

# THE PRESENT AND FUTURE DYSTOPIAS OF *NUEVO ORDEN* AND *MEDIDA PROVISÓRIA*

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Giovana (Renata de Lélis) endures life in lockdown in Iuli Gerbase's pandemic drama *A nuvem rosa*.

Courtesy of Prana Filmes.

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I wrote the script some years ago, and we shot the film in 2019. But since then, many scenes that had a touch of sci-fi now became our reality.<sup>1</sup>

—Iuli Gerbase

**It's understandable that Brazilian** filmmaker Iuli Gerbase felt the need to voice this disclaimer when talking about her feature-film debut ahead of its screening at the virtual

Sundance Film Festival. *A nuvem rosa* (*The Pink Cloud*, 2021), after all, dramatizes what happens when a toxic gas (the titular “cloud”) makes it impossible for anyone to go outside, forcing a necessary public-health emergency where everyone is ordered to stay indoors lest they succumb to sudden death. In COVID parlance, the film is about the effects of long-term lockdown on a pair of strangers who are forced to cohabitate in close quarters for what turns out to be years on end.

First dreamed up as a sci-fi allegory about freedom, intimacy, and privacy that takes place in an increasingly claustrophobic duplex apartment, Gerbase’s drama hit a little too close to home in January 2021. Many of those watching were doing so from the comfort of their own living rooms during a worldwide pandemic that had forced filmmakers all over the world to shelter in place far longer than many could have ever anticipated. *A nuvem rosa*’s vision of a dystopian near future filled with at-home workouts and remote workplaces wasn’t, as it turns out, too distant from the world in which it was screening or streaming.

On its own, Gerbase’s prescient take on the real-life present might have felt like an uncanny coincidence, an instance where life imitating art was nothing more than slightly disorienting. Yet to look around and take note of the dystopias that Latin American filmmakers have been sketching in the past few years is to see an uncanny collection of near-distant futures that, despite subtle sci-fi touches, feel more than ever like tweaked visions of already harrowing presents. Gerbase is hardly alone in diagnosing an impending illness or attack or violence. There’s Julio Hernández Cordón’s carnage-heavy thriller, *Cómprame un revólver* (*Buy Me a Gun*, 2018) and Juliano Dornelles and Kleber Mendonça Filho’s brutal neo-Western, *Bacurau* (2019); the bureaucratic nightmare dreamed up in Gabriel Mascaro’s *Divino amor* (*Divine Love*, 2019), and even the wry-humored pandemic dramedy of Ana Katz’s *El perro que no calla* (*The Dog Who Wouldn’t Be Quiet*, 2021). The trend is clear.

If Latin American filmmakers don’t need to look too far afield to construct plausible dystopias, two new films in particular exemplify the power such a genre holds on the region’s cultural imagination. As Mexican filmmaker Michel Franco wrote in his director’s statement for his latest project, *Nuevo orden* (*New Order*, 2020), at the Venice Film Festival, “*Nuevo Orden* is a dystopian view of Mexico, but it is only slightly off from reality.”<sup>2</sup> It’s in that “slightly off from reality” space that this collection of films operates. The narco-ruled barren Mexican landscapes of *Cómprame un revólver* and the bleak Argentine vision of end-stage capitalism of *El perro que no calla* are both discomfiting portraits

of realities that, as their writer-directors suggest, need only minimal tweaking to become eerily disturbing. The absence of women in the former and the arrival of a toxic gas in the latter serve less as propulsive futuristic plot devices than as frightening but altogether mundanely painted backdrops for engaging tales about ordinary folks navigating a world that looks surprisingly familiar.

Whether wrapped in thriller trappings or in absurdist sensibilities, these filmmakers’ works reveal disparities and inequities that have become well known and accepted aspects of contemporary reality. This is the promise and premise of all dystopian visions. But it’s imperative not just to examine such dystopian world building but to question the worldview that makes such visions possible and plausible in equal measure. What systems remain intact in these speculative fictions? Which are done away with? Who remains at their center, and who populates their margins? The question isn’t merely what kinds of futures these filmmakers are portraying, but to what end, and through whose eyes.

Consider Franco’s *Nuevo orden*. His Mexico City-set thriller opens with a disorienting set of images (a woman, naked, wet and alone; a set of stairs flush with green-stained water; broken furniture being tossed into a lush yard) before alighting on a scene at a hospital. It’s there that audiences first get hints that something isn’t right. Doctors and nurses are quickly making room for various men and women who are badly hurt, their bloody red gashes clashing with their green-splattered clothes. Chaos is where Franco first places his audience, making the shift in the following scene to a lavish wedding in an affluent neighborhood (presumably walled off from such disorder) all the more welcome for the audience. The portrait Franco offers of Mexico’s 1 percent is comically accurate, with many of them waving aside the whispers of looting and rioting as inconveniences to their day rather than the preamble to a national emergency.

There is an unsparing sensibility that has been characteristic of Franco’s filmography, which includes the home-care nurse drama *Chronic* (2015) and the family melodrama *Las hijas de Abril* (*April’s Daughter*, 2017). Accordingly, *Nuevo orden* may spend quite a few scenes in such black-comedy mode, but it soon shifts gears when a group of armed rioters arrive, demanding that their moneyed hostages cough up their valuables before being summarily shot on the spot. The tableau Franco constructs here—with rich, light-skinned socialites pitted against an angry mob of darker-skinned and Indigenous workers—is an almost too blunt a way of setting up the country’s racial divide. Yet Franco’s decision

to have the film roam around the wedding and to have his audience intimately get to know (and thus arguably loathe) much of its guest list ensures that these deaths end up carrying more weight than the righteous anger that presumably drives the fed-up rioters.

By the time *Nuevo orden* zeroes in on its central figures—Marianne (Naian González Norvind), the beatific bride; Rolando (Eligio Meléndez), her former servant, whom she had selflessly left her own wedding to help out; and his nephew Cristian (Fernando Cuautle)—the muddled social politics become ever murkier. This is a portrait of a nation past the point of collapse.

Martial law soon leads to nightly curfews and neighborhood checkpoints, police in riot gear, and extrajudicial executions. Marianne is soon kidnapped by rogue agents hoping to profit from the chaos, and she is eventually disposed of when the military (having been working with her family to get her back) realizes she is a liability best dealt with by pinning her death on sweet Christian and his mother. This scapegoating merely stresses the bleak outlook Franco is sketching. There is little hope in the film's speculative version of a Mexican near future: the “new order” of the title is a mirage. Corruption and power-hungry men aren't merely the villains of the piece but the very structure of the world here depicted. A final twist makes those early images of cold-blooded rioters at the wedding feel even more insidious, a hollow (and politically manipulative) threat used by the film's plot to merely set itself in motion.

Lázaro Ramos's *Medida provisória* (*Executive Order*, 2020), like *Nuevo orden*, feels very much ripped from the headlines, a timely response to years of unrest and decades (if not centuries) of racist governance. Based on Aldri Anunciação's play *Namíbia, não!* (2011), the film is set “somewhere in the future” when the Brazilian government enacts a sinister law that sets out to deport all of the country's Afro-descendent population back to Africa. The move is first euphemistically pushed as a form of reparations, an “urgent matter” to redress the country's colonial past. Issued on behalf of a “government for a fairer country,” the decree is as laughable as it is obscene, posed as a “corrective measure for the mistake committed by the former Portuguese colony and continued by the Brazilian republic.”

Like Gerbase, Ramos found his work become all the more prescient by the time of its release: its images of police in riot gear attacking and killing Black civilians (“It's easier to collect a dead body than to send them out to another country”) resonated differently following the events of 2020 in the United States and Brazil itself. “I believe art was anticipating the direction in which the world was moving,” the actor and filmmaker shared in interviews. “I want to believe that's what happened. The original alert, first issued in 2011 [by Anunciação], is still valid today, but unfortunately, we have now experienced some of the things that take place in the film.”<sup>3</sup>

By Ramos's own estimation, the film's vision of Brazilian bureaucracy and military power being leveraged against its Afro-descendent population first reads like an



Marianne (Naian González Norvind) and Cristian (Fernando Cuautle) are attacked by rioters in Michel Franco's provocative *Nuevo orden*.

Courtesy of NEON.



Lázaro Ramos's thriller *Medida Provisória* imagines a dystopian future for Brazil grounded in the country's violent legacy.

Courtesy of Elo Company.

absurdist tragicomedy. But as the narrative unfolds, the filmmaker transforms the original play into a broader indictment of a system that would rather do away with a segment of its population than earnestly grapple with its violent legacy.

Where Franco privileged an immediacy that obscures the sociopolitical goings-on that drive his film's plot, Ramos constantly shuttles between an on-the-ground approach and a broader bird's-eye view. Audiences get to follow Antonio and André (Alfred Enoch and Seu Jorge) as they hide from the government in their apartment, all the while seeing how the Ministério de devolução (Return Ministry) is tackling its stated goal and how an underground "Afro-bunker" (formerly a slave depository, then a place where props for Carnival were stored) full of activists and survivors planning to revolt is faring. There's a historical specificity to the world building here that makes the film's thriller structure so plausible. This is a Brazil that is only "slightly off" from its real-life counterpart under Bolsonaro, and for that, all the more terrifying.

The critic Antonio Enrique González Rojas has posited these dystopias as great humanist parables, examples of Latin America's "new and resounding political cinema paving its own way by combining the hyperbolic metaphor, the code-switching of genre cinema and the reformulation of social cinema."<sup>4</sup> Yet by just comparing the endings of *Nuevo orden* and *Medida provisória*, one can see two distinct ways of deconstructing the contemporary Latin American dystopian genre: where Franco looks backward, Ramos looks forward.

The final images of *Nuevo orden* hark back to a dictatorial fanfare that's perhaps all too familiar: military leaders imperiously look on, alongside a wealthy gentry and across an organized group of captured prisoners, as three

executions by hanging are prepared. If this is indeed a warning of a coming twenty-first-century future, it is one that's been recycled from many a twentieth-century past.

Compare that finale with the ebullient closing images of *Medida provisória*. As Antonio and his girlfriend, Capitu (Taís Araújo), emerge defiantly out into the streets, joining hundreds of Black Brazilians who refuse to cower in the face of government oppression, Ramos lets his characters wrestle back a vision of utopia, however provisional, from the bleak dystopia that had surrounded them. There may be a historical looking back here (in the African-inspired ensemble sported by characters, in Elza Soares's song "O Que Se Cala" on the soundtrack, in the archival images woven into its final montage), but there is a forward-thinking movement that is hopeful.

Seen as forked visions of a future that may be imagined out of this harrowing present, these riffs on dystopian orders are emblematic of potential answers to today's pressing historical moment. Which one feels the most preferable? Rather than leave its audience with an acrid feeling of hopelessness (like the kind Franco deploys to near-numbing effect), *Medida provisória* opts for a message rooted firmly in the present the film is so carefully addressing. The ending is a dawning of a new era, a bright inverse of the one *Nuevo orden* ushers in.

As footage from contemporary protests plays across the screen, Soares's lyrics feel like a powerful call to arms: "*Minha voz, uso para dizer o que se cala,*" she sings. "*O meu país é meu lugar de fala!*" ("My voice, I use to say what isn't said. . . . My country, I'm the one who can speak of it"). There's a sense of community and advocacy here, a promise for a brighter future anchored in a lived-in history that's most visible in those marches that have become all too commonplace (and necessary) in countries all over the continent. By blending footage from an at times unbearable present with images from an ebullient imagined future, *Medida provisória* stresses how a marked break from what has been (and, in turn, an invitation to reimagine what could be) need not be the stuff of speculative fiction.

The present remains, as these films suggest, one tweak away from becoming a frightening dystopia. Still, one should approach such speculative attempts with both caution and optimism, for, more than just urgent warnings, they may prove to be templates. A dystopian film need not function solely as a funhouse mirror where society's most damaging ills are distorted for entertainment purposes. It can also be a window into a new paradigm, with sci-fi touches offered as potential tools to illuminate ways to carve newer, better futures.

## Notes

1. “Meet the Artist: Iuli Gerbase on THE PINK CLOUD,” *Sundance Institute YouTube*, March 8, 2021, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPtUVC36o1Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPtUVC36o1Y).
2. La Biennale di Venezia, “*Nuevo Orden*, Venezia 77 Competition,” [www.labiennale.org/en/cinema/2020/venezia-77-competition/nuevo-orden](http://www.labiennale.org/en/cinema/2020/venezia-77-competition/nuevo-orden).
3. Rafaela Sales Ross, “SXSW INTERVIEW: ‘Executive Order’ Director Lázaro Ramos,” *Jumpcut Online*, [https://](https://jumpcutonline.co.uk/2021/03/17/sxsw-interview-executive-order-director-lazaro-ramos/)
4. Antonio Enrique González Rojas, “Aproximaciones a las distopías del cine latinoamericano contemporáneo: ¡Aquí se venden revólveres!,” *Rialta*, February 5, 2021, <https://rialta.org/aproximaciones-a-las-distopias-del-cine-latinoamericano/>. The original reads: “Así, un nuevo y rotundo cine político se abre paso desde la metáfora hiperbólica, la mixtura de códigos del cine de género y la reformulación del cine social.”