particularly difficult to find reliable data for. *Cámara* stopped publishing box office figures, and I therefore relied on the limited information available in the *Statistical yearbook 2010* published by IMCINE. The yearbook provides information for the longest-running film in movie theaters by weeks from 1912 through 2000. The figures provide a fairly good indicator of popularity, as indicated by a comparison between box office income and running time with the films from 1980 to 1985. I therefore included *Coqueta* from 1985 as it was the longest-running film from 1985 and 1986 included in IMCINE's overview (IMCINE, 2011: 147). For 1987, 1988, and 1989, I consulted the magazine *Dicine*, which took over for *Cámara* in publishing box office numbers. For 1990 through 1998, I relied on statistics about Mexico City and the surrounding areas cordially provided to me by CANACINE (personal communication).³ For the remaining period, I consulted statistics provided to me by Victor Ugalde, President of Sociedad Mexicana de Directores-Realizadores de Obras Audiovisuales [Mexican Society of Directors] and author of several articles on the infrastructure of Mexican cinema. Ugalde cordially sent me an updated version of the statistical section he had provided for the *Manual básico de producción cinematográfica* (Taibo, 2011: 125-130).

² The January issue of the journal in 1984 did not publish the statistics for 1983. I therefore used the box office statistics published in the last issue of 1983, which includes information from 16th of December 1982 until the 9th of November. *Cámara* starting separating Mexican and foreign films in 1985, hence the different title of the article in the issue from that year.

³ I wish to thank Diego Castillo Alamilla at CANACINE for collecting the data for me.

The reliability of this data is a possible source of error, as some of the secondary literature seems to have consulted different sources or do not refer to the official figures. For instance, Ramírez Berg (1992: 192) reports that *El mil usos* was “one of the most commercially successful films in the history of Mexican filmmaking”, whereas the figures published in *Cámara* indicate that *El barrendero* was about twice as popular only a year earlier. In an article entitled ‘politics and popularity’, Costello (2005) motivates her study of *Perfume de Violeta*, *Bienvenido*, and *Nicotina* with their domestic success without referencing her claim or noting that other films screened the same years were more popular.

In Venezuela, it was easier to obtain official statistics. Upon request, the Fundación Cinemateca Nacional de Venezuela cordially provided me with a complete list of all Venezuelan films screened from 1976 to 2009, with their box office income and numbers of spectators.⁴ This list was partially updated in 2011 to include figures from 2010 (CNAC, 2011). However, as in Mexico, parts of the academic community do not seem to trust the official figures, or do not reference them. For instance, Farrell (2011: 103) motivates her study of *Libertador Morales* as a blockbuster and commercial success at the movie theaters. According to the CNAC figures, however, it only had 39 192 viewers, making it the fourth most popular film of a total of nine in 2009.

Beyond the possible problems with the reliability of the statistics, another question is if sale figure at the box office is a good indicator of popularity. While it measures which films have been commercially viable, it neglects other places where people watch films; notably TV, VHS, and DVD. For my purposes, box office success was the only available source for the three decades I analyzed. Farrell notes that *Libertador Morales* screened on plazas in the government-funded program *Cine de la calle* aimed at bringing Venezuelan films to the barrio. There are however no attendance figures for these screenings, which made it impossible for me to include them in my material. As for VHS and DVD, there exist to my knowledge no published statistics on their dissemination in Venezuela. In Mexico, IMCINE ‘s *Statistical yearbook 2010* publishes some figures for DVD rentals and sales and Mexican films screened on TV for limited period in 2009 and 2010 (IMCINE, 2011: 74-97). The yearbook also notes that the market for pirated DVDs is large and cheap (as it is in Venezuela), but that little research has investigated it. In my experience, pirated DVDs are in both countries the easiest, cheapest, and oftentimes the only possible manner to purchase films that no longer run in the movie theaters.

⁴ I wish to thank Humberto Castillo of the Cinemateca for providing me with the information. The statistics are compiled by Centro Nacional Autónomo de Cinematografía (CNAC).

The power of framing social reality

In considering films as a form of communication that mediates social reality, I propose that films can be analyzed with a theory of communication power. Venezuelan and Mexican films between 1980 and 1999 communicated different stories about their countries. As Stam (2000: 224-226) notes in his survey on theoretical approaches to the study of film, Gramsci (through the influence of Hall) has inspired scholars interested in films as textual statements, thereby providing a different entry point than film scholars who premise their study on the unique characteristics of film as a medium. Landy (1994: 13) uses Gramsci to identify notions of common sense expressed in film, and suggests “a reading of mass cultural texts [...] to explore the ways in which they may replace, displace, and contradict prevailing forms of knowledge.”

To the end of analyzing films as communicative statements about the societies they depict, I turn to Entman’s theory of framing for a method of analyzing the visions of Mexican and Venezuelan societies as defined by their popular films. In a context where the states of both countries were losing legitimacy, Venezuelan films from 1980 to 1999 tended to accentuate the social problems of the country, whereas Mexican films conveyed the message that ‘everything is in order.’ How to make theoretical sense out of this difference? At stake here, I propose, is the same basic function of Entman’s frame: selection and salience. Filmmakers decide what to include and exclude in the stories they tell, and what they include assumes importance in the film’s universe. As in news media, the vision of society in films favors a side in a political debate about the state of the nation. To simplify, critics of the state seek to contest its hegemony by arguing that it mismanages society, and state representatives have a vested interest in showing that everything is indeed in order. As in news media, the opposing visions of society in popular films are “struggles over meaning” (Gamson et al., 1992: 382).

Framing theory offers an operationalization of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. While hegemony speaks to the core of the complex and multifaceted relationship between political and cultural power, its elastic character implies a methodological challenge when applying it to a concrete situation. Gamson et al. (1992: 381-382) consider the term hijacked by a jargon-driven research that has reduced it to the dominant message forwarded by elites. With the aim of preserving “the original Gramscian meaning” (1992: 382), they propose that “perhaps the word is better left at home but one cannot dismiss the issues it raises” (1992: 381). Gramsci intended hegemony to describe ideology not as transmitted in explicit political statements of the elites, but to argue that what appears as natural and common sense constitutes the real

locus of consensually based power. In considering Gramsci's concept of hegemony indispensable for salvaging a focus on power in framing research, Carragee and Roefs (2004: 222) propose that the concept of framing provides "a specific means to examine how the news media construct ideological meanings largely consistent with the interests of powerful elites." Frames, they underscore, are transmitters of power and as such integral to the maintenance of hegemony.

Framing is a theory of how communicative texts exert power (Entman, 1993: 51). To frame reality in a certain manner is to select and portray a slice or facet of reality to enhance the salience of that facet over others (Entman, 1993: 52). Framing is inherent to any text, inasmuch as every issue has at least two sides to it. Entman proposes that the most important function of frames is to set an agenda, that is, to establish what issues are worthy of attention. Framing thus decides if for instance poverty is at all noteworthy and what other questions are relevant to it, or if it is a non-topic (Entman, 1993; 2004). The setting of an agenda is in itself an exercise of power. To set an agenda, Entman maintains, impacts what issues people think about. To simplify, if films repeatedly present images of poor people as restlessly eager to kidnap or kill, this is likely to accentuate fear for criminality, and consequently muster support for a stronger penal state. Entman notes that modern media studies was inspired by a misleading quote: "the media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*" (Cohen in Entman, 2007: 165, emphasis in the original). The distinction between what people think and what they think about confuses, Entman claims, since "short of physical coercion, all influence over 'what people think' derives from telling them 'what to think about.' If the media really are stunningly successful in telling people what to think about, they must also exert significant influence over what they think" (2007: 165). Influencing people's thoughts is an exercise of power, and a successful framing thus enhances an agent's ability to get others to do as she wants (Entman, 2007).

Beyond agenda setting, an effective and developed frame has four functions. It identifies or diagnoses a problem (the poor are criminals), points out what or who creates the problem (they are lazy / social inequality), evaluates and passes a moral judgment (it's their / society's fault), and finally offers a remedy (more police / more welfare). Importantly, a poverty frame differs from just a particular story about poverty. A frame is inherently political in that it suggests a solution and favors one side over the other in a political debate: a frame "promotes interpretations that lead to evaluations" (Entman, 2004: 24). Entman (2004: 24) provides the example of defining 9/11 as an act of war: "war against the Taliban and al- Qaeda would not

be necessary, would not be an issue, were it not for the September 11 act of war against the United States.” Entman underscores how defining 9/11 as a war excluded other possible interpretations (for instance, lunacy) and thus other lines of political action.

Entman terms a frame’s effect priming. Given that an issue can be framed in a number of ways, people respond differently to the same facts depending on how they are framed. Priming associates or links one’s thinking about a topic to another related concept, or more precisely, it decides what the relevant associated topic is (Entman, 2004: 27). Poverty can thus mean a potential threat to individual security; the poor is a criminal-in-waiting. As a product of unjust social structures, poverty means that politicians need to do a better job. Poverty can of course mean both – to prime is to decide which is more important: “frames introduce or raise the salience or apparent importance of certain ideas, activating schemas that encourage target audiences to think, feel, and decide in a particular way” (Entman, 2007: 164). For instance, *Huelepega: ley de la calle* (1999) invites to sympathy with its criminal protagonist, whereas *Secuestro express* (2005) casts one of its protagonist as a sadistic rapist that commits crime both because he is poor and because he takes pleasure in inflicting pain upon others. Both films are about crime, but because they associate it with different things, crime comes to mean something distinct in each.

When repeated, frames create biases, which give them more influence (in particular, see Entman, 2007). While a single film can operate with its own frame, it is the repetition of a frame that gives it power. If films repeat a frame, the film tradition as a whole is biased towards the perspective of that frame. To say that films are biased towards a perspective does not mean that *all* films reflect it; it is a claim about tendency. A tendency implies that the audience will be familiar with the frame, and will view it at what Entman calls a low cognitive cost (Entman, 2004: 14). A central point for Entman is that people understand narratives against the background of what they believe from before, and that narratives resonating with existing beliefs are easier to understand (Entman, 1993: 53). I will return to this crucial element below, as the employment of familiar schemata and the lowering of cognitive costs applies to communication in films as well.

Bias is a result of frame dominance, which contrasts to frame contestation and frame parity. Frame parity is a democratic ideal, and refers to a situation where a number of frames and counter-frames participate in an even playing field. Audiences can freely have their pick based on what they find most convincing. Entman stresses that “frame parity is the exception, not the rule” (2004: 48). While total dominance is unusual, a key point for Entman is that it is not irrelevant where the information comes from: the more power a group has, the easier it is

to define the dominant frames (in particular, see Entman, 2004). Working mainly with US foreign policy in the US media, Entman maintains that the sitting US administration is at the top of a hierarchical cascade model. Media alone infrequently offer counter-frames to the administration's frame; they typically come from other political elites in Washington and only rarely from groups with less power.

The concept of cultural congruence constitutes a last element in Entman's theory of framing. The four functions of a frame – problem definition, causal identification, moral judgment, and remedy endorsement – “hold together in a kind of cultural logic, each helping to sustain the others with the connections among them cemented more by custom and convention than by the principles of syllogistic logic” (Entman, 2004: 6). He maintains that when a frame matches already existing ideas, “all participants in the system, from the president through the administration, other elites, journalists, and members of the public will tend to respond similarly” (Entman, 2004: 147-148). Conversely, frames that do not sit well with audiences' existing belief systems struggle to become dominant. If the frame stimulates culturally congruent topics, the response or adaption of the frame is habitual, with little or no cognitive cost to understand it. Cultural ambiguity provokes contestation, and incongruence provokes blockading. Significantly, there is a tipping point between the two in terms of how ‘alien’ a frame is to culture. Factors causing blockading identified by Entman are complexity, unfamiliarity, and little relevance to existing values. Framing of difficult, new or unknown or topics that people do not care about are thus likely to be blocked. Framing of familiar topics in ways that resonate with existing overarching paradigms or meta-schemata are likewise more likely to succeed and more difficult to oppose.

Framing theory and the study of popular films

If films are usefully understood as statements about politics and social phenomena, they cannot escape framing. As such, the statements necessarily represent a certain point of view about an issue that favors one interpretation of what the issue means over others. While Entman studies agenda-setting and problem definitions in news media, his concepts and implied method lend themselves to the study of popular films. I turn to Entman's theory of framing to discuss which perspectives the films repeat, what agendas they set, which frames tilt towards dominance, and which are contested. A methodological implication of Entman's theory is that films must be studied *over time* and in some *quantity*, as it is the repetition of a frame which enables it to participate in processes of supporting or contesting hegemony.

Entman's focus on iteration is in line with Gramsci's view on how ideas become common sense:

it really must be stressed that it is precisely the first elements, the most elementary things, which are the first to be forgotten. However, if they are repeated innumerable times, they become the pillars of politics and of any collective action whatsoever (Gramsci, 1971: 144).

Thus, analyzing how one or just a handful of movies reproduce for instance conservative gender norms would not interrogate the bias effect of the frame, which in Entman's definition is consistent slanting over time (Entman, 2007: 106).

To my knowledge, only Allagui and Najjar (2011) have applied Entman's theory to popular films. They ask how Egyptian films portray political Islam, and as me "use framing theory to understand how it is discussed and how the story is told" (Allagui & Najjar, 2011: 210). This approach enables them to detect how the seven films they analyze relate the topic of political Islam to terrorism or political violence. In other words, they focus on priming or how the films activate a schema where political Islam means political violence. They apply Entman's theory in a straight-forward manner, and pay primary attention to the problem of political Islam as defined by the films and how they cast it as a consequence of poverty. Unfortunately, however, they do not problematize the fact that frame analysis applied to news media and popular films deal with different media. In the following, I discuss how Entman's theory can travel from news media to films and the methodological challenges implied by that travel.

The theory of framing has for the past couple of decades offered a principal research avenue for scholars interested in how media tend to offer news stories that benefit the interests of political elites (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Castells, 2009, chapter three 'Networks of mind and power'; Gamson et al., 1992; Scheufele, 1999; Vliegthart & van Zoonen, 2011). The theory is characterized by a variety of approaches, leading to complaints about inconsistent conceptualizations, theoretical unclarity, and calls for a united approach (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; de Vreese, 2005, 2012: 366; Entman, 1993; Gamson et al., 1992; Scheufele, 1999; Vliegthart & van Zoonen, 2011). Gamson et al. (1992: 384) describe the concept of framing as "both indispensable and elusive", Entman (1993) in a much-cited article considers it 'a fractured paradigm', and Carragee and Roefs (2004) maintain that scholars exclude power from their framing analysis and protest incomplete approaches that do not take the frame's origin and reception into account. Indeed, scholars tend to conflate the terms 'frame' and 'framing', thus obscuring the difference between the content analysis of frame identification and the analysis of production and reception in framing (Vliegthart & van Zoonen, 2011:

102). Against this, D'Angelo (2002) protests the need for one unified approach and argues that diversity has led to more exciting research. He contends that "theoretical and paradigmatic diversity has led to a comprehensive view of the framing process, not fragmented findings in isolated research agendas" (D'Angelo, 2002: 871).

Methodological challenges in applying frame analysis to film

As forms of communication, the intelligibility and perceived credibility of both news media and films rest on their ability to connect with preexisting beliefs and audience schemata. This is what enables me to apply frame analysis to a study of films. In my reading, the gist of Entman's theory is that an influential frame becomes influential because it connects with preexisting knowledge that allows people to make sense of its message (Entman, 1993: 53, 2010: 391). This is how films make sense as well, as I will elaborate on in chapter two with reference to Bordwell (1985). To exemplify, a number of films portray dark-skinned males from the barrio as violent criminals, a portrayal people recognize as familiar because it already exists in what both Entman and Bordwell term preexisting schemata among the audiences. The portrayal rings a familiar bell, in other words. The two scholars employ a strikingly similar terminology to explain the mechanism at work. Bordwell (1985: 34) proposes that "generally, the spectator comes to the film already tuned, prepared to focus energies toward story construction and to apply sets of schemata derived from context and prior experience." Similarly, Entman (1993: 56) considers that "to identify a meaning as dominant or preferred is to suggest a particular framing of the situation that is most heavily supported by the text and is congruent with the most common audience schemata."

This is how all communication works, according to Castells. With Entman's theory as a central point of reference, Castells (2009: 157) argues that "the political views of both elites and people in general seem to be largely shaped by the information made available by the mass media or by other sources capable of wide diffusion, such as the Internet." It follows that films, to the extent they are widely distributed, also have the possibility of shaping people's political positions. Castells highlights in particular Entman's notion of priming as key to the power of the communicative process. Priming refers to the ability of a text to associate two topics as related and relevant to each other, and it thereby goes to the heart of a communicative text's ability to influence what people believe an issue is a case of (Castells, 2009: 157-158). People are more likely to understand the association if it is culturally congruent on a general level, or if it repeats a message of earlier frames on a more specific level. As such, "framing operates by leaving gaps in the information that the audience fills

with their preconceived schemas: these are interpretive processes in the human mind based on connected ideas and feelings stored in the memory” (Castells, 2009: 158).⁵

In chapters three through six, I will pay particular attention to the repetition of frames and priming within the frames over time. This enables me to allow for changes in audience schemata, in particular, how popular films themselves are venues where that change occurs. Applied to an analysis of how films narrate over time, Entman’s notion of cultural congruence sits somewhat uneasily, as it does not take changes in audience schemata into account. Carragee and Roefs (2004: 216) identify “a static conception of the framing process” as one of the key theoretical challenges the literature needs to confront. In this context, Entman’s concept of cultural resonance boils down to a narrow concept of a paradigm, such as the Cold War view of a divided world. Writing about US news media and US foreign policy, he takes liberties in assuming some tacit knowledge in the US audience, suggesting that he conceives of culture in the singular. I deal with narratives over a thirty year period in a context of significant political and social change, and what resonates culturally can consequently be in flux. Rather than taking for granted what is culturally congruent, then, I propose that identifying what elements of the dominant frames that have survived from decade to decade is a manner to investigate how films contribute to reproducing or challenging existing beliefs.

However, films and news items are different types of communication. While both involve narration, an obvious difference is that films are fiction and news is not. As I will return to in chapter two, how or if at all films should reflect social reality is a key debate among Latin American filmmakers and in the literature. While critical commentary remains a normative ideal for many, the fictional nature of films implies that they cannot be analyzed as if they were news items reporting social reality. Films do not present problem definitions, causes, ethical judgments, and solutions in the same way as news does. Importantly for how the frames are produced, the process leading up their formulation is different. D’Angelo (2002: 876) points out that framing is the outcome of how journalists gather information for news articles, what perspectives they consider newsworthy, and who provides the information. Entman (2004) specifically examines the relationships between political elites and media to interrogate who has the power to make their version of a story the dominant one in the public

⁵ Part of Castell’s purposes in *Communication power* is to link his sociopolitical analysis with recent scholarship in neuroscience (Castells, 2009: 7). In that vein, Castells contends that “framing is a fundamental mechanism in the activation of the mind because it directly links the structure of a narrative conveyed by the media to the brain’s neural networks.” This is a proposition I have no qualifications to assess the validity of, but the soundness of his argument about how communication power works does not rest on the linkage with neuroscience.

debate, and he proposes a model that explains why the White House rather than social movements tends to set the terms of the debate (see also Carragee & Roefs, 2004: 216). Directors are primarily interested in telling a good story. Depending on the nature of that story, of course, they do not gather information in the same way journalists do. The difference is that between a creative process of the filmmakers and a gathering of facts by the journalists, and political actors and social movements are less likely to actively contact filmmakers.

However, the fictional nature of film does not represent the major methodological challenge for applying frame analysis to films. Rather, the primary challenge relates to the identification or coding of a film's frame. News items are of a different format than films, usually much shorter and to the point about the content and message of their frames. A medium's format influences how it frames an issue, as Altheide (1996: 29) points out. A good news text tends to be clear about whether it is about a half-empty or half-full glass, to refer to a metaphor Entman employs in an argument against second-guessing various interpretations of frames, however plausible they might appear:

a framing paradigm cautions researchers not to take fugitive components of the message and show how they *might* be interpreted in ways that oppose the dominant meaning. If the text frame emphasizes in a variety of mutually reinforcing ways that the glass is half full, the evidence of social science suggests that relatively few in the audience will conclude it is half empty (Entman, 1993: 56, emphasis in the original).

In contrast, films can be ambivalent about whether the glass is half full or half empty, and this ambivalence may be central to what the film is about. Films operate with 90 to 180-minute long stories with a wider range of content and often more complex stories than news. They can be clear that the glass is half empty, as was the case with the portrayal of the Venezuelan judicial system in the 1980s. These films portrayed the judiciary in a critical light by showing how it protected the economic and political elites and oppressed the marginalized poor. People may of course have protested their portrayal as exaggerated, but even for ardent supporters of the sitting regime at the time it would have been difficult to understand the films other than as a critique of the state. This clarity was central to the politics of the films of the period, as I argue in chapter three.

In the 2000s, the politics of Venezuelan films changed. This change involved, among other things, a move away from the transparent political statements of the earlier films. Since 2000, Venezuelan films have been prone to cast the glass as both half-empty *and* half-full. In my analysis, I refer to these films as 'ambivalently *chavista*': parts of their narratives repeat *chavista* rhetoric, while other elements are reminiscent of the critiques commonly found in opposition discourse. One film can thus present the classical *chavista* story of how

Venezuela's social problems are the fault of the country's rich elite, but also allude to opposition discourse by painting a picture of a Venezuela without running water in the tap and where violent crime has taken over public spaces. I will argue that in their ambivalence and by repeating elements of well-known critiques, they can be classified as critical, but this classification is methodologically challenging.

Coding frames in popular film: frame and film analysis

With these methodological challenges in mind, the purpose of this section is to describe the three-staged process of how I apply frame analysis, define the terms I use to describe the frames, and conclude with a note about the usefulness and limits of frame analysis applied to films. I started watching the films with a simple question: what do I learn about Mexico and Venezuela in this film? The answer to this question is what I term 'the vision of Mexico and Venezuela' or simply 'the Mexico' and 'the Venezuela' of so and so film. At this initial stage in the process, I was primarily interested in the agenda-setting capabilities of the films, what topics the films showed, and what topics they did not show. I asked 'what' questions in this stage of the process. With each film as a separate unit of analysis, I asked what parts of the Venezuelan and Mexican societies it depicted. This gave me a list of topics, and the most repeated and salient topics constitute what I below refer to as the elements of the frames. In my notes, I formulated the problem definition, cause, ethical judgment, and proposed remedy suggested by each film. I was interested in what topics the films portrayed, how they were defined in the stories told by the films, and what meaning they conveyed. This is in concordance with Altheide's (1996: 26-27) advice about the process of qualitative document analysis, which is to ask theoretically informed questions about the material at hand, take extensive notes, and subsequently code the material. This initial stage ended after I had watched all the films once. Having identified a list of the topics in the agendas set by Mexican and Venezuelan films, I could pay closer attention to the repetition of certain topics, and their development over time. I watched the films in conjunction with reading the secondary literature, which enabled me to formulate more specific research questions.

In a second stage of the analytical process, I added 'how' questions to the 'what' questions. How does the film represent a given topic? How does the presentation of the topic privilege a political point of view? How does a film cast certain characters as villains and others as heroes? In line with the overall aim of my analysis – how the films partake in ongoing processes of forging and contesting hegemony in the two countries – I asked specific questions about the role of the state in the films. I was interested in how 'the state' figured in

the films. No film was about ‘the state’ as such, but quite a few of them evoked the state apparatus in the Gramscian sense of political society by portraying police officers, judges, and government representatives.

With the 'what' and the 'how' questions answered, I entered a third stage of coding the films by looking for similar portrayals of topics, repetitions of perspectives, and priming. I started focusing not only on the frame of individual films as in the previous stages, but on the frame of groups of films that I had categorized as belonging to each other based on the topical analysis in stage one and two. I kept on modifying the specific research questions as I continued to read the secondary literature, and realizations about how a film conveyed a certain message made me go back and reassess other films. I watched most of the films again to revise and refine my analysis in the previous stages.

This third stage gave me the largest surprise of my research, namely the ease with which the films from both countries between 1980 and 1999 could be classified as belonging to the same frame (see table one). I was surprised to find that the films looked like each other in many important aspects, they were about a limited set of topics, and drew their characters from similar social milieus. I had expected all the films to be more like the films that became more common after 2000, in other words, displaying a wider diversity of topics, and more complex stories with an ambivalent political message.

I present the results of the analytical process in table one and in figures one to four below. Table one provides the numbers and percentages of the films in the dominant and most common frames from each time period. It thereby illustrates that a situation of frame dominance in both Venezuela and Mexico between 1980 and 1999 was replaced by one of frame contestation after 2000.

Table 1. Dominant and common frames in Mexico and Venezuela 1980 - 2010

	Venezuela 1980 – 1999	Venezuela 2000 – 2010	Mexico 1980 – 1999	Mexico 2000 – 2010
Numbers of films in dominant or most common frame	17	6	17	6
Numbers of films in other frames	6	5	3	7
Percentage of films in dominant or most common frame	74 %	55 %	85 %	46 %
Percentage of films in other frames	26 %	45 %	15 %	54 %
Total numbers of films	23	11	20	13

The four figures below illustrate which audience schemata the films have appealed to and how these schemata changed in both countries around year 2000. The figures are heuristic

tools to illustrate priming, that is, which ideas and concepts the films present as connected. They show in a schematic form the associative links between the issues raised by the film and how they connect to the frame. The figures illustrate what Entman (2004: 6-7) terms “knowledge networks”, which are clusters or nodes of concepts that are presented as interrelated within a given frame. Knowledge networks function by activating associations, thereby appealing to schemata among the audiences.

Figure 1. Knowledge network for the Venezuelan crisis frame 1980 - 1999

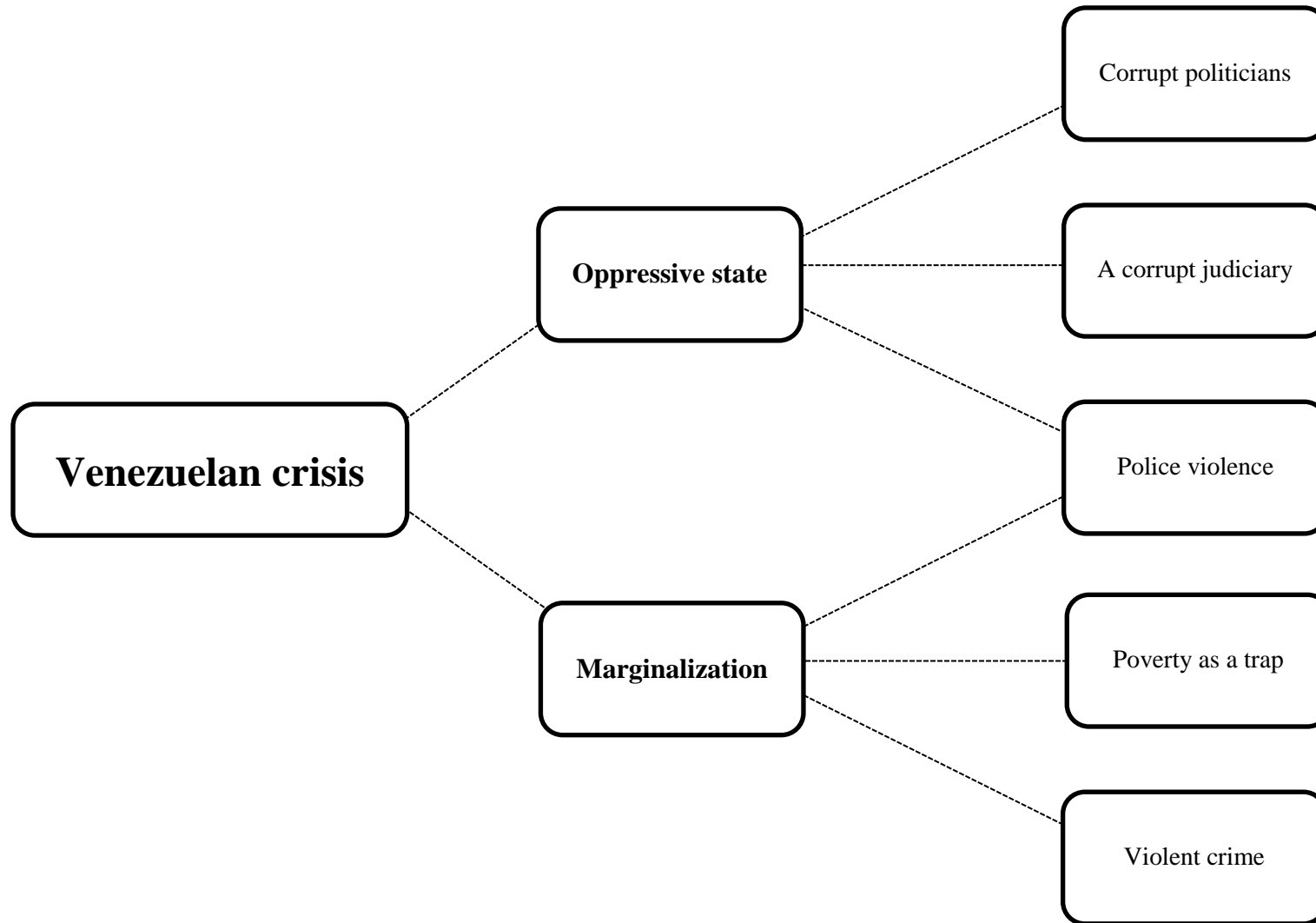


Figure 2. Knowledge network for the Venezuelan crisis frame 2000 - 2010

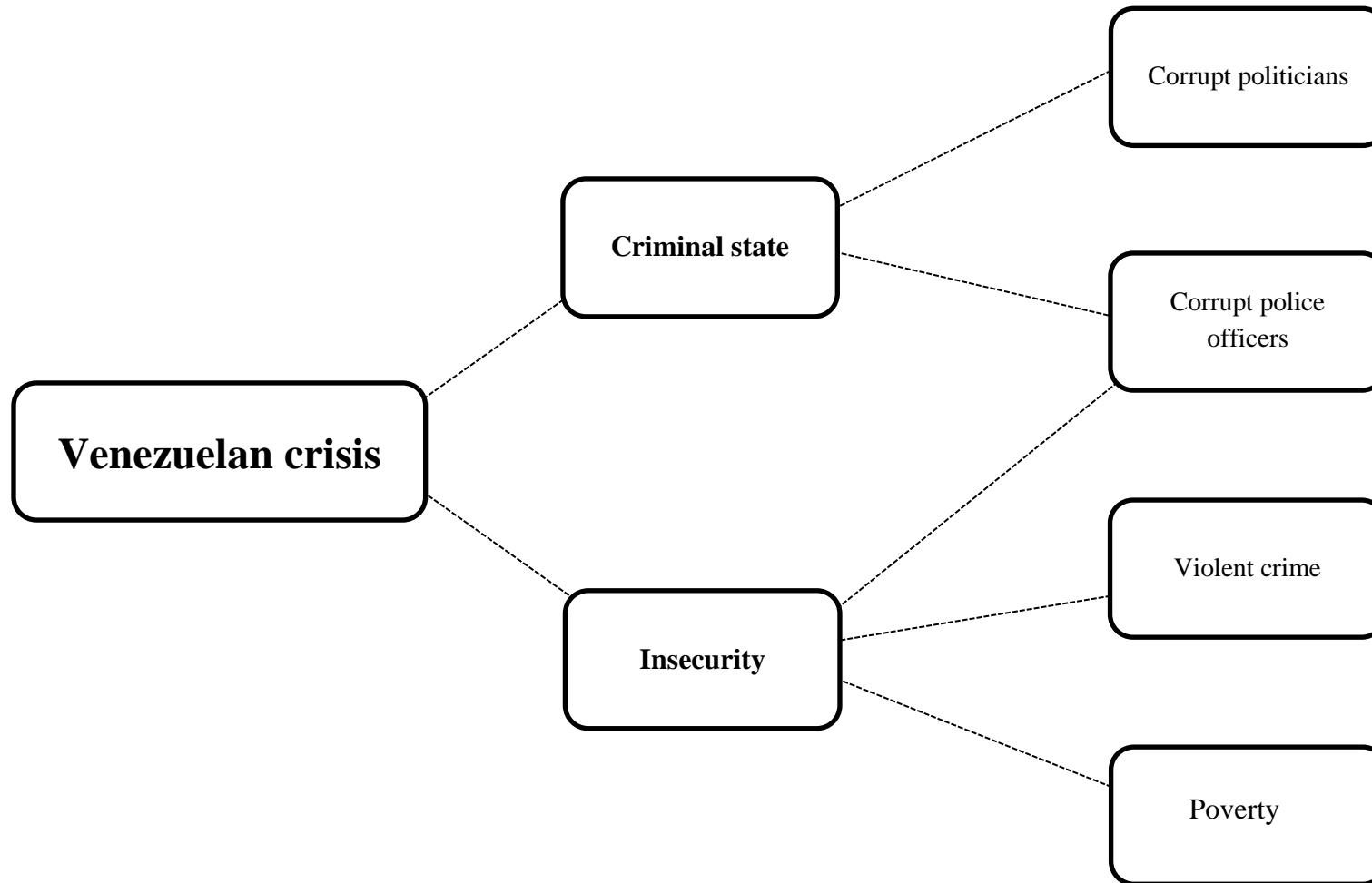


Figure 3. Knowledge network for the Mexican harmony frame 1980 - 1999

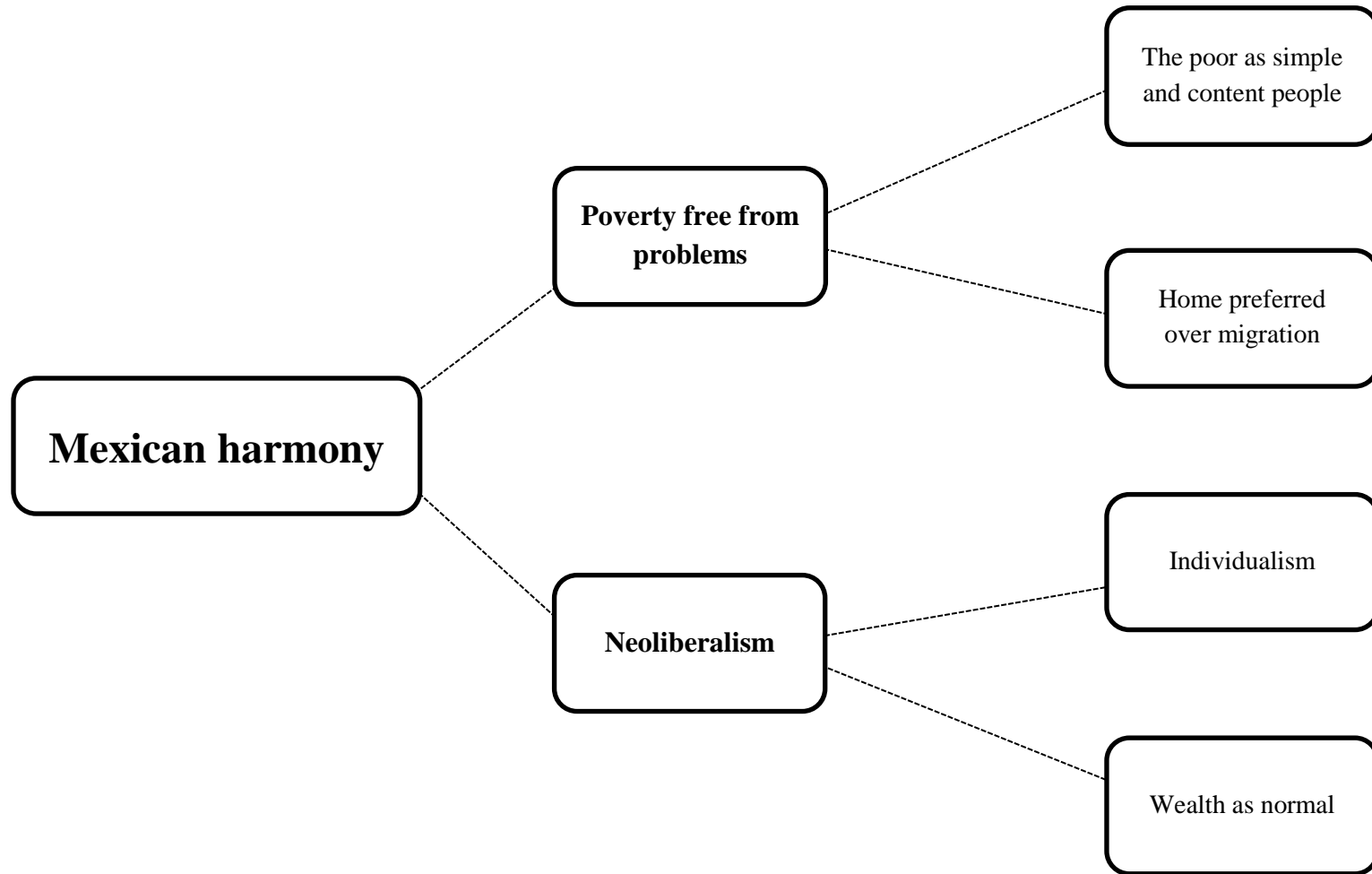
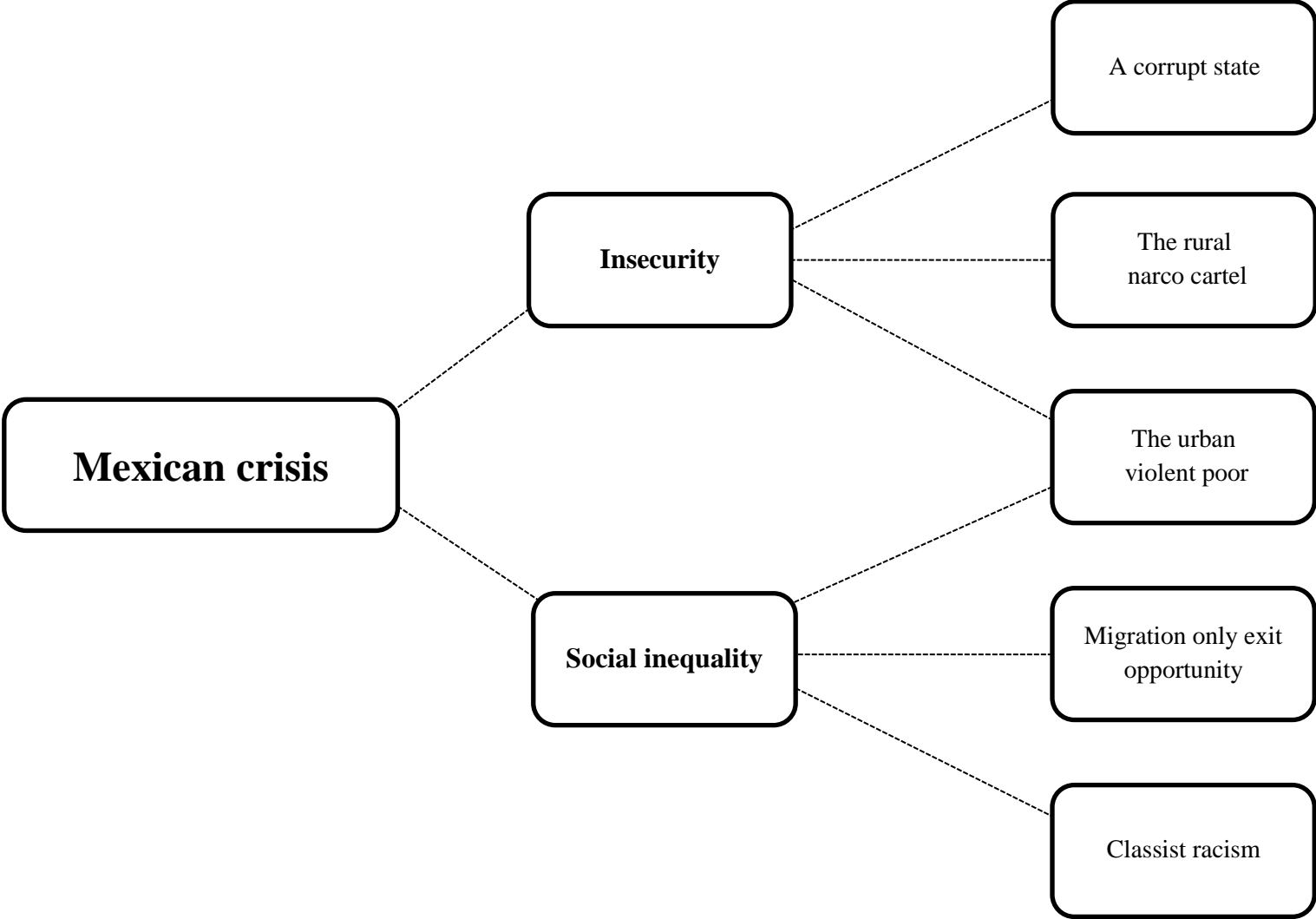


Figure 4. Knowledge network for the Mexican crisis frame 2000 - 2010



The boxes on the right-hand side in the figures side are taken from stage one of the analytical process, and reflect the answers to the 'what' questions about the topics raised by the films. I define the elements of each frame as follows:

Figure one

Corrupt politicians are politicians that accept bribes, engage in illicit economic activities, or use their political position to pressure the judiciary or the police for personal gain.

A *corrupt judiciary* is biased against the poor and favors the economic and political elites. It is not interested in fulfilling justice, but functions to maintain existing power structures.

Police violence is often seen in conjunction with the corrupt judiciary, and / or it refers to cases of arbitrary police violence mostly against poor people.

Poverty as a trap figures in films about poverty, showing how characters born into poverty are unable to cross social borders.

Violent crime refers to films that depict crime and violence as interconnected.

Figure two

Corrupt politicians are the same as in figure one.

Corrupt police officers are individual members of the police force engaged in illicit activities such as selling narcotics or receiving bribes. They are individual officers looking for personal gain, and do not act on behalf of the police as a state institution.

Violent crime is the same as in figure one.

Poverty refers to characters of a low socio-economic status. Typical markers of poverty include living in a barrio, simple lifestyles, and limited access to money.

Figure three

The poor as simple and content people figure in films about characters living in poverty, but for whom poverty does not constitute a problem. It is instead a reflection of how they as simple people prefer to lead their lives.

Home preferred over migration is a recurrent topic in films about characters who migrate, but who in the happy end return home to where they belong and where they realize they are the happiest.

Individualism is a topic in films where the characters face problems of a personal rather than societal nature. The solution to their problem is to believe in themselves, a belief that translates into success when put in practice.

Wealth as normal refers to films with stories unfolding in rich and luxurious environments, where the economic conditions do not impede the characters, and the question of affording something does not surface.

Figure four

A corrupt state is a topic in films depicting corrupt representatives of the state, ranging from government officials to the police. As in figure two, they are motivated by personal gain.

The rural narco cartel is a criminal organization that defines the parameters for possible action of rural characters by functioning as if it were an omnipotent local state that defines and effectively implements its own laws.

The urban violent poor are characters from Mexico City committing violence and making public spaces insecure by figuring as a constant potential threat.

Migration only exit opportunity is a topic in films about characters who are forced to migrate because of poverty and for whom leaving home is the only way to escape its misery.

Classist racism refers to films that show how race and class are overlapping categories, and how the rich use derogatory terms for 'indigenous' to offend less wealthy characters.

The boxes in the middle and on the left-hand side are analytical categories. They refer to how I interpreted the topics listed on the right-hand side, and the answers I gave to the 'how' questions. They are the result of the analysis conducted in stage two of the analytical process, and are designed to signal the political implications of the topics raised by the films and the way they are framed. The terms point to what the topical elements have in common.

In figure one, *an oppressive state* relates to corrupt politicians, a corrupt judiciary, and police violence. The films leave the overall impression that the state exists for the select few only, and functions as an institutionalized instrument of power for them to stay in power. *Marginalization* refers to poverty as exclusion, and films about marginalization relate the poverty of the majority of the population to the wealth of the few whose interests are safeguarded by the state.

In figure two, *a criminal state* brings up a different set of associations than the oppressive state in figure one. The films link their critical portray of state representatives to illicit activities they carry out for personal gain. 'The state' is thus not an institution safeguarding an unjust system, as in figure one, but an organization staffed by criminals who abuse the power of the state to carry out illicit activities. Films about *insecurity* associate it with violent crime carried out by the poor, thereby positing a causal link between poverty and crime.

In figure three, the representation of *poverty free from problems* contrasts to the films about marginalization in figure one. The films suggest that the poor do not mind being poor, and that they in their simple nature are the backbone of the Mexican nation. *Neoliberalism*

figures in films that became increasingly common with the Mexican state's implementation of neoliberal economic policies and embracement of neoliberal ideology.

In figure four, *insecurity* has the same implications as in figure two, though it is associated with different elements. The result is however the same; the films cast the streets of Mexico as unsafe. *Social inequality* is a term I use to describe films that emphasize and criticize the gap between Mexico's poor and wealthy. These are films that depict poverty in a critical manner to highlight it as a problem.

The boxes on the left-hand side provide the name of the frame, and represent the highest level of abstraction and analytical generalizability. They are the outcome of the third stage of the analytical process, where I labeled and formulated concise terms for the frames themselves. It was important that these terms would speak to the processes of hegemony in each country, and that they would logically relate to the list of topics I had identified as most common and salient. The terms 'harmony' and 'crisis' serve both purposes. They connote what the individual frames of each film have in common, and they indicate if the films support or contest the consent underlying hegemonic power. Put simply, the labels suggest that if the vision of society presented by the frame were to define common-sense belief about Venezuelan and Mexican societies, then this vision would either support or contest the state's power. A harmonious vision implies support, and a crisis vision implies contestation. Harmony suggests that all is well; it connotes societal order, and a satisfaction with the status quo. The films in the harmony frame are films that voice few complaints. By watching a film in the harmony frame in the initial stage of the analytical process, I learnt that no changes are required to the society the film depicts, and that the people as represented by the characters in the films are content. The second stage of the process interrogated how this happened.

Crisis is the inverse of harmony. I use this term to classify films that criticize the society they depict. By using the term crisis, I propose that the negative portrayal goes beyond stating that there is a social problem; crisis is a claim to faults and deficiencies at a systemic level. A crisis is a problem of such grave nature that the seeds of its solution cannot be found within the parameters of the system, but in a reorganization of society. The films in the crisis frame are implicit calls for political change and they contribute to a 'crisis of command and direction' and as such contribute to the failure of 'spontaneous consent', to use Gramscian terminology.

Coding films is challenging. This applies in particular to films where it is not immediately clear if they present the glass as half full or half empty, to refer back to Entman's metaphor. Since I watched the films alone, there is no intercoder reliability in my study. As I

will argue about the Venezuelan films from 1980 to 1999 (figure one), a central characteristic of these films was their clarity and explicitly political stories, a fact that facilitated their coding.

However, most of the films are open to several plausible interpretations. The Mexican films between 1980 and 1999 (figure three) were for the most part made to entertain. While this does not make them less political, as they still frame society, their politics is of a less direct nature. The films produced after 2000 (figures two and four) in both countries are more clearly political in that they present stories highlighting negative sides of the societies they depict. Still, coding them was challenging. While I do not claim that my interpretation is the only correct, I argue in my analysis for the validity of my interpretation. When secondary literature has voiced opposing views, I discuss this.

This brings me to an important point about the usefulness and limitations of frame analysis as applied to a study of 67 films over three decades. Frame analysis alone would have been grossly simplifying as it does not capture the nuances that I devote several pages to in my analytical chapters. The figures summarize the frames, and as such usefully represent “a shortcut guide to dealing with what might otherwise be the unmanageable complexity of news texts”, or for my purposes, the complexity of films (Entman, 2004: 7). Part of this complexity is that a film may aim to illuminate a topic from more than one perspective. Some of the films were indeed *about* the complexity of social life and politics in each country.

To address the potential weakness of intercoder reliability, I devote the bulk of my analysis to discussing that complexity. Framing analysis, as synthesized by the figures above, provides a useful overview over my analysis, but in order to explain how I arrived at my conclusions I discuss each film in the analytical chapters. I maintain that framing analysis applied to popular films requires an additional discussion of each film. I therefore devote the better part of my analysis to interrogate the stories the films tell about Venezuela and Mexico. Some films receive more attention than others, partly to avoid repeating similar stories presented in more than one film, and partly because the films participate in the frame in different manners. For instance, some films in the Venezuelan crisis frame are *about* a crisis in the sense that depicting a crisis is the primary focus of their stories. An example is *Retén de Catia* (1984), which I devote several pages to in order to show the different ways the film condemns Venezuelan society and the state. Other films in the crisis frame participate by letting the story of a crisis be the context in which their main story unfolds. This is the case in *Macho y hembra* (1985), which is a story about a triangular love drama. The film uses this drama to criticize traditional gender roles, but it also repeats a number of the political

critiques that *Retén de Catia* dwells on at further length: the state's violent oppression of demonstrations, a police officer's involvement in a murder case, the mainstream media's reluctance to report on the case because it involves a state official, and the state as corrupt. In *Macho y hembra* these elements of critique do not take the center stage, but provide a context where its triangular love drama unfolds. Frame analysis allows me to argue that the political significance of the film lies in its repetition of critiques voiced in most of the other Venezuelan films of the decade.

Scope of the present study

Regarding the scope of my study, the 67 films I analyze cover a representative selection of the most popular films over the three decades. Above and beyond the question of how many films it would have been feasible to include in my study, extant literature does not indicate that the dominant trends would have been different if I had analyzed more films. The only possible exception could be Mexican films in the 1990s when critical films were common yet did not become popular enough to be included in my analysis. I will return to this question in chapter five.

My analysis identifies the frames, but does not interrogate the whole process of framing from frame sponsorship to media effects as some framing scholars argue is necessary (cf. Carragee & Roefs, 2004; de Vreese, 2005; Scheufele, 1999). The difference between Mexico and Venezuela speaks to what makes the film itself, or the content of the frame, a privileged moment in the framing process. The Venezuelan state's inability to control the political posture of state-funded products is indicative of its weak hegemony, that is, of a situation where the state does not extend far into civil society. As I will argue, this was definitely the case in Venezuela from 1980 to 1999. It has arguably been the case since 2000 as well, although how the politics of the films relate to the ideology of the *chavista* state is not as clear-cut. Conversely, the Mexican case of state-friendly films not funded by the state is indicative of the resilience of the Mexican hegemony founded after 1910. Here, in a context where the state struggled to deliver in the material sphere, it still extended into the realm of film productions indicating that the state's hegemony was still strong enough to muster ideological support in this area of civil society.

Although I discuss the different conditions for making films in Mexico and Venezuela, my main interest is to interrogate the stories presented by films themselves. As Fürsich (2009) argues about news media, a textual analysis focuses on a privileged moment in the circuit between production and reception. Against this, Carragee and Roefs (2004: 219) maintain that

neglecting whose interests stand behind the text, what they term frame sponsorship, implies taking “news texts as a given, neglecting the degree to which journalist discourse is shaped by external sources, including elites, advocates, and movements.” Overestimating the autonomy of the individual journalist, the analysis overlooks what shapes the journalist’s interpretation in the first place.

Given the economic cost of producing films, an analysis of the production companies and the political views of the economic interests behind them could have been pertinent. Conceptually, I treat films as a part of civil society. In the Venezuelan case, I relate the films to a political movement (*el nuevo cine*), that is, to civil society as traditionally understood. Few of these films made any profit, as I will note in the next chapter. In contrast, the Mexican privately produced films were made *for* profit. Nonetheless, in the Gramscian scheme, they are conceptually both part of civil society. The difference is that the forces behind the films in Mexico had economic resources whereas in Venezuela they did not. In the Mexican context, the media conglomerate Televisa financed 16 of the 33 films I analyze, and the company is known to have historically strong ties to the political party that ruled until 2000 (Castro Ricalde, 2004: 204). However, there is no one-to-one relationship between the production company and the politics of the films. While I classify most of their films as supportive of the Mexican state, Televisa financed the only film with critical elements in the 1980s, *El mil usos* (1983). It produced three of the four *La India María* films, and I will make the case in chapter five that they employed a demeaning stereotype of an indigenous woman. However, it later financed *Amar te duele* (2002), which explicitly condemns the racist classism earlier Televisa-financed films had supported. This indicates that Televisa first of all financed films it believed would be commercially successful, rather than films that supported a specific ideological view.

Nor is the Venezuelan case a one-to-one relationship between frame sponsorship and the content. In chapter four, I will make the case that films funded by the current Venezuelan *chavista* government do not present a *chavista* worldview, despite apparent attempts on the part of the government to support government-friendly films. In Gramscian terms, this indicates the limited control political society has over civil society. Even in a case where the *chavista* government tries to fund *chavista* films, it does not always succeed. Funding of films surely is not the only case where there is a considerable distance between stated policy aims and policy outcomes.

While I briefly discuss the origin of the frame, I do not ask how various audiences interpret the dominant frames. As Gamson et al. (1992) note with reference to Hall, people receive and understand messages differently. Scheufele (1999: 104) contends that the very

study of media is premised on the assumption that it has effects, and gauging how media frames are received is a way to measure whether people in fact change their views or behavior in accordance with the dominant frames in media. According to this view, my analysis should have asked how, for instance, people from different social classes react to the common representation of dark-skinned young males from the barrio as the source of violent crime.

While frame sponsorship and media effects are both relevant and potentially important perspectives for understanding the wider political implications of the frames I identify, it would not be practically feasible to include them. Frame sponsorship and media effects call for a different kind of study than the one I have conducted. As Carragee and Roefs conclude about their call for a comprehensive analysis of framing: “given the scope of our recommendations for future scholarship, we believe that researchers can best address our proposals through collaborative efforts” (2004: 228). As de Vreese (2012: 366) and Vliegthart and van Zoonen (2011: 112) point out, few studies have managed to employ an integrated concept of framing that encompasses all of its facets.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that popular films participate in the contest for hegemony by communicating visions of their societies. These visions offer insight into the nature of the state in question. If a state is an expression of a society’s power relationships, and if those power relationships in turn can be thought of as the common sense inherent in various conceptions of the world as communicated by popular films, then how films depict society speaks to the ability of the state to extend into civil society. To make sense out of how this happens and to operationalize Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, I proposed frame analysis to interrogate how films as communicative statements exercise power and what political perspectives they favor. Frame analysis was initially designed to theorize the power of communicative texts in news media, and I discussed how the theory can be applied to the study of film. I proposed that the power of communication in films and news media alike is to affect what issues people think about. How they think about those issues relies on the frame’s activation of audience schemata and the ability to connect with preexisting beliefs and common sense understandings of how the world works. Since news media and films are different types of media, I discussed the methodological challenges of applying frame analysis to films and I detailed the analytical process of how I coded the films. I concluded this discussion by arguing that frame analysis is useful to synthesize a large number of films, but it

must be coupled with a more detailed analysis of a representative selection of the films to capture their complexity.

Films can be both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic. In the Latin American context, a normative ideal for many directors has been to use films as a tool in a political revolutionary struggle, as a means to combat the common sense ideology propagated by the state. This vision was reflected in Venezuelan popular films, but not in the Mexican. In the next chapter, I turn to the influential political cinematographic movement *el nuevo cine* and discuss its importance for understanding films produced over the last three decades and the secondary literature.

Chapter two. The contest for hegemony in a new and an old cinema

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present an overview of the literature on Mexican and Venezuelan cinema. My aim is to provide historical context necessary to understand the difference between the Mexican and Venezuelan film traditions. I will do this in three parts. First, I will present an overview of *el nuevo cine*, which was a political movement that used films as a counter-hegemonic tool in service of a leftist project. The movement is significant for my purposes primarily because it established the literature's normative expectations of what political role a Mexican or Venezuelan film should play. As King (1990: 3) points out, an understanding of Latin American cinema in general requires an appreciation of the polemics raised by the movement. In a similar vein Dever (2003: 33) notes about the Mexican context that labels such as reactionary and revolutionary are useful inasmuch as they "reflect a historiography of film criticism." *El nuevo cine* was also the preferred term used by Venezuelan scholars in the 1980s to describe Venezuelan contemporary cinema (cf. Aguirre & Bisbal, 1980; Roffé, 1997). My consideration of *el nuevo cine* presents its principal tenets and sources of influence, and I turn to three tensions inherent in a movement that wanted to make films that were both popular and critical: the troublesome nature of 'the popular', the movement's ambivalent relationship with Hollywood's way of telling stories, and its need for financial support from a state it criticized.

Second, I turn to the case of Venezuela, where I will propose that popular films from the 1980s and 1990s continued the *nuevo cine* tradition. I will discuss what questions the literature has asked about the films, and I will note that the representation of marginalization has been a primary focus of the films and the scholarship alike. Inasmuch as Venezuelan cinema is largely state-funded, I will also provide an overview of the relationship between the state and the film sector from the 1970s until the present.

Third, I turn to Mexico as a case of an 'old' cinema that traditionally has offered ideological support to the Mexican state. I will note the importance of understanding Mexican classical cinema (1935-1955) for apprehending the politics of Mexican films produced since 1980. I will also note how the state's policies towards the cinema sector in the 1970s and 1980s affected what type of films was produced and the prevalence of private productions. I will conclude with a discussion of the profound impact that *el nuevo cine* has had on the historiography on Mexican cinema.

El nuevo cine: for a national, realist, critical, and popular cinema

El nuevo cine refers to a heterogenous political movement with roots in Argentina, Brazil, and Cuba in the 1950s and 1960s (Duno-Gottberg & Hylton, 2008: 264; King, 1990: 67; López, 1997: 136; Martin, 1997b: 16; Stam, 2000: 94). It continues to have an impact on Latin American cinema in general, and on the historiography of film scholarship in particular (Castro Ricalde, 2004: 195; Dever, 2003: 33; Duno-Gottberg & Hylton, 2008; Farrell, 2011; King, 1990: 2; López, 1993; Martin, 1997a).

Adherents of the movement saw cinema as a weapon in a revolutionary, socialist struggle. The political terminology of the movement stems from Fanon, Gramsci, and to a lesser extent, Lenin. Fernando Birri, an influential Argentinian director and author of the manifesto whose title I borrow for this section, describes the task of the filmmaker as the responsibility to “*ponerse frente a la realidad con una cámara y documentarla, filmar realísticamente, filmar críticamente, filmar con óptica popular el subdesarrollo*” [put oneself in front of the reality with a camera and document it, film realistically, film critically, film the underdevelopment with (a) popular point of view” (in Bruzual, 2004: 6). As King (1990: 67) and López (1997: 139) observe, the Cuban revolution provided momentum to the early (utopian) optimism and energy of the movement as it did to the Latin American left in general. In Gramscian terminology, the movement’s principal task was to undo the hegemony of the capitalist state and the US-friendly national elites in control of it. Since the hegemony of a state hinges on its ability to define the commonsensical, the political task of cinema is to contest this definition imposed by the ruling classes through mainstream culture. *El nuevo cine* was to build a counter-hegemonic force by exposing the oppression and misery of the people as well as by laying bare the realities of foreign domination on Latin America’s political, economic and cultural landscape.

The movement went under several names, reflecting regional and political differences within it and indicating the diversity of its political strategies: *tercer cine*, *cinema novo*, *cine de la liberación*, *cine de vanguardia*, *cine imperfecto*, and *cine pobre* [third, new, liberation, vanguard, imperfect, or poor cinema] (Bruzual, 2004: 6; Duno-Gottberg & Hylton, 2008: 264; López, 1997: 138, 154) I will use the name *el nuevo cine* since, as López points out, it became the uniting umbrella term as the movement gradually coalesced in the 1960s and 1970s (López, 1997: 138).

From Gramsci, the movement adopted the understanding of national politics and nature of political struggle. As Burgos (2002: 10) notes, Gramsci was first introduced to Latin America in Argentina and Brazil, and quickly became influential in leftist circles. Leftist

filmmakers were principally inspired by the idea using popular culture as a tool to resist the capitalist state's hegemony, a feature of the movement that extant literature notes with or without an explicit reference to Gramsci. Some commentators further observe the particular influence of Gramsci's idea of the 'organic intellectual' (Bravi, 2010; Stam, 2000: 94; Stam et al., 1995: 392). Organic intellectuals are, for Gramsci, the ideal drivers of social and political change. They are 'organic' in the sense of coming from the same class they claim to represent. Writing about testimonial literature, Duno-Gottberg and Hylton, albeit without an explicit reference to Gramsci, capture the ideal of the organic intellectual. The nature of cinematic production where a director leads a collective work, they note, complicates the task of reaching the ideal. Testimonial literature, in contrast, lends itself more easily to a situation "*donde un intelectual orgánico de una comunidad en estado de urgencia depone una historia de vida que representa, por una relación de contigüidad, a la totalidad del grupo*" [where an organic intellectual from a community in a state of urgency deposits a history about life that represents, through a contiguous relation, the totality of the group] (Duno-Gottberg & Hylton, 2008: 268).

Instead of middle or upper class intellectuals speaking about realities they have never lived, organic intellectuals are better positioned to give a representative voice to experiences – from a 'community in a state of urgency' – relating to their own class background. As Cox (1987: 389) notes, Gramsci charged the organic intellectuals with the task of forging a new hegemony. Gramsci saw the role of the organic intellectuals as speeding up the necessarily long-term struggle to resist the leadership of the ruling classes. To do that, they must develop ideas that can compete against those of the traditional intellectuals serving the hegemony:

one of the most important characteristics of any group that is developing towards dominance is its struggle to assimilate and to conquer 'ideologically' the traditional intellectuals, but this assimilation and conquest is made quicker and more efficacious the more the group in question succeeds in simultaneously elaborating its own organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971: 10).

In this context, I find the intellectual itinerary of Gramsci's idea of the organic intellectual and his closely related concept of the subaltern relevant. I will discuss Gramsci's understanding of the term and note its reentry to recent scholarship through Spivak. As I elaborated on in chapter one, the 'spontaneous consent' underlying and giving strength to hegemony is given because the hegemonic state, to the extent it works well, has managed to define common sense. This consent is "characteristic of the history of the subaltern classes" (Gramsci, 1971: 196). In other words, the state leads rather than coercively dominates when the subalterns are oblivious to their existence *qua* class, that is, they are and remain

marginalized in part as a result of their own unconsciousness about constituting a distinct social class. In line with his resistance against economism, Gramsci does not define class in purely economic terms, although objective and material conditions matter a great deal (cf. Gramsci, 1971: 52-53). Subalternity is equally a question of alignment to the mentality and ideology of the ruling classes. Put simply, the organic intellectuals are subalterns with class consciousness. Armed with this consciousness they are to wage the counter-hegemonic battle in civil society for then to turn attention to political society where the formal state apparatus is situated.

When the *nuevo cine* directors wanted to play the role of Latin America's organic intellectuals and made films where marginalization and poverty were key topics, they necessarily dealt with the question of representation of subalternity. These films spoke *about* or *for* Latin America's dispossessed, or if the speaking was indeed done from an *organic* perspective in Gramsci's sense of the word, the films spoke *from* the positionality of the marginalized. Which was the case – whether the films paternalistically spoke *about*, arrogantly claimed they could speak *for*, or managed to avoid the pitfalls of essentialization and silencing and spoke *from* – is in my reading a principal research question of much of the scholarship on Latin American cinema. In brief, from a starting point that films partake in a contest for hegemony, how they do that is a question of how the films approach the question of marginalization.

In chapter one, I argued that how films frame the societies they depict is an exercise of power. To recap, representation is always done from a certain point of view. As I will note in the section about *el nuevo cine* in Venezuela, the movement had gradually changed from a belief that the camera could record social reality in an objective manner to a realization that such a recording itself was inherently subjective and would always privilege a given perspective on that social reality. In the present context, I want to note that a key theoretician in this regard, whose influence is particularly clear on Duno-Gottberg (2008, 2009) and León (2005), is Spivak with her influential essay 'Can the subaltern speak?' (Spivak, 1988). Here, her project is to argue that subalternity is defined by the denial or silencing of the subaltern's voice and point to the ways in which intellectuals continue to speak for the subaltern. She identified the *problématique* as who can legitimately narrate whom, given that subalterns know their own conditions and experiences better than anyone else. As Spivak later notes, she and the 'subaltern studies group' took their notion of the subaltern from Gramsci (Spivak, 2006: 475). She notes that with "the responsibilities of borrowing Gramsci's word" comes the duty to learn *from* as opposed to the study *of* (2006: 483, emphasis in the original). The

moment intellectuals talk about the subaltern, they run the risk of not listening, but assuming a superior position of knowledge. Against this background, the titles of two valuable contributions to the field can be appreciated: Duno-Gottberg's *Miradas al margen. Cine y subalternidad en América Latina y el Caribe* [Gazes on the margin. Cinema and subalternity in Latin America and the Caribbean] and León's *El cine de la marginalidad. Realismo sucio y violencia urbana* [The cinema of marginalization. Dirty realism and urban violence].

The movement drew its understanding of international politics from two sources, namely Fanon and dependency theory. Fanon's *The wretched of the earth* (1963) famously points to the need for a violent revolt against colonialism, whether internally or externally imposed. Fanon is particularly concerned with the continuation of Western dominance over Africa after the period of formal colonization, and argues that Western capital through local elites maintained influence over the continent's economies and societies (Fanon, 1963, see in particular the chapter 'the pitfalls of national consciousness'). Fanon's call for an end to internal colonization was picked up by the influential Brazilian director Glauber Rocha in his manifesto 'esthetic of hunger', (sometimes translated as 'esthetic of violence') where he argued for the revolutionary duty of filmmakers (Stam, 2000: 95-96). From the starting point that hunger "is the essence of our [Latin American] society", Rocha argued in a style reminiscent of Fanon:

Cinema Novo shows that the normal behavior of the starving is violence; and the violence of the starving is not primitive. [...] From Cinema Novo it should be learned that an esthetic of violence, before being primitive, is revolutionary. It is the initial moment when the colonizer becomes aware of the colonized. Only when confronted with violence does the colonizer understand, through horror, the strength of the culture he exploits (Rocha, 1995: 70).

Furthermore, *el nuevo cine* adopted insights offered by dependency theory. Itself a Latin American contribution to the understanding of global political economy, dependency theory holds that the very structure of the world system – politically divided into separate units called states and yet economically operating as one unit – reproduces the economic development of rich core countries and makes the underdevelopment of the poor a structural necessity (Chase-Dunn, 1981; Robinson, 2011: 3; Wallerstein, 1974). Johnson and Stam, in agreement with the theory, posit that underdevelopment is key to understanding the cinema of countries like Brazil. The domination of the rich core countries conditions the cultural production of the Third World, making it a passive receiver of First World culture and ideology (Johnson & Stam, 1995: 17-18). Crucially, counter-hegemonic struggle and decolonization was part and parcel of the same political struggle. In López' analysis, *el nuevo cine*'s central goal was to challenge "the hegemony of the Hollywood import and foreign control of cinematic

institutions and [to be] an active agent in the process of cultural decolonization” (López, 1997: 139). In this vein, she conceives of *el nuevo cine* as not just a cinematic movement but as an element in a broader social and political struggle for Latin America’s cultural, political, and economic autonomy. To this end, *el nuevo cine* was to expose the ways in which “decades of dependency” have maintained the continent’s “underdevelopment” (López, 1997: 139).

Political economists have acknowledged dependency theory for contributing with a correction to modernization theory’s teleological belief in the linearity of progress and economic development (see for instance Robinson, 2011). Wallerstein added the notion of a semi-periphery as a structurally necessary intermediate level between the core and the periphery as a way to explain the changes that evidently do take place within the so-called Third World countries (Wallerstein, 1974). Cox and Wendt have, from the perspectives of critical theory and constructivism respectively, criticized dependency theory and Wallerstein’s updated version of it for reifying the world system and understating the possibilities for change (Cox, 1987; Wendt, 1987). What matters for the present purposes is to note that dependency theory became constitutive of the theoretical basis of *el nuevo cine*, and in particular for how the movement understood Latin America’s place within the world. The cinema-producing left and the term *tercer cine* initially referred to the cinema of the Third World in general (Bravi, 2010; Izaguirre, 1984: 86; León, 2005: 19). Stam later notes that although the term Third World was empowering in that it enabled a recognition of ‘underdevelopment’ as a structurally and externally induced economic domination as opposed to essentializing categories such as ‘backward,’ it is also a grossly simplifying and homogenizing term (Stam, 2000: 93, 100, 282). Stam makes the pertinent note that “the concept of Third World Cinema has thus led to a kind of didactic pressure on films from Asia, Africa, and Latin America to fulfill the criteria from Third Cinema. A kind of miserabilist exoticism means that Third World films about middle-class people in Iran, for example, are not ‘really’ Third World” (Stam, 2000: 283). Stam, King, and Willemen therefore reserve the term for films that express an ideological project pertinent to a social struggle against mainstream culture (King, 1990, chapter three; Willemen, 1997: 231). Willemen contrasts the political cinema of *tercer cine* to the first cinema of Hollywood and the second cinema of the European art scene, and stresses that it is not Third World cinema (Willemen, 1997: 223).

So what were the goals of *el nuevo cine*, beyond acting as a counter-hegemonic and decolonizing force? The aim was to make films directed to the people that would stimulate their political consciousness. In very general terms, the movement used a ‘name and shame’ strategy. By exposing the exploitation and poverty of the people, *el nuevo cine* would foster a

revolutionary spirit. In line with the decolonizing (read: anti-Hollywood) aim, the movement was largely nationalist (Bravi, 2010; Johnson & Stam, 1995: 30; León, 2005: 18; Martin, 1997b: 16). The influential Argentinian director Birri, in one of the movement's best known manifestos, called for a “*cine nacional, realista y popular*” [national, realist and popular cinema] (Rodríguez, 2012: 92). Crucially, this nationalism was understood within the context of an anti-imperialism that was seen as necessarily Pan-Latin American (López, 1997: 145).

Beyond these general traits, a heterogeneity and diversity of approaches characterized the movement in Venezuela and the rest of Latin America (Farrell, 2011: 77; King, 1990: 66; López, 1997; Martin, 1997b; Stam, 2000; Stam et al., 1995). While it is fair to say with King that the movement sought “a distinctive break with the past and with dominant hegemonic discourses”, it did not propagate a singular strategy, aesthetically or otherwise, for how to reach its goals (King, 1990: 66). In my view, the tensions or contradictions inherent in a cinematographic project aiming to be of and for something as amorphous as ‘the people’ illuminate the challenges that filmmakers on the continent had to respond to in some way or the other. The Brazilian case with its distinct phases and internal debates is instructive for *el nuevo cine* in Venezuela and beyond (Farrell, 2011: 77; Rodríguez, 2012: 94). Venezuelan *nuevo cine* was to mirror the Brazilian precursor in important ways, as I will elaborate on later, and Brazil's *cinema novo* was referred to as a case to emulate as it had managed to produce quality films for international markets (Aguirre & Bisbal, 1980: 22). In the following, I will point to three areas of interrelated tensions in particular: the conception of ‘the people’ and ‘the popular’, the closely related question of style and attitude towards Hollywood, and the movement's relationship to the state.

Tension one: making popular films

I have almost as many problems with ‘popular’ as I have with the term ‘culture.’ When you put the two terms together the difficulties can be pretty horrendous (Hall, 1981: 227).

I start by opening up the concept of ‘the people’ and ‘popular’. As I argue in the next two sections, divergent attitudes to these terms have direct bearing on how the filmmakers relate themselves to Hollywood and the support of the state, which in turn goes to the political core of the movement: decolonization and counter-hegemony. As Hall states, the category of the popular is difficult.

What precisely does it entail to make popular films? Hall's (1981) ‘Notes on deconstructing the “popular”’ offers some conceptual clarity to the question, and his contribution speaks volumes to the tensions inherent in *el nuevo cine* movement. Hall

conceives of popular culture as a venue where social classes contest and seek to maintain power. In and of itself, it is supportive neither of the elites' cultural and ideological values, nor 'the people' and its resistance to those values (Hall, 1981: 443). Phrased in a Gramscian terminology which lies close to Hall's heart, popular culture is neither hegemonic nor counter-hegemonic. Whether a cultural form is supportive or not of the state's hegemony is a question open for empirical scrutiny and demanding of historical investigation (Hall, 1981: 449). From this starting point, Hall proceeds to define popular culture by rejecting two common definitions and proposing a third. The popular for Hall is emphatically not simply mass culture, that is, cultural products consumed by a large number of people. Hall protests this commercially based conceptualization on the grounds that this culture is produced by a select few associated with the hegemonic structure. As "cultural domination" it has tangible effects: although it does not dictate how people understand its message – since people are not "cultural dopes" – it still leaves a powerful ideological imprint (Hall, 1981: 447). Commercial mass culture, for Hall, is the means by which the dominant classes exercise their hegemony in the cultural sphere, and whereby they try to claim 'popular' culture as their own.

Neither does Hall find it satisfactory to view popular culture descriptively as the culture emanating from 'the people,' as this sweepingly broad definition makes it impossible to differentiate popular culture from non-popular culture. Hall stresses that the problem arises not so much from the potentially endless list that such a definition entails, but from the problem of differentiating between 'of the people' and 'not of the people' in a descriptive manner without an analysis of the power relations involved (Hall, 1981: 448). He therefore settles for a third definition, retaining what he finds valuable in the descriptive definition but always asking how popular culture relates to hegemonic power. He proposes to examine historically

those formats and activities which have their roots in the social and material conditions of particular classes... [The definition] goes on to insist that what is essential to the definition of popular culture is the relations which define 'popular culture' in a continuing tension (relationship, influence and antagonism) to the dominant culture (Hall, 1981: 448).

As argued in chapter one, I agree with Hall that what makes popular culture interesting for a political analysis is how it relates itself to hegemony. Hall's (2006) own essay 'Popular culture and the state' provides one of the premises for that argument. However, Hall's argument about mass culture is not sound. If mass culture "is quite rightly associated with the manipulation and debasement of the culture of the people" (Hall, 1981: 446) and if the question of a cultural form's relationship to hegemonic ideology can only be answered

historically, then either of these two propositions are false. Hall provides the example of the novel, and maintains that the answer to the question of whether it is a 'bourgeois' form of literature "can only be historically provisional: When? Which novels? For whom? Under what conditions?" (Hall, 1981: 449). If these questions are pertinent to determine the relationship between novels and 'the dominant culture', then they are also pertinent to the relationship between mass culture and dominant culture. Further, these are the questions posed by *el nuevo cine*, whose project for many of its members consisted precisely in making commercially successful films that would challenge what Hall calls the dominant culture.

As argued above, *el nuevo cine* did certainly talk the counter-hegemonic talk. The question is if they could walk the walk. As I will note below, extant literature tends to answer the question in the negative, although it notes some 'honest intentions' and exemplary cases. The literature further notes a seemingly irreconcilable tension between the wish, on the one hand, to make films that cut some ideological corners in order to become popular in the mass culture meaning of the term, and the alternative of, on the other hand, making films that are decolonizing and counter-hegemonic to the core but fail to become influential as they never reach a large audience.

The Brazilian case illustrates this tension well. Johnson and Stam note that after an initial phase between 1960 and 1964, filmmakers realized that their films did not become popular with the masses. Consequently, some filmmakers within *cinema novo* reacted by explicitly aiming for success in numbers. "In cinema as in revolution, they decided, everything is a question of power, and for a cinema existing within a system to which it does not adhere, power means broad public acceptance and financial success" (Johnson & Stam, 1995: 33). This initiated a second phase of commercially successful films between 1964 and 1968, which ended when a coup-d'état installed a military dictatorship. Stam et al. note that the left nonetheless remained dominant within Brazil's cultural and intellectual scene, and further that the dictatorship radicalized many within *cinema novo* (Stam et al., 1995: 393). The coup initiated a third phase, where the directors developed a coded cinematic language of indirect and allegorical criticism to dodge state censorship (Johnson & Stam, 1995: 38). With this, an alternative current developed in critical response to the earlier attempts to reach a mass audience. This 'underground' current "opted to slap that audience in the face" by placing a stronger emphasis on the esthetics of hunger and unconventional cinematic style, consciously operating on the margins of mass culture (Johnson & Stam, 1995: 39). Brazilian cinema subsequently entered a general crisis caused by tightened state censorship and the exile of key

directors, and *cinema novo* proper died and became just Brazilian cinema from 1972 and onwards.

Johnson and Stam relate the above fissures to different approaches to the question of how the popular, revolution, and class interconnect. In my reading, the major fault line went between those who thought of mass culture as a sell-out involving an unforgivable ideological compromise and those who thought it possible and strategically advantageous to resist the system through films with a mass appeal. I find an illuminating parallel in Marxist theory in the difference between Lenin's and Gramsci's approaches to political struggle. For the present purposes, this difference is illustrative of the schism between those filmmakers who thought that experimental style was necessary to stay true to the decolonizing aim, and those who believed in the need for communicating with the masses in a cinematic language already familiar to them. That language was provided by Hollywood, which explains the tension. This difference is furthermore instructive for the various approaches to who constitutes 'the people' and how to represent cinematographically the lives of the marginalized.

The different ways the *nuevo cine* directors approached the question of popularity is akin to the difference between Lenin's top-down approach and Gramsci's bottom-up perspective. This difference reflects itself in *el nuevo cine*'s different approaches to the question of 'the popular' and how to make cinema for the masses.⁶ As the term *cine de vanguardia* indicates, some opted for an approach that assumed like Lenin that 'the people' is in need of education by a revolutionary elite. Duno-Gottberg and Hylton note that the idea of a cinematographic vanguard corresponded to the political vanguard, and that this position was adopted by various directors in the movement. As a way of critique, they note that "*con diversos grados, observamos que éstos [directores] se presentaban como guías de una masa alienada, como sujetos privilegiados que esclarecerían las conciencias de los oprimidos*" [to varying degrees, we observe that these (directors) presented themselves as guides of an alienated mass, as

⁶ Lenin's notion of the vanguard is representative of those who thought they could comfortably speak *for* the people. For Lenin, 'the people' in the Europe of the 1800s was made up of peasants and the urban proletariat (Lenin, 1992: 36). The people, Lenin argued, could and should be united by a vanguard, that is, a professionalized political party of revolutionaries leading the peasants and the proletariat in their conquest of the oppressive capitalist state. Lenin further stressed that this vanguard must be guided by an advanced Marxist theory so as to not allow other political parties such as the social democrats win over the political energy of the workers and peasants. Now, Gramsci responded critically to what many see as the paternalistic top-down approach inherent in Lenin's notion of a vanguard. His counter-hegemony is founded on the opposite principle: before winning over the state in political society, the revolutionaries must win over the state in civil society and convince the various social groups comprising 'the people' through creating a new collective will or common sense. Like Lenin, he also assigns this task to the political party. However, as Femia points out in his analysis of Gramsci's political philosophy, Gramsci differed from Lenin in wanting the organic intellectuals to stand in the forefront of a non-coercive counter-hegemonic struggle (1981: 176). The major difference, then, relates to Lenin's 'speaking for' versus the Gramscian ideal of 'speaking from'.

privileged subjects that would elucidate the consciousness of the oppressed] (Duno-Gottberg & Hylton, 2008: 266).

Duno-Gottberg and Hylton's assessment criteria, albeit not phrased in the same terminology, are of common currency in extant literature. Johnson and Stam launch a similar critique against some of *cinema novo*'s most orthodox Marxist proponents (1995: 58). They argue that *cinema novo*'s intellectuals never were organic in the Gramscian sense of the word. Commenting on the second phase described above, they contend that "made *for* the people by an educated middle-class radical elite, the films occasionally transmitted a paternalistic vision of the Brazilian masses" (Johnson & Stam, 1995: 34, emphasis in the original). They further argue about the whole movement that it was generally guided by a Marxism strong on anti-imperialism yet weak on class analysis. López touches upon the same point when she in the Mexican context notes that mass culture is a question of hegemony rather than domination, and that the leftist critique against commercially successful films can only explain the mass appeal of mass culture as either bad taste or false consciousness on part of the people (López, 1993: 148). Her project – which I share – is to take mass culture seriously in order to understand its appeal. In this context, Knight makes a pertinent argument about the peasant movements in colonial Mexico. To grasp their appeal and political strategies underlying their local and "backward-looking" nature, Knight argues that "rather than wagging Leninist fingers at the deficient peasantry, we should make some effort to grasp the ideas and motives which lay behind their protests, even if these lacked the approved vehicle of a vanguard party" (Knight, 1992: 113-114). This effort is in line with a Gramscian approach to popular culture.

Tension two: popular films and Hollywood

La gran mayoría de los filmes venezolanos trata, ya que no siempre lo logra, de manejar el lenguaje al nivel clásico norteamericano o su derivación mexicana (Roffé, 1997: 54).

[The great majority of the Venezuelan films tries to, albeit does not always succeed, to use the classic North American language or its Mexican derivation].

The second tension in *el nuevo cine* relates to how the filmmakers are to tell their stories and how this in turn relates to the types of films their audiences already were familiar with, namely Hollywood films. This tension thus concerns why it is difficult to make revolutionary films with mass appeal. I will enter this complex question from the perspective of the cinematic mode of expression. Leaving the important question of distribution and exhibition aside, I focus on Hollywood and the predominance of Hollywood's classical or conventional way to tell a story. If making films with mass appeal entails an adoption of conventions

established by Hollywood, this is clearly problematic for a movement equating imperialism with the United States. For some commentators, the resistance to Hollywood's norms is a defining feature of the movement. For instance, Rodríguez contends that a

uniting factor of these two phases of the [New Latin American Cinema] was the systematic critique of unequal power structures and social relations through experimental styles. In both phases, filmmakers' search for an aesthetic language they could call their own was as important as, and in fact inseparable from, the search for other forms of emancipation (Rodríguez, 2012: 91).

Martin (1997b: 17-18) relates the calls for experimental or unconventional cinema to the Cuban director Julio García Espinosa's notion of an 'imperfect cinema', according to which revolutionary cinema must reject the technical perfection characteristic of Hollywood and European cinema in order to reflect the rawness representative of the everyday lives of ordinary people. Against this, other commentators stress that most of the movement's manifestos propagated aesthetic and otherwise artistic diversity towards their common political goal (King, 1990: 66; López, 1997; Martin, 1997b: 16; Willemsen, 1997: 227).

To make sense of what Rodríguez means by experimental style, I will consider what conventional style entails. To that end, I draw on Bordwell's *Narration in the fiction film* (1985). His project is to understand how films tell stories. Watching and understanding a film's story is a learnt skill, according to Bordwell. Understanding has become habitual after watching films that rely on the same principles of intelligibility from childhood through adulthood. Bordwell thus posits an active spectator who constantly applies previous experience to make sense of a film. He argues that "generally, the spectator comes to the film already tuned, prepared to focus energies toward story construction and to apply sets of schemata derived from context and prior experience" (1985: 34). Bordwell substantiates this claim by examining the narrational cues films provide to make themselves comprehensible for spectators. He does not claim to predict actual spectators' responses, but points to the conventional options that films rely on in order to make sense (Bordwell, 1985: 49). I find three of his concepts particularly useful: narration, spectator schemata, and narrational norms.

First, building on a Russian formalist tradition, Bordwell defines narration as comprised by *fabula*, *syuzhet*, and *style* (Bordwell, 1985: 50). The *fabula* or the story refers to the actions that take place within a given space and time. The *fabula* is the pattern through which the spectators infer relationships between cause and effect. It can be condensed into a synopsis, describing what the film is about. Bordwell stresses that spectators tend to agree about what a film's story is, and what elements in it that make little logical sense. A film's intelligibility is by and large a function of the *fabula*'s reliance on a range of what Bordwell terms schemata,

through which the film employs recognizable types of characters, settings, and story formats and provide cues about causation and motivation (Bordwell, 1985: 49).

Bordwell terms the manner in which this happens “the staging of action” or presentation of the fabula in the syuzhet or plot (Bordwell, 1985: 49). The fabula and the syuzhet both refer to the film’s events, but the latter denotes the way in which the story’s parts are placed together. Like a film’s architectural structure, the syuzhet thus refers to how for instance information about characters is presented, be it by inference or explicitly, in a slow or abrupt manner (Bordwell, 1985: 50). Narration’s third element, style, denotes the cinematic devices such as visual presentation, editing techniques and sound. The plot and style work together to aid the spectators in making sense of the fabula, and the three elements together comprise narration in fiction film (Bordwell, 1985: 53).

The second key concept is spectator schemata. Bordwell maintains that “insofar as a spectator comprehends a film, he or she must relate it to some schemata” (1985: 151). Schemata denote the previously acquired norms spectators have about how ‘normal’ films present their fabulas. They enable spectators to make assumptions and draw inferences (Bordwell, 1985: 37). As such, a film’s capacity to connect with or draw on schemata is fundamental to a film’s intelligibility.

Narrational norms are the third central concept for Bordwell. They are important as they inform the schemata referred to above (Bordwell, 1985: 151). Norms about how a film conventionally tells a story enable spectators to draw inferences using schemata, thus for instance reasonably inferring that a close-up of someone crying represents a sad person. Bordwell recognizes that such expectations also stem from experiences other than having seen films previously, but stresses that “we must limit ourselves [...] to the schemata which are historically intersubjective and characteristic of the formal process of narrative comprehension. Narrational norms satisfy both conditions: they underlie the viewing activities of spectators, and they constitute the principal source of formal expectations” (Bordwell, 1985: 151-152). He further contends that there is no telling which come first, narrational norms or spectator schemata. The point is that as films repeat an element, it becomes a norm that informs spectator schemata and thereby easier to understand. As noted in the previous chapter, Bordwell’s argument here resonates with Entman’s argument that the repetition of frames lower the cognitive cost of understanding them (Entman, 2004: 24).

Bordwell distinguishes between extrinsic and intrinsic norms, and it is the former category that is of particular relevance for my purposes. The latter refer to standards established early in the plot, so that the spectator can reasonably predict or estimate a logical

consistency in for instance the protagonist's behavior. Extrinsic norms are those that apply more generally to a larger body of films and inform spectator schemata. Bordwell emphasizes that norms define the parameters for how films narrate in an intelligible manner. In his own words, "any norm, extrinsic or intrinsic, gets unified by setting limits to what is possible. [...]. What makes a norm diversified is that it creates a range of compositional *options*" (Bordwell, 1985: 151, emphasis in the original).

Together, a set of norms constitutes various modes of narration. A narrational mode "is a historically distinct set of norms of narrational construction and comprehension" (Bordwell, 1985: 150). A mode encompasses something more than a genre, and it reaches across cinematic movements, national cinemas and schools (Bordwell, 1985: 150). Whereas genre conventions of for instance melodrama suggest that large emotions will be a central ingredient in the film and that it is likely to clearly indicate the characters' emotional states (Bordwell, 1985: 70), a mode more generally refers to the norms that make the story intelligible.

The canonical or classical Hollywood narrational mode is one mode among many, but it is the world's dominant mode. Bordwell's introduction to his chapter on Hollywood succinctly summarizes his argument: "in fictional filmmaking, one mode of narration has achieved predominance. Whether we call it mainstream, dominant, or classical cinema, we intuitively recognize an ordinary, easily comprehensible movie when we see it" (Bordwell, 1985: 156). He emphasizes that the classical mode provides a "historically constrained set of more or less likely options" that films rely on to make themselves understood (Bordwell, 1985: 164).

Clarity in the form of consistency or coherence is, in my reading, the central defining feature of Hollywood's narrational mode. A film following this norm wants spectators to understand its story, and employs familiar narrational cues as a means to convey clarity. To that end, narratives in the classical mode tend to be redundant (Bordwell, 1985: 161). In Bordwell's account, the classical plot starts with an undisturbed phase, disturbance followed by a struggle to overcome that disturbance, and its eventual elimination. These phases are presented and linked together by causal relations demarcating why events unfold the way they do, which drives the story forward in a linear trajectory (Bordwell, 1985: 157-158). The classical film rarely uses narrative tricks to give the spectator false cues leading to invalid inferences (Bordwell, 1985: 165). Bordwell further notes that there are two classic endings; one logical wrap-up of all loose ends and another more arbitrary and inadequately motivated from a logical point of view (Bordwell, 1985: 159). Ramírez Berg confirms the relevance of Bordwell's account in the Mexican case, where he refers to Bordwell when arguing that the

classical Mexican cinematic paradigm followed Hollywood in form and was Mexican in content (Ramírez Berg, 1992: 16).

Tension three: the state

The third tension in *el nuevo cine* concerns its relationship to the state. This tension is an extension of the question of ‘the popular’, in that making films with mass appeal is an expensive affair which historically requires the financial and legal support of the state. The dividing line in the debate about the preferred role of the state follows the same logic as the opposing approaches to the question of the category of the popular referred to above. Some filmmakers viewed the state funding as a state mechanism to control the cinema, and others welcomed it as a prerequisite for making films that could reach the masses. As Johnson and Stam note (1995: 44), most filmmakers in the Brazilian *cinema novo* acknowledged the need for the state to finance production, create institutions that promote, produce, and distribute, and to provide a legislative framework. From the political point of view of *cinema novo*, the alternatives were no better. Privately funded production tended to conform to Hollywood’s narrational mode as a way to ensure profit, and independent productions struggled to secure stable financing and ran the risk of low technical quality. Yet, the support of the state was received with an uneasy acceptance. Johnson and Stam refer to the director Ruy Guerra, who made the point that a state in a capitalist society can hardly be expected to fund anti-capitalist films (1995: 45). Below, I return to the question of the state’s role in the case of Venezuela where state funding was necessary to have a sustained film production.

***El nuevo cine* in Venezuela**

In this section, I will discuss the relevance of understanding Venezuelan cinema from the 1980s and 1990s against the backdrop of *el nuevo cine*. *El nuevo cine* was the preferred term used by early Venezuelan commentators (cf. Aguirre & Bisbal, 1980; Roffé, 1997). The cinema of Venezuela was ‘new’ in a literal sense too, as only Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina had a sustained cinematic production before the 1960s (King, 1990: 61). Izaguirre (1984: 86) explicitly refers to the nascent cinemas of Bolivia, Chile, and Cuba together with Venezuela in the 1960s. Although the first Venezuelan films were screened as early as 1897 and the first feature film was produced in 1916 (Marrosu, 1997), Hernández stresses that the very notion of a distinctively Venezuelan cinema started to settle in the 1980s after a number of commercially successful productions in the mid-1970s (in Roffé, 1997: 60).

However, there are two potential problems to the endeavor of seeing Venezuelan cinema as part of *el nuevo cine* movement. First, no Venezuelan directors have, to my knowledge,

written a manifesto of Venezuelan *nuevo cine* as their Mexican, Cuban, Brazilian, Argentinian, and Bolivian counterparts did. This raises the potential critique that if the directors did not explicitly identify with the movement, they cannot have made films that participated in it. The second problem concerns the status of the movement itself. While the literature tends to locate its birth to the 1950s and early 1960s and further refers to the late 1960s and early 1970s as its heyday, there is less agreement about the movement's status or even existence in the 1980s and 1990s.

What is the case for pronouncing the movement's death? The literature provides two reasons: it has been replaced by a different type of cinema, and its theoretical underpinnings have become obsolete and archaic. Rodríguez' recent article 'After New Latin American Cinema' contains both of these arguments (Rodríguez, 2012). He sees the movement as existing in two phases; an initial where it supported a populist and national project, followed by a second where it stood in opposition to the authoritarian or totalitarian regimes in the 1970s and 1980s (Rodríguez, 2012: 91). He further notes that when the movement's acknowledged forefather, the director Fernando Birri, made the call for a 'new, new, new Latin American cinema' in 1985, many directors on the continent no longer identified with the movement (Rodríguez, 2012: 106). He relates the lack of identification with a discontent with the movement's Marxism. Increasing dissatisfaction with Cuba's experience with actually existing socialism and the eventual implosion of the Soviet Union dealt a heavy blow to the optimism of Latin America's left and its sense that history moved in the direction a literal reading of Marx could suggest. To paraphrase Marx, whatever the capitalist bourgeois was digging, it was not its own grave. Rather, it constructed a neoliberal project after the economic crisis that hit the continent during what has been dubbed 'the lost decade' of the 1980s (cf. Huber & Solt, 2004: 151). León (2005) notes in a similar vein that the traditional left's utopian promises appeared increasingly far-fetched, and that critical theory itself moved away from earlier pretenses (or responded to critiques) that it could comfortably speak for the 'wretched of the earth'. He contrasts the top-down '*hablar por*' [speak for] typical of the cinematic vanguards of *el nuevo cine* to the more modest attitude of a '*hablar desde*' [speak from] characteristic of what he terms *cine de marginalidad* [cinema of marginalization]. In short, *el nuevo cine* as a cinema with socialist answers to everything has been replaced by a *cine de marginalidad* and *realismo sucio* [dirty realism] without hope or pretense of utopia

(León, 2005: 13).⁷ Rodríguez, focusing on commercially successful films like *Amores perros* (2000) and *Y tu mamá también* (2001), considers the stylistic shift in terms of the neologism ‘melorealism’. With this term, he wants to draw attention to the films’ focus on affect yet without the emotional excess characteristic of conventional melodramas.

The disillusionment with actually existing socialism changed the vocabulary used to make sense of the continent’s place in the global political economy. In this context, Stam notes while a burgeoning Anglophone literature on the cinemas outside the US and Europe was published in the 1980s, the term Third World came into discredit for defining the Third World countries in negative terms as passive victims of colonization and underdevelopment (Stam, 2000: 282). While retaining the notion as a useful category for films that evoke the term strategically and polemically, Stam considers that postcolonial theory inspired by theoreticians such as Said and Spivak has taken over the concerns of Third World theory from a distinctively different theoretical perspective (2000: 291-292).⁸

I disagree with the case for pronouncing the movement’s death, and propose that in Venezuela its ideals were expressed until 2000. As López argues, one must take into account how the movement adopted itself to changing historical realities. She notes that between 1969 and 1973 it was fairly clear what films participated in the movement, as in this period the “films of the New Latin American Cinema were revolutionary, explicitly political, called for an end to underdevelopment, poverty, oppression, hunger, exploitation, illiteracy and ignorance” (López, 1997: 150). This was a cinema that almost by definition operated on the margins of mainstream culture, as explained above.

Two factors changed this, López claims. First, the ideal of the movement had become a norm for all types of cinema on the continent. This is in her view a sign of one of the movement’s achievements. All film productions, including those from the industrial and commercial sector, had to reckon with the fact of the expectation that a Latin American film is

⁷ A key component of León’s argument does not apply to the Venezuelan context. He claims no alternative promising radical change has appeared after the disillusionment with the promises of the traditional left, which in turn has given rise to a cinema without hope or pretense. I contend against this that Chavismo must be understood precisely as a political project representing, in official rhetoric at least, a radical leftist promise to combat imperialism and capitalism. In this vein, Escobar notes the regime’s stance against neoliberalism, especially in terms of redistribution and social expenditure. Escobar further sees (and criticizes) the regime the continuation of the ‘old’ modernizing left that León posits does not exist anymore (2010: 17). For my purposes, Escobar points to a historical continuity between the political project of *el nuevo cine* and Chavismo.

⁸ Gramsci remains an influential theoretical source throughout this period. I have already noted his influence on *el nuevo cine* as well as his importance for current scholarship through Spivak. Another key precursor to in postcolonial theory, Said’s *Orientalism* also takes Gramsci’s concept of hegemony and his distinction between political and civil society and the state’s presence in both as a point of departure. Said explains the endurance of Orientalism as result of successful hegemony at work (Said, 2003: 7).

to speak critically to a Latin American social reality (López, 1997: 152; see also Stam, 2000: 283). The second reason concerns the pronouncement of its death and loss of specificity referred to above. Against this view, she, King (1990: 74-75), and Willemen (1997: 231) argue that *el nuevo cine* (and Third Cinema) changed in tandem with the political conditions it operated in. López contends that with the time, the movement realized that it could not successfully address issues of poverty and exclusion outside mass culture. As noted above, this implies a change in the attitude to ‘the popular’. It adopted industrial strategies in order to become commercial. No longer necessarily a marginal cinema, it also became harder to discern what films belonged or did not belong to the movement (López, 1997: 152-153). López concludes that instead of denying the movement an ability to evolve and adapt, “what seems more appropriate is to call for an analysis of how it has changed, for close studies of its expressive and social strategies and commitments” (López, 1997: 153).

So what has changed? First, the political context Venezuelan cinema operates in is different from its other Latin American counterparts. While Brazilian and Argentinian cinema reacted to authoritarian regimes and Cuban films were produced in an ostensibly socialist country, Venezuelan films dealt with the politics of exclusion in a formally democratic regime. Second, given my choice of box office success as a criterion for selection, I deal with films that evidently have appealed to the masses and as such do not operate from the margins. I here agree with King’s (1990: 220) analysis, who argues that the commercial success and critical edge in the Venezuelan case have not stood in opposition, and the most popular films were also politically critical.

In the next chapter I will make the case that the films from the 1980s and 1990s continued *el nuevo cine*’s political preoccupations. Venezuelan films from these two decades, in my analysis, attempted to place the realities and experiences of Venezuela’s marginalized on the screen. While many of the films also tended to overdo their focus on misery and suffering, I argue that they did place issues of exclusion, political and everyday violence, and poverty on the public agenda. Further and related, I deal with films that have been funded by the state. As noted, securing the financial and institutional support of the state has been important for the viability of Venezuelan cinema. In the following, I will provide a literature review to contextualize my own reading of Venezuelan cinema from these two decades. I will make the case that the literature’s primary concern is how the films place themselves on a political axis established by *el nuevo cine*.

Historical developments of Venezuelan cinema

A chronological overview of the literature evidences the influence of *el nuevo cine* on Venezuelan cinema. The central concern for the literature I review here is how Venezuelan films relate to the political ideals established by the movement. The claim of the literature is not that Venezuelan cinema was a direct continuation of the movement in the sense that it made films akin to its Brazilian, Argentinian, or Cuban forerunners. This is tantamount to noting, as López does above, that the explicitly revolutionary character disappeared after the initial euphoria of the Cuban revolution had passed. Rather, the literature indicates that the Venezuelan films pose the same kind of questions about society and politics as the other *nuevo cine* films did: what type of society is Venezuela? Who is excluded and included in dominant power structures? Who benefits and who loses out? Whose fault is it when things go wrong – is it the fault of ‘the system’ (the state, the organizational make-up of society) or of individuals? The answer to these questions is key to the films’ positioning vis-à-vis the state’s quest for hegemony.

The earliest publication I consider is written by the critic and historian Izaguirre, who sets the tone for later scholarship. Its central concerns revolve around what it entails for a film to be Venezuelan, how the films portray Venezuelan society and politics, and especially to what extent they represent a critical and leftist perspective. In *El cine en Venezuela* [The cinema in Venezuela], Izaguirre considers the history of Venezuelan cinema from its first feature film, *La dama de las cayenas* from 1916,⁹ to his present day. He evaluates Venezuelan films in terms of how well they manage to reflect and capture the complexity of Venezuelan society (Izaguirre, 1966: 13). He criticizes Venezuela’s film production from its inception to lack rigor and depth in analysis. In particular, he chides the majority of the films for failing to reflect the realities and problems of Venezuela, and for not giving

una representación de lo que somos dentro del mundo y la sociedad; lejos de alcanzar tales propósitos, el cine venezolano ha insistido en repetir una excesiva localización folklórica que, si bien pretende ser popular, parte, sin embargo, de vulgares concepciones comerciales marginadas de todo acento técnico y estético elementales (Izaguirre, 1966: 15).

[a representation of what we are within the world and the society; far from reaching such intentions, the Venezuelan cinema has insisted on repeating an excessive folkloric localization, although it pretends to be popular, it departs, however, from vulgar commercial conceptions marginalized from any elementary technical and aesthetical emphasis].

Izaguirre acknowledges the presence of a counter reaction to this commercial cinema, but criticizes it for trying to copy a European cinematographic aesthetic, thereby evidencing the

⁹ In this text and later (1983) he dates this film to 1913. This date is later corrected by Marrosu (1997) to 1916.

all too typical “*falta de autenticidad de nuestro cine*” [lack of authenticity of our cinema] (Izaguirre, 1966: 14).

He follows up a similar critique in 1983 by criticizing the folklorism exhibited by recent melodramas and comedies. He also detects a positive change in the films from the 1970s and onwards, noting that the Venezuelan public responded well to “*el intento por descolonizar las pantallas*” [the intent to decolonize the screens]” (Izaguirre, 1983: 7). Interestingly, the English translation of the text does not mention this decolonizing attempt, nor the nationalism he in the Spanish version sees as a driving force behind the then recent boom in Venezuela’s film industry. In 1984, he notes that the Venezuelan and Latin American films of the *tercer cine* or *cine urgente* [urgent cinema]¹⁰ movement remained marginal in terms of popularity. Intellectually sophisticated and at times pretentious, Izaguirre laments that these anti-capitalist films remained relegated to cinematheques (Izaguirre, 1984: 86).

Aguirre and Bisbal consider the possible forms of ‘*venezolanidad*’ [‘Venezuelanness’¹¹] in *El nuevo cine* of Venezuela (Aguirre & Bisbal, 1980: 9). They note the theoretical influence of *el tercer cine* in the country, a current they consider as continuing until their present day. For a film to qualify as Venezuelan, they contend, it does not suffice that it is made in Venezuela by Venezuelans. The contributors’ discussion of varying degrees of ‘Venezuelanness’ tacitly assumes a shared understanding of what a Venezuelan perspective entails. The discussion suggests that the ideals of *el nuevo cine* provide the standards for what passes as authentically Venezuelan. For instance, Ignacio Rey¹² posits that Venezuelan cinema “deberá en alguna manera reflejar realidades o situaciones venezolanas o puntos de vista venezolanos sobre situaciones o realidades ajenas” [ought to in some manner reflect Venezuelan realities or situations, or Venezuelan points of view on foreign situations or realities] (Aguirre & Bisbal, 1980: 10, emphasis in the original). Like Izaguirre above, he complains about how Venezuelan films lack both ‘authenticity’ and artistic quality, and that they tend to be ‘pseudo-revolutionary’ rather than truly reflecting the interests of the Venezuelan people. The discussion further complements some films for achieving a fine balance of being national, commercial and revolutionary. These films deliver a coherent

¹⁰ The term *cine urgente* also refers to the idea of *narraciones de urgencia* [urgent narratives], described by Duno-Gottberg and Hylton as narratives about repression, poverty and violence that should be told in order provide a voice to those perspectives normally excluded from hegemonic discourse (Duno-Gottberg & Hylton, 2008: 247).

¹¹ The authors put the term in inverted commas to signal its made-up character.

¹² Aguirre and Bisbal’s text is written as a conversation between different scholars and critics of Venezuelan cinema. This format is also found in Roffé’s contribution to *Panorama histórico del cine en Venezuela 1896-1993* (Roffé, 1997), and it usefully allows for opposing arguments to be forwarded in the same text.

political analysis in that they condemn recent political repression, albeit they fall short of delivering a profound political analysis (Aguirre & Bisbal, 1980: 15-16).

López and García Seguí, though not questioning the profoundness or authenticity of the films, argue that the most popular genres from 1980 through the better parts of 1984 have been political films reflecting social critique, denouncement, questioning of politics, or search for national identity (1984: 64). They note that two directors in particular, Chalbaud and de la Cerda,¹³ have found a formula for producing political films with commercial success. Although they do not define the term explicitly, they conceptualize genre as a category of films. Hernández (1987) criticizes the genre concept employed by Lopez and García Seguí, as he considers genre to imply a institutionalized set of rather strict norms or formulas, usually associated with certain production companies. In his view, Venezuelan cinema does not follow any genre conventions thus conceived. Instead, he proposes that Venezuelan cinema is a cinema of tendencies, defined thematically according to what topics the films bring to the screen (1987: 101-102). He identifies the police testimony, the critical comedy and the passionate drama as the most common tendencies between 1984 and 1986.¹⁴

Thanks to the consolidation of the financial and institutional support from the state, Venezuela's film production experienced a boom from 1984 to 1988. Writing in 1989, the first year of declining production and in a time of economic stress for the Venezuelan economy in general and film production in particular, Lucien (1989) writes a defense for the country's cinematic production. He argues that the importance of Venezuelan cinema resides in the image it has provided of Venezuelan society since its conciliation in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Specifically, he insists that

el cine venezolano, con sus buenas y sus mala películas [...] ha demostrado una singular vocación por ahondar en ese qué somos los venezolanos, en ofrecerse como espejo de un país al que la 'cultura del petróleo' forjó una imagen hartamente distorsionada, de un país que apenas uno años atrás tuvo a Miami como parte de su geografía (Lucien, 1989: 22).

[the Venezuelan cinema, with its good and its bad movies (...) has demonstrated a singular vocation for delving into the question of what we are as Venezuelans, for offering itself as a mirror of a country onto which the 'culture of petroleum' forged an extremely distorted image, of a country that only a few years ago had Miami as part of its geography].

In my reading, this statement succinctly summarizes the literature's consensus about Venezuelan cinema. While observers debate the extent of its success, they agree that

¹³ Roffé (1997: 52) notes that one of out every six Venezuelan films produced between 1973 and 1993 were directed by Chalbaud, de la Cerda or the Mexican national Wallerstein. In my selection, nine out of the 32 films were directed by either of these three, and another three were directed by Cesar Bolívar.

¹⁴ I analyze two of the films, *Homicidio culposo* and *Cangrejo II*, that he classifies under the category of the police testimony.

Venezuelan cinema has *intended* to show an image of Venezuelan society focusing on those excluded from the wealth offered by oil. In Entman's terminology, critics have thus applauded cinema's agenda-setting capacity, and negative assessments have maintained that the films should have been more critical, that is, they should have presented the problem in the frame in a more profound and, as it were, 'authentic' manner. Lucien's references to the culture of petroleum and Miami in particular may not be immediately clear to readers unfamiliar with Venezuelan history, and I will return to these important aspects in my analysis in the next chapter.

King's chapter on Colombia and Venezuela in his *Magical reels. A history of cinema in Latin America* is the first Anglophone contribution I consider.¹⁵ While his focus is more relevant to the section on state policy and cinematographic infrastructure, he notes that several Venezuelan filmmakers tried to make films with both mass appeal and a socially critical edge (King, 1990: 220). As such, these films are 'well intentioned', in King's analysis. Nonetheless, he considers that the films of Chalbaud and de la Cerda portray characters who "reveal little capacity to analyze the conditions they are living: they merely react to given situations" (King, 1990: 218).

As Venezuelan cinema moves into the 1990s, the numbers of films produced and movie theaters start falling. Gil (1995) observes a general impression in the Venezuelan public that "*el cine venezolano es malo y monotemático al presentar sólo realidades violentas, casos escabrosos*" [the Venezuelan cinema is bad and monothematic as it presents only violent realities, distasteful cases]. 1997 sees the publication of what, to my knowledge, remains the most in-depth contribution to the study of Venezuelan cinema: *Panorama histórico del cine en Venezuela 1896-1993* [Historical panorama of Venezuelan cinema 1896 – 1993]. The anthology asks two questions: what is the social or political importance of Venezuelan cinema, and what type of institutional framework best secures its viability. Marrosu's contribution details Venezuelan cinema's historical development, from its introduction in 1896, its two first productions in 1897, its scant production in the early 1900s, the dictatorial state's production of propagandistic newsreels from 1927, to the production of commercial feature films modeled after a narrational mode established by Hollywood and Mexican cinema by the still existing production company Bolívar Films from 1946 and onwards (Marrosu, 1997). She considers Bolívar Films as a paradigmatic case for Venezuela's film industry. It affirms the industry's economic dependence on the state, exemplifies the mimicry of commercially

¹⁵ Acosta Fabelo (2003: 52) notes that despite being the fifth largest cinema of the continent in terms of production, King's short chapter constitutes the most elaborate Anglophone contribution to its scholarship.

successful foreign film, and an inferiority complex vis-à-vis other national cinemas evidenced in its reliance on co-productions and frequent usage of Mexican directors and technical personnel. However, it also operated with a business realism, which ensured that it had some commercial success (Marrosu, 1997: 36-39).

Independent productions, that is, films made by an individual director or a collective, began in 1959 with the screening of the to-be emblematic director Chalbaud's *Caín adolescente* (Marrosu, 1997: 42). Marrosu considers the Cannes-awarded film *Araya* (1958) by Margot Benacerraf as a case apart, as it provides a foreign view of Venezuela, as if were made by an ethnographer.¹⁶ She notes that in the 1960s Venezuelan cinema either relied on a commercial formula, or it followed Chalbaud by making films that were revolutionary and vanguardist in intent, but naïve and aesthetically primitive in result (Marrosu, 1997: 43). With this starts the current of socially critical and state-funded films under the rubric of '*el nuevo cine*' – a term the author places in inverted commas to signal that it was a movement too heterogenous to classify as a coherent cinematographic movement (Marrosu, 1997: 43, 47).¹⁷

Beyond providing a historical overview, the contributors to *Panorama histórico* make the case that an understanding of Venezuelan cinema is integral to an understanding of Venezuelan society. That is, Venezuelan cinema is important not only for its artistic value, but for being part and parcel of social and historical processes. With reference to the Annales school, Marrosu considers cinema as constitutive of a 'history of mentality' and as such reflective of the realities of ordinary people's everyday lives (1997: 21). Using a Gramscian terminology, she conceives of history as the interplay between the powerful and the subalterns, of works and thought and customs, and economic or material factors. Cinema partakes in a "*concepción del mundo*" [conception of the world] – not in the form of an elaborate philosophy, but as the situated knowledge everyone possesses by virtue of their own everyday experiences.¹⁸

What conceptions of the world do the authors find in Venezuelan cinema? Two elements stand out. First, they consider the category of the political film, ask what it entails to make a political film, and what types of politics Venezuelan films have tended to support. Second and related, they discuss the privileged role representations of violence have had in Venezuelan

¹⁶ Rodríguez views *Araya* as an example of a film that contributed to *el nuevo* in terms of its visually appealing "poetic neorealism", albeit not adopting the movement's ideological position (2012: 93).

¹⁷ She also notes that term was introduced to Venezuela by Aguirre and Bisbal (1980). Roffé's chapter in *Panorama histórico* is entitled *El nuevo cine venezolano: tendencias, escuelas, géneros* [the new Venezuelan cinema: tendencies, schools, genres (Roffé, 1997)].

¹⁸ See chapter one, where I elaborate on Gramsci's understanding of the term conceptions of the world.

cinema. They leave the general impression that Venezuelan films are not political enough, or more precisely, not political in the sense of following the ideals of *el nuevo cine*. Specifically, the films do not show an alternative to the current political system as they should, and they tend to blame individuals rather than the political system for social problems. The discussion reveals the ambivalent relationship to ‘the people’ and the meaning of ‘popular’ films discussed above. Roffé critically notes that

hasta 1979 [...] hubo un cierto predominio de filmes donde la temática política y social se imponía, para luego ceder el paso a la simplemente espectacular o la orientada al desarrollo de una problemática individualista, ya fuera el tema directamente afectivo o base para series de acciones generalmente violentas (Roffé, 1997: 54-55).

[until 1979 [...] there was a certain predominance of films where the political and social thematic imposed itself, for then to give way to another simply spectacular or one oriented to the development of an individualist *problématique*, be it a directly emotional theme or on the basis for a series of generally violent acts].

Moving into the 1980s and further away from the influence of the Cuban revolution (1997: 68), films tended to target the general public (1997: 54), a public which moreover has a “*bajo nivel cultural*” [low cultural level] (1997: 58). Roffé relates this targeting to the reliance on Hollywood’s and Mexican cinema’s narrational mode. His view finds support in Rodríguez, who notes that in Venezuela and beyond “*todo lo que es nuevo cine, cine de vanguardia [...] ha desaparecido*” [everything that is *nuevo cine*, vanguardist cinema, (...) has disappeared] (in Roffé, 1997: 71).

The debate filling the pages of *Panorama histórico* echoes the discussion referred to above on *el nuevo cine*’s ambivalent relationship to the category of ‘the popular’, popularity as mass appeal, and politics. In the above view, popularity implies a loss of intellectual sophistication and thus of the political role Venezuelan films should play. Against this, other contributors conceive of mass appeal in positive terms. Protesting the claim that Venezuelan cinema becomes depoliticized and individualist in the 1980s, Marrosu and Hernández maintain that its politics, far from disappearing, changes from the explicit critique of society and capitalism. Hernández contends that rather than propagating individualism, Venezuelan films have tried to connect with the public and as a result “*hay una tendencia de ver lo político de otras maneras*” [there is a tendency to view the political in different ways], in particular through explorations of everyday life (in Roffé, 1997: 63). Where Roffé sees a process of depolitization, Hernández sees a two-faced process. Where on the one hand people in general have grown disillusioned about politics, this loss of faith on the other hand opens up the opportunity of exploring politics in different manners. In a similar vein, Marrosu

maintains that individual situations are political to the extent that they present this individual in a socially critical situation (in Roffé, 1997: 64). Summing up, the literature agrees that the politics of Venezuelan films changes approaching the 1990s, but disagrees about what this change does to the political status of the films.

Beyond the axis of commercial versus non-commercial films and its vexed relationship to the nature of ‘the popular’, the debate revolves around representations of crime and violence, and the role of the subaltern as a victim *of* or responsible *for*. There is a corollary discussion in Colombia that speaks volumes to the Venezuela debate and indeed seems to influence the view of Venezuelan scholars and filmmakers on the topic of how marginalization is best represented on the screen. This debate goes to the heart of the difference between speaking *for* and speaking *from*. In 1977, a fictitious story about a documentary in a Bogotá barrio, *Agarrando el pueblo* [Ripping the people off]¹⁹ by the Colombian directors Carlos Mayolo and Luis Ospina, presents a highly critical view on how Latin American filmmakers have relied on a voyeuristic and essentializing representation of barrio inhabitants. As King observes, the film criticizes filmmakers for overdoing their focus on misery. The film shows that “when events and characters are not sufficiently depressing, [the directors] invent them”, and King further notes that many directors on the continent felt that Mayolo and Ospina criticized them for personally relying on ‘pornomiserism’ (1990: 213). Similarly, Duno-Gottberg and Hylton applaud Mayolo and Ospina for drawing attention to how Latin American filmmakers evoked an idea of a “*miserabilismo latinoamericano*” [Latin-American miserablism] as a marketing strategy (2008: 248). Films tending towards pornomiserism do not incorporate the voice of the subalterns in a way that does justice to their experience and marginalized position. On the contrary, they work to reinforce the subaltern as marginalized, “removed from all lines of social mobility” to refer to Spivak’s definition of subalternity (2006: 475) and whose voice is not heard in hegemonic places (Duno-Gottberg & Hylton, 2008: 265).

In the Venezuelan context, complaints about depolitization or lack of political transcendence relate directly to representation of crime and violence in accordance with the registers of pornomiserism. Garaycoche considers that Chalbaud, for instance, increasingly used marginalization as a speculative element as his career progresses (in Roffé, 1997: 65). Miranda notes a shift from a violence of heroic revolutionary deeds to a representation of violence that “*pone el acento en el miedo o en la imposibilidad de una lucha armada*”

¹⁹ Translation by King (1990: 213).

[accentuates fear or the impossibility of an armed struggle] (in Roffé, 1997: 68).²⁰ Molina, in a book about Chalbaud's films, protests this critique. By and large sympathetic to the director's films, Molina quotes Chalbaud saying that his vision of marginalization is not the product of his imagination but the result of a lived experience (Molina, 2001: 45).

The Venezuelan case is one where filmmakers have needed and benefited from the support of the state, yet this support did not translate into a subservient cinema. While filmmaking has a long history in the country, there was little sustained film production until 1975 (Aguirre & Bisbal, 1980: 21; Fundación Cinemateca Nacional, 2004: 37) Before 1975, the cinematographic production was of a haphazard and improvised nature (Izaguirre, 1983: 7, 1984: 87; Lucien, 1989: 19). The situation improved in 1975, when the state started to finance feature films (Fundación Cinemateca Nacional, 2004; King, 1990: 219).

After three productive years and 29 feature films financed by the state, production came to a temporary halt due to a credit freeze (León, 2005: 15). The cinematographic community eventually secured the state's institutional and financial support in the 1980s, which paved the ground for what has proved to be a sustainable national cinema. This support is important as it speaks to the specificity of cinema as medium in that it requires a costly institutional framework. Unlike its Brazilian forerunner, Venezuelan cinema was fortunate not to experience a military dictatorship. This implies that it operated in a different political context, in that films opposing the Venezuelan state criticized a democracy and not an authoritarian regime. Like Brazil, however, the left enjoyed a hegemonic position among the filmmakers, which created a similarly paradoxical situation: the state funded a cinema production that was highly critical of the state and its inability to include the marginalized into its developmental projects. King reports a tacit agreement between *novo cinema* directors and the Brazilian state to avoid certain sensitive issues, in particular the developmental projects of the national elites (1990: 111) – which suggests that Brazilian filmmakers who wanted to make political films had to do a balancing act between securing finance and staying committed to their ideals.

The literature indicates no such agreement in Venezuela, tacit or otherwise. In Molina's (1997) analysis, although Venezuelan films have represented the state in critical terms, the state has nonetheless been cinema's best ally. In a statement evidencing the theoretical influence of *el nuevo cine*, Molina argues that "*esta democracia deficiente, subdesarrollada y manipulada, tantas veces condenada, fue la mejor aliada para contar nuestros grandes problemas y extraer los temas nacionales más significativos*" [this deficient, underdeveloped

²⁰ As I will discuss later, this trend becomes stronger in the 2000s in both Venezuela and Mexico.

and manipulated democracy, so frequently condemned, was the best ally to tell our great problems and extract the most significant national themes] (Molina, 1997: 81).

To unpack the nature of this alliance, I will point to two issues of particular importance. First, I will describe what kind of state support the literature has called for. Second, I will characterize the system that has developed as an institutional mess that is likely to be good news for those wanting autonomy. The type of state support that the literature has called for falls into two interrelated categories: financial support and a legislative and institutional infrastructure. The purpose of this support is to ensure stability and continuation of the country's cinematographic production. As Marrosu (1997) and Farrell (2011) note, the viability of cinema in Venezuela has always been a question of the extent of the state's support.

The need for a legislative framework was particularly important in the 1970s and 1980s. Aguirre and Bisbal complain in 1980 that Venezuela was one of few countries without a separate cinematographic law. They criticize the government for not having acted on a proposed bill [*proyecto de ley*] since 1967. This bill was reformed in 1979, though it did not pass the national assembly until 1993 and then with substantial amendments (Guenni Bravo, 2005: 69). 2005 saw a new legislative reform, which I will return to shortly.

A slow legislative process notwithstanding, the 1980s improved the situation from the Venezuelan filmmakers' point of view, and Molina (1997: 81) considers that the country enjoyed a relative institutional stability in a Latin American context. With 108 productions, the 1980s turned out to be Venezuela's most productive decade, and it was also the decade with most spectators (see appendix one). The institutional stability Molina refers to above was provided by the cinematographic development fund Foncine (*Fondo de Fomento Cinematográfico de Venezuela*), a non-profit civil association composed of both state and non-state actors. Foncine was established in 1982 and started operating in 1983, after a credit freeze from 1978 had put productions to a halt (Aguirre, 1984: 70; Aguirre & Bisbal, 1980: 55). It soon became the most important economic pillar of Venezuelan cinema (Izaguirre, 1983: 5).

Beyond its implications for film productivity, I find the credit freeze interesting as the literature explains it differently. While the Venezuelan observers either simply note its occurrence or relate it to domestic political dynamics, King explains it as the result of US pressure against the early popularity of Venezuelan feature films. He views the period from 1975 as one of enthusiasm for Venezuelan films, and notes that the law stipulating that all movie theaters would have to screen at least 12 films a year was welcomed by exhibitors who

saw that Venezuelan films easily created their own market (King, 1990: 209). *Soy un delincuente* (1976) for instance, outcompeted both *Jaws* and *E.T.* at the box office. In King's analysis, Venezuelan films became so popular that the "US distribution consortia threatened the [Venezuelan] government with a temporary boycott of new films" (1990: 219). He claims that the freeze was a direct result of this threat, and that it took three years before the government had "nerves" to fund Venezuelan films again through Foncine (1990: 219).

The Venezuelan observers, in contrast, emphasize domestic politics and a political campaign against Venezuelan cinema. Though they do not claim that the credit freeze was a direct result of the campaign, it was clearly a relevant factor. Aguirre and Bisbal (1980, chapter five) maintain that due to the political nature of the Venezuelan films, members of the Christian democratic party Copei headed a campaign against the state funding of cinema. Arguing that state censorship had been too lenient, the leftist bias of the films, and the immorality of focusing on prostitution, nudity and criminals and telling stories from the point of view of Venezuela's underworld, the campaigners argued that the state should not finance a cultural activity critical of the state itself. Copei headed government from 1979 to 1984, indicating that the party itself was divided on the issue as it broke the credit freeze referred to above.

Venezuelan cinema came to exist as a critical voice of the state, yet precariously dependent on the same system it criticized. Marrosu captures the delicate balancing act it is to request funding from and try to exist as a part of a system the cinematographic community wanted to change:

el cine está 'dentro del sistema' como un outsider, arrancando una y otra vez un pequeño espacio, perdiéndolo y volviendo a entrar, sin lograr una asociación permanente y realmente integrada en ese 'sistema' (Marrosu, 1997: 46-47).

[the cinema is 'within the system' as an outsider, time and time again grabbing a small space, losing it and entering back in again, without succeeding a permanent and really integrated relationship in this 'system'].

The reason why there are no opportunities outside the state financed system boils down to money. As Roffé (1997) explains, the ups and downs in the number of films produced result from hikes and drops in state finance. Producing films requires, as Izaguirre (1984: 87) underscores, an expensive infrastructure, the creation and maintenance of a market, and channels of distribution and exhibition. Roffé emphasizes that the primary indicator of the precarious situation of the country's filmmakers is the fact the so few people make more than one film. Filmmakers across the board, from directors to cameramen, are required to have a second job, as indicated by the fact that between 1973 and 1993 63 directors had made one

film, 23 had made two, and only five had made more than five films (Roffé, 1997: 53). During the otherwise successful 1980s, only *Homicidio culposo* and *Macu*, the two films to date to draw more than one million viewers, managed to make a margin of profit (Lucien, 1989: 21).

Venezuela underwent a period of significant economic stress in the 1980s and 1990s with important consequences for the state's support. Starting with the devaluation of the bolívar on *el viernes negro* [the black Friday] on the 18th of February 1983 and decreasing oil prices towards the millennium, Venezuela's oil-based economy entered a crisis. The ensuing neoliberal *paquetes* [literally, 'package', structural adjustment programs] implied a tightening of state budgets in general. This is a situation that Venezuela shared with the rest of the continent, including Mexico (Rodríguez, 2012: 87-88). While the productive 1980s demonstrate that there is no one-to-one relationship between the economic stress and cinematographic production, Venezuelan cinema in the 1990s produced few films and draws significantly smaller audiences. The number of movie theaters went down from 700 in 1974 to 500 in 1984, 300 in 1993 and 205 in 1994 (Gil, 1995: 4). Molina (1997: 90) claims that Venezuelan cinema continued to exist not because of the institutions supporting it, but despite of their poor standard and meager funding.

For the present purposes, the country's economic situation and its impact on the institutional support framework provides contextual background to my claim that state funding has not translated into control of the types of films that have been produced. Roffé points out that since there is no profit to be made, there is no film industry in the strict sense of the term. Rather, Venezuelan filmmakers are intellectuals who make films because they want to communicate a message or because they care deeply about the art itself (1997: 57). They frequently run a personal economic risk, taking up personal loans to cover up for the percentages not financed by the state. He further claims that there is no significant difference in the ideology of state and privately funded Venezuelan films.²¹ I will return to this argument in the next chapter, where I will argue that the dominant frame in Venezuelan cinema from 1980 to 1999 was highly critical of the state in a way that is reminiscent of what current official rhetoric says about the same state. For now, I will focus on how Chavismo has impacted on the institutional framework Venezuelan cinema operates in.

²¹ *Panorama histórico* is published by the National Cinemateca of Venezuela, and as such could be considered a publication by a state organ. This notwithstanding, the contributors to the anthology are in my reading largely sympathetic to political ideals of *el nuevo cine*, and when they criticize Venezuelan cinema for not being political enough in a leftist sense.

Venezuelan cinema and the *chavista* state

In broad lines and judging from recent box office successes, the state's policy towards the sector has not translated into a *chavista* cinema. I will back up this claim in chapter four when I analyze the 11 most seen films since Chávez assumed power. For the present purposes, I note that the current government, by all appearances, has indeed attempted to tighten the state's control over Venezuelan film production as it sees culture in general and cinema thereunder as a key platform for spreading the ideals of its Bolivarian revolution. In the following, I will note that available literature indicates that this intended policy of control has not produced the desired outcomes from the government's point of view.

As a result of the government's pronounced intention of using cinema as a tool in the transformation of Venezuela to a socialist society, critics voice concerns about cinema's autonomy and artistic freedom and protest the use of culture for propaganda. The debate on Chávez' involvement in the sector, here as everywhere else (Coronil, 2008: 3), is a Manichean for or against with few balanced voices. While literature searches in academic databases do not yield many results on keywords related to Chavismo and Venezuelan cinema, the articles I consult here range between highly and moderately critical of the government's policies.

A Newsweek article authored by Margolis provides an extreme version of the criticism. Claiming that "like Mussolini and Stalin before him, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez has erected his very own movie studio", the author draws attention to the totalitarian tendencies of the current regime. He also compares Chávez' involvement with the film sector to that of Hitler's Nazi cinema. He nonetheless considers the studio, Villa del Cine, "a hollow threat" (Margolis, 2009). Like so many other governmental projects, Margolis contends, the studio was announced with great fanfare and a lofty revolutionary vision yet with no real substance. Although he acknowledges the productions of the studio, he describes it as an idle and empty building. More moderately phrased criticism also expresses concerns over the government's attempts to control cinematographic production, though they are far from comparing Chávez with Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin as Margolis does (Díaz, 2007; Guenni Bravo, 2005; Villazana, 2008; Zapata, 2007). The most important concern, according to Díaz and Zapata, is clientelistic favoritism. They fear that only filmmakers, actors, and other personnel supportive of Chavismo can hope for employment, and only films in ideological alignment with the government receive funding.

This fear stems from the government's pronounced policy to use culture as a political tool (Farrell, 2011; Guenni Bravo, 2005; Villazana, 2008). Under slogans such as "*¡luzes, cámara, revolución!*" and "*la revolución de la conciencia*" ['lights, camera, revolution!'] and 'the

revolution of consciousness’], the stated goals of the government’s cinematographic policy are highly reminiscent of those of *el nuevo cine*. In announcing on his TV program *Aló Presidente* that the above mentioned studio would make quality films to compete with Hollywood, Chávez stated that “*¡si nos tienen una dictadura de película!*” [they have us under a film dictatorship!] in reference to the high percentage of Hollywood films in Latin American movie theaters (in Farrell, 2011: 69). The vision of the National Autonomous Cinematography Center²² (CNAC, Centro Nacional Autónomo de Cinematografía) states that cinema is “*un factor estratégico para el fortalecimiento del poder popular y la construcción de una sociedad socialista, democrática, participativa y protagónica*” [a strategic factor to strengthen the popular power and the construction of a socialist, democratic, participative, and protagonistic society] (CNAC, 2012).

Villazana notes that this vision is part of the government’s overall media policy. Her analysis also points to Telesur, a TV channel funded by Venezuela (51%), Argentina (20%), Cuba (19%), and Uruguay (10%), which aims to become Latin America’s answer to CNN and counter the dominance of US media on the continent (Villazana, 2008: 170). The stated aim of this policy is again similar to that of *el nuevo cine*, as it seeks to use cinema and news media as a counter-hegemonic tool to combat US imperialism or dominance in the Latin American media landscape. According to the official vision, Venezuelan culture should explore “*lo que se entiende por cultura en Venezuela, definida por los propios venezolanos*” [what is understood by culture in Venezuela, defined by the Venezuelans themselves] in a manner that recognizes that culture in an open-ended and negotiated process without an end goal (Villazana, 2008: 162). By turning culture into a place to implement political reform, the government has charged the products in the cultural field with additional political meaning and drawn them into the polarized debate on the pros and cons of the current rule that has characterized Venezuela since 1999. Indicative of this intention, Venezuelan cultural law stipulates that culture is a “*prioridad estratégica para alcanzar la transformación de la sociedad venezolana*” [strategic priority to reach the transformation of Venezuelan society] (Villazana, 2008: 163).

To that strategic end, the government has reformed a 1993 law for the film sector, created two new institutions, and reformed the old ones. This is part of a larger overhaul of the cultural and media sector, including the creation of a ministry of culture, a *misión de*

²² Translation provided by Farrell (2011: 40).

cultura,²³ and a cinematographic legislative reform. The new law, from 2005, gives for the first time the workers of the sector rights that to some degree assure the sector's economic stability (Guenni Bravo, 2005: 70). In response to the widespread perception that the primary obstacle for the popularity of Venezuelan films is inadequate distribution (Farrell, 2011: 56; Guenni Bravo, 2005: 72; Villazana, 2008: 165), the law requires all movie theaters to screen all Venezuelan films for a minimum of two weeks (Villazana, 2008: 167). Comparable to the threat of boycott reported by King in the 1970s, the trade association representing Hollywood's major studios, Motion Picture Association of America, has voiced concerns that the law constitutes a threat to commercial interests of the US audiovisual industry in Venezuela (Villazana, 2008: 167).

The reform has also established new institutions. Among these are the production company or studio Villa del Cine [National Film Village]²⁴ and the distribution company Amazonia Films. Though the Newsweek article above points to Mussolini and Hitler as a source of inspiration, the relevant reference and model is Cuba's *Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos* [Cuban Institute of Art and Cinematographic Industry] (Díaz, 2007; Farrell, 2011). The other institutions relevant to the sector are CNAC which provides financing, the National Disc Center (CENDIS: Centro Nacional del Disco) and the exhibitor the National Cinemateca (Cinemateca Nacional).²⁵

Farrell describes the aim of these institutions as supporting films that will rewrite the earlier official history of Venezuela and retell it from the point of view of those excluded from the earlier oil wealth. In my analysis, this is tantamount to saying the official policy on Venezuelan cinema today is to make films with a similar ideology as it had in the three preceding decades. As Farrell underscores, the current architecture of Venezuela's cinematographic institutions is complex and difficult to obtain a full overview of. For instance, Guenni Bravo reports that two years after its inauguration, many actors in the film sector did not understand the exact role Villa del Cine is supposed to play (2005: 70). This is also the institution that has, to my knowledge, received most criticism for functioning as a tool for the government to control the type of films that are to be produced (Díaz, 2007; Farrell, 2011: 39; Margolis, 2009; Zapata, 2007: 182). Though Villa del Cine does not finance productions, it offers production space and equipment based on a preselected list of themes that are to receive

²³ The *Misiones Bolivarianas* or Bolivarian missions are one of the regime's most visible public campaigns. Through a total of 26 missions ranging from combatting illiteracy to providing medical services, the government attempts to transform society in accordance with the tenets of Chavismo to deliver its campaign promises.

²⁴ Translation by Farrell (2011: 35).

²⁵ Translation by Farrell (2011: 36).

support (Farrell, 2011: 37). These themes have ranged from exalting national heroes of the independence struggle to explorations of national identity and social justice (Farrell, 2011: 40).

As stated, it is beyond my present scope to evaluate or assess the impact of the Venezuelan state's policy vis-à-vis Venezuelan cinema. The above consideration does however provide crucial contextual background to my empirical analysis in the next chapters. As I will argue there, the political message of the Venezuelan films has not been aligned with that of the state, especially not before 1999, but not particularly so after either. A possible contributing factor to the lack of state control is what I see as the apparent mess of the institutional framework governing Venezuelan cinema. This is not new in Venezuela's film history. In 1980, Aguirre and Bisbal complain about "*la incoherencia del Gobierno*" [the incoherence of the government] as it created a second institutional body instead of strengthening the existing one (1980: 48). This was not unique to cinema, they contend, as the state's policy towards the media sector in general was unclear. The literature tends to focus on insufficient funding and distribution rather than direct control and censorship.²⁶ In this vein, Guenni Bravo (2005: 66) contends that rather than cinema's historical dependency on the state per se, its principal problem has been lack of funding, the late arrival of the legislative framework, the government's failure to implement the laws that were eventually passed, and the virtual impossibility of making profit. As the state's institutional support system consolidated, nepotism started to reign. In other words, the complaints about clientelistic favoritism in the current system have historical antecedents. What has changed since 1999 is the arrival of a new elite and hence a new set of principles and contacts underlying clientelistic favoritism. In the view of Guenni Bravo, the *chavistas* have under the pretense of democratizing the institutional framework made it more difficult for filmmakers to receive funding unless they want to make films aligned with the state's ideology.

Farrell agrees with Guenni Bravo's analysis in that she recognizes the regime's use of the cinematographic institutions for political ends. However, her detailed study of the institutional architecture indicates a considerable gap between policy intent and policy outcome. She confirms Aguirre and Bisbal's earlier analysis that the state's policy is incoherent. Consequently and despite the state's attempts to use the sector instrumentally to transform society, Venezuelan cinema enjoys a relative autonomy. While policy incoherence and the

²⁶ To my knowledge, the state has not relied on censorship as a means of control. The government tried to stop the screening of one Venezuelan film in 1961 (Molina, 2001: 53) and two foreign film were censored in 1965 and 1972 (Winner, 1976: 13). Villazana (2008: 168-169) reports the exhibition of *Secuestro express* (2005) was prohibited after Rafael Cabrices, a man negatively portrayed in the film, took legal action against it.

slow management of a bulky system damage the sector's stability and predictability, they also insulate the films from state control. In Farrell's own words, the "bureaucratic labyrinth of film initiatives also protects a level of artistic freedom. The horizontally organized maze of five organizations makes complete control over the various programs sponsored by the National Film Platform nearly impossible" (Farrell, 2011: 201). This is evident in the funding of films that have been critical of Chavismo. Since the institutions constituting the Platform have different relationships to the state, different funding sources, and since they can choose to work together or not, they are in effect difficult to manage (Farrell, 2011: 36). She further sees the Cuban system that the Venezuelan system is modeled after as a hierarchical top-down model where the institutional design allows for an easier management of the actors.

El viejo cine in Mexico

Mexican popular films were not a part of *el nuevo cine* movement. Rather, I make the case that the films I analyze from 1980 through 1999 continued a tradition where Mexican cinema has offered ideological support to the state. The purpose of the following section is to situate this claim in the literature on Mexican films, and point to historical reasons for how the conditions of Mexican film production came to favor private companies. The 'old' cinema that *el nuevo cine* was to depart from was to a large extent a Mexican classical cinema that had become so popular that "the three decade long cinematic presence of the Mexican cinema on Latin American screens began to be perceived as an extension of the cultural imperialism epitomized by Hollywood" (López, 1994: 11). By virtue of its commercial success on the continent and a long history of now classical productions, Mexican cinema has always been a case apart in Latin America. When the rest of the continent rebelled against this old cinema, Mexican films from the 1960s through the 1980s were "disassociated from the principal cinematic trends of the continent" (López, 1994: 7). The Venezuelan case indicates Mexican cinema's popularity. Several Venezuelan observers note the Mexican influence on Venezuelan filmmakers; Wallerstein is of Mexican origin and Chalbaud in particular was inspired by the classical Mexican films (King, 1990: 217; Molina, 2001: 470; Naranjo, 1984: 15). Most feature-length productions until 1975 were coproductions with Mexico, and only Mexico could compete with Hollywood before the 1980s (Marrosu, 1997: 38; Molina, 1997: 69).

The Mexican impact owes itself to the enduring influence of Mexican 'old' cinema, or the Golden Age of classical Mexican cinema that lasted roughly between 1935 and 1955 (Monsiváis, 1993: 144). The first Mexican film was produced in 1897 (García Riera, 1998:

22), and as in Venezuela the Mexican state used films actively in the following decades for propaganda (Bonfil, 1994: 12). However, there were few productions until the 1930s when a combination of US educated Mexican directors, state protectionism, and ample funding made the Golden Age possible (Ramírez Berg, 1992: 14-15).

The literature agrees that the Golden Age cinema worked to strengthen the state's hegemony, a claim it substantiates by analyzing how the films contributed to creating national identity (Chávez, 2010; Dever, 2003; Felipe Coria, 2005; Híjar Serrano, 2009; López, 1993; Monsiváis, 1993; 2001: 308, 2010; Monsiváis & Bonfil, 1994; Noble, 2005; Ramírez Berg, 1992). In contrast to Venezuelan scholarship's focus on marginalization, the nexus between identity and nation is the principal research question of the literature on Mexican cinema. Scholars ask how films approach identity and gender, gender relations in the family, and how a unified and happy family led by a patriarchal father works as an allegory for a strong Mexican nation (cf. in particular Dever, 2003; López, 1993; Monsiváis, 1985: 239, 1993; 2001, 2010: 313; Ramírez Berg, 1992). In the words of Monsiváis, "the foundation of Mexican cinema is an implicit and explicit idea: the *nation* is an extension of the *family*, the *family* is the truest representation of the *nation*. Such nationalism is simultaneously useful and deplorable, real and calumnious, false and true. It is the expression of an autocratic State, a result of the political and social weakness of a majority who accept whatever might bring them together" (1985: 239, emphasis in the original).

I understand the literature's focus on identity as a vehicle for nation building against the backdrop of what Knight terms the 'peculiarities of Mexican history' in the wake of the 1910 Revolution (Knight, 1992). Knight's argument is not that the Mexican state needed to create a national identity to strengthen its own hegemony more than other Latin American states, but rather that it enjoyed a relative success in the endeavor. Out of the revolution grew a political system that proved more resilient and stable than other Latin American regimes (Knight, 1992: 104, 2010). The Mexican state became a one-party regime led by the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI, Institutional Revolutionary Party). The PRI regime kept the influence of the military at bay, and avoided significant challenges from social movements or political parties from the left. Knight emphasizes that while it preserved the interests of Mexican capitalists, it was never their managerial committee. PRI thus ruled through a negotiated alliance with the economic elite and organized labor (Haber et al., 2008: 18; Knight, 1992: 132).

The Mexican state of the Golden Age could thus govern with a comparatively high degree of legitimacy. The revolution was a 'myth' in that it did not deliver on its progressive

promises to the peasants and workers it exalted in official rhetoric, but as a credible myth it worked to strengthen the regime's ability to rule by consent (Knight, 2010). Knight (1992: 193) attributes the success of the revolution to the regime's progressive and egalitarian rhetoric, and he highlights how it instrumentally invested in popular culture together with schools to bolster its hegemony. The task facing the revolutionaries was to construct a new Mexican identity: a new man, a new woman, and above all a new child (Knight, 1994: 395). He further stresses the importance of the credibility of the myth of the Mexican Revolution: since economic stability allowed for a perception of PRI delivering at least on parts of its promises, the state's hegemony remained relatively strong (Knight, 2010).

As Noble and Ramírez Berg emphasize, the Mexican state that arose from the 1910 Revolution existed only as a political entity, that is, as a state superimposed on society. Following Knight's analysis and carrying it over into the Golden Age, Noble succinctly summarizes the task at hand for the state-builders of the regime:

in the eyes of its [PRI's] representatives, the unleashed power of the masses needed to be harnessed to the strongly centralist project of nation-state. The masses required education. They needed to be secularized and to learn to identify with the 'nation', whose manifestations, in turn, had to reflect the masses back to themselves. Furthermore, the masses had to leave their traditional practices and allegiances in the local community behind and to be inducted into the ways of the modern nation in pursuit of capitalist development with its associate social forms. In short, they had to be modernized (Noble, 2005: 10).

Mexican cinema was a central instrument in this project. The Golden Age cinema supported the state's hegemony by representing the family in accordance with patriarchal and *machista* values and by supporting a capitalist framework (Aviña, 2004: 137; Dever, 2003; Monsiváis, 1993; Ramírez Berg, 1992). As Mexican society changed after the Second World War, modernizing gender roles became more important than conserving them (López, 1993; Noble, 2005: 106; Ramírez Berg, 1992).

The Golden Age films became highly successful. Their plots relied on the compositional options provided by Hollywood, but their stories remained distinctly Mexican in that they referred to a Mexican mythology, music and history (Felipe Coria, 2005: 53; Monsiváis, 1993: 141; Ramírez Berg, 1992: 15-16). As Felipe Coria (2005: 53) observes, the task of presenting 'Mexican' stories was facilitated by the fact that "*ya existía una filosofía visual de lo mexicano, una mitología de lo nacional y un pensamiento narrativo perfectamente estructurado*" [a Mexican visual philosophy, a national mythology and a perfectly structured narrative thought already existed]. This mythology drew on the country's mixed heritage to create the figure of the *mestizo*, a combination of the country's indigenous and Spanish cultures, as the foundation of Mexican identity. Monsiváis argues that it was primarily

national cinema that gave the Mexican culture propagated by the Mexican state content and substance, and that “between 1935 and 1955 [...] it was the cinema more than any other cultural instrument that brought pleasures and prejudices up to date, and reshaped the notion of Mexican national identity by turning nationalism into a great show” (Monsiváis, 1993: 144). Monsiváis (2010: 314-315) further contends that the films of the Golden Age recreated the revolution by forging a new image of the 1910 movement as a pedagogical tool to remind the audience what the revolution really was about. He further describes the match between the official version and cinematographic representation of the revolution as a perfect one:

la revolución deviene en acontecimiento filmico. Y en medio de una enseñanza histórica superficial (fechas y discursos) la versión oficial y pública de la Revolución Mexicana termina siendo la del cine [...]. Allí se erige la única visión global aprobada, ordenada o consentida oficialmente del movimiento de 1910. Con ademán casi mecánico, productores, directores y argumentistas desechan las interpretaciones y los sucesos no traducibles en secuencias de eficacia, comercial. De modo contradictorio pero inexorable, se efectúa el despojo: en el robo, se evapora el sentido político (radical o no) de la Revolución. No importa demasiado. El cine ha encontrado el camino para organizar financieramente el interés mundial y nacional por los sucesos violentos de un país exótico (con lo que se fomente el turismo interno). No hay duda: La Revolución Mexicana es el producto más auténtico, más emocionante de América Latina. ¿Por qué no industrializarla? Al fin y al cabo es una idea abstracta (Monsiváis, 2001: 159).

[the revolution turns into a filmic event. And in the midst of a superficial historical lesson (dates and speeches) the official and public version of the Mexican Revolution ends up being that of the cinema [...]. There, the only universally approved vision gets established, officially ordered or permitted by the movement from 1910. In an almost mechanical gesture, producers, directors, and scriptwriters reject the interpretations and events that are not translatable into effective and commercial sequences. The looting is carried out in a contradictory but firm manner: in the robbery, the political meaning (radical or not) of the Revolution evaporates. It does not matter too much. The cinema has encountered the way to financially organize global and national interests of the violent events of an exotic country (thereby promoting domestic tourism). There is no doubt: the Mexican Revolution is the most authentic and most thrilling Latin American product. Why not industrialize it? It is at any rate an abstract idea].

Just like Knight stresses that the PRI hegemony rested on its ability to deliver materially, Ramírez Berg emphasizes that the Golden Age narratives about the splendor of Mexico enjoyed a degree of credibility. Put simply, the films presented an idyllic picture of Mexico in a period where the country was experiencing economic growth, a perceived Mexican ‘miracle’, and could as such pass as credible (Knight, 1992, 2010: 231; Monsiváis, 1985: 237; Ramírez Berg, 1992: 4).

This perceived miracle ended around 1982, when a debt crisis put a definitive end to an economic model of import substitution industrialization that had been under stress for some time (Knight, 2010: 231). PRI’s hegemony had already started to crack, and a number of observers point to the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre as a tipping point (Costello, 2005: 36; King, 1990: 136; Maciel, 2001: 88; Noble, 2005: 19; Ramírez Berg, 1992: 42). Soldiers opened fire on a student demonstration only ten days before the Olympic Games were held in Mexico City, killing hundreds and making clear that the economic “miracle had a brutal, coercive

underside” (Ramírez Berg, 1992: 4). Moving into the 1980s, the basis for the state’s hegemonic rule continued to falter as the principal victims of the economic crisis were the same people that official rhetoric exalted as the glorious foundation of the Mexican nation (Haber et al., 2008: 55). What Knight (2010: 264) terms the gulf between “rhetoric and practice” of the revolution thus widened further.

The Golden Age ended in the 1950s when over-protective labor unions barred off innovation and new talents. As the films became formulaic repetitions on earlier success recipes, they lost the loyalty of the middle and upper class audience, and Mexican cinema went into a period of crisis (Monsiváis, 2010: 346-347; Ramírez Berg, 1992: 6). Mexican state-sponsored cinema has since been a roller-coaster marked by six-year intervals of relative success or failure. With each new *sexenio*, a new president has introduced a policy reform, only for the next president to introduce a new set of reforms. The *sexenio* system has thus created an inherently instable infrastructure for state-financed productions (Ayala Blanco, 2001: 15; Felipe Coria, 2005: 14-15; García Riera, 1998; King, 1990: 129; Maciel, 2001: 342; Noble, 2005: 21). Felipe Coria (2005: 14-15) ascribes this instability to the wish of Mexican presidents to leave a personal imprint on the Mexican film history.

The *sexenios* of Luis Echeverría (1970-1976) and José López Portillo (1976-1982) illustrate how this instability affected who came to produce the most popular movies in the 1980s. Echeverría’s *sexenio* produced a large number of state-sponsored films, and was a short boom period characterized by liberal policy and ample funding (Carro, 1990: 2; García Riera, 1998: 278-299; Ramírez Berg, 1992). The literature characterizes López Portillo’s *sexenio* as one of the worst ever in terms of infrastructural support, which undid several of Echeverría’s achievements (King, 1990: 141). López Portillo placed his sister Margarita López Portillo in charge of the cinema sector, and under her rule several state institutions were dismantled, the Cinemateca went up in flames and with it one of the continent’s most important film archives was lost (Costello, 2005: 33).

These two *sexenios* paved way for the virtual dominance of private productions among Mexican box office hits. Echeverría lifted price control on the tickets in movie theaters, thereby making it possible for private companies to make a profit (García Riera, 1998: 305). As a result, 87 percent of the films produced between 1980 and 1989 were privately funded (calculated on the basis of Ugalde, 1994: 59). The presidency of Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988) tried to resurrect state productions, and he established Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (IMCINE, the Mexican Film Institute) in 1983. Despite initial optimism, the state-funded productions of the decade were “*un desastre en la taquilla y recibieron criticas*

muy severas” [a disaster in the box office and received very severe critiques] (Maciel, 2001: 306). García Riera (1998: 330) attributes this failure to Mexico’s difficult economic situation following the 1982 debt crisis and a slow state bureaucracy. Ugalde (1994: 47) observes that the state slowly dismantled its institutions for producing films over the decade, as evident in a decline of state financed production in the 1980s. Against this pessimistic view and with the benefit of hindsight, Noble (2005: 21) contends that IMCINE slowly rebuilt state-financed Mexican cinema to a stronger position. Almost ten years after its establishment, IMICINE coproduced a blockbuster with *Como agua para chocolate* (1992), and several observers consider the film a turning that opened the eyes of private and state producers to the possibility of making commercially successful ‘quality’ films (García Riera, 1998: 365; Maciel, 2001: 322; Miranda López, 2006: 48; Rodríguez, 2012: 88). It is however not until the last decade that state-funded films become popular enough to be included in my analysis.

The cinematographic arm of the media conglomerate Televisa, Televisine, is the most important of the private Mexican producers (Arbeláez, 2001: 637; Ayala Blanco, 2001: 6; García Riera, 1998: 307; King, 1990: 140; Miranda López, 2006; Ugalde, 1994: 45). Ugalde notes that Televisa strengthened its position in the 1980s vis-à-vis other private producers, and by the end of the decade it enjoyed a superior position. 16 of the 33 Mexican films I analyze in this thesis were produced fully or partially by Televisa. Miranda López and Arbeláez (2001: 643) note that Televisine’s success in the 1980s was based on films catered to a working class audience in Mexico and Latino immigrants in the United States, with characters and themes drawn from their everyday lives. Ugalde (1994: 45) and Carro (1990: 3) further emphasize that the publicity Televisa could give the Televisine films ensured them a visibility that not even Hollywood distributors could afford to compete with. Miranda López quotes the founder of Televisa, Emilio Azcarraga Milmo, whose statement says as much about the company’s vision for their films as the literature’s assessment of its productions. Televisine made films for the lower middle class to

sacarles de su triste realidad y su difícil futuro. Los ricos como yo no somos clientes, porque no compramos ni madre. Nuestro mercado es la clase media popular, una clase modesta muy jodida [...] que no va a salir de jodida (in Miranda López, 2006: 55).

[bring them out of their sad reality and difficult future. The rich like me are not customers, because we do not buy enough. Our market is that of the lower middle class, a modest and very screwed class (...) that won’t escape their screwed position].

The impact of *el nuevo cine*

Throughout the period from the 1960s to through the 1980s, Mexican *nuevo cine* remained marginal next to the mass-appeal of commercial private films. As Ramírez Berg notes, a

group of directors, writers, and intellectuals formed a group in 1958 that published a manifesto and a journal. Ramírez Berg argues that notwithstanding the critical initial appearance of these films, “many of the most overtly political movies of the Nuevo Cine are among the most ideologically compromised. Superficially revolutionary but fundamentally reactionary, they perform as would be expected from products of the state-funded industry, continuing to articulate ruling-class dogma as most Mexican movies have done” (Ramírez Berg, 1992: 182). Chávez (2010: 128) supports this analysis, and maintains that despite some critically minded directors, Mexico did not have the likes of Glauber Rocha or Fernando Birri.

Monsiváis, one of the Mexican *nuevo cine* group’s founding members and most influential voices in extant literature, describes the task of a Mexican cinema in service of liberation as a rejection of the Golden Age. In his own words, “if this [Mexican] cinema seeks to be an effective tool for liberation, it must begin by betraying its past, the expectations of its audience, its imposed destiny, its tradition, its shameful history which, despite everything, is not devoid of very pleasant and redeemable moments” (Monsiváis, 1985: 246). Mexican *nuevo cine* lived through a short second ‘Golden Age’ under Echeverría’s *sexenio*, but found itself without funding when López Portillo assumed power and the movement became marginalized (Carro, 1990: 4; Ramírez Berg, 1992: 29-30). Carro emphasizes the difficult financial situation of independent filmmakers in the 1980s. With the devaluation of the peso, the cost of necessary equipment purchased in dollars increased a hundredfold. The total cost per film increased by between 20 and 30 percent (Ugalde, 1994: 49). Whereas the two most important directors of Televisine produced about 59 films over the decade, most *nuevo cine* directors only produced one or two (Carro, 1990: 5).

Yet *el nuevo cine* has had profound impact on the historiography of Mexican cinema. The literature approaches the films with questions and ideals that are clearly influenced by *el nuevo cine*. This is both similar and different to the scholarship on Venezuelan cinema. Whereas Venezuelan commentators chide the films for not living up to the ideals of *el nuevo cine*, they concede that the majority of the films at least attempted to present a critical vision. In Mexico, the literature finds no such attempt among the most popular films. Monsiváis (1993: 146) appraises Latin American filmmakers outside Mexico for evidencing a “sincerity, which I would define in this context as the inability to keep themselves at a distance, physically or culturally, from their audience.” Following Monsiváis’ affinity for social criticism, most of the Mexican observers operate with a normative approach distinguishing between ‘good’ critical films and ‘bad’ commercial films. Monsiváis’ condemnation of the vast majority of Mexican films is symptomatic of the literature in general:

que las excepciones nos perdonen y nos rediman, pero la historia del cine mexicano ha sido la acumulación de una enorme basura [y] la defensa de los intereses más reaccionarios, y la manipulación primitiva (Monsiváis, 2001: 153).

[may the exceptions excuse and redeem us, but the history of Mexican cinema has been the accumulation of an enormous (amount of) trash (and) the defense of the most reactionary interests, and primitive manipulation].

Critics discuss the majority of the films I analyze from 1980 to 1999 in similar terms. As Ugalde (1994) observes, the literature operates with a normative approach that disregards private production offhand. He notes that Mexican cinema has routinely been diagnosed as going through a crisis or even pronounced dead by critics who ignore the sturdy state of Mexican cinema “*por confundir la ausencia de calidad (según determinado criterio) con la inexistencia de la producción*” [because (they) confuse the absence of quality (according to a predetermined criterion) with the inexistence of production] (Ugalde, 1994: 41). In this vein, the literature characterizes the majority of the Mexican films as superficial, profit-driven, repetitive, and of zero artistic value. The films represent everything *el nuevo cine* protested against, as they imitate Hollywood’s styles and genres, and align themselves with the interests of the most reactionary economic and political elites of Mexico and the Mexican state in particular. To illustrate, Foster claims that “the cinematic production in the 1980s, in terms of artistic merit and interpretive content, is nothing short of dreadful, and few products from the period hold more than passing interest for in-depth analysis” (2002: viii). Ramírez Berg more politely contrasts what he terms “seriously intentioned” films with the “formulaic entertainments” as a way to compare the political message between quality films and commercial films (1992: 7).

Critics chide privately produced films in particular, since they only aim at profit and not social criticism. As García Riera (1998: 305) claims, “*los productores privados encontraron muy redituable la fabricación de un cine protopornográfico y populachero al que haré el favor de llamar lépero*” [the private producers found the fabrication of a proto-pornographic and plebian cinema, to which I will do the favor of calling vulgar, very profitable]. Similarly, Maciel (2001: 297, 305) considers privately produced films to be of little interest, cheap entertainment, repetitive, and degrading. Miranda López describes the Televisine productions as “*películas de bajo riesgo, de bajo presupuestos, atinándole a la taquilla; inventado sus fórmulas, aprendiendo de oídas y copiándole a cintas exitosas...*” [low-risk films, with small budgets, targeting the box office; inventing its formulas, learning from rumors and copying its (own) successful films] (Miranda López, 2006: 26-27). Monsiváis attributes the commercial

success of the Mexican film industry to, among other things, the “backwardness of its spectators” (Monsiváis, 1985: 236).

With her article ‘Tears and desire. Women and melodrama in the “old” Mexican cinema’, López provides one of the first contributions to Mexican film scholarship that avoids the Manichean terms of the debate that *el nuevo cine* had created (editors' introduction 1993: 147). She argues about the literature on the Golden Age that

the characterization of the ‘old’ cinema as ideologically complicit and servile to the interests of the dominant classes, albeit many ways justified, was too broad, ignoring the subtleties and differences of cinematic practices, their audiences, and this cinema’s tremendous popular appeal (López, 1993: 148).

According to López, critics created a straw-man critique of the classical films and thereby failed to recognize their distinctly Mexican character and to theorize why they managed to become so popular. As López points out, the proponents of *el nuevo cine* in Mexico were worried about how easy it was for ‘old’ cinema films to influence collective consciousness, and could only account for their popularity as bad taste. Distrustful of the mass appeal of mass media, they “were unable to see in the popularity of the melodrama anything but the alienation of a mass audience controlled by the dominant classes’ capitalist interests” (López, 1993: 148).

I find the same distrust of the mass appeal of private films in the literature about the period from 1980 to the present. An underlying assumption is that a progressive quality film must remain marginal. If it is not, it is a sell-out. If the characters and situations do not deviate from established social norms, the film fails as a social critique. This is the implication of Foster’s criticism of *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*:

if Tomás or one of the other characters, perhaps one of the women, had turned out to be bisexual or gay, the analysis of sex and gender roles would have assumed a more biting or harder edged. As it stands, men and woman yelling at each other and Tomás’s promoting sex on the dining room floor as an antidote to bourgeois doldrums are not quite as interesting as they might be in the context of contemporary Mexico City and hip Polanco (Foster, 2002: 43).

Similarly, Miranda López (2006: 39) phrases his critique of Televisa's films in the 1980s in classist terms: “*se caracterizaban por una inversión mínima y por su nula calidad. Cine populachero para inmigrantes latinos en Estados Unidos, casi analfabetas*” [they were characterized by a minimal investment and their total lack of quality. Plebian cinema for Latin-American immigrants in the United States, almost alphabets].

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have prepared the ground for my analysis in the next four chapters by arguing for the relevance of *el nuevo cine* to understand the politics of popular films in

Venezuela and Mexico. I discussed the political ideals of the movement, most of important of which is the notion that a film should present a critical vision of the society it depicts. By critical is meant a relationship to ‘the people’ and an oppositional stance to the state and the economic elites that the state represents. I further made the case that the *el nuevo cine* came to influence the Venezuelan film tradition since the mid-1970s. In contrast, *el nuevo cine* did not leave a similar mark on the most popular Mexican films, largely because of the predominance of a private film industry. I further discussed how the ideals of *el nuevo cine* have influenced the normative approach characteristic of scholarship about Venezuelan and Mexican cinema.

Chapter three. The counter-hegemonic strategies of Venezuelan cinema 1980-1999

Introduction

This chapter analyzes the politics of the 23 most popular Venezuelan films between 1980 and 1999. I will argue that all but six of them were part of a cultural force that pulled Venezuelan politics in an ideological direction that favored a political project of radical change – *such as* Chavismo. The films from the period criticized Venezuelan society for the same things that official rhetoric since 1999 has done to distance itself from the state set up by the Punto Fijo pact.²⁷ The core message of Chavismo is that the state of the Punto Fijo democracy was oppressive, that the oil bonanza that financed it benefitted a small economic elite only, and that the state excluded the great majority of Venezuelans who lived in poverty in the barrios. Chávez argued throughout his political career that he was the president of the marginalized majority, and that his number one priority was to combat poverty and social inequality by redistributing the economic power in the country.

The purpose of this chapter is to argue that the dominant frame of Venezuelan films between 1980 and 1999 provided a similar vision of society as Chávez was to do later. The films portrayed the state as oppressive, its politics as benefitting the rich only, and the marginalized poor as the victims of the state. While it would be a stretch to argue that the films thus called for Chavismo, it is clear that they called for a political project promising to transform the then current system. I propose that an analysis of Venezuelan films gives insight into why Chávez had success with his radical rhetoric. As I will return to in the conclusion of the thesis, the films indicated the Venezuelan state's lack of authority and consent and the weakness of its hegemony.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the influence of a specific type of political film, the *nuevo cine* film. I proposed that *el nuevo cine* is not a clear-cut category of films, and that participation in the category is not a question of making films that look like the class films from the movement's founding period in the 1950s and 1960s. In this chapter, I further argue that the films in the dominant frame from 1980 to 1999 portrayed Venezuelan society in accordance with the ideals of *el nuevo cine*, especially through a sustained focus on

²⁷ The Punto Fijo pact was a signed agreement between the three major political parties in 1958. The parties promised to play by constitutional rules, and agreed on a common basic political framework they all would adhere to. As Smilde (2011: 1) notes, the pact gave rise to a political system that the literature saw as exceptionally stable and resilient to economic stress: "throughout the 1980s and 1990s political scientists were interested in Venezuela as a case study of an elite-pact 'second wave' democracy, which never broke down and seemed to be surviving the neoliberal era."

marginalization and a critical portrayal of the state. I term this frame ‘the crisis frame’, and I make the case that 17 of the 23 films analyzed participated in it. I further argue that the films in the crisis frame adhered to the ideals of *el nuevo cine*. I discuss the various ways the films participated in *el nuevo cine*, and I propose a definitional yardstick where presenting a critical vision of society and the dominant power structure draws the line between a *nuevo cine* film and a not-*nuevo cine* film.

The central argument of the chapter is that the crisis frame showed a Venezuela in need for political change. The films depict a Venezuela where the majority of the people are marginalized, and where an oil financed ‘system’ is at fault for excluding the poor. This system is dominated by an alliance of corrupt politicians, a rich and often criminal economic elite, and sometimes the media. The state protects and reproduces this system, notably through a legal system marked by impunity for those with the right contacts and family names and the brutal oppression of the marginalized majority through the police forces. Further, the media typically protects this structure, it protects a powerful political-economic elite in order to ensure the reelection of politicians. The only potential remedy to this crisis is represented by a few principled and courageous individuals in the police force or the media. They are however the odd ones out, because they do the right thing by facing blatant injustice even though doing so requires personal sacrifice and demands a selfless moral character.

The chapter is organized as follows. I first introduce my analysis with a close analysis of a scene that is symptomatic of the crisis frame and the way the films in it depict marginalization and the state as oppressive. By providing a detailed analysis and paying attention to precisely how the film communicates its message in the scene, my purpose is to illustrate what is a typical film for the period. This is an exercise that I repeat in the following analytical chapters as well, and the film-technical terms I employ are taken from Hayward (2006). Second, I analyze the films in the dominant frame, discuss the relationship of the films to *el nuevo cine* movement, and elaborate on what type of critique the definitional yardstick implies. I divide this analysis into two parts. The first part provides a discussion of the topics raised by the films, and the second part discusses their politics. I will argue that Venezuelan *nuevo cine* was counter-hegemonic by drawing attention to topics where the state had a low degree of legitimacy. Here, I will also discuss the points of agreement and disagreement in the frame. I will then briefly turn to the films outside *el nuevo cine*.

Framing poverty as marginalization

Macu: la mujer del policía (1987) is typical of films in the crisis frame that turn to marginalization and police violence to criticize the Venezuelan state of the time. I analyze a scene about thirty minutes into the film. The scene starts with a portrayal of an ordinary late evening in Caracas in the barrio of Chapellín. A wide shot shows a motorcycle speeding up a steep street so common in the barrios in the hills surrounding downtown Caracas. The motorcycle passes a group of teenagers hanging out and talking about their future. The topic revolves around the economic opportunities in the barrio, and what types of jobs are available. A young man states he is tired of high school: “*no voy más a ese liceo, me fastidia. No se aprende nada*” [I won’t go more to that high school, it pisses me off. You don’t learn anything]. Asked what he wants to do instead, he answers with slow diction: “*la guardia. Me voy a meter en la guardia*” [the National Guard. I’ll sign up for the National Guard].

The statement provokes a discussion among the friends. *La guardia* is the Venezuelan equivalent of the National Guard, and its members perform activities usually conducted by regular police forces such as manning road blocks. It is evident from the conversation that everyone understands and sympathizes with the reasons for joining *la guardia*: it is a safe and readily available way of escaping the poverty of the barrio. Similarly, the counterarguments also appeal to common knowledge. One boy protests by pointing out they will take advantage of him: “*¿Tú estás loco? Allí te tratan como perro, pana. Lo que hacen es sacarte la chicha*” [are you crazy? They’ll treat you like shit. They’ll exploit you]. The counterargument does not convince the young man, who says he has made up his mind because joining *la guardia* makes economic sense: “*me sacarán la chicha, pero me dan papa. Tengo donde vivir. Me enseñan y me pagan. Me resuelvo*” [they exploit me, but they feed me. I’ll have a place to live. They teach me and they pay me. I’ll sort myself out].

The second line of objection from his friends is that in *la guardia* he will end up mistreating other people. The claim is that state representatives are people with a license to abuse others, and *la guardia* is no exception. Being a part of *la guardia* is just as bad as being a police: “*está bien pana, pero ser guardia es lo mismo que ser policía. Estos tipos que están apoyados para hacer lo que les dan la gana, ¿o no?*” [that’s fine my friend, but being a *guardia* is the same as being police. Those guys are paid to do whatever they feel like doing, no?]. A third boy, one of the protagonists of the film, intervenes in the discussion and assures everyone that nobody from their group will leave to join *la guardia*. He appeals to the solidarity among the inhabitants of the barrio: “*nosotros vamos a quedar juntos. Este chamo no se va a ir*” [we’ll stick together. This guy won’t leave].

The conversation is interrupted when three or four police cars accompanied by motorcycles arrive to raid the barrio, and the events that ensue confirm the referral to the police as oppressive. As soon as people see the police cars, they start running away. The police target everyone, and everyone responds with a habitual fear of the police. Armed police officers start rounding up people at random, ransacking them. People scream, and the camera follows two of the teenagers, the male and female protagonists, in their flight. The fast-paced music, close-ups of running legs, and gunshots fired in the background make the environment tense and underline the seriousness of the situation. The camera angles shift between showing the police from the point of view of the youths – the armed police officers charging towards the camera, the camera follows the youths running away – to high-angled wide shots giving the audience an overview of the situation. The audience thus sees how the police trap three of the boys, and a police officer makes them stop at gun point. The music accompanying the chase stops as the officer points his gun at the youths, and only the sound of insects in the background can be heard. The police gather the teenagers, search them, and bring most of them to the station for questioning. The officer in charge who detained the three boys walks towards the camera with a machine gun in his right hand, partially covering a graffiti of Che Guevara's familiar face and a quote by the revolutionary leader: "*los que mueren por la vida no pueden llamarse muertos* [those who die for life cannot call themselves dead].

The police officer is after one boy in particular. In fact, he staged the whole raid just to get his personal revenge against the lover of his young wife. Smiling and visibly content with being in a position to physically dominate the teenage boy, he ransacks him. The boy is defiant, but his heavy breathing and body language reveal his fear. The officer makes no attempt to conceal his true purpose, and asks him if "*¿a ti te gusta que te quiten la mujer?*" [do you like that they take your woman away from you?] as he hits him with the butt of his gun between his shoulder blades, steals his wallet, and hits him again. The officer grabs the boy by the neck and tells him to walk with him. It is not immediately clear what happens afterwards. Only later the audience learns that the three boys have been killed by the officer.

The police raid depicted in *Macu* is illustrative of two major elements in the crisis frame. First, it presents a typical portrayal of marginalization in Venezuelan films in the 1980s and the 1990s. The poor are presented as excluded, and they are poor because there are hardly any jobs available. The conversation in the beginning revolves around the lack of economic opportunities for the marginalized youths living in the barrio. The assumptions at work in the discussion about the pros and cons of joining *la guardia* are significant in this context, because the film takes it for granted that both the youths and the audience share a common

knowledge about why the boy wants to join. This element is what I term ‘poverty as a trap’ in the following pages. *Macu* together with seven other films in the crisis frame show how marginalization implies a social situation that it is impossible to leave. It is thus not incidental that the only teenager who has a career plan that would offer him a way out of the barrio is one of the three boys killed by the police officer. The fact that the police officer himself lives in the barrio indicates that the plan of joining *la guardia* is realistic. At the same time, the scene indicates the film’s pronounced sympathy with the youths of the barrio. *Macu* is dedicated to the “*barrio de Chapellín y su hermosa gente*” [Chapellín barrio and its beautiful people], and it attempts to tell the story from the point of view of the people living there. The camera position showing the police raid from their perspective is significant in this context. The conversation in the beginning further serves to point to the lack of employment opportunities as an underlying reason for the poverty of the barrio. It is clear why the boy wants to leave an educational system where he does not learn anything, and that *la guardia* makes economic sense given the limited range of opportunities in the barrio. The conversation further reveals that beyond the economic challenges facing the youths, barrio life is characterized by solidarity and loyalty. The statement ‘we’ll stick together’ implies that the friends will help each other out, a solidarity and group feeling that is the main resource of the barrio. When characters from the barrio fail it is not – as some Venezuelan films since 2000 have implied – because they as poor people are naturally inclined to crime, but because they are victims of a society system that excludes them. The graffiti of Che Guevara is significant in this context, because it signals a leftist political intention on part of the film, and that Che’s political ideals are relevant to the everyday struggles facing the youths.

The second element in the crisis frame is the negative portrayal of the state as represented by the police, which *Macu* employs together with thirteen other films in the crisis frame. In contrast to their Mexican contemporaries, no films of the period showed the police as a force that works on behalf of the citizens. The barrio raid is shown as experienced by the inhabitants of the barrio; as an attack of a ‘them’ against an ‘us’. Apart from the officer who orchestrates and directs the raid, none of the police officers in the scene have a function or character traits beyond entering the barrio and rounding up the teenagers. The police treat the youths as a mass, they arrest indiscriminately, and their violence is arbitrary. The fact that the raid is led by an officer who lives in the barrio and who abuses his position for his own personal benefit illustrates the claim that the police can ‘do whatever they feel like doing’.

The dominant frame of Venezuelan *nuevo cine*: a corrupt state and marginalization

Criticizing the state in the 1980s

The 1980s was a productive decade for Venezuelan cinema, with ten box office successes with more than 500 000 numbers of viewers, and the average for my selection is 757 841 (see appendix one). The decade started with five films criticizing the state and the economic elites. Three of these, *Cangrejo* (1982), *Cangrejo 2* (1984), and *Homicidio culposo* (1984), define the crisis through impunity and the poor quality of the judicial state and the rule of law. In all three, an individual police officer's vain struggle for justice highlights the personal cost of doing the right thing in the face of the injustice of the system.

The two *Cangrejo* films are the most politically explicit among the three. The term *cangrejo* is a used by the Venezuelan police to refer to criminal cases where the culprit goes free because of political or economic pressure on the investigation (Izaguirre, 1983: 30). Both films narrate murder cases where the 'system' – the minister of justice, the police director, and news media – pressures the police officer in charge of the investigation not to press charges when he finds hard evidence linking the crime to people with political connections. In *Cangrejo*, a group of rich adolescents kidnap and eventually murder a young boy from their own social milieu to pay a relatively small drug related debt. The father of the boy knows the director of the police personally, who, unaware of the political ramifications the case will assume, orders a substantial investigation. The officer in charge, inspector León, discovers that the culprits are “*chavitos del este*” [kids from the east], that is, from the affluent part of Caracas. As he makes a number of arrests, with intertitles highlighting their social background, the system starts pressuring him to back down. Thanks to the family backgrounds of the arrested youths, the inspector thus sets in motion a media campaign against the PTJ²⁸ and the parents of the arrested youths call the minister of justice to complain. The parents of the arrested youths make a deal to support the opposition in an upcoming election campaign in exchange for help with their children once the election has been won. Politicians and news media complain publically that the police harass the children of decent and honorable families instead of doing their job of keeping ordinary criminals in check.

Inspector León is a principled man committed to the values of integrity, democracy, and the equality of all in front of the law. As I will make clear in this and the next chapter, the principled investigator is a stock character in Venezuelan cinema. The principled investigator

²⁸ *Cuerpo Técnico de Policía Judicial*, replaced by *Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas* (CICPC) in 2011.

is a solitary character who stands up for justice no matter what. In this way, he represents a response to one of the central dilemmas explored by Venezuelan cinema: how an individual should react in the face of injustice when doing the right thing is difficult and requires a personal cost. Following what the reader will recognize as a typical response of the principled investigator, León tells his superior he will not back down from the case, and finds hard evidence supporting his accusations. Despite paying a personal cost of risking his career and struggling with a wife who feels neglected because he works too much, León's only objective is to fulfill justice. The film explicitly indicates his moral and political stance several times. It introduces him as a lecturer at the police academy, where he effectively delivers a two-minute lecture on the importance of the rule of law and the need for police in a democratic society. He explains his students that the duty of the police is to ensure that the state functions as it should, and that without a state there is no order. The state is a social necessity inasmuch as if

no existe Estado, no existe orden. ¿Qué se entiende por orden? La sujeción de todos los ciudadanos a la ley. Y 'todos' implica sin distinción a ideologías políticas, creencias religiosas y clases sociales. Ricos, pobres, igualados por ley.

[there is no state, there is no order. And what is understood by order? The subjection of all citizens to the law. And 'all' implies no distinction to political ideologies, religious beliefs, and social classes. Rich and poor, equal by law].

The film shows him putting this theory into practice. When offered a bribe by the uncle of the kidnapped boy, León takes offence and explains that he is a representative of the state: “*a mi y a mi personal nos paga el Estado para hacer esto*” [the state pays me and my personnel to do this].

The *Cangrejo* films show that Venezuelan reality does not hold up to the democratic ideals León lectures at the academy. The scene where he delivers his lecture serves to signal the discrepancy between theory and practice, as a colleague informs León about how a rich person managed to avoid jail even though the inspector had proved he had killed his wife. The camera zooms in on the blackboard, where León has written *rico / pobre*, indicating that in practice, rich and poor are not equal by law. That the violence against the poor at the police station stands in contrast to the treatment of the rich kids, and further illustrates this practice. The case ends as a *cangrejo*: León is taken off the case, and those among his arrested suspects with the right political connections walk free.

Cangrejo 2 repeats the same narrative of impunity for those with political connections. This time the murderer is a priest who rapes and murders his sister. The same investigator León finds hard evidence against the priest, and again political pressure spoils the case. León

must again pay a personal cost by sticking to his democratic principles, by risking his career and by working so much that his marriage suffers. The police director tells the inspector that he should not take a priest to court, since the publicity of the case will hurt the image of the government and Venezuela is full of sadistic poor criminals that could serve the sentence. Both the bishop and the minister of justice intervene personally to protect the priest. While the priest does end up in jail, a voice-over informs he is released after three years, four months and 15 days.

With more than 1,3 million viewers, *Homicidio culposo* (1984) is the most popular film in Venezuela to date. It presents a similar picture of a legal system characterized by impunity. Again, the narrative tells a story of an individual police investigator's futile fight for justice against a system he cannot defeat. He too sees himself as a representative of the state and a guarantee for the rule of law, and his principles are also defeated by the police director. He pays a personal cost by risking his career, and he loses his wife to a car salesman because he works too much.

The murder case in *Homicidio culposo* is no *cangrejo* as there is no political pressure from above intervening in the case, and the narrative faults the legal system for incompetency rather than corruption. In the words of the protagonist, “*no hay ley*” [there is no law]. The murder in *Homicidio culposo* is motivated by jealousy, and executed in such a way that an innocent woman gets accused and charged. As there is sufficient circumstantial evidence to satisfy the judges in a court, the legal system is content. When the principled investigator takes a personal decision to help the woman and find the murderer, the police director takes him off the case. The film ends tragically. Suspended from the force, the investigator gathers sufficient evidence to prove her innocence, only to learn that she has just committed suicide.

Retén de Catia (1984) continues the negative portrayal of the legal system, but adds a number of elements to its critique of the state. Here, the police and the courts are principally a weapon in the state's coercive attempts to control popular discontent in a country marked by political violence, social unrest, and solidarity with the people living in Latin America's dictatorships. The film presents its characters with the same moral dilemma facing the principled investigators in the previous three films. The characters deal with a situation where ‘the system’ is clearly corrupt and morally indefensible, and well aware of this situation due to the state's excessive use of brute force, they must choose how to react. As in the above films, choosing a principled stance and fighting for justice implies a significant personal cost and risk.

The Venezuela depicted in *Retén de Catia* is in a significantly worse state than in the films described above, in that the film highlights a greater number of elements contributing to the crisis. Whereas the above films focus on the legal system, *Retén de Catia* draws attention to a number of other structural issues and it does not feature any good, principled individuals within the state institutions who fight for justice from the inside. The representation of the state is one-sidedly negative. The faults of the state institutions in *Retén de Catia* are many, but all point to a dire need for political action against the state. Indicative of a general mood of unrest and discontent, the film starts by depicting a number of large demonstrations for better wages. The police shoot dead a student demonstrator, and the story revolves around the reactions of three friends of the murdered student, which, in turn, represent three stereotypical responses to the political upheaval facing Venezuela. These stereotypes illustrate the complexity of the situation and the difficulty of finding an appropriate reaction. In the last analysis, the film suggests that the only incorrect response is inaction and apathy. *Retén de Catia* thus does not tell its audience how to react, but aims to demonstrate the necessity of a reaction and taking a political stance.

A taxi driver witnessing the demonstration shown in the opening scene represents the first stereotype. He delivers the film's first line, commenting on the futility of the demonstration. He sees politics as a matter of no concern or relevance to him; although he agrees with the common knowledge that "*este país lo jodió la política*" [politics screwed up this country], he proudly and clearly proclaims that he does not care, as "*lo mio es puro mujeres*" [I'm only into women]. Chatting on the taxi stands, his colleagues both share and contest his position. Some judge Venezuela to be in a good state, since it is a democracy with a legal system that punishes criminals. Socialism is the only alternative considered among the taxi drivers. Those who support the status quo of Venezuela protest that socialism prohibits private property and takes the children away from their parents. Others disagree, claiming that Venezuela's legal system is corrupt, that socialist states do not kill their citizens indiscriminately, and that they erase poverty. The conversations reveal that although representing a common reaction, the taxi driver must also defend and explain his happy-go-lucky attitude.

The two other stereotypes represent two types of political reactions, the student activist and the militant guerilla fighter. The student activist is altruistic and primarily motivated by doing and being good. His activism is directed at immediate and clearly identifiable problems, such as the murder of his friend. He and his girlfriend teach literacy to inhabitants of a barrio, they are not interested in party politics, and they do not ask questions about structural change. He gets arrested, and spends time being tortured and violently interrogated by police officers

who wrongly assume that he belongs to a political movement. He is teased by his fellow prison inmates, who laugh at his political activism and yet gradually accept him as an eccentric poetic type. Their goal is to make “*burda, burda de billetes*” [lots, lots of money]; which is an objective the student from a seemingly affluent social background seems incapable of relating to.

The militant guerilla fighter stands in contrast to the student activist in that he sees himself as representing ‘the people’ and he wants structural change. He states his revolutionary stance early on in the story during the wake of the murdered student. When somebody says that “*en este país tiene que pasar algo*” [something must happen in the country], he responds “*una revuelta popular*” [a popular revolt]. Met by silence, he claims that the unrest on the streets of Venezuela today is unlike the sporadic protests in the 1960s. The unrest of today is a war where people fight the status quo, as evident in the following factors:

el descontento popular, el desempleo creciente, la pobreza, la miseria, asesinatos como el de Cristóbal [el estudiante asesinado], la corrupción. Díganme, díganme ustedes, donde están los ladrones [...] que han llevado este país a la bancarrota.

[the popular discontent, the increasing unemployment, the poverty, the misery, the assassinations like that of Cristóbal (the murdered student), the corruption. Tell me, you tell me, where are the thieves (...) who have brought this country to bankruptcy].²⁹

The silence that meets his description of Venezuela and call for revolutionary action is telling of the film’s treatment of the militancy of the guerilla fighter. The other students at the wake, as representatives of the demonstrators on the streets, appear to be in line with the student activist. The revolutionary militant’s cause is perhaps just, and the film shows how his small urban guerilla captures one of the responsible people behind a corruption scandal involving the country’s economic elite and state officials. Yet, the film does not condone the kidnapping or the violence of the guerilla. The guerilla organizes a court case, where they set up *el tribunal del pueblo* [the people’s court] to interrogate their captive. The dialogue during the trial reveals that the guerilla has captured a small fish. The captive protests that there is no point in executing him as long as the president also steals, and the guerilla has no answers to his critique that the tribunal has nothing to do with the people they claim to represent.

Retén de Catia’s primary concern is to illustrate that none of the above positions provide a sustainable response to a grave political situation and blatantly unjust coercive measures. The state in *Retén de Catia* has no legitimacy; in Gramscian terms it rules by domination and

²⁹ In the analysis of López-Maya and Lander (2005: 106), the Venezuelan state managed to keep social protest at bay between the early 1970s and the mid-1980s thanks to extraordinary levels of oil revenue.

not consent. The student activist and the revolutionary militant both respond to the situation, but the former's romantic naiveté and the latter's arrogant pretense to represent the totality of 'the people' invalidate the adequacy and legitimacy of their respective responses. In the last analysis, the film is a call for the stereotype represented by the taxi driver to change his position and to take an active political stance. The narrative suggests that he eventually becomes forced to do so. The first push towards change comes from the murder of his friend Cristóbal. Though he initially protests the requests of the student activist's girlfriend to help her in locating him in prison, he reluctantly helps her out and in the process starts realizing the problems of his own position. The film ends with a close-up of him crying as he watches the body of the guerilla fighter, shot dead by the police.

Retén de Catia's brief allusion to the bankruptcy of Venezuela takes center stage in *Adiós Miami* (1984). This film denounces the economic elites of Venezuela as unsympathetic white-collar criminals, and chides the legal system for not having dealt with this type of crime. As the title alludes to, the film bids a farewell to Venezuela *saudita* and the privileged position a favorable exchange rate to the dollar gave Venezuelans visiting Miami. *Adiós Miami* depicts a Venezuela undergoing profound social and political change. As Molina (2001: 86) notes, the oil wealth had given the Venezuelan middle class the highest purchasing power on the Latin American continent, allowing them frequent travels to the United States and Europe. Thanks to a favorable exchange rate, Miami was colloquially referred to as the “¿ta'barato? Dame dos” [that cheap? Give me two] (Molina, 2001: 86). This situation changed abruptly with the *viernes negro* in 1983 and the devaluation of the bolívar. *Adiós Miami* is specifically a farewell to the *ta'barato*, and more generally to the power of the new-rich elites that the oil bonanza had produced.

Adiós Miami represents the new-rich through the unsympathetic character of Oswaldo. Although not directly involved in oil the business himself, he and his company had benefitted from oil wealth by gambling on an increasing purchasing power among Venezuelans. The company sells apartment buildings to ordinary Venezuelans, but presumably as a result of the economic crisis in the aftermath of *el viernes negro* several of the buildings it sold had never been built. Referring to the legal system in Venezuela, one of Oswaldo's business partners assures him that “*en este país, nunca pasa nada*” [in this country, nothing ever happens] – hence, it does not matter that they cannot construct buildings that they have already been paid for. Their conversation indicates different perceptions of the seriousness of the economic crisis. The partner claims that the crisis is momentary and that the situation soon will return to the old status quo: “*una crisis pasa, y el país se arregla*” [a crisis passes, and the country

recuperates]. Oswaldo voices concern for legal and economic repercussions, and protests his friend's assurance by contending that "*en serio, está en punto de morirse hermano*" [seriously, the country is about to die my friend]. They decide to buy a flat in Miami and that Oswaldo will hide there until things to calm down. Another friend of Oswaldo meets this plan with skepticism, alluding to the changed reality of a devaluated bolívar: "*¿En Miami ahora? El ta'barato se acabó!*" [in Miami now? The 'that cheap' is over].

Oswaldo meets a well-deserved failure in Miami. His actress-lover quickly spends all of his dollars, and leaves for Venezuela when she realizes he has no money left. The film ends with the Venezuelan news media pointing him out as the main culprit in the scam. Realizing that he will face jail if he returns to Venezuela, he tries to seek asylum pretending he is a Cuban refugee. Although the film ends in disillusionment for Oswaldo, *Adiós Miami* does not only say goodbye to Miami but also is a call for Venezuela to abandon the system of impunity and economic opportunism that Oswaldo had benefitted from.

Macho y hembra (1985) presents a dual critique of machismo and the Venezuelan state's oil dependency. The narrative centers on the machismo, told through a triangular love drama between a chauvinist man, an overly sexually liberal girl from the interior of the country, and her best friend and the man's girlfriend who is the narrator of the story. The film shows how a sexual adventure involving the three of them tears the friendship and relationship apart, and it presents the man as the villain with the other girl's selfish sexual liberalism as a good number two. The man beats his girlfriend, and in his machismo claims 'ownership' of the two girls: "*las dos son mías, me pertenecen, no las comparto con nadie*" [the two girls are mine, they belong to me, I won't share them with anyone]. *Macho y hembra*'s critique of machismo was not common for Venezuelan films from the 1980s, and is only repeated by *Macu*.

The Venezuela that provides contextual background to the love drama is a country in social and political disarray. It is through its critique of the state and the image of Venezuela it presents that *Macho y hembra* participates in the crisis frame. It shows a Venezuela marked by violent student demonstrations, political upheaval, a political crisis threatening to dissolve the government, and accusations in the media against a police officer who had killed three young men who had been with women who, as the officer states on TV when arrested, 'belonged' to other men.

Criticizing marginalization in the 1980s

The perspective of Venezuelan films changed from a focus on the middle and upper classes in the first half of the 1980s to an emphasis on marginalization in the latter. This move also

involved a change from a focus on the democratic and structural faults of the state and the economic elites to the violent everyday crimes committed by the poor. I now turn to five films about marginalization, three of which make an explicit causal link between marginalization as poverty and violent crime. Whether as victims of exclusion or driven by greed and an obsession with wealth and luxury, the poor protagonists commit crime because they are poor. Beyond focusing on crime, the films depict marginalization as a poverty trap, that is, as a position that is impossible to leave.

Más allá del silencio (1985) presents its doubly marginalized deaf protagonist Fidel as a victim of poverty and of his disability. In an early scene, he robs a supermarket together with a group of *malandros*.³⁰ The robbery shows the brutal behavior of the thieves, as they lock people up in the supermarket's freezer and murder a woman. The story revolves around the police investigation and the position of the deaf as a group of marginalized people in Venezuelan society. The film casts Fidel as goodhearted and naïve, not really wanting to commit crime, but not knowing any other ways to earn his living. He is a product of his circumstances, and as such an apt illustration of the social problems poverty creates in Venezuela. This interpretation is offered by another protagonist, a professor who teaches sign language with a method he developed in England. He helps Fidel towards a new and better life outside the barrio and the criminal gangs that exploit him there, but the police eventually arrest him. Importantly, a principled investigator leads the police investigation like in *Homicidio culposo* and the two *Cangrejo* films. Explaining the police how Fidel is doubly marginalized by poverty and a lack of language, the professor proclaims that “*Fidel es el país*” [Fidel is the country]. The professor's mission is to teach the deaf a language, in order to teach them about the rights and duties they have as citizens. The film makes this aim explicit during an interrogation of Fidel's friend, when the professor explains that “*te recuerdas cuando yo les hablaba de dignidad? [...] Tú tienes tus derechos y deberes como ciudadano. Deberes. Derechos. Ciudadano. Ciudadano*” [Do you remember when I talked to you about dignity? (...) You have your rights and duties as a citizen. Duties. Rights. Citizen. Citizen]. *Más allá del silencio* intends to expose the link between poverty and crime by representing Fidel as a victim of marginalization, and is as such easily co-opted by criminal gangs because

³⁰*Malandro* refers to a criminal, typically from the barrio. Crucially, the word has several connotations, most of which are negative. A *malandro* is not simply a *ladrón* (thief, robber) or *delincuente* (criminal), he (it is usually a gendered term) is also ruthless, lacks empathy, and enjoys dominating others. Positively, the term *malandro* brings up a series of positive connotations of street wisdom, strength, and wit.

he has no other opportunities. The representation functions to raise sympathy for Fidel's position and create an understanding of what has driven him into crime.

This call for sympathy is markedly less visible in *Graduación de un delincuente* (1985) and *Manon* (1986), whose criminal protagonists are driven by greed and obsession with wealth rather than the deprivation of basic needs. *Graduación de un delincuente* makes the causal link between poverty, the barrio, and crime explicit from its opening scene. The film starts with a crime scene, where the police make an arrest and a woman in physical pain is taken into an ambulance. This scene is followed by what Duno-Gottberg (2010: 49-50) terms a 'barrio shot:' a high-angle shot of an indistinguishable barrio, signaling that the film is about 'the barrio' as such rather than a specific barrio. The title of the film reads against a characteristic barrio in the steep hills surrounding the city of Caracas. The camera follows a man from his modestly furnished home in the barrio to a graduation ceremony in the city center. The film never clarifies the exact content of the course or the ceremony, except from the intention to teach the graduates about the value of money and how to become rich by believing in the power of individualism. Reminiscent of a religious revival meeting, the graduates chant "*viva el dinero*" [long live money] and "*todos seremos ricos*" [we will all be rich], they receive a diploma with the inscription "*el dinero es su meta*" [money is your aim], and a speaker talks about the greatness of each individual and the ability of everyone who wants it strongly to become rich.

The objective of the protagonist is to become rich, but the stigma of coming from a barrio stops him from finding employment. At a job interview with a US businessman, he does not want to give up his address and thus reveal that he lives in a barrio, yet his sociolect reveals him as the businessman corrects '*chamba*' to '*trabajo*'.³¹ Not able to find a lawful job, crime provides his only way to become rich. He tries and momentarily has success as an urban hustler, scamming a rich lady and gambling money on poker and horses. Ignoring an old friend's advice that the type of life he tries to obtain "*no es para gente como nosotros*" [isn't for people like us], he ends up as a failure with a large debt and being arrested in front of his son and neighbors by police officers who beat him up and put him behind bars. The film ends as he yells "*viva el dinero*" in jail, and the credits claim that the film is based on real events.

Manon rehearses the message that Venezuela is a country where the poor can never become rich. Their only realistic chance is through crime and scams, and even then they will eventually fail. *Manon*, described as "*femme fatale criolla*" [Venezuelan *femme fatale*] by

³¹ Both terms mean job or work, but *chamba* is more colloquial.

Molina (2001: 91), is a young woman whose only objective is to become rich. She seduces a man studying to become a priest, and together they run away with half a million bolívares that he steals from the Church. This money allows them a life in luxury and indulgence in Caracas for a few weeks. Though she comes to nurture deep romantic feelings for the man, she leaves him when they run out of money for an old and rich businessman from the oil city of Maracaibo. Manon makes her reason for leaving explicit, stating that she will run away from the misery of poverty at any price. As the protagonist in *Graduación de un delincuente*, Manon too fails. She steals money from the businessman, who sends hired hit men to kill her. The film ends with her asking to get a last glimpse of her stolen jewelry as she is bleeding to death after the hit men shoot her.

Con el corazón en la mano (1988) provides another take on the theme of the impossibility of leaving poverty behind. Though criticized in *Panorama histórico* for “no está explorando nada” [not exploring anything] (Marrosu in Roffé, 1997: 64), the film explores through a rather morbid love affair between a worker and rich woman the question of the lasting effect of the stigma of coming from a barrio, the marginalized position of the working class and illegal Colombian immigrants, and the drug cartel’s monopoly of violence in the barrio. The female protagonist is a young woman, who has left the barrio life behind by marrying a rich businessman. She appears unhappy with her new life, as her husband rarely has time for her and his social environment rejects her because of her class background. When she gets raped by a man from a barrio, she decides to start a sexual relationship with her rapist. Just as the rich friends of her husband treat her without respect, she kicks down at the man by treating him as a prostitute. She pays for his sexual services, dictates the terms and conditions of their relationship, and demands that he kills his best friend to prove he wants to be with her. The two develop an obsessive romantic relationship, fuelled by her strongly ambivalent feelings towards her own social background. The barrio both repulses and attracts her. She refuses to have sex with him in the barrio, yet the barrio also explains her attraction for him, as she explains him: “soy de un barrio, la gente huele como tú” [I’m from a barrio, the people smell like you].

The second film to draw more than one million viewers to the theaters is *Macu: la mujer del policía* (1987). I introduced this chapter with a close analysis of a scene in this film. In a manner that was typical for the films in the crisis frame, *Macu* represents marginalization as a

poverty trap. Based on a true story,³² *Macu* tells the story of an eleven years old girl who marries her mother's lover, a police officer. The story enters their lives eight years later, when he is under investigation for murdering her lover and two of his friends. The film represents marginalization as the root cause of Macu's predicament. It suggests that poverty caused her early marriage, since Macu accuses her mother and grandmother of 'selling' her to her husband. The film further represents the police in a critical light. It does so by portraying the husband as a *machista* who slaps his wife, and by showing how he uses his position for personal vengeance as mentioned in the close analysis. Statements such as "*todos los policías son bravos*" [all policemen are aggressive] further illustrate the commonplace perception of police brutality in the barrio. *Macu* also provides a critical view on conservative gender roles by linking the husband's mistreatment of her to machismo. Machismo figures as domestic violence, the husband's treatment of her as belonging to him, and the acceptance of Macu's family of his dominion over her. Against this, as Delgado Arria (2004) argues, Macu is a strong female character who manages to carve out a space where she exercises her agency within the strict limits offered by her life situation.

Political crisis and marginalization in the 1990s

Moving into the 1990s, Venezuela's cinematographic production and spectatorship fell dramatically. The average number of spectators for the ten films I analyze from 1990 to 1999 is 301 771, with only *Salserín* (1997) surpassing 500 000 viewers. As noted in chapter two, this fall has to do with the closing of several movie theaters and less financial support. Four of the ten films from the decade fall outside the crisis frame of *el nuevo cine*, making it markedly less dominant compared to the previous decade. Venezuelan cinema of the 1990s continued the earlier emphasis on marginalization, especially with *Cuchillos de fuego* (1990), *Disparen a matar* (1991), *Muchacho solitario* (1998), and *Huelepega: ley de la calle* (1999). The two other *nuevo cine* films, *Un sueño en el abismo* (1991) and *Amaneció de golpe* (1998), highlight other deficiencies of Venezuelan society.

³² Molina (1997: 81) and Delgado Arria (2004: 80) confirm that the film is based on a true story. As Molina notes, "*el caso verdadero del distinguido Ledezma, policía asesino de los tres amigos de su adolescente esposa, conmovió la opinión del país. De nuevo una película nacional interpretó una historia real, brutalmente real, para decir a cabalidad lo que otros medios de comunicación denunciaron*" [the true case of distinguished Ledezma, a police killer of the three friend of his adolescent wife, moved the opinion of the country. Again a national film interprets a real story, brutally real, to put adequate emphasis on what other media denounced.]

Cuchillos de fuego (1990) approaches marginalization and the violence of the streets through the story of a mother and a son who lose their home. Like Venezuela's economic situation deteriorates dramatically after *el viernes negro* and almost two decades of falling oil prices from 1980, the protagonist of *Cuchillos de fuego* goes from leading a comfortable middle-class life to facing the harsh reality of life on the streets from one day to the next. The film starts by showing the social background of the protagonist, an eight-year old boy living with his catholic mother and alcoholic father in a spacious house in the Andes. As his father leaves his family for a prostitute, the boy and his mother take to the streets. The mother soon gets raped and killed, and the story follows the boy's struggle for survival and his quest for revenge against his mother's killer. He starts working at a circus travelling around the country to earn his living. The circus, itself a collection of a range of marginalized people, becomes his new family. The people there offer him empathy, care, and a place to sleep and eat, but they do not provide him with an easy or comfortable life.

Cuchillos de fuego contrasts the struggle of the honest and hardworking people who have taken a personal ethical decision to earn their living by lawful means to the easy access to fast cash offered by the *malandro* ethic which dominates the streets. As a friend of the protagonist tells him, living on the street and not stealing is futile and unrealistic: "*mira pana, aquí todo el mundo roba, y el que no roba es un pendejo*" [look my friend, here everyone steals, and he who doesn't steal is a coward³³]. The protagonist, trying to stay true to his Catholic upbringing and thereby honoring the memory of his mother, attempts to resist the *malandro* ethic, but also helps his friends in stealing. The film embraces the protagonist's eventual revenge, as he succeeds in killing his mother's murderer. The logic underlying the justice of his revenge is that, given there is no law or no institution that protects justice, his only recourse is to take the law into his own hands.

Disparen a matar (1991) narrates marginalization from the point of view of everyday violence in the barrio and police violence against the poor. Here too violent crime characterizes the everyday life of the poor. The film introduces its topic of state coercion with a robbery of an adult man by a group of adolescents in a barrio in Caracas. They shoot him dead, believing that he had more than the 200 bolívares he gave them. The news media present the murder as the famous last drop and a sign of the government's inability to govern. This portrayal provokes a major raid in the barrio by the police, who enter with the order

³³ The insult *pendejo* can also be translated into 'asshole' or 'idiot'.

disparen a matar [shoot to kill]. An innocent man becomes an arbitrary victim of the police violence.

Disparen a matar explores the same ethical dilemma facing the principled police officers in the *Cangrejo* films and *Homicidio culposo*. A grave injustice has been committed, but facing it demands personal sacrifice. In this film, a journalist takes sympathy with the mother of the murdered man. She moves him with her personal story, telling him that when the dictatorship killed her husband she only grieved, and that this time she wants to translate her grief into anger and let the general public know what happened. The journalist decides to help her, and starts gathering evidence for his story so that he can take the responsible police officers to court.

The story's sympathy clearly goes towards the woman and the journalist trying to help her. Yet, it does not convey the message that fulfilling justice is easy. The editor of the newspaper, *El Universal*,³⁴ protests the publication of the story, just as he opposed another story by the same journalist about a political scandal involving a minister and the police. The journalist's wife argues against him helping the woman. Although selfish, her arguments are grounded in a pragmatic vision of reality. The wife points out that his efforts are bound to be futile, since the corrupt police and the judicial system guarantee the impunity of the culprits. He will pay a personal price by risking his career and police harassment. His comfortable lifestyle of drinking whisky, driving a car, and living in a house is at stake, the wife argues. Having to agree with the immediate futility of battling a corrupt legal system, his counterarguments appear utopian and far-fetched, referring to abstract ideas of justice and social equality. The film further details how everyone, from the neighbors to the police officers involved in the operation, refuses to witness against the police men who fired the fatal shots in fear of personal repercussions. The only viable solution hinted at in the film is a reference to el Caracazo as a necessary outcome of the state's policies.³⁵

Huelepega: ley de la calle (1999) also approaches marginalization from the perspective of everyday violence in the barrio and police violence against the poor. *Huelepega's* story starts in a similar fashion as *Cuchillos de fuego*, with a young boy having to leave his home and learn to live and abide by the law of the street. This law dictates that the children must earn respect by being tough and ruthless. Like in *Cuchillos de fuego*, the protagonist at first has ethical qualms about embracing the *malandro* ethic, but he soon realizes that when hungry, nothing else matters. He has to choose between being dominated or learning how to dominate.

³⁴ *El Universal* is one of Venezuela's leading daily newspapers.

³⁵ I return to the importance of the popular revolt el Caracazo below.

Thus faced with a choice of being “*chigüire o malandro*”³⁶ [coward or thug], he opts for the latter option in order to survive. He realizes that he must abandon his childhood Catholic ethics and find someone who can teach and guide him, who “*también tiene la miseria dentro su cuerpo y su mente*” [also has the misery inside his body and mind].

Huelepega portrays the homeless children as victims of a system where everyone is a *malandro*, and where they are but the most marginalized and vulnerable in a vicious circle of violence and crime, which eventually leaves everybody dead. In the Venezuela of *Huelepega*, there is no trust between people and no institutions that offer support. For the children on the street, this institutional failure started with their families that abandoned them. The state figures through a juvenile prison in appalling conditions and through the figure of a corrupt police officer. Describing himself as “*la ley soy yo*” [I am the law], this police officer is a *malandro* in uniform who works together with the criminal gangs battling for control of the barrio.

All the central characters of *Huelepega* die. The leaders and members of the criminal gangs kill each other, the police officer kills the young protagonist, and a friend of the protagonist kills the police officer. Everyone loses out in the perpetual war prescribed by ‘the law of the street.’ A status quo is thus maintained, where the players change constantly, but the game stays the same. The film ends by underscoring the call for change that introduced the film with a voice-over by the young protagonist addressing his mother from the afterlife: “*dicen que la muerte es parte de la vida, pero aunque así sea, yo prefiero la vida. Yo prefiero la vida.* [They say that death is part of life, but although that may be so, I prefer life. I prefer life].

The above films criticize Venezuelan society by highlighting the marginalization of the poor. The two other films in the crisis frame emphasize ‘the system’. *Un sueño en el abismo* (1991) draws attention to the impossibility for Venezuela’s youth to fulfill their dreams and the lure of easy money offered by crime. The Venezuela facing the youths is one of disillusionment, absence of state support, and the disinterest of the economic elites. Situated in the mountainous city of Mérida in the Andes, the film portrays the efforts of two friends trying to obtain funding to climb Mount Everest. Having managed to overcome the first obstacle of receiving a license that authorizes them to attempt, they hope that it will be easy to find sponsors willing to spend some oil money to support the image of Venezuela abroad.

³⁶ *Chigüire* is Venezuelan slang for a coward. It is also a common animal in *Los llanos* (capybara in English). When the ‘law of street’ prescribes a choice between being a coward or *malandro*, it refers to the positive connotations of *malandro* strength and street wisdom.

They are soon disappointed. State agencies and private companies alike decline their requests for sponsorship, referring to the country's difficult economic situation. They go to Caracas and climb a tall building on Plaza Venezuela to grab the attention of the media. They organize a concert to raise funds, but it ends in failure as one of the musicians faints on an overdose of *perico* [cheap cocaine].

Drug consumption and narco-trafficking play an important role in *Un sueño en el abismo*. Selling or smuggling drugs provides the easiest and most viable option for the youths to raise money. One of them tries to smuggle half a kilo of cocaine to Puerto Rico and use the money to fund the trip to Mount Everest but dies in the attempt. The hero of the film stays clear of drugs. Indicative of the film's political posture, his nickname is MEL, which he explains as a *concentrado ideológico* [an ideological concentrate] referring to Marx, Engels, and Lenin. He only receives support from his US American girlfriend for resisting the illicit ways to obtain funding. The expedition to Mount Everest never materializes. The only suggested recourse is, again, to take the law into one's own hands. The hero makes a friend pour out a pack of cocaine at gunpoint in revenge for his dead friend at the Puerto Rico airport.

Amaneció de golpe (1998) is one of the most explicitly political and state-critical films of Venezuela's *nuevo cine*. It treats two of the most significant political events in Venezuela of the period: the 1989 popular uprising el Caracazo and the failed coup attempt in 1992 by Chávez. It does so from the perspective of a principled journalist who, on the morning of the coup attempt, is trying to get her head around the underlying social reasons for el Caracazo. Living in a gated community in the same neighborhood as the country's political elites, she struggles to understand despite her honest attempts to do so. Her social position, the film suggests, makes her reality so distinct from the people who revolted three years earlier. Hesitantly, she formulates a hypothesis which she is to repeat almost word by word with confidence as an explanation of both the coup attempts and el Caracazo towards the end of the film:

Quienes nacimos después de la democracia nos acostumbramos a creer en un país seguro, en un país confiado, sin preguntarnos de donde descansaba esa seguridad... donde descansa esta seguridad, que nos induce [...] esa confianza. Días antes, horas antes [...] este era el sistema político más estable de Latinoamérica.

[Those of us who were born after democracy got used to believe in a safe country, in a trustful country, without asking ourselves where that security stopped ... where this security stops, which gives us that confidence. Days before, hours before (...) this was the most stable political system of Latin America].

The film represents the coup itself as experienced by different people, each representing a distinct social class. The first story is that of the journalist, whose husband is about to leave

her for a Spanish woman. The three of them have to hide in their house as the shooting starts and they are caught by crossfire. The second story is that that of an army general and his family. The general, his father-in-law, and the minister of transport have made a lucrative illicit deal importing cars to Venezuela, and their only potential hinder is to get the cars through custom. *Amaneció de golpe* uses this story to present an image of the government as corrupt and criminal, thereby agreeing with the pronounced intentions of the coup makers. The third story also indicates that the film sympathizes with the coup makers' intentions. This story is about a man from a barrio in need of medical attention that he cannot get because the ambulance does not dare to enter his neighborhood. Without realizing what all the gunshots are about, his family takes him to the street to find a taxi. The taxi that eventually stops soon breaks down, which causes a heated verbal quarrel between the taxi driver and the wife of the man, where she shouts that she hopes for the driver's death. The fourth story further indicates the validity of the coup makers' political critique. It depicts a businessman in the same neighborhood as the journalist who is about to close a deal for opening a mine in a natural reserve. The deal is lucrative for him and his US partners, as they will be able to pay the workers very little.

Amaneció de golpe ends on a pessimistic note. The coup fails as the rebel soldiers are outnumbered. The film sympathizes with their motivation, briefly described by a rebel officer as “*por Simón Bolívar, para rescatar la dignad de la patria, contra la corrupción, vencer o morir*” [for Simón Bolívar, to save the dignity of the fatherland, against the corruption, win or die]. However, *Amaneció de golpe* protests the violence of the coup, and suggests that the idea of creating political change by violent means is naïve.

The wife of the sick man delivers the film's last words. Seeing the taxi driver whose death she wished for earlier dead at the hospital after he had been shot, she is shocked and grieved. She excuses herself by saying that “*nadie quería que esto pasara [...] fue la rabia*” [no one wanted this to happen (...) it was the anger], thereby providing an explanation that could pertain to both el Caracazo and the frustrated coup attempt. The screen goes black, and an intertitle concludes that the underlying reasons for both events have not been addressed:

siete años después de estos hechos el país se ha seguido deteriorando y los venezolanos continuamos en la incertidumbre, buscando la manera de vivir en democracia sin corrupción y sin perder la dignidad.

[Seven years after these events the country has continued to deteriorate and Venezuelans continue in uncertainty, looking for a way to live in democracy without corruption and without losing dignity].

The counter-hegemonic politics of the crisis frame

Popular Venezuelan cinema was a counter-hegemonic cultural force from 1980 through 1999. By adhering to the tenets of *el nuevo cine*, the popular films of the period formed a crisis frame that stood in an antagonistic relationship to the state. Repeatedly providing a critical vision of society and pointing out the faults of the state, the crisis frame contested the common sense of the regime. The films analyzed here were not counter-hegemonic in a uniform manner, but contested the common sense of the state in different ways. The two principal ways of criticizing the state were to scrutinize the legal system and depict marginalization. The *nuevo cine* film in Venezuela, in my analysis, was a specific type of political film that fulfilled two functions. First, in presenting a conflict or problem that its protagonist has to resolve, the film indicates that its story was not a singular and unique instance, but a case of similar stories. A story about a poor person was thus a story about poverty in Venezuela in general. The second function was to perform a critique of the state by illustrating a negative aspect of Venezuela's political and social reality. This last aspect is crucial for the counter-hegemonic character, because it does not follow that portraying marginalization necessarily involves a critique of the state. I propose that the way Venezuelan films criticized society, from focusing on the deficiencies of the legal system to drawing attention of the plight of the marginalized, pointed to the state as the culprit. I return to this question in the section where I discuss films outside the crisis frame. By not criticizing society, these films are not usefully understood as part of *el nuevo cine* tradition. The two *Cangrejo* films, *Huelepega*, *Macu*, *Retén de Catia*, and *Amaneció de golpe* were the most explicitly state critical films in my selection. Against the view that the movement died in the 1970s, it is noteworthy that two of the most explicitly *nuevo cine* films are from 1998 and 1999.

Huelepega signals its political stance at the outset with an intertitle. Dedicated “*a los niños y jóvenes de América Latina... ¡Para que esta realidad deje de ser como es!*” [to the children and youths of Latin America... so that the reality stops being like it is!], *Huelepega* introduces its story about the harsh reality facing homeless children in Caracas with a factual description of their situation and a condemnation of the democratic state since Venezuela's dictatorship ended in 1958. The intertitle is worth quoting at length for effectively marking the topics of the film:

En Venezuela 7 millones de niños viven en estado de pobreza, 4 millones sufren desnutrición crónica, 3 millones se encuentran fuera del sistema educativo y 600 mil están en estado de total abandono. Las muertes violentas de menores de edad son parte de la vida diaria de los venezolanos siendo el ajuste de cuentas, la violencia familiar y la muerte en manos de organismos de seguridad las causas más frecuentes.

En los sitios de reclusión de menores se violan los derechos humanos más elementales: hacinamiento, violaciones, abuso por parte de funcionarios policiales, alimentación inadecuada y enfermedades sin atención. Venezuela es uno de los países más ricos de América Latina, contradictoriamente en los últimos 40 años, este problema lejos de solucionarse se ha agravado dramáticamente, convirtiéndose en un verdadero caos social.

[In Venezuela seven million children live in a state of poverty, four million suffer from chronic malnutrition, three million are outside the educational system and 600 thousand have been abandoned totally. The violent deaths of minors are part of everyday life of Venezuelans, the causes being the settling of scores, domestic violence, and murder in the hands of the security organisms. The most basic human rights are being violated in juvenile prisons: overcrowding, rapes, abuse by the police, inadequate food, and unattended illnesses. Venezuela is one of the richest countries in Latin America, [that] contradictorily in the last 40 years, this problem far from being solved has worsened dramatically, converting itself to a true social chaos].

All of these topics materialize in the film: its protagonist is a poor child, he suffers malnutrition, has been abandoned by his parents, and gets killed by a police officer. His only friend, an older and physically disabled teenager, serves times in a juvenile prison that is overcrowded and violent. The Venezuela of *Huelepega* is, in short, ‘a true social chaos.’ The homeless child is a stand-in for all poor children, a worst-case scenario of what could happen to them all.

Huelepega, *Retén de Catia*, *Macu*, and *Amaneció de golpe* stand out from the rest for treating a large number of political topics. These four films are explicit about their political posture; they criticize the state, the police and police violence in particular, they point to the marginalized poor as victims, and *Huelepega* and *Retén de Catia* explicitly blame an alliance of a criminal rich elite and the corrupt state for the state of affairs. Not only do their protagonists suffer problems that are typical, the films also attempt to deliver a social and political analysis of the issue at hand.

This was not typical, however. The majority of the films in the crisis frame did not deliver a full-fledged social diagnosis. Rather than pointing to a full range of negative aspects of society, they tended to emphasize just one issue. These singular topics resonated with the vocabulary of *el nuevo cine*. When seen in conjunction with each other and repeating elements of a social critique instead of individual narratives, these films pointed to the weak spots of the legitimacy of the Punto Fijo democracy. An illustrative example is the singular focus on the incompetency of the legal system in *Homicidio culposo*. *Homicidio culposo* clearly does not participate in *el nuevo cine* to the same degree as *Retén de Catia*, but the two films from the same year reiterate facets of the same critique. When understood in relationship to other popular films from the period, I see a film like *Homicidio culposo* as a grey-zone case that tilts towards participation. The fact that it critiques the state is decisive in this case.

Recurrence in the dominant frame

In the following, I will point to the type of politics the dominant frame in Venezuelan cinema from 1980 to 1999 supported by pointing out what they agreed upon and what they disagreed upon. I propose that the negative portrayal of the state and marginalization were the most common critiques. 14 films portrayed the state negatively and 15 criticized marginalization as a form of exclusion.

First, what did the critique of the state entail? Rather than pointing to an abstract notion of the state as such, the films criticized concrete institutions within the state and specific members of the government. In particular, the judiciary and the police suffer in the portrayal, and through them, the government as represented by the minister of justice. Except for the minister of transport, other ministers or the president never received any direct critical attention. The legal system served to maintain the power of the state by brutally coercing the poor and by protecting those with political connections from prosecution.

The critique of the state as oppressive related closely to a negative portrayal of Venezuela's economic elite. The two critiques pointed to two sides of the same coin, that is, the state and the rich constituting the dominant power system in the country. The two *Cangrejo* films, *Retén de Catia*, and *Huelepega* explicitly link the oppression of the legislative system to the power of the economic elites, so much so that political and economic power, the state and the rich, become one and the same.

Beyond casting the legal system as either corrupt or incompetent, the films criticized the state by emphasizing the violence of the police against the poor. This is where the critique of the state and the emphasis on marginalization coincides, as is the case in *Retén de Catia*, *Macu*, *Disparen a matar*, *Huelepega*, *Cuchillos de fuego*, and *Con en el corazon en la mano*.

Marginalization was the other line of critique in the crisis frame. As indicated above, marginalization did not take center stage until 1985 with *Más allá del silencio* and *Graduación de un delincuente*, followed by *Manon*, *Macu*, *Con el corazon en la mano*, *Cuchillos de fuego*, *Disparen a matar*, *Huelepega*, and debatably also in the grey zone case of *Muchacho solitario*. Marginalization as conceived by these films figures in both absolute and relational terms. In the former sense, it resonates with Spivak's definition of subalternity, namely "to be removed from all lines of social mobility" (2006: 475). This removal is caused by poverty, and it is definite. A marginalized person typically lives in a barrio or on the street, has a sparsely furnished home or none at all. According to the films, to be marginalized is to be stuck in a given social position. Three reasons contribute to this: the stigma or the shame of coming from a barrio, and the unviability of crime as a way out of poverty, and the absence of

other means to climb the social ladder. Duno-Gottberg (2010: 60) writes about *Soy un delincuente* (1976) that it presents the marginal as marginalized, as opposed to presenting the marginal poor simply as an amorphous mass of criminals from the barrio that threaten the security of the city center. In my view, this proposition holds true for many of the films from the 1980s and 1990s, especially those that attempt to narrate marginalization as experienced by the poor. I will return to this point below.

In the relational sense, marginalization figures as poverty vis-à-vis the rich. The poverty of the barrio becomes clear when contrasted to the wealth of the (city) center. In this context, Coronil makes a pertinent observation. While subalternity refers to a position of subordination, “an actor may be subaltern in relation to another, yet dominant in relation to a third” (Coronil, 1997: 16). This insight is particularly important with regards to the representation of the barrio *malandro*. The *malandro* is subaltern vis-à-vis state representatives such as the police or the wealthy people of the center. He almost always responds to a superior boss in a larger criminal organization, and not obeying the boss is a *malandro*'s death sentence. The life of the *malandro* thus centers on avoiding dominance by others while maintaining his superior position vis-à-vis people in his immediate social surroundings. The law of the street as depicted in *Huelepega* succinctly describes this. The female *malandra* in *Manon* likewise dominates her lover, yet walks a precariously thin line to avoid subordination and re-insertion into the misery of the barrio life she tries to escape.

Third, Venezuelan *nuevo cine* was not anti-imperialist or decolonizing in the sense of protesting the classical narrational mode provided by Hollywood. Except for one crucial element, the films analyzed here did not experiment with alternative ways of presenting their stories. Their plots relied on the compositional options offered by Hollywood as described in the previous chapter. The plots were logically consistent, well-known stock characters and easily recognizable stereotypes such as the principled investigator were common, events followed a logical chain, and the topic of the narrative and the conflict facing the protagonists were typically given in the introductory scenes. In Bordwell's terminology, Venezuelan cinema adhered to a narrational mode where the intelligibility of their story was prioritized.

The exception is politically significant, and it concerns the structure of the plot. As the Hollywood version, the Venezuelan plot initiated with an undisturbed phase, followed by a conflict, and the struggle of the protagonists to overcome the conflict. But it did not conclude with a happy ending as is the norm in Hollywood (Bordwell, 1985: 159). The struggles facing Venezuelan protagonists end in failure, as they either die or otherwise realize that their struggle is futile. The principled investigators within the rotten legal system are a case in point.

Their struggles for justice meet resistance at every corner, from their unhappy and sometimes unfaithful wives to their superiors who usually take them off their cases. The films show that fighting for justice is a Sisyphus fight; the characters may have managed to almost roll the stone all the way up the hill by finding evidence to free the innocent victim, but as in the myth the stone rolls down again when the victim has committed suicide as in *Homicidio culposo*. The *Cangrejo* films are equally structured.

The films focusing on marginalization were equally pessimistic. The only explored possibility of social mobility is violent crime, but it never works in the long run. I have already mentioned the murder of the young protagonist at the hands of a police officer in *Huelepega*. In *Macu*, the protagonist is eventually freed from her husband, but she loses the man she loves and two friends in the process. The protagonists of *Más allá del silencio* and *Manon* are both killed. This pessimism functions to reinforce the image of the marginalized barrio inhabitants as ‘removed from lines of social mobility’ and stuck in poverty.

The political implication of these unhappy endings contributes to the counter-hegemonic character of Venezuelan *nuevo cine*. Inasmuch as the problems presented in the films – from the faults of the legal system to the poverty of the barrio – are representative cases of Venezuelan society, the fact of failure in these films point to the difficulty of change in real life.

The last recurrent theme is oil, and it concerns the conception of politics suggested by the films. Here, Venezuelan *nuevo cine* differed from its Latin American counterparts and the influence of the notion of underdevelopment. Instead, the Venezuelan films refer to what political economists term the resource curse or the paradox of plenty. In so doing, they followed a tradition of critiquing the Venezuelan state, as Coronil (2011: 34) notes: “opposition to the state [in Venezuela], whether dictatorial or democratic, has been typically cast as a critique of the private or partisan appropriation of the nation’s wealth.”

In *Cuchillos de fuego*, a man who looks and acts like a politician – he is dressed in a suit and delivers election promises – holds a speech where he pledges to build schools and housing for everyone. “*Vamos a sembrar el petróleo*” [let’s sow the oil] he tells his audience, and asks them to name what they want from him. The scene is politically significant, as it connects the story of the homeless young protagonist to Venezuela’s relationship with oil. The phrase he uses, *sembrar el petróleo*, was coined by Arturo Uslar Pietri in a 1936 newspaper article. After the dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez ended in 1935, *Acción Democrática* (AD) embraced as its official slogan. Coronil points out that the phrase from the point of view of the governing elite was “an appropriately ambiguous metaphor” (1997: 134).

The slogan could on the one hand promise everything. It reflected the idea that oil revenues could be re-inserted into the national economy, bringing industrialization, development, and progress. As such, the slogan illustrates Coronil's main argument about the Venezuelan state. He argues that the oil economy became the fundament of the Venezuelan state's power, and that with the oil wealth followed a popular perception that Venezuela was a rich country. In his own words, "state power [...] came to rest on the state's ability to secure and manage increasing flows of petrodollars to finance national development projects (Coronil, 1997: 390). In accordance with this perception, the consecutive presidents of Venezuela promised that they would deliver miracles. With the sharp hike in oil prices in 1973, these promises appeared increasingly realistic. Indeed, it would be a political suicide *not* to deliver them, as playwright Cabrujas notes: "it would be suicidal for a presidential candidate in Venezuela not to promise us paradise because the state has nothing to do with reality. The state is a magnanimous sorcerer [...] Oil is fantastic and induces fantasies" (in Coronil, 1997: 1)

On the other hand, the metaphor does not promise anything concrete – it promises an abstract notion of progress and development, but it does not specify its form or content. Popular parlance termed the period from the oil boom in 1973 to the Venezuela presented in *Adiós Miami* 'Venezuela *saudita* [Saudi]. The middle classes could travel to *el ta'barato*, or at least realistically dream about it. Development projects such as the building of roads and factories did materialize, but they did not manage to include everyone into the Saudi version of Venezuela.

This situation changed as oil prices started falling from 1980, and especially with the above-mentioned *viernes negro* in 1983 with its devaluation of the national currency. With this, the legitimacy of the regime started faltering. With the benefit of hindsight, Villaroel (2009) sees the fall in the state's legitimacy as evidence that Venezuela's democracy from 1958 onwards did not have the stability and resilience that the contemporary literature had thought. Two principal weaknesses of the democracy installed by the Punto Fijo pact state became clear. First, the "*democracia pactada*" lacked a social foundation, as it was an alliance between the elites of the country. Second and related, people had grown accustomed to demanding performance from the state and that the governments would deliver on their electoral promises. With the decrease of state revenues, the state prioritized away from the demands of marginalized social groups, and the quality of public services started deteriorating. In Villaroel's analysis, it became common knowledge that the two political parties that had ruled since 1958 were to blame.

Joined by approximately one million people in several Venezuelan cities, el Caracazo has been the largest and most fiercely repressed social upheaval in Latin American since 1980. It has been interpreted as a turning point leading up to the failed 1992 coup and later election victory of Chávez (Beasley-Murray, 2010; Coronil & Skurski, 1991; Rotker, 2002b; Smilde, 2011: 6; Villarroel, 2009). This is an interpretation that *Amaneció de golpe* and *El Caracazo* also support, as I will return to later. A few weeks earlier, Carlos Andrés Pérez had been sworn in as Venezuela's new president. He won the election on a populist and anti-neoliberal platform. Faced with an economic crisis, Pérez initiated neoliberal structural adjustment programs that included doing away with government subsidies of gasoline, a move which led to a doubling of the price of public transport. El Caracazo started in the wee hours with people refusing to pay the increased transportation fares, and soon continued with the looting and sacking of shops and businesses in Caracas and thirteen other cities. The protests turned into a mass revolt. People barricaded the streets and emptied trucks of food and other goods. The action was collective, only a "loose organization" emerged in some barrios where people helped to bring food and goods to those unable to participate in the looting (Coronil & Skurski, 1991: 316). "A protest against bus fares had turned into a general revolt against neoliberal structural adjustment", summarizes Beasley-Murray (2010: 286). The poorly-paid police remained passive; some even helped the looting take place in an orderly manner and others participated. The state reacted late; the president was travelling, and at first did not realize the extent of the uprising. But when the reaction came, it came with brute force: "the military faced the barrio population as a military enemy; the police confronted it as a criminal gang; and the DISIP [the secret service] and other intelligence police treated it as a subversive agent" (Coronil & Skurski, 1991: 323). The official body count stands at 227, whereas others estimate it to a little over one thousand.

The notion that Venezuela was a rich country was central to the critique of the Punto Fijo democracy. Since the state had plenty of resources, funding should not be a problem. The literature on Venezuelan cinema exemplifies a critical view. Prior to the fall of Venezuela *saudita*, it evoked the notion of oil wealth to argue that the rich state should finance cinematographic production. Winner wrote in 1976 that "*hay que sembrar el petróleo*" [the oil must be sown] and argued that Venezuela as a rich country with the equipment and the know-how should invest in the sector (1976: 13).

In this vein, the films analyzed here make reference to the paradox of oil wealth on the one hand and the poverty of the marginalized on the other. As mentioned, films showed marginalization both in absolute and relational terms. While social inequality by no means

was unique to Venezuela, the perception of the country as wealthy impacted on how the marginalized poor could be contrasted to the rich, Miami-shopping elites. A case in point is the ‘social chaos’ of Venezuela posited by *Huelepega* above, where the poverty of the people is explicitly cast as a paradox linked to the natural wealth of the country.

Apart from *Cuchillos de fuego*, *Macho y hembra*, *Manon*, and *Amaneció de golpe* make explicit references to oil. In *Macho y hembra*, the oil reference adds fuel to a generalized sense of discontent and upheaval that the film attempts to establish as the background of its story. Significantly, the film introduces this background at the very outset, by showing its credits against buildings with revolutionary graffiti with slogans such as “*la revolución sigue en pie*” [the revolution carries on] and students engaged in violent demonstrations to control the university. *Macho y hembra* relates the political problems facing the country to its dependence on oil. At an open meeting, a student asks the OPEC founder Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonzo why he is so pessimistic about the possibilities oil gives Venezuela.³⁷ His reply gives a succinct summary of the resource curse. He argues that its people and the products of their labor should be Venezuela’s primary resource, and that oil wealth makes Venezuelans lazy as they grow accustomed to new material standards.³⁸ Instead of the Venezuelan people, the multinational oil companies benefit from the country’s oil production. Although the film shows people who disagree with his analysis, the student demonstrators seem to follow it. The later political problems figuring in the background of the love drama in *Macho y hembra* – a governmental crisis where the Vice-President’s departure is saved by one vote, a police director accused for corruption, a police officer who has murdered three youths – are consequences of the resource curse.

In *Manon*, the wealth of the rich – the wealth that the protagonist is willing to sacrifice everything for – is represented by a businessman involved in the oil industry in Maracaibo, the oil-producing capital of Venezuela. *Amaneció de golpe* also relates the political fate of the

³⁷ Pérez Alfonso is not named in the film, but he is addressed as “*padre del OPEP*” [founder of OPEC] and the actor looks like him.

³⁸ The reference to labor points to the fact that the capital intensive oil economy does not create much employment compared to labor intensive industries. The resource curse thesis explains the poor development indicators in oil-rich countries as an outcome of their economic dependence on a natural resource. The starting of the thesis is the statistical observation that countries with large natural resources have lower economic growth than resource-poor countries (Humphreys et al., 2007). The oil industry tends to become so dominating that it squeezes out other economic activities. Karl (1997) argues that economic growth induced by oil revenues causes a number of political changes, especially in the institutions of the state. Oil becomes the economic foundation of the state, since other industries provide significantly less revenues. This enables the state to ignore pressures from the market and civil society, making the state in effect independent of the rest of society. For an overview and critique of the determinism of the literature, see Solli (2011).

country to the false sense of security offered by the Punto Fijo State. The political crises of Venezuela, notably el Caracazo and the 1992 coup attempt by Chávez, are both presented as outcomes of the exclusionary politics of what the journalist protagonist describes as “*el sistema político más estable de Latinoamérica*” [the most stable political system of Latin America]. The film suggests that the exclusion of the marginalized led to anger, and anger led to el Caracazo, which in turn led to the coup attempt.

The references to oil make Venezuelan *nuevo cine* stand out from the theory of underdevelopment that had influenced other *nuevo cine* traditions. I have found only two explicit references to underdevelopment; one positive and one negative of the concept. The positive reference comes from *Cangrejo*. When the police investigator sets up equipment to wiretap telephones, the police department does not have the necessary equipment, and his colleague comments “*¿sabes que es el subdesarrollo?*” [do you know what underdevelopment is?]. Eighteen years later in *Amaneció de golpe*, underdevelopment figures as a negative reference representative of those who have given up on Venezuela and are unwilling to ask how they can contribute to a better future. The husband of the principled journalist states that he is “*harto de este jodio país, harto de su subdesarrollo*” [fed up with this fucking country, fed up with its underdevelopment]. The utterance happens in the middle of a violent *coup d'état* and in a heated discussion with his wife who has made him tired with her work on el Caracazo. Both the coup and the looting and killings of the popular uprising could of course be examples of underdevelopment, but in the film's universe the reference stands in for a pessimism that has contributed to the problems underlying both the coup and el Caracazo.

Points of disagreement within the dominant frame

In the following, I will focus on five elements of disagreement within the dominant frame. The first concerns the role of the police; whether the police are unequivocally negatively portrayed or if there are positive elements within the force. Importantly, this disagreement concerns the representation of individual police officers, as the legal system as such is invariably either corrupt or incompetent. When positively portrayed, it is typically through the character of the principled investigator in the *Cangrejo* films, *Homicidio culposo* and *Más allá del silencio*. As the contributors to *Panorama histórico* note, Venezuelan filmmakers have disagreed about the role of the police since the negative portrayal in *Soy un delincuente*. As Marrosu points out, “*Román [Chalbaud] siempre lo ha salvado y Clemente [de la Cerda] siempre lo ha condenado*” [Roman Chalbaud has always saved it and Clemente de la Cerda has always condemned it] (in Roffé, 1997: 65). This observation is only partially true for the

films by Chalbaud directed in this chapter; the principled investigator figures positively in two *Cangrejo* films, but *Cuchillos de fuego* places the police in a negative light in a brief scene displaying police violence in a prison.

The narratives that portray the police in a positive light do so from the point of view of the principled investigator. This does not mean that the films embrace ‘the police’ as such, but they show that within an incompetent and corrupt system, there are still honest exceptions. The two *Cangrejo* films, *Homicidio culposo* and *Más allá del silencio* emphasize the perspective of the police. The camera follows the investigator through his everyday activities, showing his arguments with his superior and the quarrels with his wife. This perspective serves to give weight to the image of a character restlessly and altruistically working to fulfill principles of justice. Importantly, they have distinct personalities and their characters often develop throughout the plot.

The outright negative portrayal of the police is a stronger tendency. The police in Venezuelan films abuse their position for personal enrichment. As Hernández notes, “*no es el policía de las dictaduras, es un policía corrupto, con poder* [it is not the police of the dictatorships, it is a corrupt police, with power] (in Roffé, 1997: 66). Except for the police in *Retén in Catia*, where they explicitly work for the state to oppress political dissidents, this observation describes the films analyzed here well. Together with *Retén de Catia*, *Macu* and *Disparen a matar* give the police a central negative role. The police also figure negatively in the background as committing violence or accepting bribes in other films. An illustrative case is *Un sueño en el abismo*, where the two protagonists receive a beating from the police when they are arrested. In *Con el corazón en la mano*, the police contribute to the marginalized status of the protagonist’s best friend, an illegal immigrant from Colombia.

The films portray the police negatively from the point of view of their victims. The frequent representation of police violence illustrates this, as I argued in the analysis of the police raid in *Macu*. Similarly, in *Retén de Catia* the camera is among the demonstrators and shows the violent response from the police from their perspective, as if one of the demonstrators were holding the camera. Similarly, in *Macu* and *Huelepega*, films where the police have a central or protagonistic yet negative role, their characters do not develop or display nuances that could counteract the negative impression.

The second disagreement concerns the role of news media in Venezuela’s crisis. The portrayal of the media relates closely to the representation of the police in that both, when criticized, figure as part and parcel of the dominant power system that oppresses the marginalized poor or reproduce the privileges of the political elite together with the state.

Here, Venezuelan cinema assumes the role of a democratic watchdog pointing to the faults of the political system. Commenting on the two most popular films of the 1980s, *Homicidio culposo* and *Macu*, Lucien contends that “*la gente fue a ver aquello que los periódicos no le habían mostrado*” [people went to see what the newspapers had not shown them] (Roffé, 1997: 67). In *Retén de Catia* and *Disparen a matar*, news media only give voice to the official side of events, and in the *Cangrejo* films they start a public campaign against the principled investigator. The negative portrayal of the news media is however not uniform. *Adiós Miami*, *Un sueño en el abismo*, and *Amaneció de golpe* all feature journalists and newspapers living up to the ideal of a democratic watchdog.

Third, the portrayal of the Catholic Church falls into the same pattern. Although relatively few films approach religion, those that do either cast the Church as supportive of the dominant power system or as an oppositional force. Importantly, whereas the Church as an institution receives negative portrayal in a similar vein as the legal system, positive references all concern individual priests inspired by liberation theology who have taken a personal stance against the system. Two films feature priests as protagonists, both directed by Chalbaud. *Cangrejo 2* represents the priest together with a bishop as aligned with the corrupt state. In *Manon*, the male protagonist and the principal victim is a priest. He is perhaps gullible, but not part of a corrupt system and the film portrays the Church as such in a neutral light. Importantly, three films feature radical priests as minor characters who oppose the system. In *Cangrejo 2*, a friend of the principled police officer is a principled priest, who works with the poor in a barrio and who is unwilling to sacrifice justice for the sake of power. His function in the plot serves to further underline the negative portrayal of the bishop, and to cast liberation theology as more in line with the Bible than the practice of the Church and the bishop.

Priests inspired by liberation theology also figure in *Retén de Catia* and *Adiós Miami*. In *Retén de Catia*, one of the passengers of the taxi driver contributes to showing him the necessity of taking a political stance. He says of the priests that “*nosotros estamos con los pobres, que nada tienen. Con los humillados y golpeados. Ante el poder injusto, hay que rebelarse*” [we are with the poor, who have nothing. With the humiliated and beaten. Faced with unjust power, one must rebel]. *Adiós Miami* uses a priest to cast the preferred political stance as oppositional. A priest working at the private high school attended by the protagonist’s son, states that he is not only political, but “*politicísimo. Pero siempre en la oposición, como debe ser*” [very political. But always with the opposition, as should be].

The fourth point of disagreement relates to how the films represent marginalization. Here the question of the narrative's point of view is decisive for whether the films are *about* marginalization or try to speak *from* a marginalized position. The majority of the films analyzed here approach marginalization from a distance, and present visions *about* the poor. A film about marginalization only represents it in its misery as 'pornomiser' (cf. Duno-Gottberg, 2008: 248; King, 1990: 213). This holds true both for the films where marginalization is a central focus and where it figures in the background. The story about the woman from a barrio whose husband was shot by the dictatorship and whose son is now killed by the police in *Disparen a matar* is a case in point. The injustice in the film is clearly caused by the police violence. The poor woman loses her family at the hands of both the dictatorial and democratic state, a fact which serves to undermine the democratic credentials of the latter. Yet, the film devotes little time to her experience and point of view, but tells her story through the eyes of a journalist in the major newspaper *El Universal*. The central dilemma the film explores revolves around his qualms and the price he has to pay to help the poor woman. The film effectively places her story in the background, thereby making the question of him risking his comfortable lifestyle appear more salient than the loss of her family.

Más allá del silencio provides a more sustained focus on marginalization than *Disparen a matar* in that the protagonist is doubly marginalized by his poverty and lack of language. Yet he remains a static character throughout, and his position does not evolve beyond being a victim of his own marginalization. The positive forces representing potential change in the film are socially privileged; the principled investigator and the eccentric character of the professor of sign language. *Manon* provides another example of a film about a person from the barrio who tries to leave her marginalized status through crime. The film was directed by Chalbaud, who has claimed that his view of the barrio stems from a lived and direct experience (Molina, 2001: 45). Garaycochea protests this view, claiming that Chalbaud's treatment of marginalization increasingly became "*un elemento especulativo para él: no se ve la marginalidad, se ve su oficio*" [a speculative element for him: one does not see the marginalization, one sees his job] (in Roffé, 1997: 65). This claim aptly describes *Manon*. Here, the question of marginalization is reduced to a character who is willing to sacrifice everything, not only to escape the misery of the barrio as she states herself, but to live a life in luxury. The same motivation drives the protagonist in *Graduación de un delincuente*. Unlike *Manon*, this film indicates the underlying reason behind the protagonist's motivation by showing his embarrassment when he cannot afford to buy his son an ice-cream. Still, what

drives his later gambling and crimes is not a father's wish to provide for his child, but an individual's obsession with luxury and money.

The most sustained attempts to narrate *from* a marginalized position come from the late 1980s, with *Macu*, *Con el corazón en la mano*, and *Cuchillos de fuego*. With a changed point of view, these films represent their marginalized characters both as victims of an unjust system and as exercising agency and thereby surpassing the passivism an exclusive focus on victimhood postulates. As such, they also counter the one-sided pessimism in the narratives about marginalization. While they do not end happily, the characters signal possibilities for change within a socially difficult situation.

Interestingly, *Cuchillos de fuego* is also directed by Chalbaud, but approaches marginalization from a different perspective by showing the action from the orphaned and homeless protagonist's point of view. His dilemma revolves around the difficulty of surviving life on the street while staying true to the Catholic ethic his mother taught him, and his need to avenge his mother's death. Unlike *Manon*, the protagonist is not a threat to anyone. He struggles, but still manages to carve out a space for himself. His survival is itself a victory, and the film also embraces his eventual revenge.

Macu is one of the films the literature applauds for its political stance. Marrosu (in Roffé, 1997: 64) considers it a good example of a political critique presented through a portrayal of an individual's problems as representative of a wider societal problem. Delgado Arria argues that *Macu* manages to show both the hegemonic and patriarchal view of women in Venezuela as represented by news media and her husband, as well as the counter-hegemonic posture of the female protagonist by highlighting her resistance. He further claims that

el énfasis en la representación de Macu [...] parece prescribir una reflexión que es, a la vez, una toma de conciencia por parte del espectador-mujer-subalterna en el proceso en tránsito hacia su propia concienciación y madurez (Delgado Arria, 2004: 46).

[the emphasis in the representation of *Macu* (...) seems to prescribe a reflection that is simultaneously a seizure of conscience on the part of the spectator-woman-subaltern in the process of transit towards raising her own consciousness and maturity].

If *Macu* indeed succeeds in showing how the protagonist uses her raised awareness of her own subordinated position as a way of indicating a counter-hegemonic route for other women in her position, it does so because the film shows her experience from her point of view. The protagonist finds herself in a difficult situation, but unlike the narratives *about* marginalization, the changed point of view allows the films to show how she exercises agency within the confines of a violent marriage. This is an important difference, where the film does

not simply show bad things that happen to her, as a victim, but also shows her reaction and creative resistance to those things. In that process, she reproaches her grandmother and mother for ‘selling’ her to her husband, and further does not allow him to decide everything and denies him sex.

Narratives about marginalization also include films where marginalized characters figure in the background as victims. They are typically portrayed as criminals being beaten up in jail as in the *Cangrejo* films. Parts of *Retén de Catia* take place in the characteristic hillside barrios of Caracas, but marginalization is nonetheless not an important focus of the film. Visibly marginalized characters figure in a short scene as analphabets receiving literacy classes by the student activist and his girlfriend.

A fifth disagreement relates to who the films posit as the victims of Venezuela’s crisis. The films where the state is the main culprit tend to narrate from a socially privileged point of view, in that their protagonists – victims as well as perpetrators – come from the middle to upper classes. The female victim of *Homicidio culposo* provides an illustrative case. Placed in solitary confinement and talking to herself to remind herself of who she is she says that she is a student who has read Shakespeare and Cervantes. Similarly, the victims in both the *Cangrejo* films are rich. *Adiós Miami* focuses its critique on the rich elite, and portrays two types of victims. First, the protagonist has a lower-class lover who becomes pregnant early on. He dumps her for the actress, and pressures her to take an abortion. The second type of victims is the presumably middle class Venezuelans who have invested in apartments that will never be built. *Amaneció de golpe* explicitly directs itself to people in a similar social position as the journalist protagonist. In this sense, it speaks from the same position as *Disparen a matar*. In both films, the marginalized poor are the main victims of the state’s coercive policies. Yet the ‘we’ addressed in *Amaneció de golpe*’s punch line quoted above is a privileged we as it refers to those who had grown accustomed to security and wellbeing during the Punto Fijo democracy. The double meaning of the film’s title – waking up abruptly and waking up to a coup – underscores to whom the film addresses itself. A sudden realization that Venezuela’s democracy was not all-inclusive necessarily refers to those who had been included and needed dramatic events like el Caracazo and the 1992 coup attempt to open their eyes to Venezuela’s problems.

El nuevo cine outside the crisis frame

As mentioned, participation in *el nuevo cine* is not a straightforward question of either or, and there is a considerable grey zone. Above, I argued that the definitional yardstick of the *el*

nuevo cine was to present a critical view of Venezuelan society by focusing on the deficiencies of the state or narrating marginalization. I described the varying degrees to which the *nuevo cine* films signal their political stance, from the explicit call to change social reality in *Huelepega* to the singular focus on an incompetent legal system in *Homicidio culposo*. Similarly, the six films I categorize outside the crisis frame, also repeat elements of a social and political critique found in the explicitly political *nuevo cine* films. These elements notwithstanding, I classify them outside the dominant frame for three reasons.

First, the happy ending. *Muchacho solitario* (1998), *El caso Bruzual* (1990), *Salserín* (1997), and *La generación Halley* (1986) follow the set-up of the classical Hollywood plot by letting their protagonists succeed. If part of the political critique of *el nuevo cine* is to show the dysfunctionality of the system by letting their characters fail, these films fulfill the opposite function. *Muchacho solitario* is a case in point as it, on face value, compares to the pessimistic vision of the barrio as *Graduación de un delincuente* or *Huelepega*. *Muchacho solitario* represents violent crime as an integral part of life in the barrio, making it impossible for the protagonist to run his soda pop delivery business and run a shelter for homeless children to keep them away from drugs. The *malandro* from the barrio is, like in *Huelepega* a victim of poverty and a difficult childhood, and he is forced to sell drugs by a mafia. However and unlike the *nuevo cine* films, *Muchacho solitario* sees the conflict get resolved as the ‘good guys’ are in the majority. The barrio *malandro* turns out to also be a good person who has just been forced to sell drugs and act violently, and when he asks the protagonist for help they manage to outsmart the drug cartel and have them arrested. The arrest is the only time representatives of the state enter the narrative, and they do so as a good and seemingly incorruptible force. All the characters in *Muchacho solitario* get what they want and the comical elements present throughout the narrative contribute to making the violence appear innocent as opposed to marking a general level of insecurity.

El caso Bruzual ends similarly on an upbeat note. Stylistically and thematically, it compares to the two *Cangrejo* films and *Homicidio culposo* in that it depicts the struggle of a principled and tough police investigator to solve a complicated criminal case about an international criminal organization that laundries money and traffics arms and children. Although the crime does allude to the involvement of government officials in the organization, the legal system as such in *El caso Bruzual* is competent and on the side of justice. Unlike the films in the dominant frame, the police director supports the investigator, and the representation of the police operations leaves an overall impression of a professional police force capable of handling complicated operations. The film ends by resolving a conflict

between the investigator and a female colleague, and the police crack down on the Venezuelan chapter of the organization.

Second, the films outside the crisis frame do not explicitly criticize society. That is, their stories are not a social critique but remain individual instances where their conflicts stay between the characters of the film and are not cast as cases of social problems. The crime and violence featured in *De mujer a mujer* (1987) illustrates this difference. The film tells the story of a woman and a man who rob people at gunpoint on the Venezuelan countryside. Although it provides an interesting take on gender roles in Venezuelan society,³⁹ it does not cast its violence as anything else than two people choosing to commit violent crime for their own personal excitement.

Third and related to the absence of social critique, these films present their stories from a privileged point of view. This is the case in *La generación Halley*, *Roraima* (1993), *El caso Bruzual*, and to some extent, *Muchacho solitario*. To exemplify, the generational conflict depicted in *La generación Halley* plays itself out between members of a comfortable Venezuelan middle class. The conflict is characterized by the pregnancy of a young teenage girl, a widowed father who wants to raise his children, the lure of drugs, and above all, an individualism that applauds each individual's ability to accomplish what she wants by wanting it strongly enough. Against this new generation stands the mother who disowns her daughter when she becomes pregnant outside marriage and the grandparents who do not trust the father to take care of his children. Against the optimism offered by the individualism and the new generation's sense that they are unique and special stands the old political elite, an elite that still shops clothes in Miami and who can pay the police a substantial bribe to avoid legal repercussions from drug abuse.

This last element of state criticism in *La generación Halley* serves as a reminder that the dividing line between films inside and outside the crisis frame is clear-cut. Most of the films I consider in this section contain elements of social critique that resonates heavily with the ideals of *el nuevo cine* movement, although they do not dwell on these critical elements. This critique happens firstly by portraying state representatives in a negative light as criminals. *El*

³⁹ *De mujer a mujer* is thus one of few films that provides a critical view of traditional gender roles as they have been defined by machismo. The film suggests that both men and women suffer under machismo. Machismo hurts men who are unwilling or incapable of living up to the demands of being tough and always in control of themselves and people around them. It hurts women who feel obliged to marry just because social conventions dictate that a decent woman is a married woman. Interestingly, *De mujer a mujer* features one of few violent women in my selection, thereby going against the dominant trend of letting males handle the guns and the women as passive. The other films representing women as capable of violence are *Huelepega*, *Manon*, and *El caso Bruzual*.

caso Bruzual, for instance, implicates members of the government in an international criminal organization, though it lets this accusation linger in the air without elaboration and without the police investigating the involvement of the officials. *De mujer a mujer* shows a police officer befriending and giving his gun to the two criminal's protagonists, and *Roraima* refers to a region as a territory without law.⁴⁰

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the *nuevo cine* films in the dominant frame of Venezuelan cinema from 1980 to 1999 contributed to destabilizing the hegemony of the state set up by the Punto Fijo pact in 1958. This tendency was particularly strong in the 1980s, where eleven of the thirteen films analyzed presented a state-critical view. In the 1990s, five of the ten films followed the same trend.

Venezuelan films criticized the state in two ways. One strategy was to depict the state itself in a negative light, focusing on corruption in the government, the legal system, and the police in particular. Another strategy was to focus on the plight of Venezuela's marginalized poor, and how an ostensibly oil rich country did not manage to include a large portion of its population into its socio-economic development.

This critique undermined the legitimacy of the state. The films provided a cinematographic version of a critique that was of common currency in the large and small social protests of the time, where el Caracazo was but a pointed manifestation. Venezuelan cinema called for a political transformation, and it called for a politics that would be inclusive of the poor and a state that would adhere to the democratic principle of the rule of law.

After the elections in 1998, Venezuelan cinema got Chávez. Under his government, Venezuela has had a president that claimed to have made *el pueblo* the sovereign. Highlighting the injustice of the previous regimes such as the state's violent repression of el Caracazo, Chávez promised to construct a new state and a different Venezuela, deepening democracy and including the marginalized. In the next chapter, I ask how Venezuelan cinema has received their new president.

⁴⁰ Roraima is the name of a table mountain in the western part of Venezuela.

Chapter four. Fear of violence and ambivalence in Venezuelan cinema 2000-2010

Introduction

This chapter analyzes the eleven most seen Venezuelan films between 2000 and 2010. I argue that the films moved away from the explicit political stance common in the previous two decades, and assumed a more ambivalent political posture. As there is no dominant frame that makes the films speak with a concerted voice, I propose that Venezuelan films since Chávez came to power has not been a counter-hegemonic cultural force in the country. It has instead displayed a plurality of perspectives that cast Venezuelan society and politics from different angles. Yet, the most repeated frame, a crisis frame consisting of six films, portrays an insecure country marked by violence, and as such contributes to what I term a culture of fear. The crisis frame consists of two elements, a portrayal of public space as insecure and represents the state as criminal and corrupt. Of the two elements, the first is most common. However, since three of them are ambiguous about whether they treat the period before or after Chávez, their ambivalence makes their political posture less explicit. Rather than explicitly inviting their audience to think about Chávez in a given way, these films can validate both a state-critical and a state-supportive position.

The chapter is organized as follows. First, I introduce my discussion with a close analysis of the representation of violent crime and what causes it in the opening scenes of *Secuestro express*. Second, I briefly describe some of the changes that characterize Venezuelan cinema of the last decade and its move away from *el nuevo cine*. Third, I note the importance of the polarized debate about the pros and cons of Chavismo. While this debate is not helpful to understand Chavismo as a political phenomenon because the two sides greatly exaggerate the vices and virtues of Chavismo, it provides necessary context for understanding what it means to make a film criticizing the contemporary state. Fourth, I discuss how the films frame Venezuelan society, paying particular attention to what topics they highlight. I note three state-critical films and three ambivalent films that in their ambivalence could just as well pass for stories about today's as yesterday's Venezuela, or as both. I analyze what I term a culture of fear and a politics of ambivalence to discuss the political stance of these six films. I then briefly turn to five films that look very different as such do not constitute a distinct frame before I conclude that Venezuelan cinema under Chávez has neither turned *chavista* nor *anti-chavista*.

Framing poverty as a threat

I introduced the previous chapter with an analysis of a scene in *Macu* where the police raid a barrio to illustrate the framing poverty as marginalization. Since 2000, the Venezuelan crisis frame has been made up of a different set of elements. Framing the crisis as a function of insecurity produced by the criminal poor has become more common, which I will illustrate with an analysis of the opening scenes of *Secuestro express* (2005). *Secuestro express* is the most pointed example of a film in the Venezuelan crisis frame since 2000, and I want to highlight how it presents its political posture from the outset.

Secuestro express starts with two intertitles accompanied by a dialogue in the background. Establishing violent crime as the film's topic, the first intertitle reads "*una incalculable cantidad de secuestros express ocurren a diario en Latinoamérica*" [an incalculable amount of express kidnappings occur daily in Latin America]. As the audience hears a door being opened and three or four men talking and laughing, the next intertitle contends that the film is about to present a true story. The film cuts to an extreme close-up of two lips of a man saying "*vamos a jugar la ruleta criolla*" [let's play Venezuelan roulette]. As Duno-Gottberg (2010: 57) observes, this is a voice "*cuya entonación será reconocida por cualquier caraqueño: la voz de unos 'malandros'*" [whose intonation will be recognized by anyone from Caracas: the voice of some *malandros*]. The next image shows just the eyes of the man, who details the rules of the roulette: "*cuando yo le doy a la ruleta, tú eres el único que participa. Si la bala no sale, volvemos a jugar*" [when I start the roulette, you are the only one participating. If the bullet doesn't come out, we play again]. A clearly scared male voice of the implied victim is heard in the background as the *malandro* continues to deliver his death sentence: "*así sucesivamente, hasta que hay un ganador. Que eres tú*" [and so on and so forth, until we have a winner. Which is you]. This is followed by a scream and a gunshot.

After this dramatic introduction to the problem definition of the film – kidnappings and their lethal outcomes – the film shows a number of images alluding to the causes Latin America's endemic insecurity. *Secuestro express* reinforces the link between insecurity and poverty by showing a barrio shot after the off-screen execution. Taken at large distance from a helicopter and accompanied by horror film music suggesting danger, the successive images give the impression that the barrio is immense and overcrowded. Filling three-fourths of the screen and placed in the foreground, the barrio appears larger than the city center in the background. By first associating the execution with the barrio and then casting it as surrounding and almost encroaching upon the city center, the first impression of *Secuestro express* is that the barrio constitutes a threat to those in the center. The scary horror film

music and the slow pace of the sequence underline this threat. The camera zooms in on approximately 150 houses crammed onto a small slot of land on a steep valley before it lifts and shows the high-rises of downtown Caracas. The camera angle shifts again, and this time it films the barrio from inside the city, as to reinforce the impression of physical proximity between the overfilled barrio and the city proper.

As the credits continue to appear, a series of cross-cut images suggests that Caracas is a capital of two worlds, one of black poverty and another of white affluence. The worlds coexist side by side, yet remain physically separated and diametrically opposed to each other. A number of shots showing supposedly typical scenes from everyday life allude to an argument the film will explore at further depth, namely that the two worlds constitute an explosive mix. In the rich Venezuela, the wealthy live in two-storeyed white mansions with impeccable greens lawns and Roman-styled columns. Shot at a slightly low angle and from the outside of the tall iron fence surrounding the houses, the film conveys a message of exteriority to the environment it films. The camera is not invited into the spaces of the rich, and therefore films them at a distance. A new shot, again taken through a fence, shows three middle-aged white men dressed in black shoes, white socks drawn well above the ankles, light and brightly colored shorts, and t-shirts on a golf course. The last shot of the wealthy world is a large shopping mall. Filmed at slow pace and with horror-film music playing in the background, the film slowly builds up to a future climax.

The climax comes as *Secuestro express* moves to 2002 and to the build-up of the brief coup against President Chávez. This event came to define the relationship between the government, the opposition, and the private media. Crucially, it is not immediately clear that the film moves back in time from a contemporary Venezuela of 2005 when the film was screened. This reinforces its claim to truth, in particular because it includes a well-known footage from the TV coverage of the time. After the distance to the luxury in the previous images, the camera is suddenly in the midst of the action it portrays, at times as a participant marked by the use of a subjective camera, and at times as an objective observer. It shows six men with Venezuelan flags at a demonstration, and one of them shouts “*asesinos, asesinos*” [murderers, murderers]. The horror film music can still be heard in the background, but the increased pace of the images mixed with the sounds from the street mark the transition to a climax. Still not clear what they demonstrate for or who the murderers are, the camera shows a wide shot of a larger crowd of people with Venezuelan flags before a black and white image shows the implied killer, a soldier firing live gunshots to a position slightly to the left of the camera. Successive images show people screaming in fear, a woman arguing with a soldier, a

tire burning on the street, and a wide shot showing six or seven tear gas patrons landing in the middle of a group of some five-hundred demonstrators. This is the brutal state clamping down on the people, the *Venezuelan* people as the flags remind, with the full might of its coercive arm. A soldier beats a person off-screen with a baton, police officers shoot apparently indiscriminately towards people off-screen, a tank drives down a large avenue, and an extreme close-up shows the bloody face of a wounded man. The camera position shifts between being among the demonstrators when the security forces attack them, to showing the forces committing violence against the people with wide and mid shots. Unlike the distanced shots of the *barrio* and the wealthy, the camera now moves freely between the people demonstrating and the security forces shooting at them, producing an effect of proximity and participation.

Without any transition between its own staging of the demonstration and a documentary clip, *Secuestro express* shows a controversial footage that became key to the opposition's understanding of the brief coup. In Coronil's (2005) account, it remains unclear what happened during the coup, and as much else in *Venezuela chavistas* and the opposition interpret the events differently. The buildup to the coup, which *Secuestro express* depicts, had started as a large demonstration protesting the government's removal of the management in the state oil company, and changed to a demand for the renunciation of Chávez. During the turmoil, 19 people were shot dead in different places close to the presidential palace and the Puente Llaguno, a bridge overlooking the Baralt avenue. As Coronil explains, private media outlets immediately blamed the government for the deaths, and repeatedly aired images of a man firing a series of shots against someone off-screen cross-cut with other images of dead civilians. According to the news media, the man was a *chavista* firing at peaceful demonstrators. The footage was used as a proof of how the government massacred its people. Coronil (2005: 94) points out that in order to win support for the coup, the images were shown to members of the military and other government officials "*para demostrar la ilegitimidad absoluta del gobierno que asesinaba al 'inocente pueblo'*" [to demonstrate the absolute illegitimacy of the government that assassinated 'the innocent people']. Supporters of the government have later argued the man shooting was returning sniper fire from the police. The person firing the shots, Rafael Cabrices, is clearly identifiable, and he later pressed charges against the director for the negative representation of him in the film.⁴¹

⁴¹ He died of heart attack before the case reached court. At his funeral, then Vice-President José Vicente Rangel denounced the film as miserable, of low artistic quality, and criticized it for painting a negative and distorted image of Venezuela (Villazana, 2008: 169).

It is significant in this context that the film makes no distinction between fiction and reality, or more precisely, that it attempts to blur the line between the two in an attempt to claim that it is a true story. Inasmuch as the audiences will recognize the footage from Puente Llaguno, the film invites them to consider the rest of its story as truthful as well. By including this footage, *Secuestro express* makes it clear from the outset that it is anti-*chavista* (Farrell, 2011: 11; Suárez Faillace, 2009: 368).

Secuestro express cuts from the controversial footage to present-day 'everyday Venezuela' and a new sequence of images contrasting the wealth portrayed before the images of the coup. The sequence purports to give a glimpse into the other side of Venezuela, the criminal and, significantly, black underworld of the *barrio*. As Duno-Gottberg (2010: 63) argues, the negative characters in the film are either dark-skinned *malandros* or state representatives. All of the characters shown in the sequence are Afro-Venezuelans, and the images are for the first time shot at night. *Secuestro express* communicates that this is a world it knows and has access to. It places the camera in the midst of the action, as if it were held by one of the young black men present. This creates a more intimate atmosphere than the previous sequences, and there are no more wide shots from a distance. In quick succession, the film shows drugs being prepared for sale, a man being tattooed, another man cleaning a pistol, an older man setting off a street fight between two young muscular men fighting each other with knives. Alternating between mid shots, close-ups, and extreme close-ups, the intimate camera angles indicate that this is a space the film has access to and knows. A man shouting something incomprehensible and another man holding a large snake give the impression that the film shows a hidden, almost secret, part of Caracas and its underworld, perhaps a ritual or at least something primitive with African rather than European connotations as was the case with the wealthy. The last image of the sequence shows four or five young men armed with knives and a pistol sneak through a narrow alley with the camera following them close behind, presumably about to commit a crime.

The scene illustrates two elements in the crisis frame. First it is illustrative of films that cast insecurity rather than marginalization as an element in the Venezuelan crisis. These films are also about the poor, but rather than being excluded as the term marginalization suggests, the films frame the poor primarily as a threat. As Duno-Gottberg argues about the opening sequence, *Secuestro express* posits a universal victim of the violence it depicts. Rather than a specific character in the film, the voice addresses “*en ese momento [...] el espectador: somos tú, yo, la audiencia. Nosotros somos las víctimas de los actos violentos que acontecen en la pantalla*” [the spectator in this moment: it is you, me, the audience. We are the victims of the

violent acts taking place on the screen] (Duno-Gottberg, 2010: 58). As one of the kidnappers puts it seconds before the victim is shot, the poor own public space in Caracas: “*pequeña la ciudad, grande el barrio papa*” [the city is small, the barrio is big].

The second element concerns the negative representation of the state. *Secuestro express* is particularly clear that it is the *chavista* state that is at fault. In a similar fashion to *Macu*, *Secuestro express* posits the state as oppressing an ‘us’ – the Venezuelan people with the Venezuelan flags at the demonstration – by a ‘them’. The state is represented later in the story by corrupt individuals working on behalf of themselves, not defending the state as during the coup. They still constitute a threat, in a similar fashion to the criminal poor. To protect themselves from insecurity, the film suggests, Venezuelans must be on the watch for young dark-skinned males and police officers.

Changes in the film sector

Before I continue my analysis, I want to note a number of changes in the film sector impacting on what types of films have become popular. First, the popularity and production of Venezuelan films popularity decreased. From 2000-2004, an average of four films were produced each year.⁴² For the films analyzed in this chapter, the average spectatorship was 295 508, and only 168 103 when excluding the blockbuster *Secuestro express* with its 930 000 viewers. With barely 70 000 spectators, the first film I turn to, *Caracas amor a muerte* (2000), had the lowest number of spectators in my selection. Rather than a measure of the decreased popularity of Venezuelan cinema, the low numbers are indicators of meager funding. With the *chavista* government’s policy reform discussed in the previous chapter, the numbers go up, with an average of 16 films produced between 2005 and 2009 and an average of 453 123 spectators to the most popular movies. This average is above those of the 1990s, but below the 1980s.

The second change concerns a marked stylistic shift. The earlier *nuevo cine* films were slow, sober, and realistic. In particular the violence was portrayed in a straight-forward manner, and people died when shot and fell when punched. The camera would typically not dwell on the violence itself. The films since 2000 look different. From the adrenalin-pumping action in *Secuestro express*, *Cyrano Fernández*, and *La hora cero* to the comical situations in *Borrón y cuenta nueva*, *Punto y raya*, and *Puras joyitas*, the films use a more modern-looking cinematographic style with the use of better technical equipment. This is an international trend found above all in Hollywood films, but also found in for instance Brazilian cinema and

⁴² Calculated on the basis of statistical data provided by CNAC (personal communication).

the blockbuster *Cidade de deus* [City of God] (2002). The new look is primarily stylistic, referring to the technical aspects such as editing and sound.⁴³ Importantly, this stylistic change makes the violence in the films from the last decade appear more brutal, graphic, and often with an added sadistic element. In my view, this accentuates the porno-miserabilism of the films that focus on the link between marginalization and violent crime. I will elaborate on this important point below. In terms of Bordwell's plot structure, they stay within the Hollywood paradigm in that they emphasize the intelligibility of their fabulas or stories just like the earlier *nuevo cine* films did. The only difference is that they have become more likely to embrace a happy ending.

Third, the politics of Venezuelan films changes. This is an 'obvious' change, in that the election of Chávez brought about a new political context. For readers unfamiliar with the Venezuelan context, it is perhaps difficult to grasp the extent of this change. As Coronil (2008, 2011) notes, debating Chavismo is entering a mine field in which a Manichean mindset where everyone is either for or against has made the room for a nuanced debate precariously narrow. Opponents decry Chávez as an authoritarian leader bordering a Cuban-styled dictator, his state as assuming control over increasing areas of society and the economy, and they point to an increased dependency on oil rents and clientelism. Supporters seem to talk about a different Venezuela and a different Chávez. They see a deepening of a participatory democracy, increased access to health and education services, and national control of 'the people's' oil. Although caricaturized, the opposing versions of what Chavismo means for the country capture the gist of each argument. As Coronil (2008) points out, they are mirror-images of each other, and they both see Chávez as representing something fundamentally new. Against this, Coronil points out that Chávez' promise to eradicate poverty is a continuation of the practice of *sembrar el petróleo*.

In analyzing the politics of Venezuelan cinema under Chávez, this polarized debate provides insight into what making a politically critical film in the present context entails. The films criticizing the Punto Fijo democracy highlighted the state's undemocratic nature and its exclusion of the poor from the oil wealth. With Chávez, the public perception of the Venezuelan state has changed, both of its virtues and vices. Combatting poverty is for instance an area where Chávez enjoys a degree of legitimacy, while violent crime is a weak spot. In the following, I will turn to a number of films that repeat elements of the anti-*chavista* stance and some that appear rather neutral. In my view, no films unequivocally embrace

⁴³ The same change occurred in Mexico after the screening of *Amores perros* in 2000.

Chavismo. Some films appear *chavista* in that they side with the official rhetoric on marginalization and the vices of the Punto Fijo state. In this, they represent a continuation of the dominant frame from the 1980s and 1990s. However, these films are ambivalent and employ a coded language to present narratives that can be interpreted as both critical and supportive of the present state. They employ audience schemata that confirm preexisting beliefs from both an oppositional and official point of view. Their critique of the *chavista* state becomes clear as such when seen in conjunction with the anti-*chavista* films, since they too point to social issues where Chávez performs poorly according to popular opinion. Under Chávez, state-critical films contribute to the perception of the omnipresence of violent crime and the *malandro* as the monopoly holder of violence in the barrio.

The ambivalence of several of the films brings me to a final change of contemporary films compared to the previous two decades. Whereas *el nuevo cine* was marked by one dominant frame characterized by a remarkable agreement on the broad lines of a state critique, Venezuelan films since 2000 have not displayed a single dominant frame. Instead, more types of films have become popular. Furthermore, the critical films are not of an explicitly political nature as was the case with *el nuevo cine*, but evidence a more careful and implicit approach. They still cast a Venezuela in social and political disarray, and as such participate in the crisis frame. I propose that the crisis frame is made of up three explicitly critical films and three politically ambivalent films that confirm both *chavista* and anti-*chavista* audience schemata. However, there are nuances and grey zones that I pay particular attention to.

In Entman's terminology, frame contestation or the absence of one dominant frame is good news from a democratic point of view, as it allows for a plurality of voices and visions of society. Critics would point to the concerns voiced in chapter two, namely that the current regime's policy towards the cinematographic sector is an attempt to control the type of films produced. In this view, the fact of fewer state-critical films evidences the undemocratic nature of the policy. In this context and to nuance this view, I want to stress that three of the state-critical films voice their critique through a coded language by making it unclear whether they depict Venezuelan before or after Chávez assumed power, or both periods as I will argue. I understand these films as employing the strategies that Johnson and Stam (1995: 38) argue Brazilian filmmakers used under the dictatorship. Faced with increased state control, they dodged censorship and secured state funding by using a coded language to voice their critique. Understanding this code then becomes crucial to untangle the politics of the films. As ambivalent and ambiguous cases, they do not share the explicitness of for instance *Secuestro express* or the earlier *nuevo cine* films. In their ambivalence, they could perfectly well be

taken as supportive of the state. I consider them as grey-zone cases where their ambivalence takes away some of the edge of their political critique compared to the *nuevo cine* films.

Critiquing the state with violence

I first turn to three films that in their negative representation of state representatives are fairly explicit in their critique of the state. *Caracas amor a muerte* (2000), which raises some of the topics later films were to elaborate on by depicting a vision of the barrio that resonates with the anti-*chavista* critique. The film is clearly about its present-day Venezuela. However, it was screened only a year after Chávez assumed power, which is perhaps too early to make it a critique of the *chavista* state. Yet the film is highly reminiscent of the opposition's critique of Chavismo. *Caracas amor a muerte* shows a Venezuela without rule of law, and where *malandros* and the police contribute to a generalized sense of insecurity. The barrio is virtually a war zone, where two petty *malandros* battle to sell drugs in their own neighborhood against a more powerful criminal group headed by a police officer. This is a Venezuela where the streets are unsafe, not only for the *malandros*, most of whom kill each other, but for everyone. Illustrative of the insecurity that the film emphasizes throughout, the two *malandros* kill two people when robbing a car at a traffic light. The question “¿por qué la mataste? [why did you kill her] is answered with a simple “me miró [she looked at me].

Caracas amor a muerte is also a story about the everyday life of people in the barrio who live in the midst of the violence between the *malandros*. The girlfriend of a *malandro*, Aixa, is a pregnant teenage girl with a strong mind and will. Her conflict revolves around whether or not to take abortion. Her grandmother, a woman in her 40s, is in favor by arguing that the family of three – herself, her daughter, and Aixa – cannot afford to feed one more person. She wants Aixa to have a different life than herself and her own daughter. As Aixa tells her boyfriend, there is no point in having a child just for him to become a *malandro* and die young. She takes pills to induce abortion, but changes her mind and rushes to the hospital to save the child. There, her boyfriend kills her in the tragic end of the film.

The second film is *Secuestro express* (2005), which I have already referred to above and in previous chapters to illustrate some of my methodological and theoretical arguments. It was an immense box office hit, and with 932 530 spectators it reached the heights of the most popular films from the 1980s and has since only been surpassed by *La hora cero*. As indicated in the close analysis above, *Secuestro express* is the most explicitly polemic and anti-*chavista* film in my selection, and it usefully illustrates some of the most common argument against Chavismo. *Secuestro express* is, to my knowledge, the most frequently debated film in extant

literature on Venezuelan cinema (see Duno-Gottberg, 2010; Farrell, 2011; Martínez, 2007; Navarro, 2007; Pinardi, 2007; Suárez Faillace, 2009).

Secuestro express stands out for delivering an elaborate political critique, pointing to a wide range of the faults of Venezuelan society in a similar manner to *Retén de Catia* and *Huelepega*. It delivers all of the four functions of a developed frame in Entman's theory. First, it defines the problem of Venezuela as one of insecurity and criminal violence, where the dark-skinned people from the barrio, the *malandros*, hold the monopoly of violence all over Caracas. In *Secuestro express* and unlike for instance *Huelepega* or *Caracas amor a muerte*, this is a threat primarily against the rich. It is a violence that hits the city center and not just the barrio. The film tells a story of a rich couple who are kidnapped after a night out by four *malandros*. From the *malandros'* point of view, the kidnapping is successful. The *malandros* call the couple's parents to demand a ransom, they buy cocaine from a homosexual Colombian drug dealer, they bribe an officer from *La Guardia Nacional* [the National Guard] with some of the cocaine at a check point, execute one of the kidnapped, and they receive money for the other.

Secuestro express is also fairly direct about what causes the crime and insecurity it depicts. The state functions as an enabling agent. In practical terms, the only difference between the state representatives in the film (the police and the military) and the *malandros* is that the former wear a uniform. These representatives appear in three significant scenes. The Colombian drug dealer is in bed, literally and – I am tempted to add – highly symbolically, with a young officer in the army. Importantly, homosexuality is negative in the film's universe, and Chávez' own background as a military officer is not incidental in this context. The officer from *La Guardia Nacional* who accepts a bribe from the *malandros* and lets them drive away is in all probability aware that one of the passengers is kidnapped. The police also appear in one of the final scenes, where two officers are about to rape the woman minutes after she is freed from the kidnappers.

Beyond the enabling effect of the state, *Secuestro express* blames the rich. This too is fairly explicit, and it was signaled in the opening scenes analyzed above. Importantly, although the *malandros* are sadistic, trigger-happy rapists, the film introduces them by giving them a human face. The scene introducing the most sadistic of the *malandros*, Budú, casts him as a caring father above all concerned about how to buy medicines for his sick daughter. After presenting the rich couple in a nightclub in downtown Caracas, the camera zooms uphill into a home in an anonymous barrio where Budú tells his son that “*ahora si le vamos a comprar todos los medicamentos a tu hermanita*” [now we'll finally buy the medicine for

your little sister]. Reinforcing the juxtaposition of extreme wealth and poverty marked in the opening scene, the film establishes an impression that kidnappings occur because the rich have money and the poor do not. In an attempt to contest Chavismo's hegemony on the discourse on marginalization, the film underscores that it is not the fact of inequality per se that causes crime, but the way rich Venezuelans arrogantly show off their wealth by overdressing and driving luxurious cars in a city where the majority lives in misery. This is the explanation Trece, presented as the 'good' middle class kidnapper, provides when the woman, Carla, asks him why she was kidnapped.

Carla: Yo trabajo todos los días en un hospital sin ningún recurso. Ayudando todo lo que puedo a los niños pobres. Y ustedes vienen a tratar así...

Trece: Coño... pero ¿quién te manda a andar en un carro del año? ¿Tú crees que yo soy adivino?

Carla: Pero ¿qué pecado es tener dinero... coño? Mi papá ha trabajado toda la vida.

Trece: Es que eso no es el peo. Yo también tengo real.

Carla: Entonces... ¿cuál es el secreto?

Trece: [...] Hay un secreto [...] cuando media ciudad está pudriendo en la mierda... tú andas boleta en tremenda camioneta. ¿Coño, cómo no quieres que te odien? ¿Cómo no te van a odiar? Mira la pinta, mira esto, mira esto... ¿Tú sabes cuántas familias pueden comer con esta vaina? Una cosa es que no somos iguales, de pinga, yo lo entiendo... Otra cosa es que le estés restregando tu dinero a todo el mundo en la cara, ¿entiendes?

[Carla: I work every day at a hospital without any resources. Helping the poor kids all I can. And you guys come and behave like this...

Trece: Fuck... But who sent you to drive around in a car of the year? Do you think I'm a fortune teller?

Carla: Fuck, but what sin is it to have money? My dad has worked all life.

Trece: The thing is that's not the issue. I also have cash.

Carla: Then... what's the secret?

Trece: (...) There's a secret (...) when half the city is rotting in shit... and you cruise around in a bad-ass car. Fuck, how do you not want them to hate you? How will they not hate you? Look at your clothes, look at this, look at that... Do you know how many families could eat with this shit? One thing is that we're not the same, cool, I get it... Another is that you're rubbing your money in everyone's faces, you get me?]

As Suárez Faillace (2009: 372) and Duno-Gottberg (2010: 62) note, the narrative assigns the middle classes the task of solving the problems underlying kidnappings produced by the poor and the class hate the rich have brought upon themselves. Carla, as a representative of the hardworking upper middle class that has become rich, has to understand that she ought not to 'rub her money in everyone's faces'. Introduced by an intertitle describing him as a middle class romantic, Trece's role in the narrative is to teach Carla that lesson. These intertitles signal from the outset who the heroes and villains of the story are. Carla is introduced as a volunteer at a clinic, and her boyfriend Martín as 'old money and high maintenance.' It is noteworthy that Trece states that he is not into kidnapping for money, and the 'they' he refers to are the dark-skinned poor lower classes. This implies that, unlike Budú who kidnaps to afford medicine for his cancer-sick daughter, Trece kidnaps either for the fun of it or because he is on some sort of social mission of teaching the rich about the vices of driving around in

expensive cars. Having identified with Carla as a fellow human being, Trece pays part of his ransom to the two other *malandros* so that they will not rape and kill her. He also saves her from two rapist police officers. On her end, Carla decides to stop showing off her wealth. In the final scene she appears modestly dressed driving an older car and on her way to pick up a sick poor child to live with her.

Borrón y cuenta nueva (2002) confirms the picture of a Venezuela characterized by violence and social chaos, albeit its focus and point of view is distinct from *Secuestro express*. The film is about a woman whose husband cheats on her with her friend and coworker after 15 years of marriage. This affair forces her into a fresh start in her life and to become independent without her husband whom she has sacrificed her youth and earlier career plans for. She uses this opportunity to fall in love with a new man, a famous soap opera actor.

Seen in the context of the other films analyzed here, *Borrón y cuenta nueva* signals its political stance in three ways. First, it speaks from a point of view of social privilege. Its central characters live in a large house in a gated community, they have a maid, and their son goes to college in the United States. Further, the camera shows only images from the rich parts of the city. The numerous overview shots of the downtown area all avoid the barrios surrounding the city, and in the city itself the camera only shows modern high-rises and fancy shops.

Second and related, the film's point of view makes violence and crime appear as a constant threat that meet the rich whenever they venture out on the streets. As I return to in my analysis, *Borrón y cuenta nueva* thereby appeals to anti-*chavista* audience schemata. Violent demonstrators and anonymous looting masses figure constantly in the background of the romantic drama of *Borrón y cuenta nueva*. People run around with torches, and set things on fire and loot while the military tries to maintain law and order. Had it not been for the cell phones, the film could very well have been set in 1989 during el Caracazo. Aside from a news report on TV referring to the disturbance as 'student demonstrations', the film attempts to give no background to the reasons for the demonstrations. Rather, it leaves the impression of a chaos where nobody is in control and where dark-skinned people take the opportunity to loot stores. Importantly, however, the violence in *Borrón y cuenta nueva* remains in the background, and it never hits its protagonists. This makes it lack the graphic and brutal elements in *Caracas amor a muerte* and *Secuestro express*.

Third, the representation of the state follows a pattern familiar from the early 1980s rather than the 2000s. The female protagonist witnesses a murder where her neighbor, a high-ranking police officer strangles his wife. The higher echelons of the police force try to protect

him, but a principled investigator intervenes in the case and eventually manages to reveal the truth. The dialogue between the principled investigator and his superior leaves the same impression as the *Cangrejo* films and *Homicidio culposo* did of a police force led by corrupt leaders. The superior declines the investigator permission to work on the case, arguing that “*Rojas, este no es el momento. Y aunque sea cierto, ¿usted no se da cuenta que estamos rodeado por el hampa? No podemos darnos el lujo de entregar uno de los nuestros.* [Rojas, this is not the moment. And even if it were true, don’t you realize that we’re surrounded by the criminal underworld? We cannot give ourselves the luxury of turning in one of our own]. The investigator does not heed his superior, telling him “*Dr. Hernández, o hay ley, o no hay*” [Dr. Hernández, either there is law, or there isn’t]. Interestingly, the film portrays the soldiers attempting to quell the looting in a positive light, making the police appear elitist in contrast to a military in tune with the people.

Ambivalently *chavista*: films on Venezuela’s recent history

Three of the films I analyze in this chapter depict recent Venezuelan history from the pre-Chávez period. I first turn to two films about 1996, *Cyrano Fernández* (2008) and *La hora cero* (2010), before I discuss *El Caracazo* (2005) which is about the 1989 popular revolt of the same name. Given that *Cyrano Fernández* and *La hora cero* both present state-critical narratives, how they communicate *which* state they depict – the pre-*chavista*, the *chavista*, or as I will argue, both states – is crucial to analyze their politics. Chávez won the elections in 1998 by promising to construct a new and qualitatively different state, and he has continued to legitimize his rule and discredit his opponents by reference to the vices of the state under the Punto Fijo democracy. Consequently, if taken as narratives exclusively about 1996 and the faults of the pre-Chávez era, the two films offer a support for Chavismo. Paying attention to how they communicate the fact of ‘1996’ then becomes a key to understanding their political stance. I propose that they are both about 1996 and present-day Venezuela. Seen as stories about 1996, they confirm classical *chavista* rhetoric on marginalization, social inequality, and the vices of the corrupt Punto Fijo state. This allows them to voice a critique of the *chavista* state from within, by using the terms of the debate as defined by Chavismo. While the films remind the audiences why Chávez came to power in 1998, they also invite to the question of what has changed since then. By appealing to the same audience schemata as *Secuestro express*, that is, by repeating a critique commonly voiced by the opposition against the current *chavista* regime, the films are also stories about present-day Venezuela. The representation of the *malandros* as the true holders of the monopoly on violence is the most important of their

anti-*chavista* elements, together with the images of the state as corrupt and incompetent. *Cyrano Fernández* and *La hora cero* would have easily passed as *chavista* in 1999, but it is questionable if they do so ten years later. I will now discuss how the two films solicit a reading of themselves as *chavista*, before I turn to their *anti-chavista* elements in the section on the culture of fear.

The apparent *chavista* posture of *Cyrano Fernández* is particularly clear. It exalts the marginalized poor as victims of the oppression of the state, its corrupt police and politicians, and a powerful narco cartel. It celebrates the poor living in the *barrio* as heroes of a “*movimiento popular*” [popular movement]. The struggles of these heroes are against the predominance of the rich and the powerful, and they win this struggle thanks to their street smartness and moral superiority.

Cyrano Fernández signals this posture primarily through its protagonist Cyrano. Spending his days writing romantic poems and beating up the bad guys in the neighborhood, he is the hero of the *barrio*. He has single-handedly killed 25 *malandros*, he protects women from their abusive boyfriends, and children from being mugged. Although he is loved and admired by everyone, he is a solitary character, shy when it comes to romantic matters, and he cannot bring himself to confess his love to the beautiful dancer Roxanna. Talking in a voice-over, Cyrano delivers short speeches that indicate the film’s objective. In the first of these, he establishes a social critique by presenting his story as a typical story of a man in a *barrio*:

Mi nombre es Cyrano Fernández, y este es mi lugar. Mi historia es la historia de todos los hombres, la distancia que separa lo que queremos ser y de lo que realmente somos. Este es mi lugar, un valle de afilados cerros que observan desde lejos una ciudad para la cual no existimos. Una espiral de esperanza y dolor, unido por la contradicción. Un laberinto que es mi única patria y única eternidad. Un pueblo, una gente, unos sueños, una injusticia, una costumbre, una guerra y una bendición. Mi historia es también el nombre de una mujer. Una mujer que nunca despertará a mi lado, ni sentirá mi aliento ni conocerás jamás mi verdadera voz. Una mujer para la que soy dispuesto a dejar lo que soy...

[My name is Cyrano Fernández, and this is my place. My story is the story of all men, the distance that separates what we want to be and what we really are. This is my place, a valley of sharp hills that overlook a city for which we don’t exist. A spiral of hope and pain, united by contradiction. A labyrinth that is my only fatherland and only eternity. A nation, a people, some dreams, an injustice, a tradition, a war and a blessing. My story is also the name of a woman. A woman who will never wake up by my side, nor feel my breath, nor ever know my true voice. A woman for whom I am willing to leave behind what I am...]

The images accompanying this presentation underline the social critique. The camera first shows a classic *barrio* shot; an unidentifiable *barrio* with small houses made of red brick and sheet metal precariously crammed onto the steep hills. As he says *un pueblo* [nation or people], a ragged Venezuelan flag appears swaying in the wind.

Two objectives motivate Cyrano: his love for Roxanna and his drive for everyday social justice. Since he is too shy to do anything about the former, he spends his days serving the

barrio. When there is no water in the tap, he goes to what an intertitle describes as the “*otro lado de la ciudad*” [other side of the city], that is, he transverses from the west to the east. The following scene leaves the spectators with a similar impression as some of the images introducing *Secuestro express*. An immense golf course where the rich live and use *agua potable* [drinkable water] to water the grass stands in sharp contrast to the cramped spaces of the barrio. Cyrano steals the truck with *agua potable* and at gunpoint makes the driver take it to the barrio. During the trip, Cyrano convinces him that with the minimum wage he is paid there is no point in protesting. The people in the barrio receive the two as heroes, while they celebrate and line up to fill buckets with clean water.

The barrio is marked by constant insecurity. The threats can be recognized from films like *Huelepega* and *Disparen a matar*. A drug cartel and a corrupt politician working on behalf of the local mayor⁴⁴ strike a deal where the politician promises to send the police to kill Cyrano and his gang *los tupamaros*.⁴⁵ Under this deal, the cartel will be able to sell drugs without interference from police or Cyrano, and in return it will ensure that the media can present an image of a tranquil city “*hasta las elecciones*” [until the elections]. Preparing for the fight with the police, Cyrano delivers a speech where he links the upcoming battle against the police with the ‘popular movement’. The battle will be challenging, he says, but justice is on our side:

Lo único que les puedo decir es que... no somos los únicos. Que antes de nosotros y por la misma causa cayeron muchos compañeros del movimiento popular. No solamente aquí en el Cota 905.

[I can only tell you that we’re not the only ones. That before us and for the same cause many other comrades of the popular movement have fallen. Not only here in Cota 905].

The *tupamaros* win their war, and the drug lord ends up in jail for 12 years. It is only at this juncture the narrative makes it explicit that it was about 1996 and not 2008, as it moves 12 years into the future – to the present – when the drug lord is out of jail. He stabs Cyrano, and the film ends on a positive note for the barrio albeit tragically for the romance between Roxanna and Cyrano. As he dies in her arms, Roxanna realizes that she has loved Cyrano all these years.

La hora cero (2010) signals that it is about 1996 early on. Similar to *Cyrano Fernández*, an aerial barrio shot and a voice-over signal marginalization as a topic of the film from the

⁴⁴ Until 2000, Caracas was governed by five mayors in five municipalities.

⁴⁵ *Los Tupamaros* or *Movimiento Revolucionario Tupamaros* is a radical social movement with long roots in Caracas. It has become one of the organizations supporting Chávez, and a sector of the movement has formed a political party that runs for local elections (Buzetto, 2008: 183; López-Maya, 2008: 60).

start. The voice-over states that he is a hit man whose final hour has finally come. As he speaks, the camera zooms from the familiar barrio shot into a narrow alley, showing a man carrying a pregnant woman in pain to meet a fellow *malandro*. A clip from the newspaper *El Universal* shows the date 26.12.1996, and various images from newspapers and TV news of the time state that “*el gobierno ha demostrado que no tiene la capacidad para resolver el emergente problema que tiene en materia de salud*” [the government has shown that it does not have the capacity to solve its the emergent health problem] and “*Venezuela al borde de una emergencia*” [Venezuela on the brink of an emergency].

La hora cero is at once a story about one of the many work stoppages in the 1990s (cf. López-Maya, 2002; López-Maya & Lander, 2005) and the story of the hit man Parca and the pregnant woman that he has just wounded. As the audience realizes little by little, he was hired by a governor to kill a woman who turns out to be his childhood love. Realizing who he has just shot, he gathers his gang of *malandros* to take her to the hospital. They go to a public hospital in the barrio, but are denied service because of the strike. Being the *malandros* they are, they kidnap a doctor, steal a taxi, and make for the private hospital San Gregorio where the wealthy *caraqueños* are still being served and Miss Venezuela is undergoing plastic surgery. During the adrenalin-inducing drive through Caracas’s heavy traffic, the woman gives birth in the taxi, the *malandros* kill a police officer at a check point and a security guard once they arrive at the hospital. They take the patients and the visitors hostage, and demand medical attention for the mother and the newborn. The hostage situation immediately becomes a top news story, and as a TV reporter and her cameraman make a live report outside the hospital the *malandros* kidnap them too. The newborn needs a blood transfer, and Parca comes on national TV asking for blood for the infant and denouncing how the medical strike hits the poor and spares the rich:

Yo sé que a mí no van a creer a un coño de la madre. Pero la sangre no es para mí. La sangre es para este chamito y para su mama Lady Di. Aquí los hospitales se ponen en huelga, y los que sufren son la gente pobre como ella. Aquí están los ricos bien de pinga en su clínica privada, y nosotros estamos jodiendo en la calle [...] A todo la gente que me ayude trayendo sangre, yo lo voy ayudar también. Que toda la gente enferma que se venga para acá, toda la gente que no tenga real ni recursos, que aquí lo van a atender. Que aquí lo vamos a ayudar. Hoy es el cielo, pobre mi gente, yo voy a brindar esta mierda. Y para asegurarme que los pacos lo dejen entrar, por cada enfermo que entre, yo voy a soltar a un rehén.

[I know there’s no fucking way you’ll believe me. But the blood isn’t for me. The blood is for this child and his mother Lady Di. Here, the hospitals are put on strike, and it is poor people like her who suffer. Here are the rich chilling it in their private clinic, and we’re screwed on the street (...) I’ll help all the people who help me by bringing blood. Let all sick people come here, all the people who have neither cash nor resources, they’ll see to them here. Here, we’ll help them. Today is paradise, my poor people, this shit is on me. And to make sure that the cops will let them enter, I’ll free a hostage for every sick one who enters].

As in *Cyrano Fernández*, the images accompanying the speech underscore its message of social injustice. People watching the news in simple restaurants and other modest environments are contrasted with a huge mansion where the rich are being served by a maid as they watch television. Parca's speech hits home, and masses of people arrive at the hospital to receive medical aid. The initial news coverage casts Parca as a savior, breaking a deadlock between the striking medical staff and the government and actually managing to bring health services to the people.

The police officer in charge at the scene is a principled investigator who tries to solve the situation with negotiations. His efforts are however countered by the film's villain, a stereotype of a corrupt governor of the pre-Chávez era.⁴⁶ Lady Di was a former employee at his house, and after he made her pregnant he hired Parca to assassinate her. The governor sends undercover agents into the hospital building, killing the baby, a doctor, and a nurse. He threatens the TV channel to withdraw their license if they air more images from inside the hospital, and the news coverage shifts to presenting Parca as a coldblooded assassin.

Realizing the governor's true intentions, the principled investigator saves the day. He enters the hospital to negotiate with Parca, and back outside he punches the governor to get a DNA sample to prove his involvement with the child. Lady Di survives, the *malandros* die, and Parca states in a voice-over that "*así como yo vendrán más. Que perra es la vida [...] pero si tienes suerte, antes que te llega la hora de morir, te llegará la hora de cambiar*" [there'll be more like me. What a bitch life is (...) but if you're lucky before your final hour comes, you'll have the chance to change]. The film ends with a crowd carrying Parca's body away in a celebratory mood.

El Caracazo is the third film about Venezuela's recent past. In contrast to the two films above, there is no doubt about what historical period the film portrays, as it moves between a present-day 2004 with people talking about their experience and the people they lost in the 1989 revolt. This makes it a film simultaneously about Venezuela before and after Chávez. It points a critical finger to both periods, though its explicit and harsh condemnation of the former takes the center stage.

Directed by Chalbaud,⁴⁷ the critique against the former regime follows a familiar pattern from the *nuevo cine* films. Through the statements of a group of survivors remembering back to 1989, *El Caracazo* points to a range of reasons for why the revolt took place. Several of them point to *la rabia* [the anger or rage] as the decisive factor, just as *Amaneció de golpe*

⁴⁶ Thanks to Belkiz Suárez Faillace for pointing this out to me (personal communication).

⁴⁷ Chalbaud directed four of the *nuevo cine* films analyzed in the last chapter.

does. A man – the first to speak about el Caracazo – justifies the looting that took place by referring to the prior injustice of the state and the economic elite, suggesting that it was about time people took to the streets to protest: “*la gente saqueó. Y bastante. ¿Y qué? No tenían nada. Los empresarios y los políticos llevaban un puño de años robando. Y nadie salió a la calle*” [people looted. And a lot. And so what? They had nothing. The businesspeople and the politicians had been robbing for years. And nobody had taken to the streets]. The other people point to further reasons such as neighborhood shop owners who, speculating on a future price hike, had stacked away food. Several mention the increased price of public transport. A police officer explains he had not been paid for a month and a half, and he is later shown first refusing to go to work and then helping people out by organizing the looting to take place in an orderly manner. A visibly guilt-ridden soldier, a young man of the rank-and-file, says that “*nos dijeron que disparamos a matar*” [they told us to shoot to kill]. Another person points to the neoliberal *paquetazo* dictated by the International Monetary Fund and implemented by a government disconnected from the people.

The film portrays el Caracazo itself in three major stages. Initially, the revolt started with people refusing to pay the increased price of the bus ticket. News media at the scene make critical comments about the absence of the police in the tense situation, and bus drivers explain that they had no choice but to raise prices given the increase in gasoline prices. The situation gradually escalates, and a man shouting “*somos pueblo*” [we are (the) people] throws a Molotov cocktail into a bus. People start looting, first local neighborhood shops and then large supermarkets. ‘Everyone’ participates in the looting: men and women, old and young. A young man links the looting to colonial history, stating directly into the camera that “*los miserables estamos haciendo historia, señores. Ahora nos toca a nosotros por habernos robado por quinientos años*” [the miserable are making history, gentlemen. Now it’s our turn, for having robbed us for five hundred years].

Then socially privileged leftist political activists try to take control, and to direct the angry masses in demonstrations directed against the state’s economic policy. They do not have full control, but classical revolutionary slogans like “*el pueblo unido jamás será vencido*” [the united people will never be defeated] indicate the popular resonance of their stance. The police clamp down on these demonstrations with a heavy hand, which initiates the final stage of a brutal response by the state with the full might of its coercive apparatus. The film portrays the state’s response as an outright massacre, ordered from above and executed by willing and unwilling members of the police, the secret service, and the army. The two major political parties that had alternated in government since the Punto Fijo pact, Acción

Democrática and Copei, agree on the response. A general gives his forces a direct order to shoot to kill, declaring that “*han declarado la guerra. Y en las guerras, no se detienen combatientes*” [they have declared war. And in wars, one doesn’t detain combatants]. He also orders the morgues to stop counting the dead bodies. The morgues literally overflow, and the bodies are later dumped into mass graves. *El Caracazo* ends in the present 2004, with the surviving family members in despair over the seemingly impossible task of taking the responsible for the massacres to court. Having exhausted all legal possibilities in the Venezuelan legal system, their only chance is to bring their case to a distant international human rights court in Costa Rica.

Culture of fear and politics of ambivalence

As noted above, the polarized debate about Chávez provides a useful starting point for considering what making a politically critical film under Chavismo entails. The films criticize Chavismo by portraying representatives of the state as criminal and by painting a picture of public space as insecure. Six films represent the state through corrupt individuals working for their own personal gain rather than protecting the state as an institution. The negative representation of the state is thus different than in the crisis frame of the previous decades. Whereas ‘the state’ in the previous chapter referred both to a system and to corrupt individuals, the state in this chapter refers to the latter only. Instead of inspiring trust, the state representatives produce fear. They are *malandros* in uniform, using their authority to illicit ends. As I concluded my analysis of the opening scenes of *Secuestro express* with, the films in the crisis frame advice Venezuelans concerned about their safety to be on the watch for dark-skinned males and police officers. In the following, I will discuss the political implication of the crisis frame under the rubric of a culture of fear and the politics of ambivalence.

The representation of the omnipresence of violence and crime provides a common theme in five of the films I analyze here. The most pointed example is *Secuestro express*, which as Duno-Gottberg (2010) and Suárez Faillace (2009) note, presents an image of violence not as unique to the barrio but that hits very center of the city. The film thereby confirms the perception of violence in line with the *chavista* camp, which portray Chávez and his radical discourse as inciting class-based hate and crime (cf. Briceño-León, 2009).⁴⁸ In my analysis,

⁴⁸ Briceño-León blames Chávez’ government and radical rhetoric for the sharp increase in violence as measured by homicide figures since 1998. He notes that although homicide figures started increasing all over Latin America from 1980, the tripling of the figures in in Venezuela from 1998 to 2008 makes Venezuela a singular and unique case (Briceño-León, 2009: 29). The author points to a political crisis that has in his view has

the portrayal of violence is key to how *Secuestro express*, *Caracas amor a muerte*, and *Borrón y cuenta nueva*, together with *Cyrano Fernández* and *La hora cero*, appeal to anti-*chavista* audience schemata. Except for *Borrón y cuenta nueva*, there are clearly elements in all the films that at first sight are reminiscent of a *chavista* discourse on marginalization, and how the rich are to blame for Venezuela's social problems. This is a continuation of *el nuevo cine* frame from the previous decades. However, the films do not use this discourse to confirm a *chavista* stance, but rather to indicate how Chavismo has not delivered.

Before I move to my analysis, I want to clarify the term culture of fear and its relevance to understand cinematographic representations of violence in Venezuela. I borrow the term from Lechner (1995, 1999). Lechner argues that seconded by fear of material deprivation (poverty, unemployment), the fear of threats against personal integrity (robbery, violence, torture) is the most pronounced fear shared by all social classes (Lechner, 1995: 87, 1999: 181). Still, the fact of its importance per se does not explain its omnipresence. Lechner maintains that since crime is palpable and concrete, it easily becomes a channel for more abstract and silenced fears of meaninglessness, uncertain future, or rootlessness. Thus, "the image of the omnipresent and omnipotent criminal is a metaphor" for intangible and ungraspable fears, an image which "crystallizes in a generalized fear of the Other" (Lechner, 1999: 181). The result is a "distrustful society" where the demand for order becomes the number one political priority (Lechner, 1999: 1985).

Extant literature suggests that the notion of a culture of fear has contemporary relevance (Jaguaribe, 2005; Rotker and Goldman, 2002). Rotker and Goldman's anthology *Citizens of fear* notes that Mexico and Venezuela together with Brazil and Colombia have experienced the continent's most dramatic increases of violence, so much so that "urban residents of these fragile democracies have become citizens of fear" (Balán, 2002: 5). Balán further notes that "the culture of violence in the mass media feeds into popular imaginings and behavior in everyday life [creating a] Latin American daily experience of violence" (Balán, 2002: 4). Rotker equally speaks of a generalized "sense of insecurity" and describes the public place as marred by "an undeclared war that pits everybody against everybody else; it is a struggle of everyone for himself" (Rotker, 2002a: 11,17).

characterized Venezuela since 1998, and claims that Chávez has not had a policy to combat crime. In his own words, "*al no hacerlo [reprimir a la delincuencia], al no dar una respuesta, [el gobierno] se está cometiendo una grave omisión que ha sido leído por los infractores de la ley como permisividad o impunidad*" [in not doing it (repressing crime), in not giving an answer, (the government) is committing a grave omission that has been read by the offenders of the law as permissiveness or impunity]. Briceño-Leon further reports that 50 percent of Venezuelans surveyed in 2008 considered that the president's confrontational style and the nature of his discourse has contributed to the atmosphere of violence in the country (2009: 32).

These considerations are important in order to understand cinema under Chavismo. A public perception of insecurity and high crime rates is the Achilles heel of the current government (Myers, 2011). 64 percent of the population identifies insecurity as the most important problem in Venezuela, in contrast to Mexico's 36 percent (Latinobarómetro, 2010: 15). Extant literature maintains that cinematographic representations of violence assume political importance because violence is an important political issue in Venezuela (Duno-Gottberg, 2010; Martínez, 2007; Navarro, 2007; Pinaridi, 2007; Suárez Faillace, 2009).

In this context, the political posture of *Secuestro express*, as well as *Caracas amor a muerte*, *Borrón y cuenta nueva*, *Cyrano Fernández*, and *La hora cero*, lies in how they inflate a fear of violence. Duno-Gottberg's analysis of how *Secuestro express* posits a victim-in-waiting can be extended to the other four films as well. In a similar vein, Suárez Faillace points out that anyone driving a modestly luxurious car is a potential victim of *Secuestro express*' violence (Suárez Faillace, 2009: 368). Writing about cinematographic violence as a phenomenon, Navarro (2007) makes an observation that is pertinent to my analysis of a culture of fear. He proposes that violent films use violence and the misery of the poor to present a show. Although audiences condemn these films from a moral and rational perspective, they still go to the movie theater to watch them. An aesthetic and sensuous enjoyment of watching suffering drives their entertainment value, according to Navarro. Violence is a thrill, and that explains the popularity of violent films. The author notes that violence in Venezuelan films became increasingly common with the increase of violence on Venezuelan streets in the 1990s. For Navarro, both factors have contributed to making violence an integral part of everyday life in Venezuela (2007: 146-148).

In view of Navarro's argument, it is noteworthy that part of extant literature understands *Secuestro express* as a realistic narrative. Martínez (2007: 100, emphasis in the original) considers it a "*buena muestra del vaciamiento indentitario de nuestras peculiares sociedades del riesgo latinoamericanas*" [a good display of the emptying of identities in our peculiar Latin-American societies of risk]. Similarly, Pinaridi (2007) maintains that the fact that kidnappings are so common gives *Secuestro express* a documentary effect. She claims that the documentary effect owes itself to both the realism of the story itself and to the fact that she believes the actors are not really acting out, but represent their day-to-day lives. In her view, the documentary effect owes itself not only to

el hecho de que [Secuestro express] narra con mucha precisión – desde una historia ficticia – una práctica común en las sociedades latinoamericanas, sino igualmente porque los 'actores' son personas que mantiene una cercanía excesiva con el problema que escenifican, con el rol que asumen, y con ello sus

'actuaciones' están impregnadas de un saber cotidiano que sobrepasa visiblemente la mera caracterización (Pinardi, 2007: 12).

[the fact that (*Secuestro express*) narrates with much precision – from a fictitious story – a common practice in Latin-American societies, but also because the 'actors' are persons that maintain a proximity with the issue that they stage, with the role that they assume, and with this their 'actuaciones' are imbued with a knowledge of the everyday that visibly surpasses mere characterization].

Both positions invite to a contemplation of the 'truthfulness' of the narrative, as if there is a clear distance between the bare fact of real violence on the street and cinematographic representation of it. I believe this question leads the analysis into a blind alley. In agreement with Duno-Gottberg (2010), Suárez Faillace (2009) and Martínez (2007), I am interested in what perspective on violence *Secuestro express* privileges, and how it “reproduce tan fielmente las ansiedades y contradicciones de una de las facciones que se disputan el poder político en Venezuela” [so faithfully reproduces the anxieties and contradictions of one of the factions that compete for political power in Venezuela] (Duno-Gottberg, 2010: 56).

I view the violence in *Caracas amor a muerte*, *Borrón y cuenta nueva*, *La hora cero*, and *Cyrano Fernández* as contributing to a culture of fear. As mentioned, the difference lies in the explicitness of their narratives. In line with the anti-*chavista* view, the films make a causal link between marginalization and violent crime, and suggest that the government's policies effectively ensure impunity for all *malandros*, whether they are from a barrio or wear a police uniform. *Secuestro express* stands out for pointing a direct finger to Chávez' government as responsible for the situation. *Caracas amor a muerte* points to both the police and the *malandros* as source of violence, and there are no safe spots in the Venezuela it presents. *Borrón y cuenta nueva* contains parts of the same narrative, albeit its violence is not as dangerous and it lacks the sadistic in-your-face element of the other films.

As for *La hora cero*, *Cyrano Fernández*, and *El Caracazo*, the key to their political posture lies in analyzing how they communicate what historical period they are about. In my view, these films are simultaneously about yesterday's and today's Venezuela. *El Caracazo* is the most straight-forward case of the three in that it moves between 1989 and a contemporary 2004. That move opens the possibility for critiquing both the state in 1989 and 2004. Given its explicit and unusually hard critique of the 1989 state, *El Caracazo* is conspicuously quiet about the current *chavista* regime. On the one hand, it makes one positive reference to Chavismo by suggesting that the traditional elite and 'decent people' that oppose Chávez are unable to grasp why people revolted. A person representing the elite suggests only criminals were responsible for el Caracazo, and he thereby links Chávez' election victory to his support from Venezuela's underworld:

El señor Hugo Chávez siempre argumenta que los sucesos de 27 de febrero de mil novecientos ochenta y nueve movilizaron sus ideas – si es que las tiene. Y propiciaron su golpe de mil novecientos noventa y dos. No me extraña que diga eso. Lo que realmente ocurrió fue producto de grupos subversivos y bandas de delincuentes. La gente decente se quedó en su casa. Y no les pasó nada. No hubo problema.

[The gentleman Hugo Chávez always argues that the events on the 27th of February in 1989 mobilized his idea – that is, if he has any ideas. And they contributed to his coup in 1992. I'm not surprised that he says this. What really happened was a product of subversive groups and criminal gangs. Decent people stayed home. And nothing happened to them. There was no problem].

On the other hand, everything that occurs in 2004 gives *El Caracazo* a critical edge against the Chávez regime. It is difficult to understand the frustrated attempts to bring the responsible for the massacre to court other than as a critique against all successive governments since 1989. *El Caracazo* suggests that Chávez capitalized on the discontent underlying the 1989 uprising, and it stresses that this discontent and the extreme actions people took that day had a legitimate ground. However, it does not embrace Chávez as a defender of the ideas and complaints of the people who participated in el Caracazo. It does the opposite, by indicating that these people still suffer from the injustice done to them in 1989 and that the current state is equally responsible for this state of affairs. The people in 2004 have resigned and given up, and their mood suggests that the distant human rights courts in Costa Rica will not make a difference.

The story of *La hora cero* signals that it is about the pre-Chávez regime by treating medical strikes, which was a well-known feature of the period between el Caracazo and the election of Chávez. As López-Maya (2002: 213) notes, medical staff and other social actors who had traditionally not resorted to illicit collective action, participated in social protest in a decade that was marked by a high numbers of strikes and demonstrations. The government was implementing an economic austerity program called Agenda Venezuela, and 1995 to 1996 was one of the peak periods in the history of violent anti-government protest in Venezuela (López-Maya & Lander, 2005: 97). Other signs of the 1990s in *La hora cero* include huge cellular phones and a Michael Jordan t-shirt worn by one of the central characters.

However, the Venezuela of *La hora cero* could very well pass for contemporary Venezuela. Aside from the newspapers at the start, there are no more explicit references to 1996. Social protest has continued into the Chávez era, probably increasing in frequency.⁴⁹ *La*

⁴⁹ López-Maya and Lander (2005: 95-96) report a daily average of 3,5 protests between 1999 and 2004, compared to a peak of 2,75 between the 1992 coup attempts and the presidency of Rafael Caldera in December 1993. However, the figures from 2001 and 2002 include work stoppages. Further, the authors note that “with the Chávez government, there has been greater recognition of the right to protest, and this has been institutionalized” (López-Maya & Lander, 2005: 98).

hora cero draws attention to three areas of critique: the injustice of inequality, the poor quality of the public health system, and the *malandro* as the monopoly holder of violence in the barrio. To the extent that a contemporary audience compares the Venezuela of *La hora cero* to today's Venezuela, it will recognize that Chávez has delivered on the two first charges and not on the third.

Cyrano Fernández can equally be taken as a narrative about Venezuela under Chávez. Like *La hora cero*, it relies on a graphic representation of violence and insecurity in its representation of the city. Further, by waiting until the final scene to inform the audience that Cyrano's struggle for everyday social justice takes place 12 year earlier, it invites to a dual reading of itself. Consequently, its frequent references to a *chavista* discourse – such as *el movimiento popular* – could be taken as a critique of Chavismo from within; that is, as an argument that Venezuela under Chávez also needs heroes like Cyrano and popular movements like *los tupamaros*. *Cyrano Fernández* points to difficulties of life in the barrio that have not improved since 1999. In particular, the scene where Cyrano brings water to the barrio because there is no running water in the tap refers to another weak spot of the current regime. Water and electricity stoppages are a common feature in Venezuela, and is one of the areas where Chávez has not delivered.

Five films outside the crisis frame

Five of the most popular films since 1999 are very different. They frame their visions of society from distinctively different angles, and as such do not repeat elements in each other's narratives. I will therefore not discuss these films in detail, but limit my treatment of them to illustrate my claim that despite worries of increased state control, Venezuelan cinema under Chávez is far from *chavista*.

Among the six, only *Manuela Sáenz* (2000) directly supports a *chavista* worldview. As Farrell (2011: 37-38) notes, films about the heroes of the anti-colonial struggle is one of the prioritized areas for funding under the National Film Platform. Other examples include two films about Francisco de Miranda and one about Ezequiel Zamora. *Manuela Sáenz* is about 'the liberator of the liberator', Simón Bolívar's trusted lover. The film focuses on the failure of the revolution seen from the perspective of a crippled Manuela Sáenz 26 years after Bolívar's death. It depicts how the revolution lost its momentum soon after the two met, and suggests that had Bolívar only listened to her and executed more of his opponents, the revolution would not have stopped so quickly. The film laments the poor conditions for

realizing a united Latin America today, but insists that the dream of a united continent has not died.

Punto y raya (2004) calls for brotherhood between Colombia and Venezuela. It depicts how a friendship develops between two rank-and-file soldiers serving at the borders. Made in a context where Chávez and Colombia's President were at a rhetorical war, it is not a *chavista* film. *Punto y raya* argues that the peoples of Venezuela and Colombia are natural friends, and that any conflict between the two countries would be the outcome of quarrels between politicians and generals.

13 segundos (2007) is an explicitly political film that directs its critique against the common practice of illegal abortions in Venezuela. The film criticizes the state for being too lenient on clinics and doctors who practice abortions, and it chides the legal system for not punishing the culprits hard enough. *13 segundos* also warns against a proposed bill to legalize abortion in Venezuela. However, its main charge goes against the women who take abortions. The film claims that 93 percent of women abort “*por razones sociales*” [for social reasons]. These reasons, presented through the story of a number of pregnant women, range from poverty to weak women who allow their partner or family to pressure them to take an abortion. Unlike *Caracas amor a muerte*, it grounds its critique in a universal human rights discourse without reference to Catholicism. Abortions are always unethical, as they violate the most basic human right: the right to live and thereby the very chance to have dreams.

In 2007, two comedies were among the most seen films. *Una abuela virgen* (2007) is a comedy about an 80 year old dead woman who resurrects into the body of a 20-year old woman. She manages to find her granddaughter, and together they try to avoid an angel that God sends down to earth to reestablish the heavenly order that the resurrection disturbed. *Puras joyitas* (2007) is a comedy about the theft of the crown of the Miss Venezuela contest. Although it depicts crime, it does so from a point of view that makes it stand outside the films contribute to a culture of fear. Its violence is hardly present, and unlike the other films about the criminal poor analyzed in this chapter, *Puras joyitas* features criminals from a well-organized professional organization. Thanks to its comical nature, it posits no potential victims of its crimes.

Conclusion

In chapter one, I argued by extending Entman's analysis of TV-news frames to film that the primary political function of popular films is to impact on what topics people think about. In

the previous chapter, I argued that Venezuelan films between 1980 and 1999 made people think about the state as corrupt and creating marginalization.

This suggests two arguments about Venezuelan cinema since 2000. First, there is no dominant frame like in the two previous decades. Instead there are six films that from different perspectives and in different manners tell their audiences to think about Venezuela as a violent and insecure country. Inasmuch as this coincides with one of the main criticisms leveled against Chávez, these films are state-critical. They contribute to what I termed a culture of fear. However, three of these films are about the time before Chávez assumed power. I argued that one of them, *El Caracazo*, is explicit about this temporal aspect of its narrative. By moving between a contemporary 2004 and 1989, it criticizes both the current and the previous regime, albeit it presents a stronger critique of the latter. I further argued that *Cyrano Fernández* and *La hora cero* are ambivalent about which time period they are about. I proposed that they invite to a reading of themselves as stories about both today's and yesterday's Venezuela. Further, *Caracas amor a muerte* was produced so shortly after Chávez became president that it is difficult to say if it portrays Venezuela before or after his presidency.

This ambivalence is important for how the films partake in an ongoing contest for hegemony. I argued in the previous chapter that its explicitness was central to Venezuelan cinema's counter-hegemonic strategy between 1980 and 1999. In contrast, since 2000 only *Secuestro express* speaks with the same clarity. Duno-Gottberg (2010: 55) notes how the film was applauded by the opposition and rejected by many *chavistas* – but the two sides agreed that it was anti-*chavista*. This agreement is unlikely for *La hora cero* and *Cyrano Fernández*, because the films contain elements of a political narrative that confirm both a *chavista* and an anti-*chavista* stance. In their ambivalence, they are more likely to confirm the audience's pre-established view on Chavismo than to change it.

Chapter five. Mexico 1980-1999: everything in order

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the politics of films that paint a rosy and idealized picture of Mexico. 17 of these films were screened between 1980 and 1999, and I will analyze them against the backdrop of political developments in this time period. Unlike their Venezuelan contemporary counterparts, Mexican films did not operate with an explicit political message of protest. Instead, Mexican films had remarkably few complaints about Mexican society or politics. The dominant frame in the period defined a Mexico where ‘everything is in order’. I term this ‘the harmony frame’, and 19 of the 33 films from the three decades I analyze participated in it, two of which after 2000. In a context where the state’s legitimacy was gradually faltering, the Mexico of the popular films was a country where the poor take pride in their poverty, and there is no crime. In this Mexico, traffic runs smoothly, the police help citizens when needed, and most people live in spacious apartments with wooden floors and dark wooden furniture.

I divide my analysis into three sections. I start with a close analysis of a scene in *El barrendero* (1982) to provide an illustrative example of how the films analyzed in this chapter convey a message of harmony. In the second section, I discuss the recurrent topics of the films. I organize this section thematically and chronologically, and devote one part to comedies portraying marginalized characters in the 1980s and another to melodramas about the romantic woes of privileged Mexicans in the 1990s. I introduce each section by briefly noting the most significant changes in the film industry that have impacted on what kind of films could become popular. The films in the harmony frame appear as stories about individual problems, and extant literature considers them as cheap entertainment rather than films that pretend to provide social commentary. In my view, these films are as political as *el nuevo cine* films, but their politics is not one of protest or resistance to the state. Rather, their politics is a function of their narrational modes, which allows them to represent poverty as unproblematic or wealth as normal. I will therefore discuss how the intelligibility of the films relies on their use of comedy and melodrama as narrational modes.

The third section asks how these films spoke to political and ideological developments, and in particular to the ideology the government used to legitimize state power. I propose that both the comedies and the melodramas supported the state ideology. In making this argument, I note the change in state ideology from the reliance on the 1910 Revolution to embracing neoliberalism. Rather than juxtaposing the cinematic narratives with how this change ‘really’

occurred, my aim is to discuss how it unfolded when seen through the lens of popular films. The Mexico presented at the box office changed from exalting marginalized subjects content with the little they have to celebrating wealth and individualism in a country where the American dream is attainable for everyone.

Framing harmless violence

To convey what I mean by harmony, I turn to a scene from *El barrendero* (1982), starring the well-known comedian Cantinflas as a street cleaner in a wealthy neighborhood in Mexico City. To show how *El barrandero* conveys a message of harmony, I analyze a scene towards the end of the film where it frames violence as something harmless and inoffensive. In the scene, two men armed with a knife and a pistol pursue and try to kill Cantinflas. The scene starts with a wide shot of Cantinflas walking with his cart of two oil barrels filled with trash and two brooms. The pursuit starts as one of the men points a gun at Cantinflas and threatens to kill him. Cantinflas pushes the man away with his cart and starts running. To signal that nothing dangerous will occur, *El barrendero* accompanies the movements of its protagonist with upbeat and happy flute music. Cantinflas does not really run; he jogs lightly away from his armed pursuer. His jogging style – lifted elbows and his arms swirling in small circular movements, his feet taking small steps on the tips of his toes – functions together with the music to invite to laughter rather than suspense. The other pursuer, shown in a medium close-up and marked as dangerous by a dramatic piano tune, watches Cantinflas crossing the street, waits for him to hide behind a car, and takes out a knife before he slowly runs over to the car only to find that Cantinflas has miraculously disappeared.

Accompanied by the upbeat tune, Cantinflas makes it into the property of a mansion where his lady friend works as a maid. One of the pursuers, the man with the knife, walks to the gate of the property, and stands next to the maid to look for Cantinflas. Cantinflas spots him, and runs into the house without being seen. Entering the bedroom of the owners, he runs over the bed and steps on the stomach of the man of the house before he continues into the bathroom. The man wakes up, sits up with a “huh?” and a surprised expression on his face before he lies back down to sleep. In the bathroom, the music slows down and changes to romantic violins as a mid shot shows Cantinflas in the foreground of the silhouette of a naked woman taking a shower shown through the glass doors of a shower cabinet. As Cantinflas leaves through a different door, the camera zooms in to a full shot of the naked woman in the shower.

Cantinflas exits the house and returns to the lawn between the house and the gate. Seemingly surprised to see the pursuer he fled a moment ago still standing at the gate, Cantinflas runs back into the house and the bathroom, this time with the man after him. The door locks behind Cantinflas, and the man remains outside on the lawn. Back inside the bathroom, the music changes from the piano tune marking danger to romantic violins as the woman, presumably expecting her husband, says “*amor, pásame el talco*” [dear, pass me the talcum powder]. Cantinflas hesitates for a second, grabs the powder and hands it to the woman in the shower with his head turned to towards the camera and away from the shower cabinet. He closes the door of the cabinet, hesitates a second, opens the door and sticks his head inside to look at the naked woman. She covers herself with a towel, Cantinflas closes the door, opens it again to look at her a second time, the woman lets out a surprised “ah” and covers herself again with the towel. Cantinflas closes the door, and jumps in excitement with both his feet lifted and his knees pointing outwards before he exits the bathroom and leaves the house through the bedroom and over the same bed. Again, he steps on the stomach of the man who, again, reacts with a confused “huh?” before returning to sleep.

Back outside on the lawn, Cantinflas is again surprised that his pursuer is still there. With the man armed with the pistol guarding the gate, Cantinflas and the other man run around the lawn for a while in a cat-and-mouse chase. The music emphasizes the protagonist’s movements: when Cantinflas jumps a drum sounds, when he walks slowly the music slows down. The men run around a water fountain a couple of times, before Cantinflas outmaneuvers his pursuer by crouching down and making the other stumble and fall over him. Eventually, however, the man manages to corner Cantinflas against the wall of the house. Realizing that his last hour has come, Cantinflas sits down on a bench under a balcony, looks up in the sky, crosses himself, and says a silent prayer to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Standing on the lawn a couple of meters away, the man slowly prepares to kill Cantinflas by throwing the knife at him. Just as he lifts his arm and is about to throw, Cantinflas is saved by a large flower pot falling down from the sky and hitting the man momentarily unconscious. In unbelief, Cantinflas looks startled at the man on the ground, before he steps out on the lawn where he sees the lady of the house on the balcony. They smile flirtatiously at each other, before she calmly walks back into the house. With music marking new danger, a medium close-up shows the other man placing his pistol close to Cantinflas’ head and saying “*hasta aquí llegaste*” [this is the end for you]. Cantinflas is again saved in the last moment; the camera zooms out to a wide shot and shows the maid armed with a broom hitting the man. Accompanied by happy flute tunes marking that danger is over, the maid continues to hit the

two men as she says “*ándale, ándale*” [come on, come on]. Cantinflas and the maid overpower the two men, who try to run away when they hear sirens approaching. Out on the street, they are stopped by a group of about 15 maids and another 15 street cleaners who arrive from each side and stop their flight. The police arrive, arrest them, and leave.

To crown the happy end, Cantinflas is called into the office of the secretary of the head of government in Mexico City, commonly referred to as *regente* [regent], which at the time was an unelected position similar to a mayor directly appointed by the Mexican president. To thank him for his outstanding service to the nation as a street cleaner willing to exceed expectations, the secretary awards Cantinflas with an automatic street cleaner, and is cordially thanked by Cantinflas: “*muchas gracias, señor licenciado. Y por favor dígame al señor regente que es re-gente*” [many thanks Sir, please tell the regent that he’s very nice].⁵⁰

The scene illustrates two elements in the harmony frame. The most pronounced element is the framing of violence as something harmless. *El barrendero* uses a situation that in the films analyzed in the other chapters would have led to a different and probably lethal outcome to invite to laughter. How come Cantinflas survives being pursued by two armed men? The answer is slapstick violence, the comical portrayal of violence that most of the films analyzed in this chapter resort to when they include violent scenes. The camera remains an objective observer throughout the scene, staging a comical show. The register of ‘man falling on banana peel’ is used frequently in the scene, for instance when Cantinflas crouches down and his pursuer falls over him. Thanks to the film’s stylistic presentation of violence, it invites to laughter. The representation of a violence that does not harm the protagonist makes sense in the scene. The story (the events taking place on the screen) and the style (the techniques used to present them) work together in the narration of violence, exemplifying Bordwell’s (1985: 50) observation that “style is thus wholly ingredient to the medium.” The use of film techniques and in particular the employment of exaggerated sound effects and music assure the audience that despite the knife and the pistol ‘everything is in order’.

A second element, less pronounced but clear just beneath the surface, concerns the interplay between the different characters, especially the wealthy woman, the maid and the street cleaner as the proletariat, and the state representative. Since the scene takes place towards the end of the film, it comes as no surprise to the audience that the rich lady does not mind the street cleaner peeping on her in the shower – *all* women adore Cantinflas, and he is the Don Juan who mesmerizes the maids of the neighborhood. The rich and the proletariat

⁵⁰ ‘*Re-gente*’ is a word play on the word ‘*regente*’ and the expression ‘*buena gente*’ that means ‘good person’. The prefix ‘*re*’ gives emphasis to ‘*gente*’, and can be translated with ‘very’.

help each other in *El barrendero*, and the flower pot saving Cantinflas is just one of several instances in the film of mutual assistance. This mutual assistance applies to the state and the proletariat as well. When the regent, through his secretary, thanks Cantinflas for his outstanding service, the scene that comes to mind is one where Cantinflas convinces the labor union of street cleaners that going to strike to demand increased wages would be a betrayal to the nation and their duty as public servants. Why would a street cleaner in Cantinflas' position want to strike? He is not wealthy, and there is a considerable gap between the luxury of the mansions of the neighborhood where he works and his own home. But this gap is not a cause of concern to Cantinflas. He has all his material needs covered, and his job allows him to do what makes him the happiest: serve the nation by keeping the streets clean. The state's reward, an automatic street cleaner, keeps him in his place as a street cleaner and allows him to do a more efficient job, precisely as he wants.

Ni algún premio me van a dar: comedies and the 1980s

The 1980s were a productive decade, with an annual average of 81,2 films (calculated on the basis of IMCINE, 2011: 137). As noted in chapter two, the infrastructure of Mexican cinema favored private productions. The private companies operated on a three-legged economic model, where roughly one third of the sales was secured in Mexican movie theaters, another third on the VHS market, and a last third in movie theaters catering to Latino immigrants in the United States (García Riera, 1998: 346). The Mexican audience was largely working class (King, 1990: 143), and the majority of the blockbusters depicted a working class or rural environment. The majority of the popular films were comedies. Although comedy represents a pillar in Mexican film history (Aviña, 2004: 143), extant literature tends to write them off them as cheap and easy entertainment (Castro Ricalde, 2004: 194). In Monsiváis' (2010: 352) judgment, the 1980s were the worst decade in Mexican film history in terms of quality.

In the following, I will discuss eleven comedies that paint a harmonious picture of Mexico in one of two ways. First and through the topic of migration or temporary travels to the city, they convey the message that Mexicans should stay at home where they belong. 'Home' is the Mexican countryside, the village that the protagonists leave in the beginning only to experience hardship in the large city, for then to return home. The second version portrays the lives of lower-class people in their home environment, either in Mexico City or the countryside. These characters display an easygoing, happy-go-lucky attitude towards life. Despite of, or perhaps precisely because of, occupations or life situations that seem at first glance to offer little, these people are content with what they have, and they make an effort to

maintain the status quo. They find an intrinsic value in being good and doing good. They do not need rewards, recognition, or a higher social status to be content. In the words of Cantinflas, *ni algún premio me van a dar*” [not even a prize they’ll give me], still, serving society and being a good person is enough. An ethical glory surrounds these characters, both the migrants and the protagonists who stay put. Represented as honest and hard-working, these people are a resource of the Mexican society, despite obvious mockery of their naïveté, lack of modernity, and cluelessness.

Ten of the 19 films in the harmony frame share the genre of *humor blanco*. The term *humor blanco* [white humor] refers to a type of comedies that, as opposed to dark humor, tries not to offend anyone and caters to the tastes of all audiences (Bonfil, 1994: 33; Miranda López, 2006: 23). As comedies, they make sense in a different manner than the other films considered in this thesis. Rather than presenting coherent narratives, the intelligibility of the films stems primarily from what Bordwell terms prototype schemata of recognizable characters and locales (1985: 49). The narratives of these films are structured around loosely related sequences, and their synopses are relatively short and straightforward. Slapstick violence is an important element in all of these films, except the two *La risa en vacaciones* films.

The films are either comedian comedies or gag-based comedies (cf. King, 2002: 20, 24). The comedian comedies are represented by one film by Cantinflas and four by La India María. I will return to their stock characters below; for now I want to say something about what characterizes comedian comedies. As King points out, these films center on an already well-known character and the narrative plight of the protagonist is of secondary importance. Rather, the films’ function is for the comedians to celebrate the jokes that made them famous and as such “the films exist primarily as showcases for these performances” (King, 2002: 32). This implies that the narratives often contain logical gaps of events that do not add up. As Castro Ricalde observes about *Ni de aquí ni de allá*, it “presents several sequences that do not clearly relate to each other” which she considers “a measure of its poor assembly” (Castro Ricalde, 2004: 207). For King, the ‘poor’ assembly is central to the genre. He emphasizes that while telling a coherent story is not important, the comedian comedies adhere to other conventions of the classical Hollywood narrational style such as featuring clearly goal-oriented protagonists (King, 2002: 33). Bonfil’s (1994: 33) observation of Cantinflas pertains to La India María as well: both are highly predictable characters and they follow a pattern established in their early films. As extant literature points out, their characters both stem from the lower classes and both attracted mainly a lower-class audience (Castro Ricalde, 2004: 204;

Galera & Nitrihual Valdebenito, 2009: 101; King, 2002: 33; King, 1990: 50; Pilcher, 2000: 345; Stavans, 1995: 29). Cantinflas is a *mestizo*, a slightly feminized everyman, who represents the rural lumpen that have settled down in Mexico City (Pilcher, 2000: 345). According to Monsiváis (1985: 244-245), he came to monopolize the representation of ‘the People’ more than any other comedian of the Golden Age. Cantinflas filmed his last film in 1982, and La India María soon assumed his place as the most popular Mexican comedian (Castro Ricalde, 2004: 28). She portrays a rural mazahua indigenous woman, and according to Rohrer (2009: 56) she offered one of first representations of a Mexican indigenous person by a dark-skinned actress.

The non-comedian comedies analyzed here are what King (2002: 20) would describe as “little more than strings of gags tied only loosely together by narrative thread.” The principal difference between the two is that the non-comedian comedies do not feature well-known comedians. They establish absurd behavior as a norm, and as a result the films hardly tell coherent stories that make logical sense. Rather, they invite their audience to laugh at *albures*⁵¹ of witty conversational exchanges, slapstick violence such as falling from tall buildings, improbable confusions, and practical jokes. Their comical elements are constituted primarily by transgressing normal behavior and encounters with the non-expected (cf. King, 2002: 5). Like the comedian comedies, they make sense to a significant extent by relying on stereotyped characters and easily recognizable social milieus.

There’s no place like home: Mexicans belong to Mexico

Five of the comedies in the harmony frame turn their axis on the migratory experience of rural marginalized Mexicans who travel to Mexico City or the United States. The migratory theme owes its popularity in the 1980s to the character of “*la mexicanísima*” India María [the very Mexican Indian María]. I have included four of the sixteen La India María films produced between 1981 (*Ok Mr. Pancho*) and 2012 (*La hija de Moctezuma*) in my analysis. Three of these films deal directly with migration, and were box office hits. Castro Ricalde (2004: 204) reports that that *Ok Mr. Pancho* and *El que no corre, vuela* (1982) occupied the second and third place, respectively, of the most seen films in the years of their release. *Ni de aquí, ni de allá* ranked above *Rambo 3* (Rohrer, 2009: 54). I will turn to *Las delicias del poder* (1999) later, as it has a different thematic focus.

The narratives of the four La India María films are similarly structured. All center on a rural indigenous woman’s encounter with the large city. They depict La India María’s

⁵¹ *Albur* refers to playing with words of a double meaning, often with sexual connotations.

ignorance about urban modern life and its most basic technological and material differences with the village. Markers of her visible discomfort with and ignorance about modernity include her cluelessness when confronted with public transportation, shoes, or technology. As in all of her films (Rohrer, 2009: 56), the films in my selection combine accentuated stereotypes of María as an indigenous woman with caricatured characters such as the sleazy priest, the corrupt police officer, the power-crazed politician, or the exploitative US American. Their use of slapstick violence allows María to miraculously escape from seemingly impossible situations by using her physical strength. In all films, María's encounter with the migratory destination is unpleasant, because she as a stereotyped ignorant indigenous person is out of place in the modern city. She therefore returns home to where she 'belongs'. The films thus end happily in the sense that she is better off than she was in the city, although she does not obtain what she wanted.

María's reasons for leaving home are the most notable differences between her three first films. In *Ok Mr. Pancho* (1981) she falls in love with a white US American drug trafficker (Mr. Pancho) who takes advantage of her naïve kindness and makes her bring a bag of narcotics to Houston. Across the border, a midget tries to rape her, but she escapes with the help of an indigenous man in a stereotypical outfit complete with feathers, stone axe, and bow and arrow. He helps her to Houston, where she soon realizes that Mr. Pancho has tricked her. A long scene of slapstick violence erupts, consisting of several sequences where she overpowers a number of armed men with her impressive acrobatic and martial arts skills, occasionally helped by her stone axe-wielding friend. The violence is innocent in that it is not physically harmful; all shots miss their target, the drug cartel members pursue María on a penny-farthing bicycle, and María's friend survives being driven over by a road roller. The police eventually take María into custody, and in all friendliness invite her back to the United States with a valid passport before they place her on a bus to Mexico where she returns to her farm *el cielo* [heaven].

In *El que no corre, vuela* (1982), María leaves her village to complain to her representative in a political body for rural issues in Mexico City about a land robbery and ask about her brother who has been missing for three weeks. The film emphasizes her discomfort with modernity and urban life to a greater extent than *Ok Mr. Pancho*, and it starts with an eight minute long scene showing her clumsiness on public transport. When she finally arrives at *la central campesina* [the rural office], she is unable to fill out a form in 12 copies because she does not know what a copy is. María soon loses sight of her initial reason for travelling to Mexico City. The police throw her into jail after a white woman accuses María of stealing her

bag. There María takes pity on another white woman, whose children live on the streets. Like in *Ok Mr. Pancho, El que no corre, vuela* shows María eventually triumphing over seemingly impossible obstacles, and the film also features long sequences of slapstick violence such as a food fight between the police and people at a market. In the final scene, María triumphs in a *lucha libre*⁵² match and wins enough money to help her friend out of jail. When a journalist asks her about her next fight, she responds that rather than cultivating money and fame in the city “*prefiero cosechar nopales en el monte. Más mejor ser campesina que campeona. Porque aquí, el que no corre, vuela*” [I prefer to cultivate prickly ears in the countryside. Better to be a farmer than a champion, because here, people take advantage of you at first opportunity].⁵³

The anti-migratory message of *Ni de aquí, ni de allá* (1988) is more transparent than in the above films, as indicated by its name and the song introducing and ending the film. The film starts by showing María travelling by bus through a northern rural landscape. The theme song plays in the background, and the lyrics suggest that migrants lose their sense of belonging and their identity: “*Señor todopoderoso, mira como estoy sufriendo. Estoy lejos de mi tierra, de penas estoy sufriendo [...] Lo único que siento con tanto relato, que ya yo no soy ni de aquí ni de allá*” [Almighty God, look how I’m suffering. I’m far away from home, suffering from sorrow (...) The only thing I feel with disturbance is that I’m neither from here nor from there]. After being convinced by a US American couple to come and work at their house for a year, María leaves what her father describes as a land of abundance for the United States to buy a tractor and a tape recorder. *Ni de aquí, ni de allá* also uses a combination of her discomfort with and ignorance about modern things combined with slapstick violence to transmit its humor. A long scene of María on the plane to the United States shows how she is afraid of getting aboard and does not understand how a seatbelt works. When she clings on to a fellow male passenger in terror, he excuses María’s behavior to his infuriated girlfriend by referring to María as “*indígena*” [indigenous].

Once in the United States, María meets a number of probable and improbable obstacles. In the former category, she is as an illegal immigrant exploited by a number of employers who do not pay her, and she struggles with English. In the latter, a drug trafficker tries to kill her and the FBI initiates a major operation against her upon suspecting that she is the leader of a drug cartel. Like in the previous films, María concludes that the best solution for her is to return home even without the tractor: “*mejor me voy. Aquí todo es distinto. No puedo aprender*

⁵² *Lucha libre* is a popular form of Mexican free wrestling.

⁵³ The grammatically incorrect *más mejor* is a typical example of how the films use linguistic marks to highlight María’s status as an indigenous person.

el inglés. Y se me está olvidando español. Y al rato como dijo mi tata voy a ser ni de aquí, ni de allá.” [I’d better leave. Here everything is different. I cannot learn English. And I’m losing my Spanish. And as my father said, soon I’ll be neither from here nor from there].

Beyond rehearsing the theme of María’s encounter with urban modernity, *Las delicias del poder* (1999) is different than the three earlier films. The film openly satirizes PRI’s long hold on power, and it depicts the run-up to a presidential election between PUM (*Partido Único de Machos*, the Male Only Party) and PUF (*Partido Único Femenino*, the Female Only Party). PUM tries to assassinate the PUF candidate, an indigenous woman adopted as a baby by an earlier PUM President in a political move. PUF brings in her estranged twin sister, La India María, to run the rest of the campaign. The scene is thus set for an intense training period of María in order to make her pass off as her sister, that is, as someone who has grown up among the political elite. The training shows María undergoing an intense ‘civilizing’ educational training process, where she is bathed and cleaned with an oversized brush, made to wear high-heeled shoes, and must learn the name of the heroes of the 1910 Revolution. *Las delicias del poder* depicts María as more ignorant and out of touch with everything modern than the previous three films. Yet she takes charge to a larger extent, and manages to win the elections by promising political change for Mexico’s indigenous and marginalized.

El mil usos (1983) is the fourth migratory film in my selection. Like the India María films, it portrays a person who travels to the large city and whose rural background makes him ignorant about even the most basic aspects of city life. *El mil usos* is also a comedy, though not of the family-friendly *humor blanco* kind. It presents a coherent story, and as Ramírez Berg (1992: 192) observes, *El mil usos* owes its comical effect to the protagonist’s clownish and helpless behavior. Yet unlike the India María films, the protagonist is no athlete, and the hardships he faces make him suffer and experience physical pain. There is no slapstick violence to take the edge off the dangerous situations. As a result, the violence against the protagonist Tránsito invites to sympathy with him as a victim rather than laughter.

Tránsito goes to Mexico City explicitly in search of economic opportunities, and tells his wife that there are no opportunities in their village. As Ramírez Berg (1992: 193) and García Riera (1998: 307) observe, the film unequivocally condemns his migration. *El mil usos* highlights Tránsito’s marginalized status throughout: he leaves for Mexico City without luggage, he eats a raw plantain to suppress his hunger, and the fifty cents he arrives in the city with cannot buy him even a simple meal. His stay in Mexico City is one large failure; he is exploited and scammed in the various jobs he takes, and he is most content when imprisoned. Like La India María, he is out of place in the immensity of the city, and visibly uncomfortable

with traffic and masses of people. He speaks poor Spanish, and does not understand the *chilango* dialect of Mexico City. He is the only one of a group of day workers who cannot write his own name, and in one instance he tries to set his fingerprint with a glove. Upon leaving jail, he is told twice by a prison officer to “*regrese con los suyos*” [go back to your own] since “*son campesinos, y en el asfalta no se siembra. [...] Aquí ya no cabemos, váyase a su pueblo, allá es alguien, aquí no es nadie* [you are farmers, and in the asphalt one does not sow. [...] We do not fit here, go to your village, you are someone there, here you are nobody]. To drive the point home, the movie’s theme song repeatedly states that “*ya no vengan para acá, quédense mejor allá, el D.F. no es ya para habitar*” [do not come here anymore, you’d better stay there, Mexico City is inhabitable]. The ending of *El mil usos* sees Tránsito walking into his village. While he escapes the miseries of Mexico City, his fate in the village remains an open question.

Laughing at everyday life

In this section I turn to six comedies that differ primarily from the above films about migration and travel by turning their axis on ‘home’ and on portraying how lovely life is there. The first variant invites their audience to laugh at comical everyday situations in the lives of the urban or rural lower classes, and celebrates their poverty as something desirable. The poor are content with the little they have, and want no change in their lives. The second variant draws its central characters from a socially privileged milieu, but is otherwise very similar.

El barrendero (1982) is the odd one out in this selection, as it stars Cantinflas who is one of the most famous stock characters in Mexican cultural history (García, 2011: 111; King, 1990: 50; Monsiváis, 1985: 243-244, 2011; Noble, 2005: 15; Pilcher, 2000: 333; Stavans, 1995). Often described as a mexicanized Chaplin (García, 2011: 112; Stavans, 1995: 67), he established his fame during the Golden Age (Monsiváis, 2010: 326). In *El barrendero*, Cantinflas acts as the street cleaner Don Napo.⁵⁴ He always smiles and he is dressed in the easily recognizable orange suit of Mexico City’s street cleaners, complemented by a cart with two empty oil barrels and a set of brooms. The same outfit is still used today, although Cantinflas’ suit differs by staying conspicuously clean and new-looking throughout the film (much like La India María’s colorful dress).

El barrendero introduces Cantinflas as a happy, dancing, and singing street cleaner who sweeps various iconic places in Mexico City. The opening scenes serve to re-introduce Cantinflas to the audience as the recognizable and predictable character he was (cf. Pilcher,

⁵⁴ The ‘Don’ – used by the maids in the wealth neighborhood Napo cleans – signifies a high social status, and the closest English equivalent ‘Mister’ is not quite as formal.

2000: 333). He is streetwise, and his nonsensical *cantinfladas*⁵⁵ allow him to fit into any social environment and steal the show. A high-society party where he works as a waiter provides an illustrative example. After serving himself to the drinks he is supposed to give the guests, he starts flirting with the women and blends into the conversations about politics and finances among the male guests. In his typical style, he manages to make a mockery of the rich guests while simultaneously passing himself off as one of them. Asked what he knows about finances, he tells a group of businessmen that he in all confidence will let them in on a secret about ‘a financial movement’:

Calculamos según los financieros... que es, permíteme un momentito, [Cantinflas toma un trago] es un movimiento financiero que viene en el mundo – pa' que vean que uno sabe lo que dice – y atraviesa a Londres, sale en Singapur, llega a Nueva York, se va a Londres y regresa a Japón. Este triángulo, ¿ya que quiere decir? Hombre, vamos entonces, estar alerta. Si el banco en cierta forma dice bueno muy bien, la situación mundial en este momento porque, por los ángulos que vienen y en realidad, la fluctuación sigue y sigue, ¿y entonces que pasa? No, muy bien, que eso no salga de entre de nosotros, este es el fenómeno.

[Let’s calculate according to the financiers that there is – excuse me for a moment [Cantinflas takes a drink] – there is a financial movement that comes in the world – so that you see that I know what I’m talking about – and crosses to London, leaves in Singapore, arrives to New York, goes to London, and returns to Japan. This triangle, what does it tell us? Hey, let’s see, be alert: if the bank in a certain way says very well, the fluctuation continues and continues, and then what happens? No, very well, let’s keep this to ourselves, this is the phenomenon].⁵⁶

El barrendero transmits its humor through this and many other examples of *cantinfladas*, the nonsense gibberish that according to Monsiváis is the message of Cantinflas (2010: 327). The story of *El barrendero* is straight-forward. Going about his daily business of flirting, dancing, and cleaning, Cantinflas gets mixed up in a theft of a valuable painting. He must also take care of, and eventually find new parents to, a baby who somebody abandons. In short, the story revolves around how he manages to avoid the thieves, who are the armed pursuers in the scene I introduced this chapter with. Illustrative of the mutual assistance between the rich elite and the proletariat I identified above, Cantinflas also hands the baby over to a wealthy childless couple to avoid their divorce and thus saves the job of his lady friend.

La pulquería (1981) and *Tres mexicanos ardientes* (1987) rehearse the basic elements of *El barrendero*, especially the use of *albur*, nonsense humor, and slapstick violence. *La pulquería* features a supposedly classic clientele of a *pulquería*;⁵⁷ a street vendor with his dog, a charlatan selling herbal medicine, and a teacher. Good-natured and above all simple people,

⁵⁵ As a marker of Cantinflas’ influence, the Real Academia Española has included the words *Cantinflas*, *cantinflar*, and *cantinflada*. The noun *Cantinflas* refers to a person who talks or acts like Cantinflas, the verb *cantinflar* and the noun *cantinflada* refer to talking in a incongruent and ludicrous way without saying anything (Real Academia Española, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c).

⁵⁶ As Stavans (1995: 39-40) and King (1990: 50) note, translating Cantinflas is particularly challenging.

⁵⁷ A *pulquería* is a type of bar serving the traditional pre-Hispanic alcoholic drink *pulque*.

they spend the better part of the day drinking *pulque*, chitchatting, and fighting. The film also portrays the troubled sexual life of a rich man, who falls in love with a female doctor trying to help him out with his sexual impotence. To his aid comes none other than the devil, who agrees to give the man his potency back – and with that his manliness, according to the narrative – in exchange for learning what love is. The devil finds love in the *pulquería*, where he meets the street vendor. These two stories interlace with scenes of the local police officer who unsuccessfully insists that people address him with the formal *usted* [you] and who is ridiculed by the local prostitutes, and an old man who tries to enjoy as many cigarettes as he can and to look at posters or photographs of naked women before he dies.

Tres mexicanos ardientes takes the nonsensical humor a step further by placing more emphasis on the slapstick and less on the coherence of the narrative thread. Here, three ‘passionate’ men try to conquer the same woman, but end up exchanging each other’s wives instead. A criminal midget and an immortal rapist *indio* team up to rob people’s houses, and the *indio* ends up with the woman the three other men tried to conquer. The slapstick violence never physically hurts anyone. The *indio*, for instance, falls down from high buildings and is driven over by cars without getting hurt, and the victims of his rapes take pleasure in his assaults.

The films in the second variant of the gag-based comedy equally present their comical elements through a series of loosely related sequences. The difference relates to the prototype schemata that the films rely on in order to make sense. Instead of making fun of poor people, the second variant invites to laughter about the rich.⁵⁸ In *Verano peligroso* (1991), a newly married woman struggles to choose between her husband and his best man. They compete for her admiration, but must both see her lost to a third man.

La risa en vacaciones (1990) and *La risa vacaciones 2* (1991) were the two first films of a series of eight films in the 1990s. Modeled after the Spanish contemporary *To’er mundo e güeno* [~everyone is good], Miranda López reports that the *La risa* films together with films of La India María and Gloria Trevi were among the largest of Televisine’s large commercial successes (2006: 39, 48). The two *La risa* films are collages of short scenes shot with a supposedly hidden camera on the beaches of Acapulco, trying to ridicule and have fun with Mexican and foreign tourists. Miranda López (2006: 37) is uncertain whether the camera is actually hidden and suspects the victims are actors, whereas García Riera (1998: 375) confirms that the sketches are acted out. The sound quality and the potentially dangerous

⁵⁸ The tendency of portraying rich instead of marginalized people becomes gradually stronger in the mid-1980s, and in the 1990s it becomes dominant. I will elaborate on this important shift in the analysis below.

nature of some of the pranks (such as a puma in a public bathroom) indicate that the films used professional actors. The sketches play relatively innocent practical jokes on people by placing them in uncomfortable situations that fall outside expected and 'normal' behavior. Examples include a woman using a urinal in the men's bathroom, a nurse giving vaccines with an enormous syringe, a man carrying a mirror on the street and wanting to charge a pedestrian who looks at it, a woman pretending to be handicapped who makes people carry her wheelchair up some stairs before she walks away, and a man pretending to be homosexual and complementing other men in the bathroom. Some of the pranks transgress social conventions, such as prejudices against homosexuals, or exploit people's disposition to help disabled persons. However, the majority of the sketches show how people react when faced with an unusual situation, for example when a urinal squirts water in their face.

The melodramatic 1990s

The films in the second version of the harmony frame differ by how they, as melodramas, convey the message of harmony. Precursed by *Coqueta* (1984) and *Escápate conmigo* (1989), the Mexico portrayed by popular films changed from celebrating an exalted marginalized subject to embracing wealth and a consumerist lifestyle as the desirable norm. As I will argue below in the analysis, this change paralleled the transition in the state's self-legitimizing rhetoric from the 'old' PRI that evoked the ideals of the 1910 Revolution to a 'new' PRI embracing a neoliberal ideology.

The 1990s brought with them three new conditions that impacted on what type of films could become popular. First and I believe most importantly, the audience itself changed. A number of commentators describe a process of two mutually reinforcing and gradual processes that exchanged the lower-class audience of *Cantinflas* and *La India María* with a middle and upper-class audience that preferred to watch a cinematic reality more reminiscent of their own daily lives (García Riera, 1998: 357; Hind, 2004a: 96; Maciel, 2001: 317; Miranda López, 2006: 80; Wood, 2006: 60). On the one hand, a number of movie theaters catering to the lower classes in the barrios closed down. Maciel (2001: 316-317) reports that the total number of theaters in the country decreased from 2389 in 1989 to 1642 in 1999. On the other hand, a new type of multiplex movie theaters appeared in shopping malls and other places that wealthier people are more likely to visit. With this came an increase of the ticket price from 1985 and onwards (Maciel, 2001: 317). While this benefited producers who found it easier to cover their expenses (Wood, 2006: 60), the lower classes could no longer afford to go to the cinema (Miranda López, 2006: 69). With a new audience, the characters on the

screen also changed. Where exaggerated stereotypes of lower-class Mexicans characterize the comedies above, the melodramas I turn to below mostly focus on the lives of privileged and fairer-skinned Mexicans. The economic challenges facing some of the characters discussed above are absent in the melodramatic version of the harmony frame.

Second, the three-legged business model underlying the comparatively high numbers of inexpensive comedies relying on a combination of female nudity and slapstick violence produced over the previous decade became outdated. Not only did the movie theaters in the barrios gradually close down, but the US market also imploded. García Riera (1998: 357) notes that US migration enforcement after the Simpson-Rodino bill of 1986 targeted the movie theaters popular among illegal immigrants, eventually making them close down.

Third, the state's policies towards the cinema sector assumed a more neoliberal character. A number of state institutions were dismantled as a part of a general trend towards a free-market economy, and IMICINE was charged with the task of reducing state funding in cinematographic productions (Maciel, 2001: 320). With the ratification of the free-trade agreement NAFTA in 1994, a law that stipulated that a certain percentage of Mexican films had to be shown in movie theaters decreased its demand from 30 to 10 percent (Wood, 2006: 40). NAFTA treats films as a commercial product subject to free trade legislation, and Miranda López (2006: 78) reports that the Mexican negotiators neglected to request an exemption for Mexican cinema as a cultural exception despite Canadian advice and a previously established practice from the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).

Furthermore, the devaluation of the peso in December and a subsequent economic crisis made it more expensive to produce films. As a result, production numbers fell from an annual average of 81,2 films in the 1980s to 34,4 in the 1990s. In the period from 1994 to 1999, only 16,6 films were produced annually (calculated on the basis of IMCINE, 2011: 135-136). The decrease was mainly due to fewer private productions (Maciel, 2001: 313).

Faced with these new conditions, the private producers started distancing themselves from the success formula of the 1980s and developed a new strategy for making popular films (Maciel, 2001: 300). Miranda López (2006: 67) reports that Televisine shifted its strategy from making 'entertainment' to making 'culture' of higher quality. With the exception of the eight *La risa en vacaciones* sequels, this involved a move away from comedies. García Riera (1998: 357) notes that Televisine strengthened its position among the private film producers, as the others had financially relied on the Latino population in the United States and did not have the financial backing of a conglomerate such as Televisa. Televisine contributed to making 100 films or 25 percent of the total Mexican production of the decade, half of which

were exclusive productions of the company (Miranda López, 2006: 80). It produced seven of the ten films from the decade analyzed here.

The new strategy involved, in my analysis, a return to the Golden Age's affection for melodrama. In describing the films below as melodramatic, I follow the understanding of melodrama as a narrational mode offered by Brooks (1976) generally, and of Noble (2005), Dever (2003), and López (1993) with regards to Mexican melodrama specifically. I want to highlight the distinctiveness of Mexican melodramas. As Monsiváis (2006: 512) and Aviña (2004: 133) note, melodrama is historically the most common form of expression in Mexican cinema. Importantly, this implies that Mexican melodramas historically have supported state hegemony as noted in chapter two. Indeed, the proponents of *el nuevo cine* considered melodrama as the one of 'old' cinema's major faults, and blamed its alleged inability to speak critically to a social reality on its reliance on melodrama borrowed from Hollywood (López, 1993: 148). However, as López and Noble underscore, Mexican melodrama is both similar and dissimilar to its Hollywood counterpart. It is similar in that Mexican melodrama too relies on excess, hyperbole, and an appeal to grand human emotions. In this, a Mexican melodrama corresponds to Brooks' analysis of European melodrama (Dever, 2003: 144; López, 1993: 152; Noble, 2005: 98). In my reading, the gist of Brooks' definition is that the melodramatic is a claim to importance and interest. In his own words, in

creating situations of astonishment, melodrama realizes, in heightened form, the aesthetics of the 'interesting' proposed by Diderot. It will always make an implicit claim that the world of reference – 'real life' – will, if properly considered, live up to the expectations of the moral imagination: that the ordinary and humble and quotidian will reveal itself full of excitement, suspense, and peripety, conferred by the play of cosmic moral relations and forces (Brooks, 1976: 54).

To the end of claiming that the events played out on screen or on stage are more important than the routine of the audience's own lives, melodrama relies on excess and presentations of emotionally charged situations. Melodrama further tends to be clear and overt in its communication. Mexican melodramas from the 1990s to the present are no different. Podalsky (2008: 149) identifies a trend where commercially successful films such as *La primera noche* and *La segunda noche* feature "characters [who] have well-defined problems that have well-defined solutions." Brooks emphasizes the ethical facet of melodramatic clarity, inasmuch as "one of the most immediately striking features of melodrama is the extent to which characters tend to say, directly and explicitly, their moral judgments of the world" (Brooks, 1976: 36; see also Dever, 2003: 9). In this, it fits well with Hollywood's classical mode of narration as described by Bordwell; melodramatic clarity facilitates the narrative's

intelligibility by making it clear who is the hero and who is the villain, and what is at stake in their conflict.

Melodrama thus lends itself to the staging of a Manichean universe where the forces of good and evil contest, where the heroes seem outnumbered and overpowered by the villains, but where they eventually secure a moral triumph towards the end (Brooks, 1976: 30-31). Although the easy solutions that lead to the victory of the hero may be improbable, it is difficult not to recognize what is at stake (Brooks, 1976: 206). Importantly for Brooks, this does not require a happy ending in the form of the hero's victory, but recognition of the hero as virtuous and thus morally superior to the villain. *Coqueta* exemplifies this: the protagonist's girlfriend tragically dies, but the film melodramatically celebrates his loyalty and unwavering faith in eternal love and thereby recognizes him as virtuous. *Coqueta* thereby illustrates Brooks' argument about the structure of the melodramatic narrative. Brooks maintains that the recognition of virtue involves a restoration of the old order rather than the promise of something new. The narrative structure of melodrama thus sees "a reforming of the old society of innocence, which has now driven out the threat to its existence and reaffirmed its values" (Brooks, 1976: 32). This reaffirmation is a call for maintaining the status quo, and the central part of Brooks' argument is that melodrama lends itself to a democratic but conservative worldview.

It is important to recognize melodrama as a distinctive Mexican phenomenon for my purposes. As Noble (2005: 98) points out, while Mexican melodramas have always relied on a narrative strategy of emotional excess similar to Hollywood's, it responds to and operates in a different historical context. As such, it employs a different set of audience schemata to make sense. Most important in this context, according to Noble, is that Mexican melodrama invariably related to the state's nation-building project by addressing how an individual's gendered identity stood in for a national identity. For Dever, melodrama lends itself to supporting an ideological project. She contends that melodrama works to give clear answers in times of uncertainty and that it thus

functions to right a world irrupted by personal, civil and foreign conflicts. That an outpouring of national sentiment so often characterized the genre is a consequence of one of its functions as mediator and redresser of social injustices (Dever, 2003: 8).

The above considerations serve as a springboard for understanding the difference between the popular films of the 1980s and 1990s. The films I analyze in the following pages clearly demonstrate the claim to portraying something 'bigger-than-life' and exemplify the propensity to invite the audience to one interpretation of the central characters' positions. All

but one (*Pelo suelto*) of the films focus on romantic relationships, and the stakes are the be-all and end-all for the characters involved.

I start with three innocent teenage dramas, *Coqueta* (1984), *Escápate conmigo* (1989), and *Pelo suelto* (1991). With the time, a different type of melodrama becomes prominent. It starts with the critically acclaimed *Cilantro y perejil* (1997), which is the only coproduction between IMCINE and Televisa analyzed here. This commercial success was followed up by the teenage films *La primera noche* (1998) and its sequel *La segunda noche* (2000), and the largest commercial success since 1999, *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* (1999). In the meantime, the historical films *Como agua para chocolate* (1992) and *Salón México* (1996) also rely heavily on melodramatic excess and grandeur.⁵⁹ The late nineties see tension and heightened drama replace the innocent worlds of the earlier films, yet here too melodrama promises a better future by restoring the old social order.

Melodramatic teenage innocence

Good, altruistic, and self-sacrificing teenagers who inhabit an essentially innocent world take the center stage in *Coqueta*, *Escápate conmigo*, and *Pelo suelto*. Music is central to all three movies, and they are starred by real-life music stars. The first two tell the stories of how two righteous couples find love and each other while triumphing over obstacles represented by a lethal disease and an evil aunt, respectively. In *Coqueta*, thirteen-year-old Pablo falls in love at first sight with Rosillo, a romance promptly signaled with violin music during their first encounter. After he finally takes the courage to ask “¿quieres ser mi novia?” [do you want to be my girlfriend?] – the task of taking initiative is clearly his – the bulk of the film portrays their happy love, emphasized by romantic songs that they perform to each other. Melancholic hyperbole kicks in as Rosillo falls sick and eventually dies. What makes *Coqueta* melodramatic is the way the adult characters try to comfort Pablo. His father tells him that only God knows why such things happen; there are things in life that are simply inexplicable. Rosillo’s older brother and Pablo’s teacher tells him to open himself up to his grief and yet not to worry. Rosillo is in heaven, and in heaven there is no sadness. The ending is sad, but it celebrates Pablo for having done the right thing throughout.

Escápate conmigo exchanges the conflict of disease and death with an evil aunt who terrorizes the young female protagonist. About to turn 18 and thus gain independence from her legal guardian, she dreams about becoming a star and living a life in glamour. When the evil aunt attempts to force her to marry a sleazy old man, the protagonist runs away. She

⁵⁹ The films do not portray contemporary Mexican society and I have therefore excluded them from my analysis.

meets three men who help her out, and they manage to avoid being caught by three armed men that the aunt sends after them. *Escápate conmigo* uses the flight to highlight the protagonist as a virtuous character. Winning the contest of the TV show *Reina por un día* [Queen for a day] is central to her dream of fame and glamour. When she finally gets the chance to perform in *Reina por un día*, she sacrifices herself and gives her spot to a younger girl in a wheelchair. *Escápate conmigo* thus crowns the heroine as virtuous not by fulfilling her dream about becoming famous, but by showing how she practices her altruistic goodness. As a reward of her moral superiority, she finds love and is reunited with the man she wanted from the beginning and who had been sent away by the evil aunt.

The theme of a teenage girl running away from a family stopping her from realizing herself recurs in *Pelo suelto*. Like the above films, the protagonist's objective is to be good, and she is also willing to sacrifice her dream of becoming famous on the altar of altruistic goodness. *Pelo suelto* introduces Gloria Trevi as an adolescent girl who dreams about becoming a rock star. She lives in an unidentified place in the countryside, where she performs songs and works at a bar known for discovering talented artists. She ran away from her parents who objected to her dressing style (tight pants with holes, a loose t-shirt, and messy, curly hair), despite the mutual love and care they feel for each other. Convinced that achieving her dream is a question of making the CEO of a record label listen to her music, she travels to Mexico City on her motorcycle, without luggage and with her loose hair fluttering behind her. The CEO had just left the city to go to the very same bar where she worked in search of new talents, so she goes to the beach town Acapulco instead where performing on the street allows her a luxurious lifestyle in restaurants and hotels.

Pelo suelto also uses a conflict between good and evil in order to show that Gloria Trevi deserves the success she eventually earns. The villains are two men who kidnap children in an orphanage to send them to the North Pole for genetic experiments. The unlikely nature of their crime in combination with their over-acted and theatrical performance (a pirate's eye patch, explicit statements about their evil intentions) make the villains appear harmless. Their function in the narrative is to allow Gloria Trevi to show that she places being good above achieving fame. She helps one of the children who escapes from the kidnappers, and brings him along to Acapulco. In the happy ending she performs the theme song *Pelo suelto* in front of an ecstatic audience in Acapulco. The lyrics reinforce the message of her freedom and independence as doing whatever she wants: “*voy a traer el pelo suelto, voy a ser siempre como quiero, voy a olvidarme de complejos, a nadie voy a tener miedo.*” [I'll carry my hair loose, I'll always be as I want, I'll forget about complexes, I won't be afraid of anyone]. After

her performance, the CEO tells her that “*el éxito es tuyo*” [the success is yours], and that she deserves it for single-handedly having made herself into a star by working hard and believing in her own talent and music.

Romantic woes and individual crisis

I now turn to the melodramas from the late nineties to the present day: *Cilantro y perejil* (1997), *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* (1999), *La primera noche* (1998), *La segunda noche* (2000), and *No eres tú, soy yo* (2010). These are films about love and the difficulties of maintaining a relationship, a topic the films establish in their opening scenes. As a character in *La segunda noche* states about a minute into the film, “*me está costando trabajo creer que existe el amor*” [I’m struggling to believe that love exists]. The films further leave an impression of a privileged Mexico in which individualism is the proper response to whatever challenges their characters face, and especially to the soul-wrenching task of finding love. The characters create problems for themselves when they in, self-deceit, do not realize that they must hold on to and fight for their romantic relationships. In the happy endings, the solution boils down to taking the courage to love and be loved. The films hold up a stable heterosexual relationship as the ideal, and they show how to obtain it. The characters who fare well find back to their old partner, they find a new partner, or in the case of *La primera noche*, they find a partner for the first time. In all the films, the virtuous good characters end up finding love, and the morally suspect and bad end up failing. Good and bad are defined as possessing or lacking empathy. That is, good people have the ability to care about others even when it counters their immediate and personal interests.

Love and breaking up is the central theme in *Cilantro y perejil*, *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*, and *No eres tú, soy yo*. In *Cilantro y perejil*, a student making a documentary for a school assignment interviews her family about love. The central story portrays the separation of her sister with her husband. He is a busy architect who has little time for his family. As soon as they separate, they enter an emotional crisis and their primary objective becomes finding a new partner. He has an unsuccessful affair with his secretary, and she goes on unsuccessful dates with several men. Both miss the other, and the happy ending sees them finding back to each other.

Like *Cilantro y perejil*, *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* approaches love as the be-all and end-all for the protagonists. *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* tells the story of two unhappy couples. The return of two old friends prompts the break-up of each couple. In the first couple, the conflict revolves around a man who does not pay sexual attention to his girlfriend. The man, Carlos, is

a Zen-inspired writer who meditates and contemplates the meaning of life and love while being financially maintained by his mother. He lives together with the commercial advertisement photographer Ana who views Carlos as a perfect lover on the emotional plane, but a failure in bed. They are the virtuous characters of the film, and their relationship has a remedy. Once they take courage to ask each other for forgiveness and recognize that he must learn how to see her as a person and she must control her temper, they find back to true love.

The relationship of the second couple is more violently conflictual, and has no remedy. The film shows the front-page model Andrea and the publicist Miguel in constant argument, and he displays a sexually aggressive behavior that hurts her physically and emotionally. She is also angry at him for his unfaithfulness. As another character advises, “*Andrea, no te abandones, solo tienes a ti misma*” [Andrea, don’t abandon yourself, you only have yourself]. That is, her remedy consists in finding the courage to leave her abusive man. This separation emancipates her, although she fails in reaching the ideal of a stable relationship. Miguel’s violence and lack of empathy make him the villain, and unlike Carlos he does not deserve that Andrea forgives him.

As Maciel (2001: 329) and Ramírez Berg (1992: 2) note, Mexican cinema gradually moved away from a chauvinist representation of the invulnerable man to a man estranged by his powerlessness. *No eres tú, soy yo* repeats *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*’ theme of a weak man who does not give his partner the sexual attention she demands and deserves. In *No eres tú, soy yo* the woman is the villain. The couple breaks up after she leaves her husband for another and more famous man shortly after their wedding. This plunges the man, Javier, into a deep existential crisis marked by scenes of him crying, harassing his friends and family because he cannot handle the situation, and boring the counselor paid by his father. After months of intense crying and counseling, he slowly learns how to stand on his own feet, and he meets another woman. In the happy end, he finally musters the courage to cut off emotional bonds with his ex-wife, who regrets her actions and wants him back.

The topic in *La primera noche* and its sequel *La segunda noche* changes to finding Mr. or Ms. Right. Their thematization of the sexuality of good and decent teenagers makes them stand out from earlier Mexican melodramas, where sexuality historically has been a “*cosa de perdidas, impensable para la hijas y las madres, sencillamente la desconocen*” [thing of lost women, unthinkable for the daughters and the mothers, they simply do not know what it is] (Aviña, 2004: 138; see also Maciel, 2001: 339). From the 1990s to the present, a number of films began to narrate a “sexual coming-of-age” (Podalsky, 2008: 149). In *La primera noche*, the narrative revolves around a group of teenagers who want to lose virginity in the ‘right’

way with the ‘right’ person. The stories include the overweight boy who is insecure and nervous around girls, the girl who cannot help falling in love with a man who mistreats her, the boy who falls in love with an older prostitute with whom his father has a sexual relationship, and the innocent couple who nervously and in great detail plans how they will spend the first night of making love. The sequel leaves the topic of losing virginity in a beautiful and romantic manner, and presents the slightly older characters trying to find and keep the perfect partner.

The politics of the harmony frame

In the films discussed above, the relationship between cultural and political power is one of symbiosis. The films discussed above were produced in a time of significant economic and political stress, marked by the 1982 debt crisis, a poorly handled earthquake in Mexico City in 1985, another economic crisis in 1994 that dealt the death wound to public confidence in PRI, and a change in the official state ideology from the 1910 Revolution to neoliberal ideology. PRI’s gradual loss of hegemonic control culminated with its election defeat in 2000 to Partido Acción Nacional (PAN, the National Action Party). Whereas the myth of the 1910 Revolution contributed to Mexico’s relative political stability before the 1980s, Mexico has since been without a credible myth that could stabilize the state’s hegemony. The purpose of this section is to interrogate how the films discussed above spoke to the political developments, and in particular with regards to stories that could strengthen or destabilize the state’s hegemony.

Potential Mexicans, *indigenismo* and a Golden Age ideology

The comedies of the 1980s showed Mexico from a marginalized perspective. With characters such as *Cantinflas* and *La India María*, the films turned their axis on the lower classes and their everyday experiences. They did so, I argue, by playing on the inverse register of poverty than the pornomiseria films that I analyzed in the chapters on Venezuelan cinema. That is, instead of accentuating how miserable and terrible poverty is, the films exalted and celebrated poverty as something noble. I will make the case that they thereby evoked significant elements of the myth of the 1910 Revolution eloquently analyzed by Knight and supported the by then significantly weakened ‘Swiss-cheese’ hegemony of the Mexican state (cf. Knight, 2010: 272).⁶⁰

It is not obvious that the comedies supported the state’s hegemony. A number of observers detect satirical and critical elements in the comedies, especially in those of *La India María* (Aviña, 2004: 149; Castro Ricalde, 2004; Ramírez Berg, 1992: 63; Rohrer, 2009). As

⁶⁰ Knight attributes the term to Jeffrey Rubin.

such, they represent resistance to and not support of the state's hegemony. The case for resistance rests on the observation that La India María, just like Cantinflas, displays various positive character traits that counter a racist and classist stereotype. Further, their characters use comedy to draw attention to the injustices that state representatives and the rich commit against marginalized Mexicans, and to show how two marginalized characters manage to have it their way by using their wit and street smartness.

This critical element is present in the films I analyze. The *cantinfladas* of Cantinflas at the party where he works as a waiter in *El barrendero* provide a case in point. I already cited the example of how he makes a mockery of the financial elite. In the same scene, he also protests against a politician's description of Mexico as a democracy by calling it a "*dedocracia*" ['fingercy'⁶¹] and claiming that the president is elected not by popular vote but by the sitting president pointing his finger at his successor. When asked if he supports PRI, he replies that "*estoy con el PRO y con el PRE [...] el PRÓximo PREsidente* [I'm with the PRO and the PRE (...) the next President].⁶² Similarly, the scene in *El que no corre, vuela* where La India María is asked to fill out a form in 12 copies in order to talk to her representative illustrates the inaccessibility of the state bureaucracy as much as her ignorance about modern technology. When she is arrested shortly after, it is because the police automatically believe a white and richer woman's word over María's.

Understood as satire, Cantinflas and La India María appear as a type of David against Goliath; of the marginalized subject who against all odds manages to have it their way with the rich and the powerful. The films portray common problems facing poor people and invite the audience to laugh at the responsible rich and state representatives. In this respect, both characters represent a positive and potentially critical portrayal of marginalized Mexicans. The India María films highlight everyday social injustices committed against indigenous people. As a number of observers note, the films in this sense represent a political satire and the victory of a marginalized person over figures of traditional authority, such as the police or richer white people (Aviña, 2004: 149-150; Castro Ricalde, 2004; Maciel, 2001: 341; Ramírez Berg, 1992: 62-63; Rohrer, 2009: 59). This observation provides the point of departure for the scholars who consider La India María in particular as political satire. Rohrer (2009: 60) maintains that La India María "presents a counter-image of an indigenous woman by breaking with common representations" and as such offers a type of resistance (2009: 57). Castro Ricalde (2004: 200) notes that criticism against María invariably has been couched in an

⁶¹ The terms *democracia* [democracy] and *dedocracia* are phonetically similar. *Dedo* means finger.

⁶² The statement illustrates the difficulty of translating Cantinflas. *Próximo* means next.

elitist language that views all cultural products with mass appeal as ideologically suspect. She argues that in the context of working for Televisa with its strong historical ties with PRI, La India María displayed a “discursive daring unusual for the time” (Castro Ricalde, 2004: 204). Similarly, Ramírez Berg (1992: 63) claims that “there is a method in India María’s comic madness which allows her to have it both ways: apparently staying in a ‘woman’s place,’ she nevertheless takes charge. The India María comedies are grand examples of the winning use of feminist nonconfrontational politics.”

Extant literature’s criticism of Cantinflas is often phrased in the same elitist terminology that Castro Ricalde rightly takes issue with in the case of La India María. The literature maintains that the early Cantinflas films of the 1930s and 1940s were more experimental and evidenced a critical edge that was lost as Mario Moreno Reyes, the actor and creator of Cantinflas, became increasingly politically conservative after 1950 (Bonfil, 1994: 33; King, 1990: 50; Knight, 2010: 258; Pilcher, 2000; Stavans, 1995). As a comedian with tremendous popular appeal, Cantinflas was criticized for providing cheap entertainment. King considers his films boring and repetitive, though his *cantinfladas* show “the possibility of vernacular speech as a force of subversion (King, 1990: 51). García Riera and Macotela (1984: 5) categorize Cantinflas as a part of the low quality characteristic of popular films with mass appeal.

There is a double edge to Cantinflas that represents both satire and conformism. As Carlos Fuentes contends, “*a través de Cantinflas la gente de toda Hispanoamérica empezó a reírse de sus políticos, porque hablaban como él; que fue casi un partido de oposición*” [through Cantinflas, the people of Spanish America started to laugh at their politicians, because they talked like him; he was almost an opposition party] (in Monsiváis, 2011: 99). Despite of his satire, the literatures considers the politics of Cantinflas to be harmless and conformist (Chávez, 2010: 126; Galera & Nitrihual Valdebenito, 2009; Pilcher, 2000; Stavans, 1995). “‘*Todo en orden*’, *parecieran decir las películas del cómico*” [‘everything in order’, the films of the comedian appeared to say” (Galera & Nitrihual Valdebenito, 2009: 102). Chávez (2010: 125-126) maintains what while Cantinflas allowed the audience to laugh at political injustices, he never blamed the state directly and his critical edge is momentary as it does not question the social structure underlying the injustices.

According to Monsiváis, this conformism has been characteristic of Mexican comedians in general. Always representing the lower classes, comedians are “appealing but obedient, lascivious but manageable, roguish but honest” and further “turn social resentment into grateful folklore, making humor a device for deadening rebellious impulses” (Monsiváis,

1985: 243). As Stavans (1995) notes, Cantinflas went from being embraced by all classes in the 1940s to representing lower class Mexicans from the point of view of the elites. While he maintained his popularity among the lower classes by relying on *albures* and on vulgar jokes, Pilcher argues that he eventually became “the mouthpiece for their [the Mexican elite] interests” (2000: 333).

Extant literature’s treatment of *La India María* and *Cantinflas* illustrates two pitfalls in the analysis of popular Mexican films. The first pitfall is to associate all films with mass appeal as alienating and ideologically suspect without empirical analysis. I believe that this approach is erroneous, but its inverse involves a second equally fallacious pitfall of associating mass appeal with the interest of the masses. In this vein, the literature cited above wrongly posits a one-sided negative stereotype of the marginalized when it applauds the positive character traits. The logic of the argument is that because *La India María* and *Cantinflas* have it their way against the rich and the powerful, there is more to their characters than ignorance of modernity, and they therefore offer resistance to traditional negative stereotypes. This assumption is erroneous on two grounds: first, it misconceives the stereotype of the marginalized subject historically used by the Mexican state to secure hegemonic control; second, it overlooks important conformist elements in the films.

My first objection relates to how the literature conceives the traditional stereotype. I propose a viewing of *Cantinflas* and *La India María* together with the other marginal characters in the popular comedies against the backdrop of PRI’s rhetorical embracement of Mexico’s rural and indigenous roots. The ideology of *indigenismo* is of particular importance in this context. In seeing *indigenismo* as the appropriate context to analyze *La India María*, I follow a strategy suggested by Ramírez Berg (1992, see chapter eight ‘the Indian question’)⁶³, Noble (2005, see chapter five ‘Seeing the Other through film’), Chávez (2010: 116-117), and Dever (2003: 48).

As noted in chapter two, the leaders of the Mexican state after 1910 faced the task of presenting a credible legitimizing ideology. In this context *indigenismo* was the answer to the ‘Indian problem’ (Brading, 2008; Chávez, 2010: 116; Knight, 2010: 77; Ramírez Berg, 1992). According to Knight (2010: 76), the Revolution itself owed a significant degree of its success to the indigenous population. The concept of the *indio* was of Spanish usage, and lumped together a variety of groups to designate a non-Spanish ‘them’. Colonial parlance thus cast a numerically inferior ‘us’ versus a numerically superior backward Indian ‘them’; between

⁶³ Ramírez Berg’s places his analysis of *La India María* in his chapter on the representation of women rather than in conjunction with other representations of indigenous people.

“Indios and *gente de razon*” [Indians and people of reason] (Brading, 2008: 84). In this context, *indigenismo* became a means towards incorporating *el indio* into the Mexican nation. Brading and Knight describe a process where supporters of *indigenismo* saw indigenous cultures as a mix of backward traits, like poor Spanish, lack of material possessions such as shoes or baths, and positive traits such as handicraft and architectural monuments. Brading underscores that *indigenismo* conceived the aesthetic elements of the indigenous cultures as the only element worth preserving, and to that end it exalted and celebrated native arts and crafts and pyramids as the foundation of the Mexican nation. The aim of this rhetorical celebration was not to preserve indigenous cultures, but to make the indigenous Mexican and mestizo (Brading, 2008: 77; Knight, 2010: 80). In the words of Brading, “the ultimate and paradoxical aim of official *indigenismo* in Mexico was thus to liberate the country from the dead-weight of its native past, or, to put the case more clearly, finally to destroy the native culture which had emerged during the colonial period” (2008: 88).

As Noble and Dever note, Brading’s and Knight’s analysis of *indigenismo* is indispensable for understanding the representation of indigenous people in Mexican film history. For the most part, indigenous people were marked by their “structural absence”, as Ramírez Berg (1992: 27) observes. When present,

they are usually stereotypical minor characters – rural simpletons who provide comic relief or servants who cook, clean and open doors for the lighter-skinned protagonists. Villains are seldom identifiable Indians, though they often exhibit the Indio’s key iconographical marker – dark skin color (Ramírez Berg, 1992: 27).

In a similar vein, Dever argues that the films typically have portrayed the various cultures as one homogenous and rural group, in need of modernization and civilization; as “colorful natives” and “potential Mexican[s]” (Dever, 2003: 48, 77). In Noble’s account, *indigenismo* applies equally to the Golden Age as the representation of the indigenous in *Y tu mamá también* (2001).

The four India María films, *La pulquería*, and *Tres mexicanos ardientes* confirm the analysis of Noble, Ramírez Berg, and Dever. The two latter are outright racist in their portrayal, and as such employ a one-sided negative stereotype of the indigenous. *La pulquería* identifies the clientele of its *pulquería* as *nacos*; a racist term used by the owner of the bar not necessarily to imply that they are indigenous but to brand them as such to cast them as backward. The rapist *indio* in *Tres mexicanos ardientes* is an exaggerated stereotype; ignorant, dirty, and only interested in raping women. In contrast, the reliance of a repertoire reminiscent of *indigenismo*’s celebration of the indigenous makes the case of La India María less straightforward. Rohrer admits that she “assume[s] that the counter-reading of the stereotype

is chosen by spectators less aware of the discourse on ethnicity” (Rohrer, 2009: 64). Given the widespread knowledge of the myth of the 1910 Revolution (Knight, 2010), I find this assumption difficult to accept. As noted above, the films dwell on her inability to deal with everything modern: shoes, baths, public transport, photocopies, and the like. Her colorful and always conspicuously clean dress is also important in this context, as it represents the aesthetic positive element that *indigenismo* purported to preserve of indigenous cultures.

Las delicias del poder provides an illustrative case of a film both supporting *indigenismo* and satirizing the state. Here, La India María manages to have it her way against the most powerful among the Mexican political elite to a larger extent than the other three films. Produced in 1999, after a troubled decade for PRI, the film openly caricaturizes the party as undemocratic and decadent, and it shows how María puts the ‘feminist nonconfrontational politics’ Ramírez Berg identifies into practice. By pretending that she will do as told, she inserts her own agenda of protecting indigenous groups. At the same time, by making her going through a training to become a modern politician, *Las delicias del poder* shows La India María as more ignorant about the ways of modern life compared to the other three films. *Las delicias del poder* suggests, as did *indigenismo*, that India María can be modernized, and that her ignorance is a function of her cultural background and her lack of access to the ways of urban Mexico.

My second objection relates to conformist elements in the films. The marginalized characters of the comedies are submissive and always content. Cantinflas provides an illustrative example in *El barrendero*, where he at various points argues against political action and for the intrinsic value of serving society without any reward. Cantinflas takes pride in his profession as a street cleaner, and explicitly sees his job as a way to serve the nation. His default state of mind is contentment, and as he states in one of his songs his lack of money is no obstacle to doing what he wants: “*con dinero y sin dinero yo hago siempre lo que quiero*” [with money and without money, I always do what I want]. In the theme song of the movie, performed by a dancing and singing Cantinflas in front of an audience of mesmerized young maids, he states the reasons for his pride. He sings that his task is to keep the poor as well as the rich parts of the city clean. Although the trash smells bad and he is upset with people not putting the trash in its proper place, he underlines that “*soy muy cumplido, con amistad a mi sociedad yo siempre he servido* [I always comply, I have always served my society with friendship]. He further suggests that serving ‘my society’ has an intrinsic value, even though he is doing a type of work that most people do not recognize as important: “*ni un*

papelito deajo escapar, ni algún premio me van a dar” [I don’t let even a small paper escape, not even a prize they’ll give me].

In this sense, Cantinflas and in particular his ethical stance towards his profession contradicts his satire. As I mentioned in the analysis introducing the chapter, *El barrendero* posits a mutually beneficial relationship between the state and the proletariat. As a good person committed to serving ‘my society’, Cantinflas does not allow the self-interest of others to obstruct the social mission he as a street cleaner is on. The way he protests a call for a strike in his labor union provides a pointed example. In the verbal exchange at the meeting Cantinflas stands for orderliness and properness, and the two fellow workers who want to strike for increased wages are unreasonable. Thinking about their own interest only, they fail to recognize the vital social function of their profession. Cantinflas states that although their profession appears insignificant, they are “*revolucionarios de la salud*” [revolutionaries of health], in an apparent reference to the 1910 Revolution. “*En nuestras escobas está la salud del pueblo*” [the health of the people is in our brooms] Cantinflas further exclaims to great applause. When a co-worker protests by asking where their rights as workers are, Cantinflas replies that “*nuestros derechos, compañero, están donde están nuestras obligaciones*” [our rights, comrade, are where our obligations are]. Interestingly, Cantinflas seems to run out of arguments and *cantinfladas* at this point. When another worker protests and states that they have to call a strike and fill the city with filth, Cantinflas repeats that they have an obligation to keep the city clean before he starts slapping the other man. The film does not show the outcome of the physical turmoil, and the next scene reinforces Cantinflas’ pride in his profession. Here, a car bumps into his cart with oil barrels, and the female driver yells at him for being in the way. Describing himself as a functionary of the state and his cart as a state-authorized vehicle, Cantinflas tells the woman that harassing him amounts to offending the nation.

The political conformism in the La India María films functions according to a similar logic. In all four films, María leaves her village for the city, she experiences that city life is not for her despite potential economic or other rewards, and prefers to return home to her village where she belongs. María could not be more content than as an indigenous woman leading a simple rural life and making ends meet by selling things at the local market. Although the films portray ‘home’ sparsely, La India María leaves a land of abundance and happiness. A scene where she is crossing the US – Mexican border in *OK Mr. Pancho* illustrates this. There, she meets a group of other migrants wearing old and grey clothes, in sharp contrast to her colorful dress. They explain to her that they have left home because “*la*

tierra no deja” [‘the soil or the land does not produce’, that is, farming is not economically feasible]. She responds with surprise, telling them that in her village there is excess of both fruit and fish. As Obscura Gutiérrez (2011: 176) argues, the films use María’s marginalized status as a decorative element in the background.

El mil usos is the only comedy that portrays poverty as a problem. As noted above, it shares its anti-migratory message with La India María films: the rural protagonist commits a mistake in leaving his village. Although the rural poverty is bad, urban poverty is worse, the film suggests. The film is about the poverty, about how it first forces the protagonist to migrate and then how he does not find any solution to it in the city. Unlike the other comedies, his marginalization motivates all of Tránsito’s actions and decisions. When he returns home from the saturated Mexico City, he does not return home to a land of abundance like María does. As Ramírez Berg argues,

just beneath the migratory-control message [of *El mil usos*] lies another one, nearly as blatant: no options exist for the Mexican underclass, rural or urban. Wherever Tránsito goes, whatever he does, he will have to scramble to make a living, at best just managing to scrape by (Ramírez Berg, 1992: 193).

In this, the film brings attention to the plight of the marginalized. However, in doing so, the film speculatively lapses into pornomiserism. I here agree with Obscura Gutiérrez (2011: 171), who categorizes *El mil usos* under the rubric of “*la falsa denuncia*” [false denunciation]. Her analysis is similar to that of Duno-Gottberg’s and King’s argument about pornomiserism referred to in chapter three and four. Obscura Gutiérrez (2011: 171-173) describes *la falsa denuncia* as films that pretend to bring the attention to the plight of the marginalized, but rely on speculative elements that place the responsibility for the misery of the poor on the cultural practices of the poor themselves.

Like La India María, *El mil usos* supports *indigenismo*. The two characters share the primary indigenous marker, as they both speak an imperfect Spanish and are unable to understand the *chilango* dialect of Mexico City. María speaks a markedly better and more clearly pronounced Spanish than Tránsito, yet she is explicitly presented as indigenous while he is not. In the context of *indigenismo*, they are clueless and naïve in the same way and about the same things; they are both in need of modernization. In both cases, the films rely on overacting and exaggeration to present an underlying message that people from the countryside are ignorant and gullible in a comical fashion.

Screening neoliberalism

When popular films supported the myth of the 1910 Revolution in the 1980s, they arguably lagged a few years behind PRI’s move to neoliberalism. With the romantic melodramas and

their focus on wealth and individual liberty in the 1990s, popular Mexican cinema caught up with official self-legitimizing rhetoric. In short, PRI exchanged the myth of the 1910 Revolution and *indigenismo* for a neoliberal ideology that promised affluence to everyone who believed in the American dream. Knight (2010: 267) argues that although the 1982 debt crisis paved the ground for a neoliberal economic model, it fell upon the *sexenio* of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988 - 1994) to provide its ideological wrapping. Under the slogan of ‘social liberalism’, Salinas sacrificed economic nationalism of import substitution for the open market and the notion of comparative advantage underlying the free trade agreements GATT and NAFTA.⁶⁴ Knight (2010: 268) describes social liberalism as “an ersatz myth which probably won few genuine converts, but which at least provided a convenient discursive facade for Salinas’ ingenious blend of economic neo-liberalism and political populism.” Social liberalism worked in favor of PRI’s ability to rule by consent as long as it appeared credible, that is, as long as the government was seen to manage the economy well. As Knight (2010: 269-270) points out, it enjoyed a relative success in the endeavor until the economic crisis in December 1994 and the devaluation of the peso.

Neoliberal ideology never became common sense, and Salinas’ attempt to trash the myth of the 1910 Revolution eventually backfired and damaged the legitimacy of the party (Knight, 2010: 268). It is nonetheless significant that PRI tried to legitimize its neoliberal turn, and it is significant that the popular films supported this attempt. Harvey (2005) underscores the importance of popular culture to pave the way for neoliberalism in Mexico and elsewhere. With reference to Gramsci’s concept of consent and common sense, he argues that it was at the level of the diffusion of neoliberal values in popular culture that neoliberalism was perceived as “as a necessary, even wholly ‘natural’, way for the social order to be regulated” (Harvey, 2005: 41). He further emphasizes that this process played itself out differently in each country depending on their cultural history (Harvey, 2005: 55). But the task was similar, in that “neoliberalization required both politically and economically the construction of a neoliberal market-based populist culture of differentiated consumerism and individual libertinism” (Harvey, 2005: 42). To be adapted as commonsensical, Harvey argues, neoliberalism was aided by mass media and popular culture.

Popular films contributed in two ways, by promising affluence and the viability of the American dream by celebrating individualism. The Mexico of the melodramas from 1984’s

⁶⁴ Both free trade agreements represent two important chapters in Mexico’s neoliberal history. Mexico joined GATT, the forerunner of the World Trade Organization, in 1986, and NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) in 1994.

Coqueta to 2010's *No eres tú, soy yo* is rich and socially privileged. As such, the melodramas employed a different set of prototype schemata than the comedies did (cf. Bordwell, 1985: 49). These schemata held up a US American consumerist lifestyle as the idealized point of reference. In this sense, Hind's (2004a) analysis of *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* pertains to all Mexican melodramas analyzed in this thesis. She argues that judging by the film's immense popularity,

the Mexican audience does not seek a documentary-like presentation of reality, but rather a refined narration that unfolds with characters whose clothes, pastimes, vehicles, jobs, and furniture compete with the best of the United States' fantasy lifestyle movies [...] The look of accomplished frivolity, rounded out with fanciful activities such as an executive masquerade party and Polanco jogging routes, upholds the possibilities for achieving a lifestyle in Mexico reminiscent of the upper-middle class in the United States (Hind, 2004a: 106-107).

The films establish these upper-middle class schemata in three ways. First, the opening scenes establish the social milieus the films portray. To provide examples from the early melodramas, *Coqueta* starts by showing a well-dressed boy walking across a polished wooden floor to a ready-made breakfast table. The furniture of the large house together with his dressing style evidence his status as wealthy. *Escápate conmigo* opens with images of palm trees against a skyline to indicate the provincial setting, and then shows a well-dressed girl on a horse and shortly thereafter her to-be boyfriend entering in a stylish veteran car. In *Pelo suelto*, the dressing style of Gloria Trevi also suggests her relative wealth, albeit to a lesser degree than in the previous two.

Second, the protagonists take wealth for granted and never worry about if they can afford something. Pablo in *Coqueta* laments that he 'only' has 600 pesos to buy his girlfriend a gift to celebrate their first week as a couple. Later, he hires a full Mariachi band to perform a serenade outside her bedroom window. The protagonists of *Escápate conmigo* and *Pelo suelto* both leave home, and maintain a luxurious lifestyle without problems. The female protagonist in *Escápate conmigo* meets a polite gentleman soon after running away, who describes himself as a free-spirited man who lives "como un millonario" [like a millionaire] without working. In *Pelo suelto*, Gloria Trevi travels to Mexico City without luggage, and later she pays for a life in up-market hotels and restaurants of the beach resort Acapulco by singing at traffic signs. In brief, basic needs are not a concern for the characters in these melodramas. The ease with which they can travel and maintain their comfortable lifestyle stands in sharp contrast to Tránsito in *El mil usos* and the fifty centavos he arrives in Mexico City with.

The focus on wealth continued in the next two decades. *Cilantro y perejil*, *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* and *No eres tú, soy yo* depict the lives of upper class Mexicans. In *Cilantro y perejil*,

markers of wealth include well-furnished apartments, clothing styles, and professions such as architect and psychiatrist. In *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*, the characters are a famous publicist, a fashion photographer, a biologist working in Kenya and the United States, a writer being maintained by his mother, a front-page model, and a globetrotter who returns to Mexico after seven years of travelling the world for pleasure. In both movies, the troubled love relationships mean that the characters must move out of their homes. They do so without any problems. In *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* domestic workers who have had no previous role in the narrative appear to help the women move into the new apartment. Similarly, the protagonist, a surgeon, in *No eres tú, soy yo* continues his comfortable lifestyle despite not working for months. He takes time off to find himself, and spends his days going to a counselor and walking his dog. The three films normalize the wealth by not contextualizing it and not contrasting it to less privileged economic statuses.

In contrast, the characters of the two teenage movies *La primera noche* and *La segunda noche* stem from varieties of the middle class. Compared to the other melodramas, they accentuate the social problems facing Mexico to a greater extent. Examples include short displays of poverty and violent crime. Both films highlight the professional and social backgrounds of the parents as a way to place their characters socially. For instance, the single mother of two of the girls in *La segunda noche* is a nurse who must work double shifts to make ends meet. The film emphasizes how strenuous this is, and the mother complains about how hard she works and that her daughters do not appreciate her sacrifice. Nonetheless, they live in a comfortable apartment, and the clothing and lifestyle of the daughters indicate that they do not need to take too much care in how they spend their money. Their economic situation is not luxurious, but definitely situated in a comfortable middle class.

The melodramas' depiction of a Mexican crisis represents a third way to normalize wealth. *Cilantro y perejil* and *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* frequently refer to "*la crisis*" [the crisis], but it is a crisis that does not affect the lives of their characters. Indeed, judged by these films, the economic crisis spurred by the 1994 devaluation had insignificant economic consequences. In *Cilantro y perejil*, the male protagonist moves into a fashionable apartment after his separation from his wife. A psychologist and friend of the wife complains that because of the crisis he has to temporarily work at a public hospital instead of receiving private patients since not enough people could afford counseling.

Rather than casting it in economic terms, the films approach *la crisis* as the disappearance of universally accepted norms and values. *Cilantro y perejil* talks about how society has become distanced from the traditional value system that governed it, and that in the wake of a

“*crisis general*” [general crisis] “*la crisis individual florezca*” [the individual’s crisis flourishes]. Carlos in *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* also illustrates this. The film casts him as a weak man who spends his days contemplating the meaning of life. He only finds meaninglessness, as evident in statements like “*nuestras vidas no nos satisfacen. Nuestras relaciones amorosas son... precarias*” [our lives do not satisfy us. Our love relationships are... precarious]. The personal conflicts of the characters are accentuated by the fact that society offers no universal values, and the characters have to create their own meaning. In particular, the disappearance of traditional gender roles create trouble, as the weak male characters in *Cilantro y perejil*, *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*, and *No eres tú, soy yo* illustrate. They are portrayed as unmanly in that they fail to give their partners the sexual attention they want, and they are too soft. This frustrates the women, who want men who are able to stand up for themselves.

The Mexico of the melodramas is a Mexico where the American dream is within reach and where the appropriate solution to the conflicts presented in the films boils down to individualism. *Pelo suelto* exemplifies this trend. I signaled above how *Gloria Trevi* portrays her as a self-made woman who deservingly becomes a rock star. Gloria Trevi became a famous singer-songwriter in 1989 with the solo album *¿Qué Hago Aquí?* and she published her last album in 2011. Frequently seen as a Mexicanized version of Madonna, she became famous for playing on her sex appeal and apparent rebellion against the conservative Mexican gender roles in favor of an idealized US American model (Correa, 1995: 90). Similar to the real-life super star, the film version of her plays on sexuality and eccentricity to cast her as unique. The narrative suggests that she succeeds because she believes in herself.

The unlikely nature of her quick rise to fame is secondary in this context. As Brooks (1976: 206) points out, “even if we cannot believe in the easier forms of reward that melodrama traditionally offers, there is virtue in clarity of recognition of what is being fought for and against.” Gloria Trevi fights for individual liberty, a message that the film repeatedly communicates through the lyrics of her songs. The film casts the conflict of her individual freedom as a struggle against ‘society’ and its straitjacket norms. The song *¡ya no!* of the opening scene makes this clear: “*esta sociedad, me quiere atrapar (¡ya no!) no me pienso dejar, me voy a escapar*” [this society, it wants to trap me (enough!), I won’t let it happen, I’ll escape]. The chorus prescribes individual liberty as a remedy against societal pressure: “*quiero mi libertad, no puedo fracasar, tengo tantos motivos, lo veo claro, el éxito es mío*” [I want my liberty, I can’t fail, there’s so much I want, I see it clearly, the success is mine]. For Gloria Trevi, independence means that nobody can boss her around. The lyrics reinforces the message of her freedom and independence as doing whatever she wants in the face of a

society that sees her as indecent: “*voy a traer el pelo suelto, voy a ser siempre como quiero, voy a olvidarme de complejos, a nadie voy a tener miedo.*” [I’ll carry my hair loose, I’ll always be as I want, I’ll forget about complexes, I won’t be afraid of anyone].

Gloria Trevi here posits an opposition between individual liberty and society. In so doing, the film employs what Bourdieu and Wacquant (2001) and Mirowski (2009) consider the key to neoliberalism’s ideological success. Neoliberal ideology rests on a series of binary opposites, whose first part implies restriction and second part connotes liberty: state against market, open against closed, rigid against flexible, immobile against dynamic, the group or collectivism against the individual or individualism, totalitarian against democratic. The terms suggest a political program of neoliberal adjustment based on the simple but irresistible notion of liberty (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2001).

Like *Gloria Trevi* embraces herself, the romantic films prescribe a similar recipe for achieving a stable relationship. The characters that achieve and deserve success are the virtuous characters that succeed when they realize that they can only rely on themselves. Personal success becomes a question of applying oneself. *La segunda noche* provides an illustrative example. One of the protagonists goes through an initial conflict where she falls for a married Spanish man. Realizing that he is taking advantage of her, she gathers the strength to reject him. Further, she finds a job as a model to signal her status as self-made and independent. She prescribes the same recipe for achieving personal liberty to her mother, who also takes courage to break ties with her lover who does not commit to her, and the mother too becomes a model.

Summing up, the melodramas supported neoliberalism with narratives that reiterated one of its central ideological tenets: individualism as the way to reach the American dream. The government justified their economic policies with a need to catch up to more advanced countries by emulating their political economy. The melodramas operated with a similar logic. By upholding a US consumerist lifestyle posited as normal, they posited a norm for Mexicans to emulate (cf. Podalsky, 2008: for a similar argument about youth films).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Mexican popular films from 1980 to 1999 defined Mexico as a country where ‘everything is in order’, a vision I termed the harmony frame. I identified two versions of this frame, one exalting a marginalized subject and another celebrating individualism and positing wealth as a norm. Both ways of defining Mexico supported the Mexican state’s hegemony in a context where the state struggled to rule by consent. This

support is what made me describe the cultural power the films exercised as symbiotic with state power in the introduction to the thesis. When the state changed its self-legitimizing strategy from the 1910 Revolution to neoliberalism in the 1980s, Mexican popular films followed suit. By arguing that ‘everything is in order’, Mexican films suggested that no political change was necessary.

As I noted at the outset, the harmony frame was by far the dominant frame of the 1980s and 1990s. In the cinematographic debate about how to define Mexico, contesting and more critical visions of Mexico existed alongside the harmony, albeit only *Violación* (1989) became popular enough to be included for my analysis. I return to this film in the next chapter, where it fits better thematically. As I will argue, the symbiotic relationship between the state and the film sector changed in 2000, when films presenting a critical vision of Mexico started to attract larger audiences. In the next chapter, I discuss a number of films that have turned their axis on the social and political ills of Mexico.

Chapter six. Mexico 2000-2010: nothing in order

Introduction

This chapter turns to films that narrate a Mexico in crisis. Since all but one of them have been screened after 2000, I discuss them in conjunction with developments in the Mexican film industry over the last decade. I will make the case that, as in Venezuela, Mexican films have since 2000 no longer presented one dominant frame, but rather a plurality of contesting voices offering opposing visions of what Mexico is. Two films continued the neoliberal trend of the 1990s, whereas five of the most popular films did not portray contemporary Mexican society.

However, and despite this frame contestation, one critical and pessimistic narrative has become the most commonly repeated frame. I term this the crisis frame, and six of the 13 most popular films of the decade participated in it. In different ways, the cultural power represented by the crisis frame stands in an antagonistic relationship with the state's power. It does so by defining a Mexico in social disintegration, marked by violence of the marginalized poor in Mexico City and powerful narco cartels in the countryside. The films are transparently political, in that they clearly depict a *Mexican* social reality that extends beyond the private problems of the characters involved. In this Mexico, things are falling apart and society is in a state of crisis. Society's social fabric has come undone, and people are left with no chance but to fend for themselves. Insecurity and everyday violence, a corrupt and violent state, racist classism, and migration as the only viable exit option are key characteristics of this crisis. It is further an ethical crisis brought about by Mexican people themselves. People who appear good and empathetic soon lose sight of others' wellbeing when tempted by power or money. The police protect the rich, and refer them to hit men. The poor acts as a mass, ready to assassinate or steal at first opportunity. Traffic is always congested. People live in shacks or small apartments with narrow corridors and small rooms, all sparsely furnished and made by concrete and painted in faded colors. However, in a similar fashion to the Venezuelan popular films of the same period, the films present an ambivalent political stance and invite to a variety of possible interpretations. I will make the case that they contribute to a culture of fear, and in painting a vision of a Mexico in crisis they implicate to varying degrees the Mexican state as a culprit. They represent a call for a different Mexico, without specifying what type of change they want.

The chapter is organized as follows. I start with an analysis of a scene in *Amores perros* framing arbitrary violence. I then note that the 2000s segmented developments in the film industry from the previous decade. I further discuss the topical variations and commonalities

in the crisis frame. I posit that their politics is a function of how they narrate society. This does not mean that their narrational modes and reliance on for instance melodramatic excess is irrelevant for how the films make sense. I will however exclude a consideration of this aspect from my discussion, because it is not necessary in order to relate their narratives to political developments in the country. I will conclude the chapter with a discussion of the possible political implications of these pessimistic and ambivalent films.

Framing arbitrary violence

A salient aspect of the films in the crisis frame is how they, similar to their Venezuelan contemporaries, cast public space as insecure and depict an arbitrary, blind violence positing a universal victim. Whereas the violence in *El barrendero* in the previous chapter was harmless and funny, the violence I analyze below is dangerous and creates fear. *Amores perros* (2000) provides a pointed example of how a film communicates this message. I analyze a scene where the film introduces one of its protagonists, the hit man El Chivo, by showing how he commits a murder in broad daylight on a busy street in Mexico City.

The scene starts about fifteen minutes into the film. This is an intimate scene, filmed with a subjective camera and seen through the eyes of characters present. A close-up of food being stir-fried on a large hotplate tells the audience that the location is an expensive restaurant where the food is being prepared at the table. Further signaling wealth, another close-up shows a middle-aged, clean-shaven man dressed in a blue button-up shirt taking a sip of a small cup of alcohol. A green bottle partially obstructs the view, and gives the impression that the camera is held by person sitting at the table opposite of him. The camera follows the man's hand as he puts down his drink, and then cuts to a view from the street. A medium close-up shows another middle-aged man, dressed in a worn suit jacket and with unruly, dirty hair and a large beard suggesting poverty. Playing with the contrasts that are so central to the film, the street view is filled with the noise of traffic as opposed to the small talk, the sound of the frying food, and Asian-style music in the background of the restaurant. The camera cuts rapidly between two medium close-ups of the man on the street; one frontal shot and another showing the man's profile. A new shot from inside the restaurant shows the man in the blue shirt talking with a colleague or business partner of similar age and social standing with the man on the street visible through a large window behind the two men in the restaurant. Again, the items on the table partially obstructing the view convey a feeling of presence and intimacy. The subjective camera position opposite of the two men has a view to the street outside through the large window. The camera cuts back to the street and a close-up of the man shows

his worn, furrowed face and his expressionless calmness in contrast to the people hurrying past him. Nobody takes notice of him; this is a common everyday scene of an anonymous and therefore typical busy street in Mexico City and a restaurant where a group of men are having a business lunch just as they probably do most every day. These are anonymous and ordinary men; two relatively wealthy men eating inside an upmarket restaurant accompanied by at least one more person, and another poorer but equally ordinary man who happens to be outside the restaurant. The three camera positions from the sidewalk just outside the restaurant, across the street on the opposite sidewalk, and inside the restaurant underline this impression of ordinariness. Objects between the camera and the poor man on the street, such as passing cars and people, reinforce the sense of a subjective camera position. The effect is that the camera documents something realistic rather than staging a show as was the case with the objective camera in *El barrendero* in the previous chapter.

The man on the street walks back and forth a couple of times, carefully looking around himself. The camera cuts between close-ups and medium close-ups of the man, a low-angle shot taken from the table inside the restaurant, and a wide shot taken across the street. Looking around himself two more times, the man calmly reaches for his pocket and pulls out a pistol. Without haste, he uncocks the gun, looks around one last time before he resolutely steps closer to the window with his back facing the camera on the opposite sidewalk. The camera cuts swiftly between a low-angle shot of him lifting the gun seen from inside the restaurant and another taken by a person standing about a meter away from him at eye level. As he pulls the trigger, the bullet enters straight through the large window, and hits the man in the blue shirt who jerks backwards before his upper body falls down. The camera on the street shows the killer running away from the crime scene. Back inside the restaurant, the companion of the murdered man tries to help him, but to no avail. A close-up image of a boiling stream of blood on the hotplate flowing towards the camera signals the man's death.

The immediate effect of the murder is to reintroduce a feeling of suspense in the film. *Amores perros* has so far been a rather slow film, aside from an adrenalin-pumping car chase in the introductory scene. After this, the film has so far dwelled on the daily lives of three of the film's central characters, during which it has cross-cut to glimpses of the killer. The audience thus knows the killer as integral to Mexico City's urban landscape, as someone one would expect to see on the street. He has been shown looking for valuables in the trash next to a large avenue, protecting the dogs that accompany him from being killed, and as a lonely man in what must have been his sparsely furnished home. Apart from his visible poverty, the absence of emotional expression characterizes the man. Everything he does is done with the

same unexpressive body language. He does not twitch when he looks through the garbage, when he prepares the pistol in his home, or when he pulls it to kill the man in the blue shirt. The audience still does not know that he is one of the protagonists of the film, or that his gun can be hired for money and that the execution was a job given to him by a corrupt police officer.

This way, the scene illustrates a central element in the Mexican crisis frame, namely the arbitrariness and ordinariness of violence, a violence that hits like a bolt from the blue, indiscriminately and without mercy. The victim is an unidentified wealthy man, but as seen from the two camera positions on the street, he could have been anybody. From their point of view, they just see the bearded man pulling the gun and firing it seemingly at random. The sense of proximity and of being present as a witness works to communicate that the victim of the murder could have been anyone present; the assassin just so happened to shoot the man in the blue shirt.

Developments in the film industry

The last decade did not bring about any significant changes in the conditions impacting on what type of films could become popular. The developments from the 1990s described in the previous chapter carried over into the next decade. The middle and upper classes continued to visit the US-styled multiplex movie theaters, and Mexican films received a popularity boost after the immense success of *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* in 1999 (Hind, 2004a: 98; Obscura Gutiérrez, 2011: 177). State funding of production diminished with PAN's election victory in 2000 and the new government's continuation of neoliberal economic policies (Costello, 2005: 32). Instead of requiring a certain percentage of projection time for Mexican films, a 2000 law stipulated that at least one Mexican film should always be offered (Costello, 2005: 37). Production numbers have nonetheless increased towards the present, from a decade-low of 14 films in 2002 to 70 in 2007 and 2008 (IMCINE, 2011: 137). Compared to the previous decade, the annual average increased by about 13 to 47,2. This is still lower than the 81,2 films produced annually in the 1980s.

The popularity of Mexican cinema increased, marked by blockbusters such as *El crimen del Padre Amaro*, *Una película de huevos*, *Y tu mamá también*, and *Amores perros* (see appendix one). Woods (2006) and Sánchez-Prado (2006) contribute the new-found success to new marketing strategies. Spending more than ten times the average amount on publicity compared to the average Mexican film, *Amores perros* in particular managed to make itself

into a hype through a massive advertisement campaign after it had won the Critics Week award at the 2000 Cannes Film Festival (Wood, 2006: 87).

Amores perros further represented a new production strategy for private films. Instead of opting for the slow bureaucracy of IMCINE funding and the ties on the production process that state support involves, the makers of *Amores perros* created a new production company by creating a joint venture between the entertainment provider Corporación Interamericana de Entretenimiento (Interamerican Entertainment Corporation) and the untraditional candidate of the capital investment fund Sinca Inbursa (Wood, 2006: 62). This new company, Altavisa Films, contributed to producing three of the films analyzed in this chapter. Producing films under the name of Videocine, Televisa became less dominant among the private producers (Miranda López, 2006: 81). It still participated in four of the most popular productions of the decade.

However, state-funded productions also became more popular. In the previous chapter, only *Como agua para chocolate* (1992) and *Cilantro y perejil* (1997) received funding from IMCINE. In this chapter, the state agency partially funded six of the most thirteen most seen films of the decade, one of which I have classified as critical of the state.

The most notable change in Mexican film, however, has been thematic. The decade saw fewer films about the 1910 Revolution, more films about a Mexico in crisis, and a greater diversity in topics and genres (Monsiváis, 2006; Obscura Gutiérrez, 2011: 177). Hind (2004a) argues that most films produced after Mexico joined NAFTA in 1994 look conspicuously like Hollywood imitations and that they further share a thematic consistency by exhibiting a “common political passivity” and negative treatment of European characters (Hind, 2004a: 108). Monsiváis (2006) contrasts the unity of the Golden Age films with the contemporary absence of one dominant cultural movement, and maintains that Mexican cinema since 2000 is rather the sum of singular successes.

For my purposes, it is important to note that the films communicate that they narrate a Mexican society rather than individual stories. This change is both linguistic and aesthetic. Mexican slang becomes more common, with the frequent usage of expressions such as *güey* [~ dude] or *cabrón* [~dude, asshole], *romper la madre* [beat someone up] *pinche* [~damn] and *no mames* [~no way]. This linguistic shift makes Monsiváis (2006: 513) conclude that “*el habla es un personaje central*” [speech is a central character] of the Mexican films since the late 1990s. Further, the films tend to show more overview images of landmarks in Mexico City. This is politically significant: by accentuating that they are *about* Mexico, they signal that their stories are representative of Mexican society in general.

Screening a Mexican crisis

A crisis frame defining Mexico as undergoing a social and political crisis was the most prominent frame of the decade, with six of the fourteen films analyzed participating in the frame. I also include *Violación* from 1989 as a precursor of the crisis frame. All films rehearse the theme of the everyday violence and insecurity of public spaces. Other markers of a crisis are the state as a source of violence and corruption, a racist classism, the lack of economic opportunities for Mexico's talented but poor youth, and migration as the only exit option out of the misery that defines Mexico. As in the previous chapter, I have organized my discussion chronologically and thematically.

Violación (1989) is the first clear member of the crisis frame, and it presages some of the topics of the later films. It differs from its contemporaries included in the previous chapter by showing violence in a realistic manner and by a general pessimism. Apart from one comical relief character, a sober realism characterizes the film. The characters are believable, their motivations are clear, and there is no exaggeration of the violence as in the slapstick comedies. Thematically, *Violación* focuses on the impunity of a serial rapist and the inadequacy of Mexico's legal system. After establishing rape as a topic, the film shows the rape of a woman in her own home. With the help of the upstairs-neighbor and protagonist, the police come and arrest the responsible three men. Crucially, the film portrays most of the individual police officers and other representatives for the legal systems as decent people trying to do their job. *Violación* defines the crisis as a malfunctioning legal system. The medical expert examining her at the police station states that "*legalmente, no hay violación*" [legally, there is no rape] since he cannot find any physical evidence. The assumption of the legal system is that she, a woman dressed in a short dress, is likely to have consented. The responsible men are set free, and the woman tells her neighbor that she does not see the point in pursuing the case legally as she is convinced they would be free again after a few months. After being told by his lawyer that such cases rarely see the culprits ending up in jail, the protagonist exclaims "*esta sociedad está más podrida a lo que imaginaba*" [this society is more rotten than I had thought].

Violación validates his claim. Despite what seems to be clear evidence against the serial rapist, the laws' stringent demands for hard, physical evidence protect the aggressor. Similarly to the principled investigator and journalist in the Venezuelan films, the protagonist concludes that the only way to help the woman is to take the law into his own hands. Since the state through the legal system fails, he must act. He hunts down the rapist, and the film ends in a shoot-out between the two men, leaving the rapist along with several innocent people dead.

The police arrest the protagonist, and the implied upcoming prison sentence of the hero who stood up to defend justice and an innocent woman underscores the failure of the legal system. An intertitle on the last image on the screen utilizes a claim to reality as a way to underscore its political message. The intertitle blames the legal system for the state of affairs the film depicts: “*esta historia está basada en hechos reales. De acuerdo a las siguientes estadísticas, cada nueve minutos se comete una violación en México. Solo se denuncia un 33% de los casos de violación a las autoridades competentes*” [this story is based on real events. According to the following statistics, a rape is committed every nine minutes in Mexico. Only 33% of the rapes are reported to the proper authorities].

In the decade after *Violación*, the films drawing attention to political and social problems did not become popular enough to be included in my analysis. They did, however, exist as an important undercurrent, according to Maciel (2001). He underscores that a number of directors determined to produce films about Mexico’s political and social crisis made their first film. In particular, *Rajo amanecer* (1989) has received acclaim for its critical portrayal of the 1968 massacre at the Tlatelolco square, when hundreds of protesters were killed by the government just a few weeks before the summer Olympics celebrations in Mexico City (Costello, 2005: 36; Híjar Serrano, 2009: 89; Maciel, 2001: 34). The massacre marked a turning point in Mexican political history, and extant literature considers it a key event in the loss of PRI’s hegemony (Híjar Serrano, 2009: 88; Knight, 2010: 264). However, most of these critically-minded directors only managed to produce one film due to insufficient funding (Maciel, 2001: 311). Eleven years after *Violación*, the critically acclaimed political satire *Ley de Herodes* (2000) makes mockery of the corrupt and power-crazed politicians of PRI (Hind, 2004b). It was the fifth most seen movie in 2000 with 1,1 million tickets sold. In comparison, the romantic melodrama *La segunda noche* attracted 2,2 million people. Yet the most seen film of the year, *Amores perros*, sold almost 3,3 million tickets. As several critics have observed, it set the tone for a new way of making film in Mexico and became applauded as marking a “new age of Mexican cinema” (Costello, 2005: 35).

As noted above, *Amores perros* (2000) is a film about contrasts. Primarily, this contrast is evident through the three interlaced stories about the lower-middle class Octavio and his attempts to seduce his sister-in-law Susana, the rich couple Daniel and Valeria, and the poor ex-guerilla turned professional assassin El Chivo and his reencounter with his daughter. The opening scene of *Amores perros* sets a tone of tension, violence, and adrenalin-inducing action. A car chases two young men in another car through Mexico City’s congested traffic. The intense sounds, the two men’s visible fear, a bloody dog in the backseat, and the gunshots

from the pursuers make the seriousness of the situation clear. The pursued car rams into another car; one of the men dies on the spot and the other is severely hurt. At this juncture, the three stories of the film converge. The first story is about the driver Octavio, the second is about the blond girl in the other car, and the third is about El Chivo, who witnesses the accident.

The first story presents the crisis as the insecurity and poverty of a Mexico City barrio. Octavio, an apparently unemployed and otherwise idle man in his twenties, is in love with his brother's wife. Octavio's plans to run away with her to Ciudad Juárez in northern Mexico become economically viable when he discovers that his brother's dog is an unbeatable fighting dog. The story initially paints Octavio as a good and empathetic person and his brother as the villain. The brother cheats on his wife, yells at her for not washing his clothes properly, shows neither ability nor interest in taking care of their baby, and robs supermarkets.

Dog-fighting is a central theme in this story. When Octavio enters a dog-fighting club, the owner explains him how the business works: "*esta es mi empresa. No pago impuestos, no hay huelgas ni sindicatos, puro billete limpio*" [This is my firm. I don't pay taxes, there are not strikes or labor unions, just clean cash]. Dog-fighting yields a substantial amount of money, between 10 and 20 000 pesos per fight. Octavio soon becomes rich; he buys himself a car, and shares the profits with his best friend and his brother's wife Susana. The quick success corrupts him, and Octavio's plans falter. Whereas he is a sympathetic character during his initial success, a gradual loss of empathy forecasts his abrupt failure. He gambles all of his and his friend's money in one last fight, and asks the owner of the club to beat up his brother. Octavio now deserves his fate. His opponent shoots his dog, his brother and his best friend die, and he ends up severely injured. Susana rejects him, and her answer to him during his brother's funeral succinctly summarizes Octavio's quick adventure: "*¿Sabes que decía mi abuela? Si quieres hacer reír a Dios, cuéntele tus planes*" [Do you know what my grandmother used to say? If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans].

The second story tells the crisis in terms of the superficiality of wealthy Mexicans. It follows the woman Octavio's car ran into. Similarly structured, this story is also about the deserved failure of two persons. Valeria is a Spanish top-model, previously introduced on huge billboards on the streets and as a guest at a celebrity TV show. Her story starts with her success; she is famous and about to move in together with her lover Daniel, a fashion magazine editor who has finally left his family and bought her an apartment. The apartment is not luxurious, but the wooden floors and spacious rooms clearly indicate wealth. However, the couple's happiness is short-lived. The accident occurs the same evening they move in

together, and leaves her chained to a wheelchair. Physically handicapped, she has lost her beauty and with that everything that was special about her. The relationship quickly wears down as both of them lose their temper and patience. Her failure becomes total as she must amputate her leg after the wounds become gangrenous, and the story leaves her in the apartment as the huge billboard with her image on it is being taken down outside the window. Daniel on his side misses his wife.

Amores perros' final story returns to the crisis as violence and insecurity. By inverting the structure of the two foregoing stories, it sees a man turning a deserved failure into possible hope. The scene analyzed above is central to the negative portrayal of his life situation. As I indicated, the initial position of El Chivo is marked by destitution, poverty, and despair. He tries to live off of whatever he can find in the trash, but accepts assignments as a hit man from a police officer. As the police officer tells one of their customers, El Chivo left his comfortable life as a university professor and family to be a leftist guerilla fighter some twenty years ago. El Chivo's lack of human empathy is central to how the narrative paints his initial failure. He is characterized by a stoic calmness, slow movements, and no visible emotional response to human suffering apart from his own. His clear affection for dogs makes his disinterest in people more evident. When he transforms and turns his life situation into hope, he first regains his empathy. He starts showing interest in his daughter, but realizes that he must first become a new person. As he explains to her in a phone message, in order to ask her for forgiveness he must first come to terms with his own past and find the courage to look himself in the eyes. *Amores perros* ends on a positive yet uncertain note, seeing him walk off into a desert as a clean-shaven and well-dressed man.

The Mexico of *El crimen del Padre Amaro* (2002) is equally bleak. Like *Amores perros*, a generalized sense of violence figures as contextual background, while the narrative pays most attention to the acts of violence committed by its protagonist. It does not include the same graphic and prolonged violent scenes as *Amores perros*, and its violence is committed by people with power: a narco cartel and a priest. *El crimen del Padre Amaro* depicts a rural Mexico where a narco cartel holds the monopoly of violence, the municipal authority provides a legal stamp to the cartel's activities, and the church legitimizes the power of the cartel and the municipality.

A young and principled priest enters this world of corrupt politics. His sole objective is, in his own words, "*yo solo quiero servir a Dios*" [I only want to serve God]. The narrative presents the young priest with three moral dilemmas that each involve an ethical choice: liberation theology, celibacy, and abortion. The film portrays how Amaro each time chooses

the unethical option. Amaro's choice is that of ethics versus power; of following the Bible's commands or the example of the Church's men; of honesty and siding with the powerless or money and siding with the rich and powerful. Amaro opts for power, not because power in and of itself corrupts, but because he chooses the solution that yields most personal gain. The dilemma of liberation theology is presented through a conflict between Amaro's superior Padre Benito and Padre Natalio who works with a group of poor farmers in the region. Padre Benito accuses Natalio of working with the guerillas, and bashes his "*maldita teología de la liberación*" [damned liberation theology]. Natalio replies by accusing Benito of supporting the construction of a local hospital, which in reality laundries drug money. Amaro clearly sympathizes both with Natalio as a person and with his social cause, but he allows Benito and the bishop to pull him away. Natalio denies the charges of aiding guerillas, stating that in his area there are only people defending themselves as best as they can from gunmen and narco cartels making it impossible for them to farm. Amaro seems to believe him, and clearly sympathizes with the situation of the farmers and the priest when he pays Natalio a visit to hand over the bishop's messages.

The most serious crime of Padre Amaro is a result of breaking the clerical celibacy. Amaro's moral failure starts after seeing Benito in a romantic relationship with a woman. Like in his meeting with liberation theology, Amaro soon leaves his initial ethical standpoint, and he falls for the 16-year-old seductive Amelia. She is clearly interested in Amaro, dumps her boyfriend, and carefully initiates a romantic relationship with the young priest. Unlike Amaro, she has ethical qualms about her sexual desire; Amaro later justifies their sexual relationship with him 'being a man'. When Amelia becomes pregnant, he tells her his vocation is more important than her and pressures her to have an abortion. Amelia bleeds to death at the illegal abortion clinic.

Padre Benito realizes his moral wrongs, confesses his sins to Amaro, and asks God for forgiveness. In contrast, Amaro refuses to confess. The ending sees Amaro replacing Benito's position in the village, and the final scene shows him hypocritically leading Amelia's funeral service in front of a congregation that believes he is still a good person. Padre Benito leaves the service in disapproval, but the story implies the maintenance of the status quo with the Church supporting the corrupt alliance between the narco cartel and the local authorities.

Y tu mamá también (2001) and *Amar te duele* (2002) paint the crisis of Mexico from the perspective of social injustice and inequality. *Y tu mamá también* casts Mexico's political elite as rich and corrupt, and parallels the fall out between two best friends with PRI's first election defeat in 71 years. After introducing the protagonists Julio and Tenoch, a voice-over provides

social background information about the two. Tenoch is the son of a corrupt PRI politician; a doctor in economics from Harvard University and an under-secretary of state. Julio's background is more modest; his mother is a secretary for a multinational corporation in Mexico City, and he has had no contact with his father for five years. Through Tenoch, he has access to the privileges common to the highest echelons of the Mexican political elite, including exclusive access to a sports club once a week and invitation to a wedding where the president will be present. The initial impression of Julio and Tenoch is of two happy-go-lucky, immature and spoiled adolescents full of energy and dreams. Tenoch's father wants him to study economics, and threatens to take his car away if he protests. Tenoch states that "*me cagan los economistas cabrón. Por mí todos esos ojetes se pueden ir a chingar a su pinche madre [...] Ni madres güey, yo quiero ser escritor, cabrón*" [Fuck the economists man, for me all those assholes can go and screw their fucking mom (...) No way dude, I want to be a writer man].

The film sees Tenoch's plans of rebelling against his parents falter. Tenoch and Julio go on a road trip with the Spanish wife of Tenoch's older cousin. During the trip they discover that they both have slept with the other's girlfriend, which causes a conflict between the two and also reveals their class differences. Tenoch reproaches Julio's violent outburst of anger as a sign of his lower class: "*¡A huevo te tenía que salir lo pinche nacote, güey!*" [obviously the fucking Indian⁶⁵ in you had to come out]. The story culminates at a local restaurant at the final destination, where the two friends set matters straight and all three drink mezcal and beer. The boys confess to each other that they regularly slept with each other's girlfriends, and Julio says he also had sex with Tenoch's mother, hence the title of the movie. After Luisa takes the last shot of mezcal, she leads them on to a threesome where the boys, as she predicted, also make out. This act clashes with their machista worldview, and it gives the final blow to their friendship.

The movie ends with the end of their friendship, Luisa's death, and – the voice-over informs – the end of the 71 years rule of the 'official party:'

Al regresar de Europa, Ana y Cecilia terminaron sus relaciones con Tenoch y Julio. Dos meses después, Tenoch comenzó un noviazgo con su vecina. A Julio le tomó nueve meses comenzar a salir con una compañera de su clase de francés. Julio y Tenoch dejaron de frecuentarse. Al verano siguiente, el partido oficial perdió las elecciones presidenciales por primera vez en 71 años. Julio se encontró a Tenoch de camino al dentista. Sentarse a tomar un café resultó menos incómodo que las excusas para evitarlo.

[On their return from Europe, Ana and Cecilia ended their relationships with Tenoch and Julio. Two months later, Tenoch started a relationship with his neighbor. It took Julio nine months to date a classmate from his French class. Julio and Tenoch stopped hanging out. The next summer, the official party lost the

⁶⁵ The term *naco* is a common and offensive term for someone indigenous, ignorant, and of bad taste.

presidential election for the first time in 71 years. Julio met Tenoch on his way to the dentist. Sitting down for a coffee was less uncomfortable than the excuses for avoiding it].

The film ends on a pessimistic note. It does not celebrate the changes – new romantic relationships and a new political party in charge – rather, it relates the changes to the end of the friendship between Julio and Tenoch. Symptomatically, Tenoch has started studying economics like his parents wanted him to. The friends agree to meet up again, but the omniscient voice-over informs that “*nunca volverán a verse*” [they will never see each other again].

Mexico’s social inequalities and a racist classism receive a more sustained focus in *Amar te duele* (2002). The film tells the story of a teenage romance between the upper class Renata and the lower class Ulises. They meet through a love-at-first-sight encounter at a shopping mall, quickly establish a relationship of mutual trust and love, and make a pact to always be together. The film embraces their relationship and the open-mindedness underlying their willingness to be together with someone from a distinct social class. An important early scene where Ulises tells Renata about how he dreams of studying art highlights just how different their social backgrounds are. He shows her an impressive self-made graffiti depicting a planet from a comic where “*todos los hombres son iguales*” [all men are equal]. He must explain Renata that he is unable to start school “*porque tengo que trabajar todo el día en el puesto*” [because I’ve to work all day at the stand]. The narrative highlights the importance of this statement by placing it in an intertitle that remains on the screen for several seconds. His family runs a small business selling cheap clothes at one of Mexico City’s informal markets, and his father needs his assistance to make ends meet. Ulises’ reality thus stands in sharp contrast to Renata’s daily life of private drivers, maids, and private schooling.

Prejudices from both the rich and poor quickly create problems for their relationship. Renata’s sister refers to Ulises as “*un pinche indio*” [a fucking Indian], “*el aborigen*” [the aborigine] and “*naco*” [Indian / ignorant]. Their parents condone the use of the racist term *naco*, and insist that Renata cannot date someone from a lower social class. When she refuses to listen, they decide to send her to Canada. Similarly, the family and friends of Ulises consider the relationship doomed to fail. His best friend tells him that “*son ellos contra nosotros*” [it’s them against us]. When Renata’s ex-boyfriend with the help of her sister and the private security guards at their school beat up Ulises, his social circle from the barrio responds *en masse* by beating up Renata’s friends and seriously injuring one of them. Renata and Ulises decide to run away to the sea, but the film ends tragically with Renata’s ex-boyfriend shooting her dead. The ending is sad and melodramatic. The heroes do not get each

other, but the narrative shows their stance towards social inequality as the only virtuous and sensible response.

Social inequality is the primary focus of *Rudo y Cursi* (2008) and *La misma luna* (2008) as well, but these films let their characters migrate to escape the poverty of home. They thus define the crisis as the lack of opportunities at home, which necessitates migration. In *Rudo y Cursi*, leaving the village is simply referred to as “*la chanza*” [the chance]. The film tells the story about the rapid rise to and the equally rapid fall from fame of two brothers in their late twenties or early thirties. The film introduces them as two quite average rural Mexicans working at a plantain plantation. It is clear that their surrounding is relatively poor, though it is not characterized by hunger or acute poverty. Indicators of this relative poverty include a make-shift soccer field in one of the early scenes, the wife of one of the brothers who complains that they cannot afford to buy a blender, and images on the TV showing commodity goods such as SUVs that demonstrably are not part of the everyday life in the village. Importantly, a narco cartel figures in the background as the only source of coercive power in a similar fashion to *El crimen del Padre Amaro*. A voice-over with an Argentinian accent stating that “*es en el lugar más pobre y desamparado donde encuentras al diamante en bruto*” [it is in the poorest and most forsaken place where you find the purest diamond] drives the point home.

The quote succinctly summarizes the film’s topic. *Rudo y Cursi* is the story of two poor Mexicans with lots of unexploited and undiscovered talent, a talent which moreover in their present context as plantation workers is highly unlikely to find its use. Just like the two brothers are stylized examples of the Mexican rural poor, the Argentinian too is a cliché. He drives a red sports car, has a young and blond model-like girlfriend, and he appears to have lots of money. Frequent usage of the Mexican *güey* and the Argentinian *boludo*⁶⁶ underscore their national backgrounds. The Argentinian turns the two brothers into soccer stars in Mexico City, but both fail quickly as a result of a romantic misadventure and gambling. They return home without any money, only to see that their sister has married a local *narco* who has built her the house they had promised her. One of them, Rudo, returns as an amputee, after he was shot because he did not pay his poker debt.

La misma luna is about migration to the United States. It tells the story of the nine-year old boy Carlitos, whose mother has been in the United States as an undocumented migrant worker for four years. They both miss each other, but she cannot afford the USD \$ 4000 it

⁶⁶ The terms have roughly the same connotations. Used between friends, it is a manner to express a confidence and trust. Used to strangers, it is mildly offensive.

costs to fix the papers she needs to be able to bring him to the United States. When Carlos' grandmother dies, he runs away to the United States to escape the relatives who want to claim custody over him just to receive the mother's remittances. As in the migrant movies of the 1980s and *Rudo y Cursi*, the new destination delivers no solution. The United States of *La misma luna* is characterized by a violent and discriminatory police, exploitative employers, and no protection for undocumented workers like Carlitos' mother. Unlike the earlier migrant films, 'home' is no better than the migratory destination. Unless one has very good reasons, one does not come to the United States to work under these conditions, as one of the undocumented Mexicans helping Carlitos explains him. Life in the US is hard, but still better than the one they left behind in Mexico. Mexico is simply a country without opportunities. *La misma luna* ends happily. Carlitos only knows that his mother lives in Los Angeles, and goes there in search of an intersection his mother has described to him on the phone. He is dependent on the assistance of others. The film sees how the initially hostile and self-centered undocumented immigrant Enrique sacrifices himself to help Carlitos. Enrique saves Carlitos from being taken away by the police, allowing the young boy to miraculously find his mother.

Summing up, the 2000s stand out as the decade when stories about how bad everything is in Mexico became popular. Only *No eres tú, soy yo* and *La segunda noche* continues the harmony frame from the previous decade. However, it is also the decade when films that do not represent contemporary society become popular. While this excludes them from the scope of my study, it is noteworthy that five of the most seen movies set a different agenda than today's Mexico. The historical films *El tigre de Santa Julia* (2002) and *Arráncame la vida* (2008) portray the discontent and battles leading up to the 1910 Revolution and the political oppression of the 1930s. While both relate to the Mexican revolution, the former is a violent comedy and the latter is a romantic melodrama. *KM 31* (2005) is a thriller about a series of mysterious deaths on a road outside Mexico City. Its violence is brutal and realistic as in *Amores perros*, yet it represents a privileged Mexico without social problems in the same way as *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*. Its central theme of a ghost responsible for the deaths made me exclude it from my scope, since the supernatural does not square with an analysis of contemporary society. The two last films are the immensely popular *Una película de un huevo* (2005) and *Otra película de huevos... y un pollo* (2009), which are cartoons about an egg becoming a chicken.

Culture of fear and the politics of ambivalence

How does the crisis frame speak to political developments in Mexico? By defining Mexico as a country marked by insecurity, and social inequality, it presents a pessimistic view of society and implicates the state as responsible for the situation. In the city, the criminal poor control the streets. In the countryside, the narco cartels are responsible for the generalized sense of insecurity. Compared to the popular films of the 1980s and 1990s, the films in the crisis frame are of a qualitatively different kind. They are films that, while they do not operate with an explicit political message, are transparently political. They are political in that they shift the focus away from narrating private problems with private solutions to problems that are societal. The protagonists of these films, and the conflicts they experience and the challenges they must overcome, are Mexican conflicts and challenges. The characters are thus allegorical stand-ins for wider Mexican phenomena. By exchanging the message ‘everything in order’ with a message of ‘nothing in order’, they break with a tradition in Mexican film to support the state’s hegemony.

It is as cinematic social criticism that these films have attracted more attention and acclaim from extant literature than the comedies and melodramas analyzed in the previous chapter (Aviña, 2004; 2010; Costello, 2005; Híjar Serrano, 2009; Hind, 2004a, 2004b; León, 2005; Monsiváis, 2006; Noble, 2005; 2007; Obscura Gutiérrez, 2011; Podalsky, 2008; Rodríguez, 2012; Sánchez-Prado, 2006; Wood, 2006). As narratives open to a range of plausible interpretations, scholars find different political messages in films of the 2000s. The internationally acclaimed *Amores perros* and *Y tu mamá también* have in particular been received as both progressive and conservative films. Noting this ambivalence, Podalsky (2008: 155-156) stresses that *Amores perros* and several of its contemporaries present a series of issues to the table for negotiation instead of presenting a transparent argument. To provide examples from positive assessments of the films, Shaw (2007) considers that *Y tu mamá también* speaks from a principled moral standpoint. Similarly, Wood (2006: xii) maintains that after the commercial success of *Amores perros* and *Y tu mamá también*, “no subject was taboo, no narrative too complex, in the continued search for an authentic means of expression and the need to address directly the ever-present issue of what it meant to be Mexican.” Costello contends that *Amores perros* and to a lesser extent *Y tu mamá también*

have rewritten the role of repression, which is now shown to affect every sector of society: rich and poor, male and female. These films give a voice to the poorest and most marginalized, those who, until recently, have remained completely outside the political reality (Costello, 2005: 37).

Podalsky offers a more critical interpretation, as she considers that there is a substantial difference between giving voice to the marginalized and making films about them. She applauds a generation of films from the late 1990s and the 2000s for addressing Mexican youths in a cinematic language they are accustomed to through music videos and MTV, thereby offering narratives that resonate with other familiar cultural products (Podalsky, 2008: 151).

In a more critical vein, Sánchez-Prado (2006), Chávez (2010), and Obscura Gutiérrez (2011) argue that *Amores perros* represents a conservative ideology and that it uses a sensationalist approach to marginalization and violence as a marketing strategy. The crux of their arguments is that showing the harsh and violent reality of Mexico City's streets does not in and of itself amount to a critique of that reality. Obscura Gutiérrez (2011: 178) places *Amores perros* in the same category as *Mil usos*, as 'false denunciation' that relies on the register of pornomiseria. Chávez (2010: 137) argues from a normative point of view that "almost at the end of the first decade of the Mexican political transition, we are still waiting for fiction films to expose in greater depth the corrupt ways and massive economic and political crimes of the old and new political class." *Amores perros* and *Y tu mamá también* "do not substantively touch political realities" as they, presumably, ought to (Chávez, 2010: 137). Sánchez-Prado (2006: 46) proposes that "violence is an element that is used strategically in cultural representations in order to validate specific political and social perspectives." He concludes that "far from being a progressive film, *Amores perros* simply deals with a catalogue of urban bourgeois fears" (Sánchez-Prado, 2006: 43). Like Chávez, he normatively posits that "all references to violence should be a critique of violence, a comprehension of its profound economic, social and political roots" (Sánchez-Prado, 2006: 51). He takes issue with how the film narrates the violence of the poor from the point of view of the potential middle and upper class victims. As such, the film relies on a sensationalist portrayal of marginalization and crime without a critical intention to understand the underlying causes of poverty.

The literature rightly points out the tendency of Mexican films after 2000 to present more critical but also more ambivalent narratives compared to the previous two decades and the classical Golden Age films. In arguing that the crisis frame destabilizes the state's hegemony, I depart from the normative assumption about how the films 'should' represent social reality, and rather focus on how thematic repetitions convey a message of fear and hopelessness. I will focus on how they narrate insecurity, and discuss what role they assign to the state in the crisis.

In spelling out the political implications of the crisis frame's representation of violence and insecurity, I find it useful to note the significant overlaps between the representation of violence in Mexico and Venezuela since 2000. In both countries, the representation destabilizes the state's hegemony by showing that the state does not have the monopoly of violence. This is central to their antagonistic stance to state power. Crucially, violence is an important politicized topic in both countries, where public perception of insecurity and violent crime is a sore point in the legitimacy of both governments. My introductory remarks to the section on a culture of fear and the politics of ambivalence in chapter four pertain equally to this chapter. It would be an oversimplification to describe *Secuestro express* as a Venezuelan version of *Amores perros* – but it would not be too far off the mark either. Both films have been stylistically influenced by Tarantino (cf. Ramírez Berg, 2006), they share a graphic mode of portraying brutal violence, and – for my purposes, most importantly – they posit a causal linking between poverty and violent crime. Lechner's and Rotker's arguments about a culture of fear provide a relevant contextual point of reference, and building on their insights I propose that the principal political charge of the frame lies in their portrayal of violence.⁶⁷

Amores perros and *Secuestro express* do however interact with different contexts, which give the culture of fear different political implications. Seen against the Mexican blockbusters of the previous two decades, *Amores perros* represents a break with a tradition by providing social commentary rather than entertainment. The politics of the crisis frame become particularly clear in comparison to the rosy and idealized vision of Mexico presented by the comedies and romantic melodramas. *Secuestro express*, in contrast, entered a film tradition where most popular films had been accentuating the social and political ills of Venezuela for decades. This difference, perhaps, explains why parts of the literature applaud *Amores perros*, while Venezuelan scholars are more prone to attack *Secuestro express*' sensationalism. Further, the films comment on a different political context. PAN represents a continuation of PRI's neoliberalism, whereas Chávez professed that he wanted to break with it. Crucially, however, violence is a politicized topic in both countries. Although 64 percent of Venezuelans compared to 34 percent of Mexicans identify crime as their country's principal problem (Latinobarómetro, 2010: 15) and homicide levels are significantly higher in Venezuela than in Mexico, the visibility and brutality of drug-related violence makes it an important issue in

⁶⁷ Sánchez-Prado uses Rotker's anthology *Citizens of fear* as a point of departure for this analysis of the construction of fear in *Amores perros*.

Mexico as well.⁶⁸ To simplify somewhat, in Venezuela, the figure of the dark-skinned male *malandro* from the barrio is perceived as the primary threat to security, while in Mexico the marginalized poor share this position with the narco cartels. A hotly debated ‘war on drugs’ where the government has employed the army to combat organized crime has claimed 50 000 lives since 2006 (Campell, 2012: 2).

Like in Venezuela, the films in the crisis frame inflate the perception of violence and contribute to fear. In particular, they present a causal link between poverty and violent crime and thereby place the responsibility of Mexico’s insecurity on the marginalized. This holds true for *Amores perros* in particular, and to a lesser degree for *El crimen del Padre Amaro* and *Amar te duele*. These films posit a victim in waiting identified by Duno-Gottberg in *Secuestro express*. *Amores perros*’ presentation of the protagonist of El Chivo analyzed above provides an illustrative case in point.

In short, the films in the crisis frame leave an impression that nobody is safe anywhere. When the poor responds as a mass in *Amar te duele*, they brutally beat up the rich kids just because they happen to attend the same school as Renata’s ex-boyfriend. The armed private guards are outnumbered and beaten up. *Y tu mamá también* relates the insecurity of the city to its heavy traffic, which kills a rural migrant worker who tries to cross an avenue. The rapist in *Violación* pursues his victims inside their homes. One of the first scenes in *El crimen del Padre Amaro* shows a hold-up of the bus Amaro travels in, and a woman and two men rob the passengers at gunpoint. The countryside in *El crimen del Padre Amaro* and *Rudo y Cursi* is dominated by narco cartels that figure as an omnipotent threat in the background of the narratives. In both films, they function as if they were the local state. As Hind (2004b: 30) notes about *El crime del Padre Amaro*, the representation of the local provincial state in hands of a cartel points to a widespread national problem. The cartels function rather as the final arbitrator, the organization that makes the final calls.

State representatives are in general not present in the films in the crisis frame. Where the early precursor *Violación* turns its axis on the inadequacy of the legal system, the more recent films focus on other problems. No agents of the state are protagonists in these films. In different ways, the films do nonetheless hold the state as responsible for the crisis. *Y tu mamá también* and *El crimen del Padre Amaro* do so to a high degree, *Amores perros* to a medium

⁶⁸ Mexico has a homicide rate of 18,1 per 100 000 compared to Venezuela’s 49,0 (UNODC, 2011: 93-94). Mexico’s homicide rates vary significantly from state to state, and the states of Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Guerrero and Baja California record 41 percent of the national total, but only have 11 percent of Mexico’s population (UNODC, 2011: 50).

degree, and the state is absent in *La misma luna* and *Rudo y Cursi*. *Y tu mamá también* in particular directly relates its negative vision of Mexican society to PRI as a corrupt party that has been in power for too long. Tenoch's father is a corrupt under-secretary of the PRI government, and the omniscient voice-over informs that he was involved in a scandal where a firm sold polluted corn when Tenoch was a child. Characteristic of the PRI's impunity for its own party members, the family avoided the scandal by moving to Canada for a few years. Further, by juxtaposing PRI's election defeat in 2000 with the girlfriends of the protagonists leaving them and the end of their friendship, the film suggests that the new government will not bring about positive change. In *El crimen del Padre Amaro*, the local government supports the narco cartel as noted above. In *Amores perros*, a police officer gives El Chivo assignments as a hit man, suggesting that the police contribute to the insecurity committed by the criminal poor.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Mexican popular films of the 2000s did not operate with one dominant frame. Two films continued the harmony frame from the previous decade, and five films did not portray contemporary Mexico. Yet, six of the most popular films, together constituting a crisis frame, repeated a pessimistic and critical view of Mexico. Compared to the previous two decades, the most significant change is that the films replaced the message of 'everything is in order' with 'nothing is in order', and accentuated insecurity and social inequality as primary markers of a Mexico in crisis. They thereby displaced the symbiosis of the previous two decades with an antagonistic stance to the state's power. The crisis frame was not as explicitly critical of the state as *el nuevo cine* films in Venezuela were, although it did implicate the state as responsible to some degree. The films point to facets of Mexican society that do not work rather than narrating how state institutions and representatives create a crisis. This is a critique of society that does not call for a new state, but it is a call for a different Mexico.

Conclusion: symbiotic and antagonistic relationships

Reformulating the problem statement and theoretical platform

In this thesis, I have analyzed 67 of the most popular Venezuelan and Mexican films between 1980 and 2010. Of these, I classified 17 Venezuelan films between 1980 and 1999 as antagonistic to state power, 17 Mexican films from the same period as symbiotically state-supportive, and six Mexican and six Venezuelan films made since 2000 as politically critical and antagonistic to the state. The purpose of this analysis has been to discuss the relationship between political and cultural power. I have been interested in film narratives that support or challenge the legitimacy of the state in a time where the state was in particular need of ideological support. I turned to popular films not because I am interested in them as art or in their aesthetic qualities, but as communicative statements about the societies they depict.

Gramsci's notion of power provided the theoretical point of departure for understanding the relationship between the political power of the state and the cultural power exercised by films. Gramsci's notion of power is useful to make sense of the complex way the two forms of power relate to and impact each other, in particular in a situation where power relationships are in flux and it is not clear who exercises power and from where. In the Gramscian account, power is strongest when it appears as a natural expression of common sense, "as transparent descriptions of reality, not as interpretations, and [as] apparently devoid of political content" in the words of Gamson et al. (1992: 382). This is uncontested power; power at its optimal performance, smooth, frictionless, invisible, and difficult to spot. To exemplify such power with reference to Hall (1996), the endurance of racism in a context where everyone is ostensibly antiracist and colorblind, but where racism's segregating effects continue to reproduce white privilege, speaks volumes to racism as a strong form of power. Strong and resilient, because it is difficult to recognize and therefore to protest and contest.

This is what Gramsci terms hegemony. He stresses that hegemony is never complete, never perfect; it is always liable to resistance as soon as people become conscious that what appears commonsensical conceals an exercise of power benefitting someone's interests at the cost of someone else's. Armed with this consciousness, resisting the commonsensical becomes possible. Contesting hegemony, what Gramsci terms counter-hegemony, risks bringing out the reverse side of the hegemonic power coin: brute coercion. The power of the stick thus remains a necessary and integral part of Gramsci's notion of power, as he underlines in one definition of hegemony as two levels of power that can be theorized as "corresponding to the dual nature of Machiavelli's Centaur – half-animal and half-human [the

two levels] are the levels of force and of consent, authority and hegemony, violence and civilisation” (Gramsci, 1971: 169-170).

The Gramscian power coin is not just a mix of physical coercion and consent, but it is equally one of the power of ideas and the power of economic might. Long-term, stable hegemonic relationships rest on a pillar of consensual rule, secured by an ideology that people believe in and give their consent to. This stability is also supported by an economic pillar, where the social groups in power give concessions and enter into convenient alliances. I chose the cases of Venezuela and Mexico starting in 1980 because both countries experienced an economic crisis unsettling the political stability of the state’s power. With the economic pillar of their power base under significant stress, each state could have needed the political support of films to bolster their ideological power. Put simply, they needed films that told their audiences not to worry, that everything is in order, and that the states are doing their job.

Could the state representatives who were worried about people’s loss of confidence reasonably expect this support from the films? As I pointed out in chapter two, extant literature notes a history where the cultural power of films and state power has been in a symbiotic relationship. State and nation building and nationally produced cinematographic narratives have traditionally gone hand in hand on the continent. The classical case in this context is Mexican Golden Age cinema from 1935 to 1955, and the few Venezuelan films produced before the mid-1970s also indicated a positive answer.

However, the 1950s and 1960s saw the birth of a political movement determined to break with ‘old’ cinema’s ideological support for Latin American states. *El nuevo cine*, or the New Latin American Cinema, wanted to use films as a tool in a revolutionary battle against the capitalist states submissive to US commercial interests and oblivious to the needs of the marginalized majority. Inspired by the Cuban Revolution, the anticolonial writings of Fanon, and the revolutionary writings of Gramsci and Lenin, the ideals of *el nuevo cine* spread from Brazil and Argentina and became the continent’s most influential cinematographic movement. The idea was to use films to transmit a revolutionary consciousness to the audiences. With films depicting the continent’s underdevelopment, the misery and hunger of the poor masses, films would function as a counter-hegemonic tool.

A central tension within *el nuevo cine* related to how to make popular films that would reach and communicate with ‘the people’. As an anti-imperialist leftist movement, it naturally wanted to show that the Hollywood way was not the only way to make popular films. However, what Bordwell terms the classical narrational mode in Hollywood cinema was the classical mode in Latin America as well, due to the influence of Hollywood and what for *el*

nuevo cine was the Latino version of Hollywood: Mexican Golden Age cinema. Yet, in order to become popular, to make films that people actually went to the movie theater to watch, filmmakers had to rely on the compositional options provided by Hollywood.

This reliance is due to what makes films intelligible for their audiences. As Bordwell succinctly argues, “in fictional filmmaking, one mode of narration has achieved predominance. Whether we call it mainstream, dominant, or classical cinema, we intuitively recognize an ordinary, easily comprehensible movie when we see it” (Bordwell, 1985: 156). This is Hollywood’s way of making films, and it is a way to make films that spectators intuitively understand because of the clarity of their plots. Films made in accordance to the Hollywood narrational mode rarely trick their audiences to draw invalid conclusions, but instead tend to be redundant to make sure the message is clear. Filmmakers following this norm want spectators to comprehend their story, and employs familiar narrational cues to convey a coherent narrative.

By relying on the Hollywood narrational mode, films connect to what Bordwell calls audience schemata. For instance, spectators intuitively understand that a close-up of a running person usually means he or she is being chased, because they have seen it before. Watching and understanding films is thus a learned activity, something that people become tuned into as they watch film after film. A film’s intelligibility is by and large a function of the story’s reliance on a range of what Bordwell terms schemata, through which the film employs recognizable types of characters, settings, and story formats and provide cues about causation and motivation (Bordwell, 1985: 49).

As I argued with reference to Castells and Entman, the intelligibility of all forms of communication rests on the ability to connect with audience schemata. In understanding films as a form of communication, I brought the theory of framing from news media to the study of popular films. I did so because I am interested in film as communicative statements, rather than film aesthetics or what is specific to film as a medium. Gramsci offers a theory of power that speaks to why *popular* films are interesting when the research question focuses on the state’s hegemony. Popularity speaks to what ideas become common sense, which is how films participate in an ideological contest. However, the concept of hegemony is broad and difficult to operationalize as formulated by Gramsci. Referring to Carragee and Roefs (2004), I proposed the theory of framing as a way to apply hegemony analysis to communicative texts.

In Entman’s account, the theory of framing is a theory of how communicative texts exert power. Essentially, to frame involves selecting what issues are worthy of attention, a selection that inflates the salience of the issue as it decides what is a topic and what is a non-topic.

Beyond agenda-setting, a developed frame has four functions: it defines a problem, construes a cause for that problem, passes an ethical judgment, and proposes a remedy. Not all four functions are necessarily present in a frame, all parts of the text do not have to partake in the frame, and sometimes a single sentence or image can evoke one of the four functions of a developed frame.

Crucially for Entman's theory and for my purposes, frames work effectively when they connect to existing schemata. Here, Entman's and Bordwell's theories converge. People are able to understand news items and narratives in films because they are accustomed to similar types of stories or ways of casting an issue from previous experiences. A frame of crime defining old rich women as the main culprits would not resonate, but one blaming young males does, because it is familiar and as such appear more credible. This credibility is key to how a news story or a film's portrayal of an issue makes sense, as it confirms preexisting beliefs.

By implication, it is the repetition that gives a narrative or a frame its communicative power, according to Entman and Bordwell. Gramsci too emphasizes the importance of recurrence for establishing a belief as a new common sense; ideas "repeated innumerable times [...] become the pillars of politics" as they pass for elementary (Gramsci, 1971: 144). In other words, one film arguing that for instance the judicial system is corrupt is not powerful enough to affect commonsensical perceptions of the judiciary, but it is the repetition of the narrative and its possible recurrence in other forms of mass communication that gives the narrative its power.

A methodological implication of Entman's theory of framing is that to understand how films exercise cultural power, they must be studied in some quantity and over some time. By analyzing 67 films over three decades, I have interrogated what type of stories became popular in a given time and thus I have also asked if what Entman terms cultural congruence or resonance itself has been in flux over time.

Scope

The scope of my study has two principal limitations. Films are not alone in communicating visions of society, and other cultural products such as music or *telenovelas* [soap operas] as well as traditional news media partake in the contest for presenting dominant frames about what *really* define Mexico and Venezuela. The recognizable stereotypes and social milieu the films employ are probably found in *telenovelas* as well, especially in the case of melodrama which is the *telenovela* narrational mode par excellence. Nor are films alone in presenting

political messages of how the legal system is or is not corrupt, and it is reasonable to assume that the narratives make sense because they reiterate elements of frames from other forms of communication. I have not compared how the frames in films compare to frames found elsewhere.

Further, I have conducted a frame analysis rather than considering the entire framing process from production through reception. If a frame is the outcome of how journalists or filmmakers gather information (or creative inspiration), then an examination of whose ideological interests are represented in that process would have been logical. Similarly, it is reasonable to assume, unless people are “cultural dopes” in Hall’s (1981: 447) celebrated phrase, that different audiences receive and interpret frames differently. A frame about poor young, dark-skinned males from the *barrio* as responsible for a country’s insecurity is probably received differently by a poor young dark-skinned male and a rich person.

Nonetheless, I proposed that the content, the frame itself, constitutes a privileged moment in the communicative process. Taking production and reception into account would have called for a different and more elaborative study. As Entman highlights, the power of the communicative text is not simply to tell people what issues to think about. In his own words, “short of physical coercion, all influence over ‘what people think’ derives from telling them ‘what to think about’” (Entman, 2007: 165). This does not take away the importance of the frame’s origin or its reception, but it does point to the distinct power that a frame as such can exercise.

Visions of society in Venezuelan films

Chapters three and four turned to Venezuelan films and asked what issues they told Venezuelans to think about. I argued that from 1980 to 1999, Venezuelan films were a counter-hegemonic cultural force in the country. The films of the period operated with an unequivocally political message that is not plausibly understood other than as a critique of the state. The films conveyed the message that the Punto Fijo democracy was oppressive, the oil wealth that financed it benefitted an economic elite only, and that the state excluded the great majority of Venezuelans who live in the *barrios*. The films drew attention to areas where the state had a low degree of legitimacy. The legal system in particular was portrayed as the culprit, in that the judiciary was both incompetent and uninterested in legal justice. Instead, the police and the courts existed, according to the films, to protect the rich elites and to keep the poor masses down. A second line of critique, increasingly common towards and into the 1990s, focused on marginalization. This narrative emphasized the misery poverty entails, and

portrayed marginalization as a trap without exit options. Those who tried to escape poverty did so typically through violent crime, but they all failed and often died in the attempt.

Politically, the dominant frame of Venezuelan films in this period worked to delegitimize the Venezuelan state. As indicated by widespread popular unrests where *el Caracazo* was but one marked instance (López-Maya, 2002; López-Maya & Lander, 2005), the Venezuelan state of the period did not rule by consent. When Chávez won the elections in 1998, he capitalized on a widespread discontent and common perception that the state was part of the problem. That is, Chávez repeated a narrative that popular films had propagated for two decades. The films had thus prepared the ideological ground for a radical political project such as Chavismo.

In so doing, the films called for a state that would be inclusive of the country's marginalized poor and not abuse the state's coercive powers. Yet the films were better at criticizing the faults of the state than communicating an alternative. Chavismo's founding principle is that it is of a different nature than the previous state. The *chavista* state is, in official rhetorical, of and for *el pueblo* whereas the old state represented an economic elite only.

In chapter four, I asked how the Venezuelan film community has received Chavismo. The films I analyzed differed in two principal manners from their earlier counterparts. Whereas 17 of the films participated in the counter-hegemonic frame of the 1980s and 1990s, there has been no dominant frame since 2000. Instead, a variety of films have become popular, including the comedies *Una abuela virgen* and *Borrón y cuenta nueva*, the anti-abortion film *13 segundos*, two historical films, the staunchly anti-*chavista* film *Secuestro express*, and three politically ambivalent films. While the 2000s have opened for a plurality of voices and perspectives, critics referred to in chapter two claim that the absence of more state-critical films is indicative of the *chavista* government's attempts to create a *chavista* cinema. However, as Farrell (2011) argues in her in-depth study of the five organizations in the National Film Platform created by the *chavista* government, the institutional make-up of the system is so complex that it is difficult for the ministry of culture or any other single actor to control what kind of films eventually are produced. Critics are right to point to policies stating a *chavista* vision for the film industry, but in cultural policy as in other policy areas the distance between stated policy aims and policy outcome is of equal importance.

My analysis found no transparently *chavista* films, it identified six films in a crisis frame, three of which were politically ambivalent. This ambivalence is the other principal difference between the films produced before and after 2000. To refer back to Entman's half full or half empty glass, the earlier films framed the glass as half full in that they explicitly presented a

political critique. Films made after Chávez assumed presidential power cast the glass as both half full and half empty. That is, they have played on a wider range of audience schemata. *Chavistas* can thus see *La hora cero* and *Cyrano Fernández* and find elements that confirm their worldview: the poor are poor because of the rich elite, and since the films are set in 1996, they portray political problems characteristic for the pre-Chávez period. However, the films can also confirm beliefs in the anti-*chavista* camp: the problems portrayed are as acute after Chávez assumed power as before him, and the films only briefly mention that they are about 1996 and not present-day Venezuela. It is not immediately clear which state the corrupt politicians and abusive security forces in each film represent, the state of the Punto Fijo democracy or the *chavista* state.

In this context, a study of media effects would have been interesting. Given that the films solicit several plausible readings, it would have been interesting to gauge which interpretation has been the dominant. However, my frame analysis allows for the conclusion that Venezuelan films since 2000 have distanced themselves from the ideals of *el nuevo cine* and that the most commonly repeated narrative is one propagating a culture of fear by confirming a perception of public space as insecure. In Venezuela today, the films suggest, most everyone is a likely victim of violent crime.

Visions of society in Mexican films

In chapter five, I argued that Mexican films from 1980 through 1999 conveyed a message that everything was in order. This was the dominant frame, 17 of the 20 films participated in it, as did two films from the 2000s. According seven films in this frame, poor people take pride in poverty and prefer to live simple lives. This way of narrating poverty was common in comedies, especially in the 1980s. Mexican films gradually moved away from a comical to a melodramatic mode of expression, and seven of the films started focused on the lives of wealthy Mexicans.

The chapter also discussed a change in the Mexican state's ideology. From legitimizing itself on the basis of the myth of the 1910 Revolution, a myth the Golden Age had been instrumental in creating and sustaining, the state embraced neoliberal ideology in concordance with its neoliberal economic politics. The shift to melodramatic portrayals of wealthy Mexicans supported the new ideological wrapping of the Mexican state, in particular by propagating individualism and suggesting that the American dream is attainable for all Mexicans.

Chapter six turned to Mexican films after the trend-setting success of *Amores perros* in 2000. It is as if the Mexican film industry after *Amores perros*' international and domestic success realized that not only *telenovelas* in film format could become popular, but also crisis-maximizing pessimistic visions of social chaos where everyone fends for him or herself in the dog-eat-dog world that defines Mexico. Like in Venezuela, however, Mexican popular films in the 2000s have shown a variety of voices and perspectives. Six of the 13 films from the decade participated in the crisis frame; two continued the neoliberal melodramatic trend from the previous decade, and five did not portray contemporary Mexico. The crisis frame, while not dominant, was still the most common way of representing Mexico. In this Mexico, things are falling apart, the police are violent, the governing political party corrupt, the rich are racist, and the poor act as an amorphous violent mass. I argued that the Mexican crisis films, as their Venezuelan counterparts, contributed to a culture of fear, and criticized the state's hegemony by showing what does not work and how the state is guilty by association, directly, or by its absence. Like in Venezuela, these films are not transparently political in the sense the *el nuevo cine* films were, but they are political by providing a critical vision of today's Mexico.

What is the relationship between the state and films?

In conclusion, Venezuelan films compared to Mexican films speak to the different nature of how their states faced the economic and political crisis of the 1980s. The similarities I noted at the outset concern the material facet of the crisis: faced with falling oil prices and a rising national debt, each state scrapped the economic protectionist model for a neoliberal one. The economic troubles continued over the next two decades, and popular perception saw the neoliberal economic model as part of the problem (Arditi, 2008: 71, citing a Latinobarómetro survey).

In this context, the political differences between Mexico and Venezuela matter for the resilience of state hegemony when faced with economic stress. The Mexican state, described by Knight as exceptional in a Latin American context for its political stability and the longitude of its hegemony, had slowly been constructed after a revolution in 1910. In contrast, the Venezuelan state that faced the troubled 1980s had been set up in 1958 after ten years of military dictatorship. Aided by an oil bonanza, the Punto Fijo democracy fared well in a regional context where military coups were common. Political scientists at the time saw Venezuela as a stable and well-functioning democracy. However, with the benefit of hindsight and the electoral victories of a radical political project such as Chavismo, the

apparent stability belied the weak underbelly of Venezuela's hegemony where the majority did not feel included.

The cultural power exercised by Venezuelan films from 1980 through 1999 was part and parcel of the political system's weak underbelly. The films contributed to the weakening of the state's hegemony and its ability to rule by consent. The apparent paradox that state-funded films criticized the state speaks to the nature of the Venezuelan state at the time. In Hall's Gramscian terminology, it shows how the state did not extend into the film sector; and that political society was at odds with civil society even when it controlled the funding.

In contrast, the Mexican case from the 1980s and 1990s was one where political society and civil society were two sides of the same coin. The privately funded films continued to show an image of a trouble-free Mexico in a context where the country's economic and political troubles increasingly became more acute. If the production companies, mainly Televisa, did so because they simply made the films that stood the best chance at making a profit or if they had a vested interest in supporting the Mexican state's waning hegemony is not beside the point, and my analysis stopped short of establishing the case that ideology of the films supported the ideology of the state. This finding is still important, because it speaks to the strength of the Mexican state form at the time.

I started my analysis by asking what the relationship between the political power of the state and the cultural power of films is. I made the case for approaching the question with a Gramscian notion of power, because his elastic concepts of hegemony and the state allow for a flexible analysis of multifaceted social phenomena. The cases of Mexico and Venezuela exemplify the complexity of interrogating the relationships between films and the state. What constitutes 'the state' in a certain historical context is not given, and a Gramscian perspective allows for theorizing the changing nature of the state. Thus, interrogating how films and the state relate to each other is not just a question of how the state in the form of cultural institutions, policies, or legal framework relates to the film sector or how films represent state institutions or state representatives. That would have implied an ahistorical conceptualization of what 'the state' is, what it means for a film to portray the state, and a relationship between the state and civil society as two ontologically separate entities. Rather, when they are separated as was the case in Venezuela in the 1980s and 1990s, the cultural power of films works to destabilize the power of the state. In the Mexican case, in contrast, the two were not separated but well integrated. What better ideological support could the state hope for than from a sector not formally part of its apparatus? In Mexico, the relationship between films and the state was thus a case of a symbiotic relationship between cultural and political power.

A Gramscian perspective further suggests an absence of hegemony in Mexico and Venezuela after 2000. The state and the film sector are now two separate entities, despite state funding of the films in both countries. Inasmuch as there is no dominant narrative in either country, films have not played a counter-hegemonic function. However, the films also suggest that neither the Mexican nor the Venezuela state can rely on hegemonic rule, or more precisely, the films do not contribute to the state's ability to rule by consent. Further analysis should compare the ideology of the popular films with dominant frames in mass media and other areas of popular culture, and ask what the images of the state's power look like when seen from other sectors of Venezuelan and Mexican civil society.

Appendix one

Table 2. The popularity of Mexican films, 1980-2010

Original title	Year of screening	Income, Mexico City and Greater Mexico AM in 1980 pesos ⁶⁹	Income, Mexico in 1980 pesos	Running time, weeks	No. of theaters	Spectators, Mexico City and Greater Mexico	Spectators, Mexico
1980-1984							
<i>OK Mr. Pancho</i>	1981	\$44 444 611		18	19		
<i>La pulquería</i>	1981	\$40 688 729					
<i>El Barrendero</i>	1982	\$70 586 520		14	14		
<i>El que no corre... vuela</i>	1982	\$43 171 086		15	20		
<i>El Mil Usos</i>	1983	\$39 513 225		15	8		
1985-1989							
<i>Coqueta</i>	1985			12	12		
<i>Tres mexicanos ardientes</i>	1987	\$8 25 074				775 580	
<i>Ni de aquí, ni de allá</i>	1988	\$19 314 899					
<i>Escápate conmigo</i>	1989		\$21 025 245				
<i>Violación</i>	1989		\$20 216 581				
1990-1994							
<i>La risa en vacaciones</i>	1990	\$55 792 142					
<i>Verano peligroso</i>	1991					1 210 522	
<i>Pelo suelto</i>	1991					1 129 083	
<i>La risa en vacaciones 2</i>	1991					1 447 184	
<i>Como agua para chocolate</i>	1992					1 184 657	
1995-1999							
<i>Salón México</i>	1996					299 268	
<i>Cilantro y perejil</i>	1997					364 539	
<i>La primera noche</i>	1998					439 584	
<i>Sexo, pudor y lágrimas</i>	1999						5 326 378
<i>Las delicias</i>	1999						785 000

⁶⁹ Adjusted for inflation based on data provided by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (2012). I wish to thank Yuri Kashara for assisting me in calculating the correct data.

<i>del poder</i>		
2000-2004		
<i>Amores Perros</i>	2000	3 281 000
<i>La segunda noche</i>	2000	2 237 000
<i>Y tu mamá también</i>	2001	3 528 000
<i>El crimen del Padre Amaro</i>	2002	5 238 898
<i>Amar te duele</i>	2002	2 043 457
<i>El tigre de Santa Julia</i>	2002	2 246 304
2005-2010		
<i>KM 31</i>	2005	3 218 645
<i>Una película de huevos</i>	2006	3 994 616
<i>Rudo y Cursi</i>	2008	3 019 294
<i>La misma luna</i>	2008	2 535 869
<i>Arráncame la vida</i>	2008	2 383 227
<i>Otra película de huevos y un pollito</i>	2009	
<i>No eres tú, soy yo</i>	2010	2 908 222

Table 3. The popularity of Venezuelan films, 1980-2010

Original title	Year of screening	Spectators
1980-1984		
<i>Cangrejo</i>	1982	502 439
<i>Homicidio culposo</i>	1984	1 335 252
<i>Cangrejo 2</i>	1984	436 837
<i>Retén de Catia</i>	1984	480 619
<i>Adiós Miami</i>	1984	350 546
Average		621 138
1985-1989		
<i>Macho y hembra</i>	1985	614 522
<i>Graduación de un delincuente</i>	1985	802 238
<i>Más allá del silencio</i>	1985	830 966
<i>Manon</i>	1986	912 112
<i>La generación Halley</i>	1986	758 196
<i>De mujer a mujer</i>	1986	753 333
<i>Macu: la mujer del policía</i>	1987	1 180 621
<i>Con el corazón en el mano</i>	1988	894 249
Average		843 280
1990-1994		
<i>Cuchillos de fuego</i>	1990	367 652
<i>El caso Bruzual</i>	1990	160 775
<i>Disparen a matar</i>	1991	271 635
<i>Un sueño en el abismo</i>	1991	166 150
<i>Roraima</i>	1993	140 023
Average		221 247
1995-1999		
<i>Sicario</i>	1995	458 856
<i>Salserín</i>	1997	546 356
<i>Muchacho solitario</i>	1998	414 904
<i>Amaneció de golpe</i>	1998	173 796
<i>Huelepega: ley de la calle</i>	1999	317 560
Average		382 294
2000-2005		
<i>Caracas, amor a muerte</i>	2000	71 028
<i>Manuela Sáenz</i>	2000	311 817
<i>Borrón y cuenta nueva</i>	2002	148 731
<i>Punto y raya</i>	2004	159 718
<i>Secuestro express</i>	2005	932 530
<i>El caracazo</i>	2005	149 222
Average		295 508
2006-2010		
<i>Puras joyitas</i>	2007	358 548
<i>Una abuela virgen</i>	2007	344 404
<i>13 segundos</i>	2007	377 023
<i>Cyrano Fernández</i>	2008	243 782
<i>La hora cero</i>	2010	941 857
Average		453 123

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