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Pelo malo: Representing Symbolic Violence in the Intricacies of Venezuela's Contemporary Film Landscape

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Abstract: This article explores how Mariana Rondón's award-winning Venezuelan film *Pelo malo* (2013) reveals the inner workings of private relationships and language, representing what Bourdieu termed "symbolic violence". *Pelo malo* challenges the exponential celebratory boom in Venezuelan state-supported filmmaking as the Chávez administration turned to cinema to narrate the nation. Despite the excitement and increase in state-sponsored filmmaking and the Chávez era's nation-building discourse, *Pelo malo* exposes the limits of Chávez' imagined community in both the film's plot and its post-production trajectory.

Keywords: Venezuela – symbolic violence – national film – *Pelo malo* – imagined community

Introduction



On Tuesday April 22, 2014, seven months after winning the prestigious Concha de Oro prize at the San Sebastián Film Festival, Mariana Rondón's film *Pelo malo* [*Bad Hair*] played its third showing to a packed cinema during New York's Tribeca Film Festival. During the question and answer session following the film, Rondón explained to audiences that it was "una pequeña película" and that she was happy to see such a small movie reach so many audiences. The following November, the film returned to New York to play at The Film Forum, one of the city's most prestigious theaters. On The Film Forum's marquee below the title *Pelo malo*, read a quote by the *New York Times* calling *Pelo malo* "A little gem of a film," echoing the intimate focus of this work (Holden). While critically acclaimed internationally, Rondón's "little gem" of a film ignited a fierce controversy and even death threats in her native Venezuela.

With a close look at *Pelo Malo*, I argue that the film reveals a complex intersection of homophobia, gender, class, race and politics found in language and gestures, echoing Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, in which she states, "the personal is political" (49). The film follows the main character, Junior, who lives with

his single mother Marta and baby brother in a dark apartment in 23 de Enero, a public housing complex in Caracas. With the film's action primarily occurring within the confines of the apartment, the camera accompanies Junior as he stares in bathroom mirrors at his hated hair, or *pelo malo*, a culturally pejorative term I explore further. Each day Junior tries to tame his hair while his mother interprets his obsession as proof of his homosexuality, which she responds to with violent language and punishments.

To analyze how Rondón's film captures the overlooked and accepted violence in daily interactions, language and behavior, I use Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence." With examples of symbolic violence present throughout the film, *Pelo malo* contrasts with the euphoric, omnipresent narrative of 21st century socialism in Venezuela that enters Junior's dark apartment by way of television programming throughout the film. As Junior watches the celebratory national television programming, the film begins to reveal how the accepted norms of masculinity, beauty and heterosexuality are formed and reinforced in ways that exclude those like Junior, who are outside of that norm through language and socially accepted behaviors.

In my analysis, I contextualize Rondón's film in the midst of Venezuela's largest initiative in national filmmaking, which began in 2005 with the creation of a new film law, followed by the National Film Platform (2006) and the Villa del Cine (2006), which add to the ubiquitous messages of the Bolivarian Revolution's re-imagined community. While many Venezuelan contemporary national films re-narrate the nation through historical heroes and exultant popular stories, *Pelo malo* reveals the overlooked and quiet violence in today's Venezuela and challenges the prescribed binary relationship between good and evil often found in government-supported films and omnipresent current national discourse.

I. State, Violence, and *Pelo malo*

Since 2005, contemporary Venezuela has seen an exponential increase in films celebrating the achievements of the Bolivarian Revolution. Simultaneously behind the screen, there has been an overwhelming increase of violence in Venezuela, making Caracas in 2015 the second most violent city in the world (Seguridad, Justicia y Paz). Rondón's work embodies both the exponential increase in filmmaking and in violence in and beyond her film. During the press conference following the Concha de Oro award ceremony, when asked about the root of intolerance captured in *Pelo malo* and contemporary Venezuela, Rondón explained: "¿De quién fue la responsabilidad [por la intolerancia]? Toda de Chávez. Cuando dijo eso de que 'quien no está conmigo está contra mí' nos sentenció a esta guerra. Y Maduro sigue el mismo camino'" (García). Rondón pointed to Chávez' declaration of a strict and intolerant binary between Chávez supporters and enemies of the Revolution as a foundational piece of the widespread intolerance that she reveals in her film.

While Rondón makes the connection between violence and the exclusionary rigid narrative of the Bolivarian Revolution, her words were not taken lightly. In response to Rondón's press conference, fervent Chávez government officials and artists used the fact that Rondón received funding for *Pelo malo* from the Centro Nacional Autónoma de Cine [CNAC] to delegitimize her statements. An official note from el Sistema Bolivariano de Comunicación e Información [SiBCI] declared: "[Rondón] desconoció al Gobierno bolivariano que financia sus películas" (Lozano). This statement was followed by Tweets by Venezuelan dancer, Zhandra Rodríguez, which declared that, "Mariana Rondón es una vergüenza patria, después de que Chávez financió sus películas ahora ataca su memoria." The comments not only express a level of discontent with Rondón's criticism; but they also identify Chávez as the original benefactor of the contemporary Venezuelan film funding structure and equated receiving state funding with a commitment to uphold official discourse. These comments highlight that there is an accepted representation of contemporary Venezuela, while also demonstrating a simplistic understanding of the workings of the Venezuelan Film Platform, which have roots far beyond what "Chávez financió." Equating funding with a commitment to the Bolivarian Revolution strengthens Rondón's criticism that represented Chávez as a media messiah enforcing a rigid national and intolerant binary. Despite this binary, *Pelo malo* was made with funding from an alternative form of state funding, and presents an under-represented symbolic violence of the small, normalized violence in daily interactions and language atypical of Villa del Cine-supported Venezuelan cinema. The symbolic violence found in *Pelo malo* is often ignored in the current government-supported films, and is not factored into the previously mentioned growing homicide rate, but its destructive effects are quietly threatening.

While *Pelo malo* is unique in the type of violence that it depicts in contemporary Venezuelan film, at a closer look it is a continuation of a previous national tradition of contemplating deep societal challenges and violence through state-supported domestic cinema in the country's famous canonical works of the 1970s and 1980s. Critics such as Duno Gottberg, Miranda, Suárez, and Vázquez have explored Venezuela's golden age of state-supported filmmaking in the 1970s, which dedicated the majority of screen time to denouncing institutional and street violence in what would later become known as New Venezuelan Cinema. This movement included films such as *Los niños callan* (1970), *Cuando quiero llorar no lloro* (1973), and *Soy un delincuente* (1976), among others. As a result of the national film funding, in 1976, the year *Soy un delincuente* was released, there were only six domestic films released in Venezuela (Periodo referencial). From 1976-2005, there were two state institutions to support filmmaking, the Cinemateca Nacional (1966) and the Centro Nacional Autónoma de Cinematografía [CNAC] (1993) that survived until 2005, when Chávez announced a revival of state supported filmmaking thereby creating the largest film investment in Venezuelan history and an aggressive film law.

Chávez' return to an investment in filmmaking in 2005 came immediately after

the release of a highly popular film, *Secuestro Express* (2005), which challenged the rigid binary that Rondón referenced. Despite being denounced by the government, the privately funded and violent *Secuestro* quickly became the highest grossing Venezuelan film of all time.¹ While criticized by the government with a successful attempt to censor the film from the Oscars competition, Venezuelans on both sides of societal divides flocked to see the controversial *Secuestro*'s urban kidnapping story of uncontrolled street violence, extensive military and police corruption, and deep class division in contemporary Caracas. Consequently, three months after *Secuestro*'s release, the government announced the revised national film law on October 26, 2005, to increase domestic film production and distribution, and to ensure screen time quotas for nationally supported film in both commercial and public cinemas. Following the film law, the government created additional film institutions, the national production company Villa del Cine (2006) and state distribution company Amazonia Films (2006). In 2006 Chávez publicized the film initiative and the national production company Villa del Cine on his television show *Aló Presidente*, hearkening Bolívar to further contextualize the importance of the revival of Venezuelan filmmaking. He explained his vision: "Venezuelan film will be for the world, as Bolívar said, 'artillery of thought'-artillery of our culture, artillery of our essence" (*Aló Presidente*). Chávez connected Bolívar to the national film industry while also echoing Benedict Anderson's seminal work on "Imagined Communities." Similar to Anderson's study of print journalism, film allows the repetition and wide distribution of common themes and discourses regarding the nation, rooted in this case, in twenty-first century socialism, omnipresent media, and in the form of film.

Since the investment in film, there were 50 national releases of domestic films in 2014 alone, marking the highest number of film releases in Venezuelan cinema history. Despite the impressive increase in film, the types of films that Villa del Cine produces are not films revealing symbolic violence like *Pelo malo*, nor physical violence found in *Secuestro Express*. Instead, the government supported "artillery of thought" films are often biopics celebrating past national heroes, from *Miranda Regresa* (2007), which chronicles the life of Francisco de Miranda, and the continent's most expensive film *Libertador* (2013), based on the life of Bolívar.² The Villa has also supported films revisiting key historical moments, such as the history of Venezuela's petroleum business in *Venezuelan Petroleum Company* (2007), *Víctimas de la democracia* (2007), which linked the understudied guerrilla movement of the 1960s with Chávez's Fifth Republic and Bolivarian Revolution. Many of the state-sponsored Villa films often reinforce a strict binary between good Chavismo and evil Opposition with limited space in between, as well as overtly connecting the original struggles of the founding of Venezuela with Chavista narratives, which echo Rondón's criticism of Chávez during her comments at

¹ See both Duno Gottberg and Vázquez for more analysis on *Secuestro Express* and the ensuing controversy.

² For more analysis on the types of films the Villa del Cine produces see Valladares.

the San Sebastián Film Festival. This film investment in literally narrating the nation includes a level of “memory and forgetting” or “a systematic historiographical campaign deployed by the state” (Anderson 201). One of the primary exclusions from these large budget, state approved Venezuelan films is contemporary violence in its diverse forms—structural, physical and symbolic.

While Villa films often are equated with national production in general, and despite the reactions to Rondón’s films, Chávez did not disassemble the pre-existing film institutions such as the Cinemateca Nacional (1966) and the Centro Nacional Autónoma de Cinematografía [CNAC] (1993). For *Pelo malo*, Rondón benefited from the combination of old and new national institutions with funding from the CNAC, an organization that has resisted much of the government influence and is funded through a hybrid private funding structure with public cinema taxes to maintain its budget. The CNAC holds an open call for scripts and filmmakers to receive film funding, and has a different committee from the Villa’s to determine which projects receive funding. Rondón applied to the CNAC and received support for *Pelo malo*’s budget. The alternative, older CNAC is not one of the institutions that Chávez celebrated repeatedly on his weekly *Aló Presidente* show, as he did with the government-aligned Villa. Instead, the ensuing personalized controversy over *Pelo malo*’s funding reflects the symbolic violence depicted in the film itself. The CNAC does not adhere to the accepted binary of pro-government and anti-government films and faces an unsure future in the Venezuelan film landscape as the organizations continue to face restructuring. With its questionable future, the CNAC, and the funding realities of this film, exemplify Rondón’s criticism of the Chávez-promoted rigid social binary in contemporary Venezuela, which left limited room beyond its prescribed narrative.

II. “Symbolic violence”

Despite the boom of celebratory nationally funded heroic films since 2005, *Pelo malo* explores violence in the private home, personal interactions, and constructions of gender. In doing so, the film reveals what Bourdieu has coined as “Symbolic violence” which he describes as a:

gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims’, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition..., recognition, or even feeling...the logic of domination exerted in the name of a symbolic principle known and recognized both by the dominant and by the dominated. (2-3)

The power and threat of Bourdieu’s concept of a “gentle violence” is that it remains undetected and is passively accepted as the ‘norm’, often times through language and socially accepted behavior. This symbolic violence is in direct dialogue with the grand

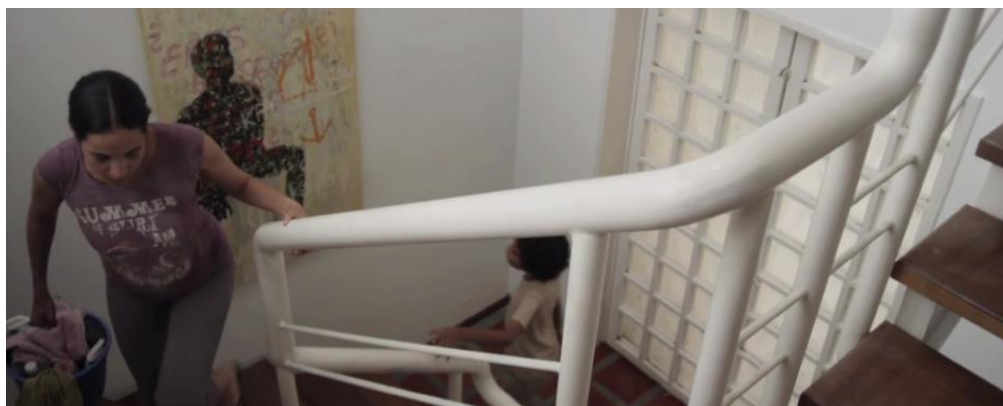
narrative of the Bolivarian Revolution in contemporary Venezuela throughout the film as each of *Pelo malo*'s characters watches television programming, national news, and beauty contests. The carefully placed camera reveals the violence of these narratives on the minds and bodies of the protagonist Junior and his only friend, *La Niña*.

Pelo malo immediately sets the violence within the walls of an apartment, interactions among family members, and rigid gender definitions. In this small space, the camera exposes the damage caused by the unspoken rigid definitions of accepted behavior according to gender norms. Bourdieu refers to this as:

the paradoxical logic of masculine domination and feminine submissiveness, which can, without contradiction, be described as both spontaneous and extorted, [and] cannot be understood until one takes account of the durable effects that the social order exerts on women (and men), that is to say the dispositions spontaneously attuned to that order which it imposes on them (38).

This prescriptive form of domination and submissiveness is both silently pervasive while also violent in this intimate film riddled with tension. The mother, Marta, demands that her son, Junior, assume the rigid trappings of a heterosexual 'proper' Venezuelan male, albeit silently.

In order to reveal the quietly and accepted violence the characters will face, the camera situates the "small" focus of the film inside the walls of the domestic space by connecting the private with the underrepresented forms of contemporary violence. The film begins with Marta and her son Junior climbing winding stairs inside a pristine white space with a piece of art of an unidentified black body enveloped by whiteness hanging on the wall.



This opening image summarizes the story. With the unidentified black body serving as a piece of art on the wall amidst the winding white bars and gates on the stairs and

windows, the film will problematize the rigid definitions of both race and gender that become a type of daily prison for the protagonist Junior, as well as for his mother Marta. The prison the film reveals is a complex mixture of heterosexual machismo and nationalism with roots in white European notions of beauty in seemingly harmless behavior and television shows.

Dressed simply in informal clothing, the two characters are not in their home. Instead, the mother Marta is cleaning someone's house, and her son Junior accompanies her due to a lack of childcare. While Marta works on the master bedroom, she leaves Junior in the bathroom giving him clear instructions to wipe down the tub while she reminds him to not get his clothes wet. Attempting to wash the bathtub, he unintentionally gets his clothes wet and decides to strip down to clean the bathtub. Filling the Jacuzzi with water, he climbs in to clean it, but instead, goes underwater to hold his breath. The off-camera female voice of the owner of the house finds Junior under water and irately yells to Marta "el niño está en mi Jacuzzi." "El niño," similar to the non-descript black body adorning the walls of the stark home, remains unidentified. He is not a subject and the annoyed voice off-camera does not directly address Junior.



Marta responds saying that "el niño me está ayudando" taking him out of the Jacuzzi, wrapping him in a towel, visibly angry with her son. Marta repeats the unidentified way that the wealthy owner of the home refers to her son, instead of calling him by name or letting him explain himself.

This opening sequence and tense exchange between the characters set the reoccurring elements that throughout the film point to symbolic violence. Marta will repeat learned forms of denying Junior a voice and individuality to please an invisible (in this case off-camera), yet present power whether it is her boss, social rules, or her learned definition of a 'proper' Venezuelan male. The denial of Junior's voice is not

necessarily an overt threat, but rather a passive one that will become exacerbated throughout the film. This denial will reoccur in the bathroom, repeatedly serving as the space associated with symbolic violence in the film. In different bathrooms throughout the narrative, Junior will confront his hated hair staring at himself into various mirrors. As the plot unfolds, Junior secretly uses an array of products to straighten his hair, from mayonnaise to hairdryers. During these mirror scenes the audience comes in contact with Junior's gaze as he fights his hair, making the connection with the title of the film.



The title alludes to the first battle between Junior and his hair, echoing the colloquial and pejorative term used to discuss hair of Afro-Latin descent: “bad hair”. However, the title has an additional meaning beyond serving as an entrance into socially accepted notions of beauty and worth that are rooted in racism and randomness.³ This alternative reading of ‘pelo malo’ will come into focus as the story unfolds. For Junior’s mother, the reason why Junior’s hair is ‘bad’ is that his obsession with his hair exposes the possibility that Junior could be gay, a reality far worse for Marta than living in the slums of Caracas, or her lack of employment.

Throughout the film, Junior’s hair becomes a point of conflict between racially conceived notions of beauty and gender assigned roles in a rigid binary, yet neither racism nor homophobia is explicitly discussed in the film. Instead racism and homophobia linger in the air and shape the story, remaining invisible. The invisible and accepted racism and homophobia, coupled with national heroic narratives that will appear later on in the film, lead to concrete violent acts of silencing, or erasing characters, similar to the denial of Junior’s voice in the opening scenes. When Marta catches him attempting to straighten his hair in the many bathroom scenes, she

³ For extensive analysis of the randomness in these associations see Harry Hoetink’s theory of “Somatic Norm Image”.

repeatedly punishes him, hits him, and refuses to talk with him. Junior's obsession with straightening his hair highlights her fear that he is breaking with the role of the Venezuelan macho, which she mentions only once in the film—in private to her doctor.

In the privacy of the bathroom, Junior comes in contact with much larger overarching messages of homophobia, racism, and self-hatred omnipresent in the arbitrary yet rigid notions of accepted normalcy. Bourdieu refers to these rigid notions as “the paradox of doxa”, in which doxa represents how “the most intolerable conditions of existence can so often be perceived as acceptable and even natural” (1). This type of violence is not factored into homicide rates or national statistics, as captured in previous overtly violent blockbuster films such as *Secuestro Express*; but it is an accepted and silent ‘norm’ that continues to wreak havoc on contemporary society.

III. The Television as Bridge between Private and Public Spheres

The personal focus of the film raises the question of how such symbolic violence or accepted forms of doxa enter Junior's intimate world. Despite the private domestic establishing shots and the bathroom as the first zone of conflict, Junior is not divorced from more public spaces in contemporary Caracas. Connecting the private with the public, the television programming and news will serve as both teacher and narrator of said doxa throughout the film.

To document this process of teaching this doxa, the camera catches images of each of the characters watching television either together or alone. The audience accompanies the programming as a fly-on-the-wall, witnessing the characters passively watching television. The programming shows the harsh realities that the current media sends and one way that these messages reach the private lives of the characters.

While transmitting and reinforcing the national narrative and a constant stream of national terms to its audience – solidarity, beauty, glory, and a collective voice – the television also serves as the secondary narrator of the film firmly rooting the story in a particular time in Venezuelan history. The use of the television in this film, echoes Venezuelan anthropologist and cultural critic, Fernando Coronil and his 2007 analysis of the use of words in the Bolivarian Revolution in which he wrote, “in the case of Chávez, words are [an] indispensable...constant narrative to give meanings to all that happens...it is not just that words are produced as part of the revolution, but that words produce the revolution” (Coronil “What's Left of Chávez?”). Coronil highlights language as a protagonist in the Chávez era that shapes the revolution itself instead of documents it. Rondón captures this abundance of words in Chavismo and reveals the gap between the television programs' celebratory rhetoric of Chavismo, Venezuelan national identity and Junior's daily life.

The television's omnipresence reminds the audience of how socially accepted forms of symbolic violence and doxa reach characters such as Junior and *La Niña*. In

doing so the camera shows the quietly violent, contemporary process of re-imagining and narrating the Venezuelan nation through the distorted social mirror.

In a key scene Junior sits with his only friend, *La Niña*, on the sofa of his apartment mesmerized by the *Miss Venezuela* program.



The overweight young *La Niña*, who also lives in the 23 de Enero complex, excitedly sings along with the theme song: “Hoy es la fiesta de la belleza, todas podíamos ganar, tú, yo, ella, todas podíamos ganar.”



The lyrics of this seemingly innocent song establish a collective, while also exclusionary, Venezuelan identity. The song’s chorus uses the first person plural form of the verb “poder” creating a collective voice where each of the audience members watching the competition, has the possibility of someday becoming Miss Venezuela. This façade of

inclusion makes a link between the beauty contest and national identity. Using the idea of a collective shared identity as a tool, Anderson discusses how the nation is produced even in the remotest of areas (6). Reflecting this image of communion, *La Niña* excitedly sings along with the program, yet Junior sits in silence watching the show. Upon closer examination, the lyrics using the word “todas” in the refrain highlight that this national obsession with beauty is expected of Venezuelan women, excluding Venezuelan men, or transgender people. Barraged by the obsession with aesthetics, the accepted doxa will make Junior’s interest in aesthetics ‘abnormal’ as a Venezuelan male.

Venezuela’s complex and problematic national obsession with the Miss Venezuela and Miss Universe beauty contests have been the topic of exploration for filmmakers and cultural critics such as Bello, Coronil and Nichols. Through these explorations of the role of beauty in Venezuelan society and politics⁴, the focus is on Venezuelan women. In *Pelo malo*, however, we see that the contests not only value a white, European definition of beauty, but also make this obsession a ‘natural’ one for Venezuelan women while excluding others.

In the next scene the camera will capture the internalization of the television’s messages and the rigid rules on gender and beauty. Junior and *La Niña* head to a makeshift photography studio to have their school portraits taken to start the new academic year. The photographer and his studio consist of a rundown space, and an inexpensive flip cell phone camera with two special background options beyond the basic blue that include: 1) the Miss Venezuela crowning ceremony for the young girls; and 2) a camouflage military background for the young boys.

Both Junior and *La Niña* explain how they want to be represented:

La Niña: Yo quiero una foto de Miss.

Fotógrafo: Para las más bonitas tienes que traer más dinero, y te pongo esta corona y el fondo de la computadora--vas a aparecer como la Miss Venezuela.

Despite the gripping poverty in which she lives, *La Niña* will ask her struggling mother for the extra money for the picture background.

⁴ See Bello for more on the relationship between beauty, and politics in Venezuela.



In this context, Miss Venezuela is not only a nationally and internationally applauded title; it has also proven a way for women to gain social and political mobility.⁵ If Miss Venezuela is a path for upward mobility for young women, a career in the military has proven a similar path towards success and visibility for young men, as with the celebrated military career of Hugo Chávez.⁶ Chávez coming from a humble background in the llano of Venezuela rising through the ranks of the Venezuelan military serves as a Venezuelan self-made man narrative during the fourteen years of the Chávez led government. Chávez, therefore, is not only a political leader but also a symbol of the self-made Venezuelan man.

After assigning the Miss Venezuela background to *La Niña*, the photographer turns to show Junior a picture of a boy dressed as a soldier with a red beret, similar to a young version of Chávez and explains:

Fotógrafo: La tuya es de teniente coronel. Vas a ser igualito a éste.

Junior: Yo me voy a tomar la foto vestido de cantante con el pelo liso.

The photographer advises Junior to take his picture with the typical portrait background for young boys with a military tank, dressed in camouflage while wearing the Bolivarian Revolution's symbolic bright red beret.

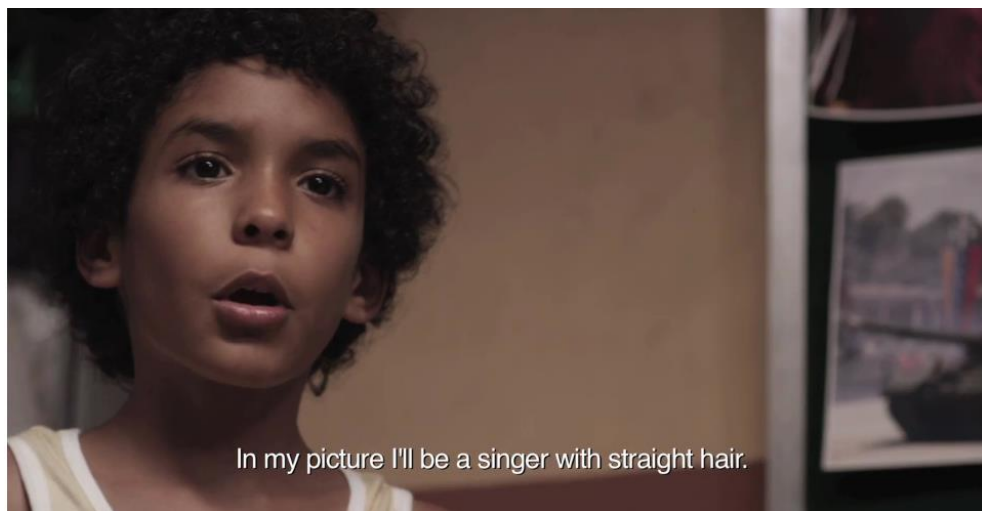
⁵ See Bello for more on the relationship between beauty, and politics in Venezuela.

⁶ See Coronil for more analysis on Chávez's rise to power.



The photographer is shocked by Junior's desire to be represented as a television singer with straight hair, revealing an assumed normalcy in gender roles and representation.

While Junior further explains the picture he has in mind dressed as a television singer with straight hair, he shares the screen with a military tank with the Venezuelan flag, whose gun is pointing towards Junior's head, forewarning the end of the film.



Junior's dream of looking like a straight-haired singer will need to die in order to remain in his apartment, his family and the public school.

Both Junior and *La Niña* want to match images they have seen on television, yet their families react differently towards their interest in their school portraits. *La Niña's* mother works extra hours to earn money for her Miss Venezuela photograph. In

contrast, Junior's mother, fearing that he is gay, reacts violently towards him each time he tells her about wanting to straighten his hair for the school portrait and drags him twice to the doctor's office to 'cure' him. This scene explicitly highlights a double standard for an obsession with appearances, which also includes strict ideas of sexuality and gender norms. *La Niña's* obsession is considered normal, while Junior clearly breaks with acceptable male behavior. While the television has a role in teaching and reinforcing these gendered roles, Junior's mother, Marta, is ultimately the gender police in her house. In his analysis of *Pelo malo*, Ribeiro Barreto writes "Marta é a própria encarnação do controle social no seio doméstico, vigiando, condenando e corrigindo cada gesto, opinião ou atitude de Junior em dissonância com o que seria considerado 'normal'" (6). She punishes Junior for his obsession with his school picture, his hair, his appearances and any other worry beyond the 'norm'.

While Marta's process of reinforcing a definition of a 'normal' man is oppressive and leads often to punishment, Junior is not completely a victim. Instead, unlike the aggressor/victim binaries represented in *Secuestro Express*, Junior perpetuates the micro-violent acts in various moments in the film. He repeats this learned hurtful treatment in his "friendship" with *La Niña*. In one scene, as they cross from the 23 de Enero courtyard to the makeshift photography studio, *La Niña* explains that she is afraid of rape crossing the courtyard. Junior responds that she is too fat to be raped. He later makes fun of her as she dreams of being the next Miss Venezuela while she brushes her Barbie's long blonde hair. Junior's comments repeat a learned correlation between attraction and weight for women, while also the dangerous assumption of the female body provoking rape or violence. Both of these interpretations highlight the ways that Junior takes part in reinforcing the learned symbolic violence even in his relationships with one of his few allies in the film.

While the television throughout the film teaches and reinforces a national obsession with aesthetics, the television also serves to place Junior's story in a specific time in contemporary Venezuelan history. The plot occurs during Chavez' chemotherapy treatments in 2011 in the midst of a bombardment of national messages in attempts to keep the Bolivarian Revolution alive despite an ill and struggling leader.



In two scenes, Junior and his mother watch actual footage from Venezuelan news of Chávez supporters in front of Venezuela's presidential palace, Miraflores, shaving their heads in solidarity with Chávez during his chemotherapy treatments. The film's audience simultaneously watches the footage with Marta and Junior and witnesses the mother-son dynamic.



This news footage is of Chávez supporters on August 20, 2011, showing their solidarity with the president during an event called the “Oración ecuménica de sanación y acción de gracias.” The supporters sit for their haircuts in the street in front of Miraflores, the presidential palace, and speak of the president as if he were a sacred holy leader in interviews with hovering reporters. This quasi-sacred offering of the Chávez supporters’ hair further complicates the many references to the title of the film in an unresolved

tension between hair as a symbol of racism, homophobia and, in this scene, a form of political fanaticism or an offering to aid Chávez in his fight against cancer. The hair is “bad” as it represents illness-and the Chávez supporters offer their hair in support and to resemble their fearless and beloved leader. As such, even the process of a haircut becomes politicized in this hyper-mediatic and overly narrated nation. The scene links daily processes with the accepted, if not celebrated divorce, between either Chavismo or the Opposition, further echoing that the “personal is political” (Beauvoir 49).

While Marta and Junior watch the television, neither of the characters reacts to the fanaticism of the “Oración ecuménica.” Instead, they silently listen to the eulogies and sacred language used to refer to Chávez as a messiah. The camera zooms in on the face of a participant linking the mundane act of cutting one’s hair with sacrificial language in support of a just cause. The news and television programs remind the characters of the accepted normal, the sacred, and ultimately the national while the camera cuts to show the sacrificial barber wearing a red t-shirt with the faces of the new trinity: Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and Hugo Chávez as he shaves the heads of Chavistas. This is a process that both includes while it excludes a calcified importance on appearances: beauty for women, military power for men, and a fanatic following of a messiah-like leader.

Coupled with his obsession with his hair, Marta notices Junior gazing at the young man that runs the small shop in the 23 de Enero housing complex as the shopkeeper watches television waiting for customers. Fearing that Junior is gay, Marta repeatedly takes him to the doctor to ‘fix’ him. She asks the doctor on her second visit with Junior:

Marta: Yo no lo toqué cuando era chiquito. Yo quiero saber ¿si es por eso es raro?

Doctor: ¿Raro cómo?

Marta: Marico...

She states the word as if it were the ultimate failure in the midst of her world of poverty, unemployment, and abuses of power. The doctor disregards her reading of her son as “raro,” and suggests that she find a strong male boyfriend so that Junior can see that a male and a woman can have a healthy relationship. The doctor softens her fear of her son’s ‘sickness’ or as Ribeiro Barreto explains “o profissional termina por legitimar a homofobia da mulher que, de modo inusitado e com o objetivo de ‘curá-lo” (Ribeiro Barreto 6). Given the doctor’s reaction it is clear that Marta is not the only character in this film condoning homophobia. This is the only scene in which Marta explicitly voices her fear that her son is gay, reframing the pejorative and racial title of the film *Pelo malo* one more time. For Marta, Junior’s hair is ‘bad’ because it embodies his possible homosexuality and is a continual reminder that Junior does not fall within what is accepted as “normal.”

The film concludes with Junior's first day of school. Marta brings a bag into the kitchen packing all of Junior's belongings to send him permanently to live at his grandmother's house as a way to threaten Junior and give him an ultimatum. Upon seeing the bag, Junior panics, begging: "¿Y ¿si me corto el pelo me puedo quedar?" She places an electric shaver on the kitchen table, explaining either he cuts his hair or he leaves to live with his grandmother. Marta's behavior in this scene is the final form of symbolic violence.



In a moment of desperation, he reluctantly shaves his hair off in the dark kitchen as the camera captures his shadowed profile. This scene is in stark contrast with the many images of Junior's head-on gazes below the bright lights of bathroom mirrors attempting to style, and straighten his hated hair. In this scene, he gets rid of his hair without looking at himself. The camera registers Junior's dark profile, enveloped by whiteness while his individual features become hidden. While Junior shaves his unique hair, he begins to resemble the unidentified anonymous black body painting adorning the wall surrounded by whiteness in the establishing shot of the film. In this way he is no longer an individual and instead conforms to a conventional definition of his identity, yet another example of symbolic violence.

The camera cuts from Junior's obligatory haircut to the next scene of a bird's eye view of the courtyard of the 23 de Enero housing complex. The camera zooms in on the courtyard while young primary school children line up in neat rows dressed in tidy uniforms for their first day of school beside the hovering 23 de Enero complex. These students at first appear miniscule in comparison with the towering structures, which remind the audience of overwhelming poverty as the camera zooms in on their faces. The young students in matching uniforms sing the Venezuelan national anthem.

As the camera pans, we see that Junior, with his shaved head, is the only student not singing.



Without his unique hair and clothing in preparation for his school picture, he has outwardly become one of the other students. He stares blankly forward as if he has lost everything while the students sing “Gloria al Bravo Pueblo.” In the national anthem, similar to the lyrics of the *Miss Venezuela* theme song, the audience sees that Junior does not fit into the collective, national narrative of heroism and beauty. In order to fit into the public school, he is forced to shave his head, don a uniform that denies how he wants to be seen, and lose his voice.

Conclusion

In this intimate film, the audience witnesses a level of symbolic violence that remains outside of Venezuela’s homicide statistics as well as beyond the exponential increase of euphoric heroic government-supported films. *Pelo malo* captures a violence located in the home, in relationships, words, gestures, and everyday messages on the television rooted in a contemporary Venezuelan hyper-politicized context. While the film portrays the intimate and personal, these characters are connected with national messages through the omnipresent media, behaviors, speech, relationships, and aesthetics affecting every aspect of their lives. The effects of a discourse of conformity, power, and fanaticism leave no character untouched from its grips; rather it shows the violence of creating and sustaining the imagined community and rigid definitions of the gender roles all for the ‘health’ of the nation and for the “Gloria al Bravo Pueblo.”

Similar to Junior, the film itself struggles to protect a place in the socially accepted formula for state-funded cinema, which has resulted in threats of physical violence for showing holes in the euphoria of Venezuela’s contemporary narrative. As

official voices denounced Rondón's comments for criticizing Chávez after "he financed her film", we see the doxa, the indoctrination, that shapes and harms the private life of young Junior. This doxa discourse also challenges an accepted form of national memory and forgetting in the current Venezuelan film landscape.

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