

## *After Half a Century* (1966) and the decline of Shell as a modernizing agent in Venezuela

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**ABSTRACT:** Framed within the study of petroculture and the business cinema of the global petroleum industry, this article analyzes the representation of the modernizing impact of oil in Lagunillas (Zulia State) in the film *After Half a Century*. This film was commissioned by the Shell Company from the production company Neofilm as Shell reorganized its corporate media and discourses due to the end of oil concessions. Our research's historical-pragmatic and textual-discursive perspective encompasses the context of production, distribution, and exhibition; as well as the film's functions, topics, and textual and discursive construction. The analysis allowed us to identify continuities and ruptures in *After a Half Century* regarding a selection of films produced by Shell's Venezuelan film unit until 1965. We may interpret these findings as signs of a crisis in Shell's corporate discourses as the company faced the decline of its role as a modernizing agent in Venezuela.<sup>1</sup>

**KEYWORDS:** Venezuela; modernization; petroleum industry; cinema; film archives.

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### Después de medio siglo (1966) y el ocaso de la Shell como agente modernizador en Venezuela

**RESUMEN:** Desde el estudio de las petroculturas y del cine empresarial, este trabajo analiza la representación del impacto modernizador de la industria petrolera en la región de Lagunillas, Estado Zulia, en el filme *Después de medio siglo*. Dicho filme fue un encargo de la Compañía Shell a la productora Neofilm tras el cierre de la Unidad Fílmica Shell de Venezuela, durante la reorganización de los medios y discursos corporativos ante el inminente fin de las concesiones petroleras. El abordaje histórico-pragmático y textual-discursivo aquí propuesto abarca el contexto de producción, distribución y exhibición del filme; sus funciones; su temática y su construcción textual y discursiva. El análisis del filme permitió identificar continuidades y rupturas en relación con la producción de la unidad fílmica interna de la Shell. Estos hallazgos apuntan a una posible crisis en los discursos corporativos de la Shell ante el ocaso de su rol como agente modernizador en Venezuela.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Venezuela; modernización; industria petrolera; cine; archivos cinematográficos.

**TRANSLATION:** María Gabriela Colmenares España / Universidad Central de Venezuela

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#### HOW TO QUOTE

Colmenares, M. (2024). *After Half a Century* (1966) and the decline of Shell as a modernizing agent in Venezuela. *Culturales*, 12, e861. <https://doi.org/10.22234/recu.20241201.e861>

**RECEIVED** June 25, 2024 / **APPROBED** October 8, 2024 / **PUBLISHED** November 12, 2024

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<sup>1</sup> Research conducted with financial support from the associate researchers program of the Secretariado de Investigación y Transferencia at Universidad Católica Andrés Bello.

## Introduction

The corporate cinema of the oil industry in Venezuela portrayed the modernizing impact of this sector as an ongoing process that sought the cooperation of the petro-state, elites, and Venezuelan society to sustain its operations in the country. This representation was structured around the dichotomies of backwardness-progress, tradition-modernity, and rural-urban; it emphasized the industry's processes—exploration, drilling, extraction, transportation, and commercialization—and underscored its modernizing role through urbanization and industrialization. In Venezuela, the production of corporate films by oil companies began as an experiment in which several firms hired foreign production companies, such as Princeton Film Center and Shell Film Unit in London. This experiment led to the establishment of in-house film production units within the companies themselves, following the work of the Oil Industry Film Committee (1947-1952), which paved the way for units like the Creole Film Unit (UFC, 1952-1968) and the Shell Film Unit of Venezuela (UFSV, 1952-1965).

In the 1960s, in response to the government's policy of not granting new oil concessions after the expiration of the existing ones in the 1980s, oil companies reduced investments in Venezuela across all areas of activity. This cutback affected all media and narratives of the industry, including corporate magazines, radio and television broadcasts, books, brochures, and films. Shell and Creole shut down their film production units. Following the closure of the UFSV in 1965, Shell commissioned its corporate films from the newly established production company Neofilm, led by former UFSV employees with the company's support. The last corporate films produced by Neofilm for Shell date back to 1971. In total, Neofilm produced 33 films for Shell.

A key question is how Neofilm's corporate films for the Shell Company of Venezuela represented the modernizing impact of the industry faced with the impending end of oil concessions and the eventual departure of transnational companies like Shell and Creole. This assumes that the shift in the relationship between oil companies, the state, and Venezuelan society influenced, to some extent, the companies' public relations strategies and their constellation of media and narratives. In this research, I analyze how the

modernizing impact of the oil industry on the Lake Maracaibo region is represented in *Después de medio siglo* (1966), one of Neofilm's first corporate films for Shell Venezuela, produced and exhibited within the described context.

Although studies on oil in Venezuela have primarily focused on its economic and political dimensions, Coronil (2002), Silva-Ferrer (2013), Tinker (2009), and Colmenares (2019) have examined its social and cultural aspects. The latter two, along with González and Guilarte (1992) and Filloy (1995), have studied the media and narratives of the oil industry in Venezuela. Recently, Zazzarino (2022), approaching petro-culture from an environmental perspective, analyzes the discourse of *El Farol*, the corporate magazine of Creole Petroleum Corporation, and deconstructs it through a reading of the documentary *Pozo Muerto* (Rebolledo, 1967) to propose a counter-discourse based on the lived experiences of Lake Maracaibo's inhabitants as represented in the film.

From the perspective of film and media studies, Dahlquist and Vonderau (2021) examine the historical relationship between cinema and petro-culture, a concept that highlights how oil shaped industrial and post-industrial societies by ushering in a new era of consumption and mobility. The authors pose questions that are central to my research: how the oil industry used moving images to structure oil exploitation and promote modernization, and what historical role cinema played in informing, educating, or persuading the mass public about oil.

Dahlquist and Vonderau (2021) introduce the concept of *petrocinema* to refer to all films that depict oil as a source of energy, products, and services. This includes commercial fiction films and newsreels, as well as educational, advertising, and documentary films produced by oil companies as part of their efforts to construct an image of oil exploitation and align their corporate objectives with the cultural and social concerns of oil-producing nations. Hediger and Vonderau (2009a) propose the concept of *corporate cinema* to designate non-fiction films across various genres and subgenres—including educational, advertising, and documentary films—that industrial organizations use within their constellation of organizational practices, media, and narratives. Finally, Hediger, Hoof, and Zimmermann (2024) consolidate, diversify, and expand the study of corporate cinema initially proposed by Hediger and Vonderau (2009a).

The concept of *petrocinema* refers to films that share a common theme: oil. Thus, both *Le salaire de la peur* (Clouzot, 1953) and *Venezuela y petróleo II: sus técnicas* (Nemes, 1960) are considered petrofilms. In contrast, *corporate cinema* is a pragmatic category that examines the uses and functions of films commissioned by corporations within their specific context of production, distribution, and exhibition. My research, focused on films produced by corporations within their constellation of media and narratives, builds on Colmenares' (2019) approach and operates within the framework of *corporate cinema* in the oil industry.

Many studies on petro-culture and petrocinema focus on the relationship between oil, culture, media, and the narratives of oil companies in countries such as Iran, Kuwait, and Iraq. Damluji (2013, 2016, 2021) examines the urban imaginaries shaped in these territories by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC)—predecessor of British Petroleum—and the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO), linking the organizational practices of both corporations to the end of British colonial rule and the emergence of newly independent nations. India and Nigeria underwent their respective decolonization processes after World War II. Canjels (2021, 2024) examines Shell-BP's film production in Nigeria within the context of decolonization during the 1950s, when Shell discovered commercially viable oil fields.

Postcolonial and decolonial approaches, such as Damluji's, are relevant and productive in specific contexts like Iran, Kuwait, or Iraq. However, from my perspective, they have limited applicability to the study of oil companies' media and discourse constellations in Venezuela. From a pluralistic debate that challenges both hegemonic and homogenizing perspectives as well as counter-hegemonic, decolonial, and anti-capitalist approaches, I argue that the lens of asymmetric power relations distorts the dynamics between corporations and nations like Venezuela, which had already experienced a century of independent history by the time commercial oil exploitation took off. In Venezuela, through policies such as the 1943 oil reform and the "no more concessions" policy following the democratic transition of 1958, the state progressively gained control over oil revenues. As its power increased, the state redistributed oil rents across

Venezuelan society, which came to be structured as a rent-seeking society (Urbaneja, 2013).

From this perspective, my proposal builds upon and expands Colmenares' (2019) analysis of corporate films produced by the Oil Industry Film Committee and the film units of Creole and Shell. While the corporate films Shell commissioned from Neofilm were documented and cataloged by Filloy (1995), they have not been analyzed in detail. In this sense, this study represents a first approach to their analysis.

In this study, I approach the analysis of corporate oil industry cinema from two levels: First, the historical-pragmatic level proposed by Elsaesser (2009), Hediger and Vonderau (2009b), and Hediger, Hoof, and Zimmermann (2024), who conceptualize corporate cinema as a parasitic cinematic form that inhabits others, adapting its aesthetics and techniques according to the requirements of different communication spaces. This approach involves reconstructing the context of production, distribution, and exhibition to determine who commissioned the films, the purpose behind their commissioning, and their intended audience. It also requires identifying the functions of these films within their contexts: documenting corporate activities, employing rhetoric to secure audience cooperation, and rationalizing business operations.

Second, the textual and discursive analysis considers advances such as the study of image-sound relationships in Shell Film Unit (SFU) corporate films from London and Nigeria. Davison (2024) examines the production practices of the former and analyzes the interplay between voice, music, sound effects, and imagery in *Proud Ships* (Armitage, 1954). Canjels (2021, 2024) explores how voice and music function as elements that provide local grounding in Shell's films in Nigeria. These studies help characterize the most common uses of sound in relation to visuals in Shell's corporate films and serve as a useful reference for analyzing *Después de medio siglo*.

The analysis of corporate oil films presents a series of limitations and challenges for researchers on a global scale. As historical actors, oil companies have produced and safeguarded a vast array of media and discourses—including films, photographs, videos, printed reports, corporate magazines, and bulletins—stored in archives that, due to their origin and function, have been subject to mergers, splits, and nationalizations.

Additionally, access to these materials is controlled by the companies themselves, while in cases where the industry has been nationalized and state-run—such as in Venezuela since 1976—government intervention also plays a role in their preservation and availability. Damluji (2015, 2021) and Colmenares (2020) have addressed these challenges based on their own archival research experiences. Damluji (2021) defines such archives as collections encompassing various media formats, preserved by oil companies both online and offline, in analog or digital formats, whether cataloged or not. These archives are often incomplete or stored in a fragmented and disorganized manner. Both authors emphasize the need for researchers to document and conceptualize their experiences when working with these types of archives.

These limitations and challenges have shaped the present research. Out of 33 corporate films produced by Neofilm for Shell, I was only able to access six. Of these, only three were available in well-preserved physical formats, from which I obtained DVD copies—such is the case of *Después de medio siglo*.<sup>2</sup> The remaining three films were recorded with a digital camera from heavily deteriorated copies projected on a moviola<sup>3</sup>. There is also little documentation regarding the production of *Después de medio siglo* that would allow for a detailed reconstruction of its production, distribution, and exhibition context, aside from what has been documented by Filloy (1995).

The analysis of this film identifies both continuities and ruptures between the productions of UFSV and Neofilm regarding representations of the modernizing impact of the oil industry on Lake Maracaibo. These ruptures and continuities are interpreted in light of the imminent end of Shell's and other corporations' oil concessions in Venezuela. Below, I outline the research method.

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<sup>2</sup> Under the same conditions, I obtained DVD copies of *Los criollitos* (Vidal, 1967) and *Las industrias venezolanas de buena voluntad* (Carrera, n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> This was the case for *Los primeros frutos* (Vidal, 1967), *Por qué usar buenas semillas* (Vidal, 1967), and *La batalla de Carabobo* (Vidal, 1971).

## Method

To explore the representation of the modernizing impact of the oil industry on the eastern shore of Lake Maracaibo and understand how the “no more concessions” policy affected the media and discourse networks of the Shell Company of Venezuela, I analyze *Después de medio siglo* within the context of its production, distribution, and exhibition. This corporate film was commissioned by the Shell Company of Venezuela from the production company Neofilm after the dissolution of UFSV in 1965.

The analysis is structured around two main categories: First, modernization, understood as the set of social processes that, in the 20th century, converged to shape modernity as a continuous transformation. Some of these processes include major scientific discoveries and their impact on our understanding of the universe and our place in it, industrialization, urbanization, large-scale migrations, the rise of mass media, and the expansion of the capitalist market (Berman, 1988). Here, I adopt the perspective that modernities are multiple, plural, ambivalent, and contradictory (Eisenstadt, 2000).

Second, the oil industry as both a constituent and a driving force of modernization processes. I define it here as the global industrial activity that explores, extracts crude oil and natural gas, processes them into a wide range of products, transports, distributes, and markets them (Rosenfeld & Feng, 2011). These products include fuels, lubricants, pesticides, and plastics. In Venezuela, the industry began on April 15, 1914, on the eastern shore of Lake Maracaibo, with the blowout of a well at the Zumaque estate (Straka, 2016). Until 1975, the oil industry was controlled by transnational companies with predominantly U.S. and European capital (Tinker, 2009).

In *Después de medio siglo*, the representation of the modernizing impact of the oil industry in the Lake Maracaibo region focuses on Ciudad Ojeda and the Lagunillas oil field, including both its extraction area and its residential community.

The term *oil field* refers to the area containing active extraction wells along with other industry-related facilities, as well as the specialized human settlements established and managed by a particular oil company to house its workforce (Colmenares, 2019).

In oil fields, modernization can be represented through public services and social benefits available to company workers, which are associated with upward social mobility. Here, I consider public services to include electricity, waste collection, drainage systems, healthcare, transportation, and education. Social benefits refer to labor rights beyond wages, such as mobility expenses, severance payments, and discretionary allowances (Bueno, 2006). Wages constitute direct compensation based on the worker's position, while social benefits serve as an indirect form of remuneration independent of job rank. Their purpose is to improve workers' quality of life both within and outside the company. Social benefits include bonuses, commissaries, dining facilities, employee transportation, group life insurance, loans and savings funds, retirement supplements, and medical-hospital assistance, among others (Chiavenato, 2011). Social mobility refers to an individual's ability to move up or down the socioeconomic ladder. *Vertical social mobility* describes a shift from one social class to another, either upward or downward. For example, a worker who receives a salary increase and improved social benefits may experience upward social mobility. Upward mobility is considered a characteristic of modern or modernizing societies (Sánchez, 2012).

I approached the film through a historical-pragmatic analysis of corporate cinema as an event, encompassing two levels: historical-pragmatic and textual-discursive. At the historical-pragmatic level, I identified the corporate functions of recording, rhetoric, and rationalization (Hediger & Vonderau, 2009b). I linked these functions to the film's production and exhibition context by integrating information provided by the film itself with a review of testimonies and documents from previous studies (Fillooy, 1995). This served as a tool to determine who commissioned the film, for what purpose, and to whom it was addressed (Elsaesser, 2009).

At the textual and discursive level, I segmented the film into scenes or reading units defined by their meanings (Barthes, 1980). Based on this segmentation, I analyzed its thematic structure—that is, the interdependence of themes and subthemes underlying its deep semantic level (Roffé, 1990); the predominant modes of discourse organization in each film—narration, description, explanation, dialogue, or argumentation (Casamiglia & Tusón, 2002); and, finally, specific uses of codes and subcodes corresponding to the

expression plane of the cinematic signification system, which may be characteristic of corporate cinema (Eco, 2000).

Finally, I supplemented the analysis with references to corporate films from UFSV with similar themes, such as *Pueblo petrolero* (Nemes, 1957), *Venezuela y petróleo III: sus comunidades* (Lovera, 1960), *Vida en la comunidad I: las escuelas* (Carrera, 1964a), and *Vida en la comunidad II: la recreación* (Carrera, 1964b).

*Después de medio siglo* belongs to Neofilm's early stage, during which the production company, still in the process of internal organization, focused on completing projects that UFSV had left at various stages of production. The analyzed copy of the film—one of the few remaining from Neofilm's extensive production for Shell—was obtained on DVD in 2012 after a search in the Audiovisual Archive of the National Library and the Film Archive of Venezuela's National Cinematheque.

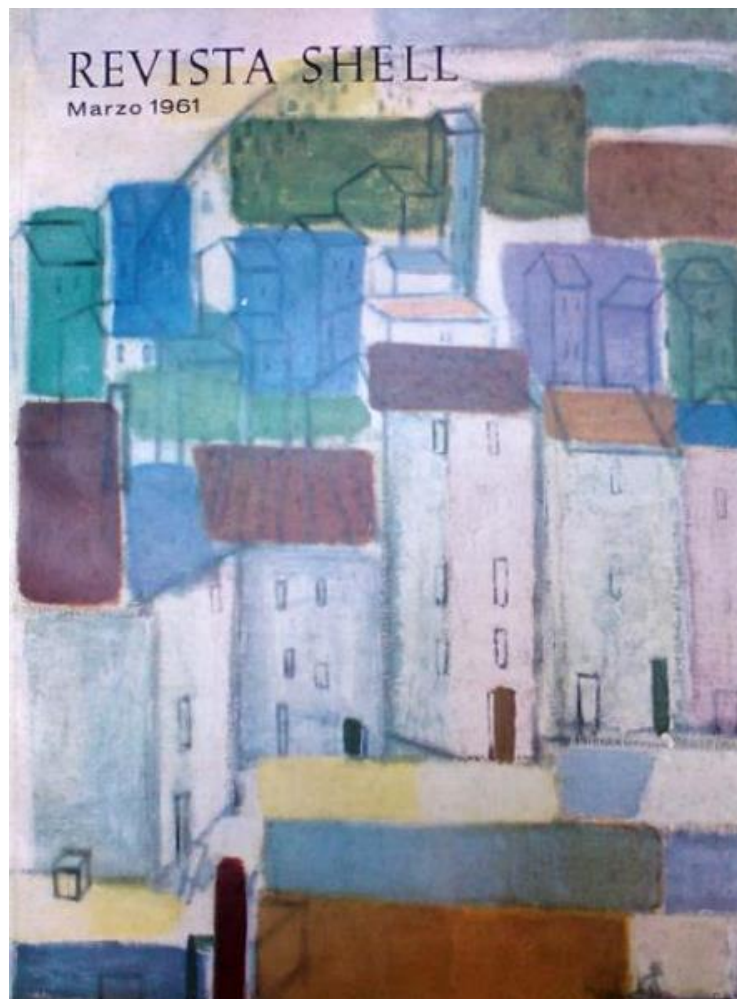
I analyzed the film in MP4 format using ATLAS.ti 9 in its restricted version. After segmenting it into narrations, I conducted an initial coding at the textual-discursive level, identifying the isotopies or semantic categories that help determine a film's content (Azuaga, 2000), the discourse organization modes, and the primary uses of codes and subcodes within the cinematic signification system. At the historical-pragmatic level, I coded the functions of the film according to its production context. After reviewing this first coding, I began grouping and merging isotopies until I arrived at three thematic axes: public services, social benefits, and upward social mobility. Below, I present the results of the analysis, divided into five sections.

### **After Half a Century: Context of Production, Distribution, and Exhibition**

Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonzo's nationalist "no more concessions" policy halted the granting of new oil concessions and the renewal of those expiring in 1983, which, according to the 1943 law, could be extended for an additional 20 years (Urbaneja, 2013). In light of this scenario and following the industrial principle of rationalization, companies ceased exploration and cut back on their investments. The media and discourse constellations of the oil companies in Venezuela lost their utility, and both Shell and Creole closed their internal corporate film production units: the former in 1965 and the latter in 1968.

In 1962, the *Shell Magazine* ceased publication (Figure 1), the photography section was closed, and an independent company, Estudios Noguera, was created to take over the production of photographic images for Shell. In 1965, when the closure of the film unit was announced, Rubén Pérez Morales managed the creation of the independent production company that would handle Shell's corporate films. The plan was to work with the UFSV teams and acquire some new ones, establish premises with a company loan to purchase land and build the headquarters. An advance from Shell would cover the initial productions and finance the new equipment (Fillooy, 1995).

**Figure 1.** *Shell Magazine*, March 1961.



**Source:** Digitized cover by the author.

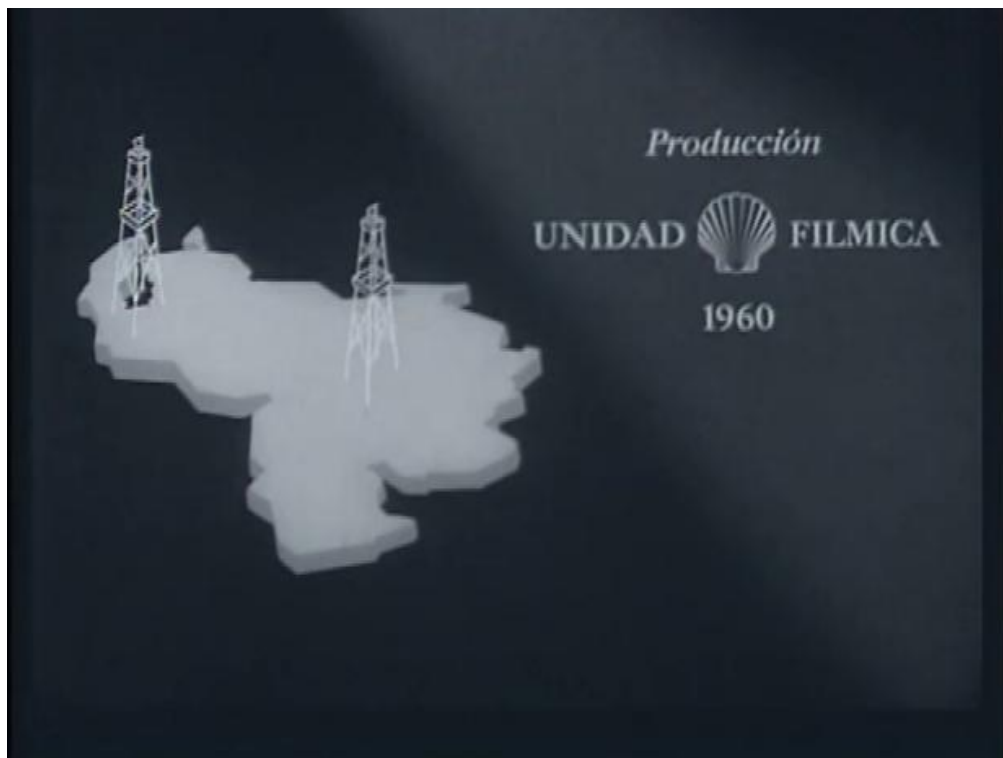
Neofilm was created by three partners from UFSV: sound engineer Julio Garbi, Guillermo Carrera, and Rafael González (Filloy, 1995). From UFSV, Giorgio Benucci moved to Neofilm as head of the sound studio, Alberto Vidal, cameraman and director of photography Giuseppe Nisoli, and Juan Jiménez also joined. According to Guillermo Carrera, Neofilm worked for Shell for three years. In the first year, production was abundant, and they completed films that had been left pending from UFSV, as well as some new projects (Filloy, 1995).

The corporate films produced by Neofilm made use of the distribution and exhibition infrastructure built by Shell since 1952. The Shell Cinematheque published a catalog of available films and stored both the UFSV films and those coming from the SFU. By 1966, Shell had three film distribution centers in Caracas, Maracaibo, and Punta Cardón. Additionally, Shell Service for the Farmer films circulated from Cagua, in the state of Aragua, and Pueblo Nuevo, in Zulia. Shell corporate films were distributed free of charge to individuals or institutions interested in them. They were premiered at events for political, economic, and cultural elites, and later shown at company facilities, with Shell operating 18 cinema rooms, most of which were located in employee clubs. Occasionally, they were also screened in commercial theaters and at the National Cinematheque (Filloy, 1995) (Figures 2 and 3).

*Después de medio siglo* fits within the theme of life in oil fields and the services, benefits, and opportunities these offer to their workforce. This theme also includes *Pueblo petrolero, Venezuela y petróleo III: sus comunidades, Vida en la comunidad I: las escuelas, and Vida en la comunidad II: la recreación* (Figures 4 and 5).

Shell's corporate films during the so-called Military Decade (1948-1958) focused on the industrial processes and the geography, history, and culture of Venezuela. The theme of life in oil communities, with one exception, is from after the establishment of a liberal democracy in 1959, guided by the social-democratic and Christian-democratic orientation of the governments of Rómulo Betancourt (1959-1964), Raúl Leoni (1964-1969), and Rafael Caldera (1969-1974). This reinforces the argument that the media and discourses of oil companies aligned, until 1975, with the policies of successive Venezuelan governments as a strategy to avoid conflicts and extend their presence in the country (Colmenares, 2019).

Figures 2 and 3. Credits of *Venezuela y petróleo III: sus comunidades* (1960).



Source: Frames captured by the author.

Figures 4 and 5. Credits from *Después de medio siglo* (1966).



Source: Frames captured by the author.

I have not found any records that establish which department of Shell commissioned Neofilm to create *Después de medio siglo*. The reason seems to have been

the 50th anniversary of the oil industry in Venezuela in 1964. The two-year difference between this date and the film's release could be due to the transition from UFSV to Neofilm. The target audience for the film was diverse. First, the Venezuelan state and society, to make them aware of Shell's legacy and its contributions to the modernization of Zulia. Second, the people of Zulia, to convince them of the positive impact of the oil industry on their lives. Third, retired oil industry workers, young workers just starting, and potential candidates for joining the oil workforce.

The main function of *Después de medio siglo* is to document the services and benefits available to the oil industry's workforce and how these promoted upward social mobility in the Lake Maracaibo region. These benefits and their impact are represented as a cycle already achieved; their continuation is indicated for the future, but the modernization driven by the oil companies is shown as a completed process.

The film presents the oil industry as the main modernizing agent that transformed the landscape, urbanized, built services, and created well-being for its employees. The documentation of these achievements seeks to gain recognition from the oil workers and Venezuelan society. Another function of the film is its rhetoric, as it aims to convince the public that the relationships with the workforce were always harmonious and that the company, willingly, provided numerous benefits to its workers, minimizing the role of unions, the state, and labor legislation. The film also functions as support for the recruitment of human talent for the company, while also aiming to preserve the achievements of cooperation with the petrostate and society, and strengthen both corporate identity and employee loyalty. Through this documentation and rhetoric, the film aims to establish Shell's legacy in Venezuela and to promote the continuity of its practices in the uncertain context of the end of oil concessions.

### **Geographical Location**

*Después de medio siglo* shows Agustín Salazar, a retired oil industry worker, leaving his home in Ciudad Ojeda to visit his former workplace and residence, the Lagunillas oil field. Along Salazar's journey, the achievements of the modernization driven by multinational companies like Shell in this area of the Bolívar District are displayed (Figure 6).

Figure 6. The Bolivar Coastal Field in 1965.



Source: Shell Company of Venezuela (1966).

The Bolivar District of the eastern coast of Lake Maracaibo was an area of low plains and natural lagoons (Distrito Bolivar, 2021). In 1926, significant oil reserves were discovered in this region, and thus began the history of the Costanero Bolivar field, which stretches over more than 100 kilometers along the eastern coast of the lake. In 1935, Shell drilled the first well in Tía Juana, north of the then palafitic town of Lagunillas. This field became the most important in the country (Cilento, 2005).

The commercial oil exploitation of this region began in Lagunillas. The demand for housing led to the construction of residential fields in Lagunillas, Tía Juana, La Salina, Bachaquero, and other sites. These camps, autonomous and independent from the nearby towns, were the first planned urban settlements in Venezuela. Each company built and

managed its own residential camps. Ciudad Ojeda, for its part, was born as an oil city. The government of Eleazar López Contreras (1936-1943) decreed its construction in 1937, and by the end of 1939, it was officially populated. Its growth in the following decades was closely linked to the impact of the oil industry on the eastern coast of the lake (González, 2013). By 1966, the year *Después de medio siglo* premiered, the Bolívar District consisted of the parishes of Santa Rita, Cabimas, Lagunillas – where both Lagunillas and Ciudad Ojeda were located – and Valmore Rodríguez (Distrito Bolívar, 2021).

### **Public Services and Social Benefits**

The services available to oil workers and the population of the Bolívar District are represented in the film as achievements of the oil industry, which self-proclaims itself as the main modernizing agent in this region. From the moment Agustín Salazar leaves his house in Ciudad Ojeda, we see roads and transportation, public lighting, modern housing, and businesses. These accomplishments make up the present of the region and its inhabitants, showcased through their daily life, from something as simple as taking a taxi. When Agustín arrives in Lagunillas, the industrial landscape and the community where workers and their families live are shown (Figures 7 and 8).

Figures 7 and 8. Agustín Salazar on his way to Lagunillas.



Source: Frames captured by the author.

During the taxi ride, a retrospective segment attributed to Salazar is introduced – “the old veteran remembers...” (Vidal, 1966, 00:00:41) – in which he describes the entire process that led to the transformation of the natural landscape into an industrial and urbanized one, from the initial exploration and drilling in the swampy regions along the lakeshore to the construction of the oil fields. Through animated archival photographs, it first shows the construction of dirt roads and makeshift camps with rudimentary tents and homes, followed by the development of gravel roads, then paved roads, and finally the construction of industrial infrastructure and modern houses with all services. The most significant point is the central role of the oil industry in the transformation of space, the environment, work, and daily life for its workers and the region’s inhabitants. Progress is presented as a linear sequence that led to the shift from tradition to modernity (Figure 9).

**Figure 9.** Lagunillas de Agua.



**Source:** Frame captured by the author.

Public services in the oil fields of Lagunillas and the surrounding towns are shown as the final result and logical consequence of Shell’s technical capability and the

transformative process it triggered in the region (Figure 10). Modernization is represented here as an already accomplished process that changed the natural landscape into an industrial-urban one.

**Figure 10.** Lagunillas de Tierra.



**Source:** Frame captured by the author.

In Lagunillas, the services available to the workers living in the residential area and their families are listed: housing, security for their children, education, medical and hospital care, water supply, telephone communications, roads and traffic signs, garbage collection, and street lighting (Figures 11 and 12).

**Figures 11 and 12.** Public services in Lagunillas.



**Source:** Frames captured by the author.

While the public services driven by modernization directly benefited the majority of the urban and interurban population in the Bolívar District, the social benefits of the oil industry were exclusively aimed at its workforce and their families. By 1966, Shell's

Venezuelanization program had reached a total of 95.4% Venezuelans across all payrolls, with 72.1% of Venezuelans in the senior payroll. Additionally, the number of Venezuelans on the Board of Directors reached seven (Shell Company of Venezuela, 1966). This meant that Venezuelans were the primary recipients of the social benefits Shell offered to its workers.

The film depicts the benefits Agustín Salazar enjoys as a retired worker after 30 years of service. In addition to the security of being able to grow old with dignity in his own home, with peace of mind and economic stability, there is a focus on access to cultural activities – such as cinema and concerts – as well as social events like meetings and festivities, the staff clubs, and sports (Figures 13 and 14). All these activities have a distinctly Venezuelan touch: a group of workers enjoys an afternoon of *bolas criollas*, and a crowd of oil workers and their families attends a Venezuelan symphonic music concert.

**Figures 13 and 14.** Sports and culture.





**Source:** Frames captured by the author.

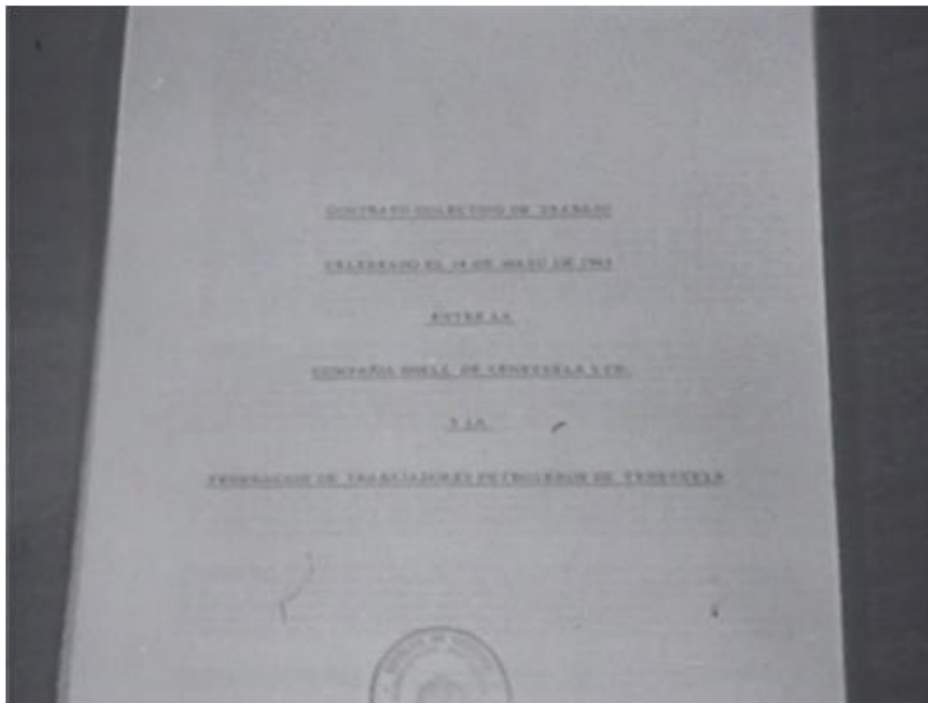
The message conveyed is that it was worth spending a lifetime working for the industry to enjoy these benefits in old age. In the film, retirees stay connected with the company, their former colleagues, and the new generations of employees. The latter are shown heading to their workstations and joining the company's savings, retirement, and housing plans. The connection between the newcomers and the retirees creates a sense of continuity in the industry—a feeling of belonging and well-being that will persist in the future.

Like *Pueblo petrolero*, *Vida en la comunidad I: las escuelas y Vida en la comunidad II: la recreación*, produced by the UFSV, *Después de medio siglo* avoids mentioning the union struggles that helped secure these benefits, despite the resistance from the companies. The voiceover emphasizes that they were achieved through dialogue, labor legislation, and improvements made by the companies themselves. The audiovisual discourse presents, in a personal and individual way, what Shell's corporate reports convey through figures and lists of benefits. *Después de medio siglo*, although it acknowledges the existence of a union, does not mention its name. The company's reports do, however, naming it the Federation of Venezuelan Petroleum Workers (Fedepetrol).

### Upward Social Mobility

Access to public services and participation in the social benefits provided by the oil industry are portrayed in the film as key factors for upward social mobility (Figures 15 and 16). However, the film omits any verbal reference to another crucial factor: labor rights and their gradual expansion, although brief visual references are included. The annual reports of Shell, while maintaining corporate rhetoric, provide relevant data that suggest a link between labor unions and the gradual expansion of labor rights, which served as the foundation for upward social mobility in the oil industry.

**Figures 15 and 16.** Collective agreement and labor benefits.





Source: Frames captured by the author.

In 1965, as part of the effort to integrate residential camps with neighboring towns, Shell signed a social agreement with Fedepetrol to grant property titles to workers in Cabimas for the houses they lived in (Shell Company of Venezuela, 1966). This paragraph further clarifies the relationship between benefits and labor rights:

The established policy of benefit plans, which supplemented each worker's salary, remained in place. Notably, 130 loans were granted under the Housing Acquisition Plan, totaling 5.4 million, bringing the accumulated total—since 1953—to 962 loans amounting to Bs. 49.8 million [...] (Shell Company of Venezuela, 1966, p. 22).

Improvements in the Hospitalization and Surgical Benefits Plan for workers' family members are also mentioned, including an Excess Plan that expands coverage to protect parents and student children up to the age of 23. Additionally, the continuation of programs aimed at improving housing, schools, clubs, streets, and parks is highlighted,

<sup>4</sup> Amounts are expressed in 1966 bolivars.

along with educational support for the Welfare and Culture Associations (ABC by its acronym in Spanish) (Shell Company of Venezuela, 1966).

According to the annual reports, in addition to these ABC for its workers, the company provided resources to the Parent-Teacher Associations and the social and sports clubs of its personnel. In 1966, a new collective agreement was signed between the company and Fedepetrol; the integration of residential fields into neighboring communities advanced through the granting of property rights to workers for the houses they lived in; and, finally, a new Combined Risk Insurance was implemented, which also covered vacations and absences (Shell Company of Venezuela, 1967). Additionally, it is noted that:

[...] the Housing Plan was improved in order to achieve lower costs and greater facilities for employees. By the end of 1966, 1,082 loans had been granted for a total of Bs. 54.5 million [...]. Significant improvements were also introduced in the Retirement Plan<sup>5</sup> (Shell Company of Venezuela, 1967, p. 21).

By focusing on the journey of Agustín Salazar, a man from Margarita Island who migrated to Zulia three decades ago in search of work in the oil fields, the film attributes upward social mobility to the company. It shows Agustín enjoying his retirement with tranquility and economic stability, with all his needs met. The film only mentions Agustín's origin from Margarita Island, suggesting that he improved his socioeconomic situation by joining the oil workforce. Areas like the Bolivar Coastal field received significant numbers of internal migrants—farmers and fishermen—who arrived from different states in the country seeking work in the industry to overcome the precarious socioeconomic conditions in their places of origin (Tinker, 2009).

According to the film, oil workers are able to develop all their skills and access all opportunities to improve their socio-economic situation, thanks to good salaries, public services, and social benefits. The idea of upward social mobility in the film is equated with progress and personal improvement: it involves a teleology and a linear progression (Riesco, 2014). The new generations of workers have at their disposal the experience

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<sup>5</sup> Amounts are expressed in 1967 bolivars.

accumulated by their predecessors and will continue their work. All workers in the industry and their families have a guaranteed future and will be able to enjoy a stable and peaceful old age.

The analysis reveals an unavoidable tension in the film. Agustín Salazar recalls everything he experienced while working in the oil industry and witnessed its modernizing impact through public services and social benefits that allowed him to improve his socio-economic status. This represents Shell's modernizing work in the Bolívar District as a completed and finished cycle, in contradiction with the idea of progress inherent in the concept of modernization. However, by marginally representing the younger workers and insisting on the benefits the company offers them in the future, just as they were received by now-retired workers in the past, the film brings back the idea of progress as a sort of footnote. A question then arises: Does Shell consider its modernizing work to be complete but, at the same time, promote the preservation of its legacy after its imminent departure from Venezuela?

### **Discursive and Expressive Construction**

The predominant mode of discursive organization in the film is description. The images are always descriptive, and their editing constructs sequences that connect wide shots and panoramic views of the landscape in Ciudad Ojeda and Lagunillas: panoramics, tilts, and tracking shots. These images hold concrete value: they provide visual evidence that supports the thematic propositions of the film and bear witness to the actual, historical existence of everything built by Shell in the Lagunillas region and the living standards of its inhabitants.

The voiceover, also descriptive, serves as an anchor in relation to what is shown in the images. In its anchoring function, the verbal elements identify and describe the visual elements; they link them to a meaning or reference through a nomenclature (Barthes, 1986). Here, the voiceover identifies the characters and provides biographical data about them; it also designates places and times, and mentions their key characteristics:

Agustín Salazar, a man from Margarita Island, came to these lands in Zulia more than half a century ago. Salazar worked for 30 years in the oil industry and now enjoys the benefits

of retirement. Don Agustín frequently travels the short route from Ciudad Ojeda to Lagunillas. Despite knowing these roads so well, the old veteran always remembers... He witnessed the transformation of the landscape, seeing how buildings and highways emerged over the once-flooded lands (Vidal, 1966, 00:00:41).

Finally, the voiceover articulates and presents the corporate rhetoric:

The prosperous condition of the oil workers is the outcome of a continuous process of productive collaboration between the workforce and the companies. Organized into unions and protected by labor laws and some of the most advanced collective agreements in the world, Venezuelan oil workers attain their objectives through dialogue. Numerous improvements have been introduced by the companies, including collective life insurance, housing plans, retirement plans, and various benefits provided by the savings systems (Vidal, 1966, 00:11:10).

The journey of Salazar from his home in Ciudad Ojeda to Lagunillas represents a passage through both space and time. The voiceover introduces a retrospective segment, describing how Lagunillas appeared before the commercial exploitation of oil and how the landscape evolved as the oil industry grew in the region. This narration highlights the transformation of the natural landscape into an industrialized and urbanized one shaped by the oil companies:

Don Agustín participated in this dynamic process that transformed the Lake region and the Bolívar District. He witnessed the emergence of oil fields, which eventually grew into the modern communities of today. Over half a century, the pioneer's huts were replaced by increasingly better homes (Figures 17 and 18). Today, the oil worker enjoys excellent housing, equipped with the best facilities, while his children grow up healthy and happy in this home (Vidal, 1966, 00:4:48).

**Figures 17 and 18.** The oil field.



**Source:** Frames captured by the author.

Although the audiovisual description briefly situates Agustín within the industrial landscape of the oil fields during the credits, the true focus is on the neighborhood he resides in, with its roadways, commercial and service buildings he passes along the way,

and the facilities he visits upon arriving in Lagunillas, such as the savings bank headquarters and the social and sports club (Figures 19 and 20).

**Figures 19 and 20.** Agustín's environment.



Source: Frames captured by the author.

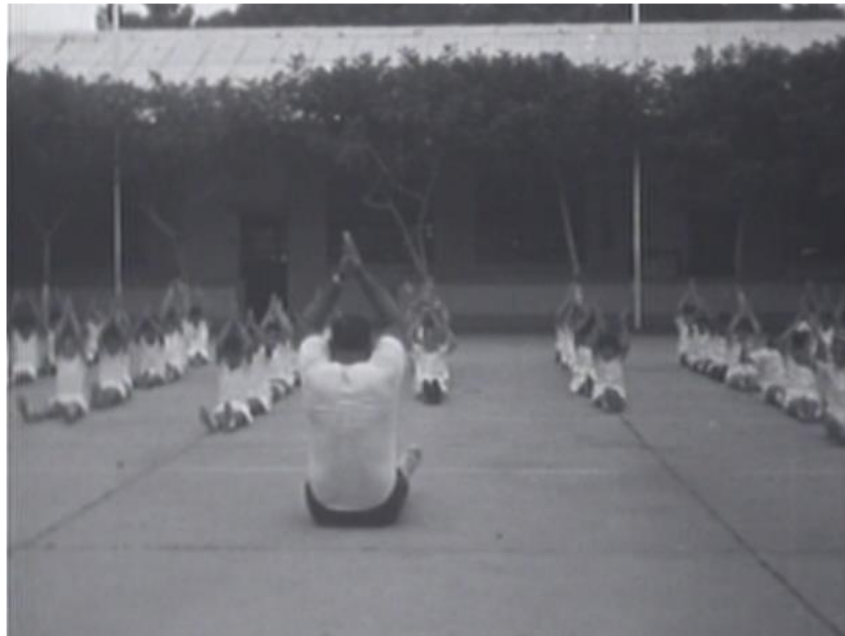
By adopting the temporal and spatial perspective of Salazar as a retired worker, the predominantly descriptive discourse constructs everything shown in the film as completed events. The transformation of Lagunillas, driven by the oil industry, and the upward social

mobility attained by its workers are presented as achievements, rather than ongoing projects or developing processes. The oil industry is portrayed as the principal agent of this modernization and the social mobility of its workers.

Although Agustín is presented as an individualized character, he lacks a voice in the film; the only voice is the indirect discourse delivered through the voiceover. Throughout most of the film, incidental music and the voiceover commentary are predominant. These are generally not mixed or overlapped but are presented in distinct blocks. The audiovisual construction makes sparse use of diegetic sounds. In segment 4, which illustrates the technical capabilities of the industry in 1966 through imagery, the voiceover is interspersed with diegetic sounds of various machines, edited to appear as in-sound, as the montage transitions from one machine to another, each accompanied by a different machinery sound (Vidal, 1966, 00:04:15). In segment 6, children in a school in Lagunillas engage in physical education, guided by their teacher. When the voiceover ceases, diegetic post-synchronized sounds are introduced, corresponding to the children's jumps as part of their exercise routine (Vidal, 1966, 00:05:53) (Figures 21 and 22).

Segment 8 showcases the services and their constant improvements in the Lagunillas community. The off-screen commentary alternates with some diegetic sounds: machinery, passing cars, and a worker checking the state of the streetlights (Vidal, 1966, 00:07:15). Finally, in segment 11, a Venezuelan symphonic music concert is shown in an auditorium: the piece played by the orchestra is diegetic music, both in and out of the frame, although it is not direct sound, but rather post-synchronized sound effects (00:09:22). Based on these findings, I will proceed to the discussion and conclusions of this article.

Figures 21 and 22. Images with post-synchronized sounds.



Source: Frames captured by the author.

### Discussion and Conclusions

*Después de medio siglo* belongs to the subgenre of films that portray the life of the labor force in the oil fields and its central theme is the representation of the modernizing impact of the oil industry in the Bolivar District of the Zulia state. It was the only Neofilm movie produced for Shell between 1966 and 1971 with this theme, which, on the other hand, was

widely represented in the corporate films produced by the UFSV between 1957 and 1965, such as *Pueblo petrolero*, *Venezuela y petróleo III: sus comunidades*, *Vida en la comunidad I: las escuelas*, and *Vida en la comunidad II: la recreación*. This marks a first indication of how the state's policy of not granting more oil concessions affected the production of corporate films: this subgenre reached its peak during the Venezuelan democratic transition but practically disappeared after the closure of UFSV and the shift to Neofilm.

This subgenre represents the public services and benefits available to Shell's workforce and their families, and how these are directly responsible for upward social mobility in Venezuela's oil regions. However, the way each of these films represents these topics slightly differs based on their purpose, the commission's objectives, and the target audience.

The main function of the UFSV films *Pueblo petrolero*, *Venezuela y petróleo III: sus comunidades*, *Vida en la comunidad I: las escuelas*, and *Vida en la comunidad II: la recreación* was to motivate potential recruits to join the oil industry workforce. *Pueblo petrolero* portrays a day in the life of an oil community through the daily routines of its active workers and their families, emphasizing, in addition to the services and benefits they enjoy there, camaraderie, a sense of community, and a positive working environment. *Venezuela y petróleo III* and the two installments of *Vida en la comunidad* offer a top-down view, that is, from the company's policies, in a descriptive and explanatory manner.

None of these films represent the retired workers of the industry, as *Después de medio siglo* does. On the contrary, they emphasize how the families of active workers grow, how new houses are built or existing ones modernized, and how public services are continuously improved. There is always a vision that connects to the future; modernization is depicted as an ongoing process, open-ended, without a set conclusion in time.

However, *Después de medio siglo*, by depicting a day in the life of a retired worker from the industry and presenting itself as a film commemorating half a century of the oil industry in Venezuela, exalts those who worked during those 50 years, records the social benefits and services that allowed them to improve their socio-economic situation, and represents modernization as a completed, achieved process. This is not consistent with the ideas of modernity and modernization, which are grounded in the idea of progress as an

unlimited advancement in time. Thus, as a side note, the film introduces active workers and their perspectives of improvement in the industry. Does this create a semantic disturbance, an incongruity, by representing modernity as both a concluded and ongoing process? Or, perhaps, is it simply representing the generational turnover of the industry according to the idea of progress, presenting a cyclical or circular vision of modernity?

At this point, it is important to remember that one of the principles guiding the production of corporate films by Shell globally was to achieve prestige for the company by promoting values such as technological know-how, modernity, health campaigns, or corporate identity, avoiding the mention of the company's name or its products except in the opening or closing credits of the films (Canjels, 2021). This is precisely what distinguishes Shell's corporate films from advertising cinema. In *Después de medio siglo* and in the corporate films of the UFSV, the term "oil industry" actually designates the Shell Company of Venezuela. The tension and dissonance that emerge in *Después de medio siglo* stem precisely from this: the end of concessions does not mark the closure of the modernization process or the end of the oil industry. What concludes is Shell's role as a modernizing agent in Venezuela. Within the media and discursive constellations of Shell, this idea is the unspeakable, the impossible to represent.

The discursive construction, especially in the relationships between image and sound, is also relevant for understanding how *Después de medio siglo* represents the modernizing impact of the oil industry. The principles of Shell's corporate cinema, established by John Grierson in 1934, emphasized both expository clarity and aesthetic elaboration, as both elements were essential for corporate prestige. In this sense, I turn to an analysis of the image-sound relationship in *Proud Ships* (1954), a training film from SFU. It integrates music, noises, and off-screen voices harmoniously, so that each assumes and then cedes primacy (Davison, 2024).

The use of voices in *Proud Ships* is complex: there are more than eight different voices, most of them off-screen. In some cases, the voice is constructed, through editing, as an interior voice that expresses the characters' thoughts, using regional accents and sociolects. This is not unusual in British documentary based on the Grierson model and seeks authenticity and closeness to the characters. Regarding music, it interacts

dramatically with the entrances and exits of the off-screen commentary and adjusts to the meaning of the images. At times, music is not used to avoid conflicts with other sound elements. Noises and sound effects are dosed to avoid congestion.

Some UFSV films, such as *Pueblo petrolero* and *Vida en la comunidad II: la recreación*, complicate the relationships between image, music, off-screen commentary, voices, and noises, following some of the configurations recommended by SFU as they appear in *Proud Ships* (Davison, 2024). However, *Después de medio siglo* simplifies them; it maintains the authoritative off-screen commentary characteristic of the expository documentary and denies a voice to its main character, although it does organize part of the discourse from his perspective. By doing so, the film acknowledges the work and merits of its retired workers, but does not represent them as modernizing agents; instead, they are portrayed as passive beneficiaries of corporate policies. The Shell company, designated exclusively with the label “the oil industry” by the off-screen commentary, is the only representable agent in the constellations of media and corporate discourses.

The corporate rhetoric in *Después de medio siglo* works, then, to conceal the underlying semantic inconsistencies in the representation of oil modernization in the Lake Maracaibo region, due to the irrepresentability of Shell’s cessation of activities, as it could not renew its concessions in Venezuela. Provisionally, we could interpret this as an expression of a crisis in Shell’s media and discourses, but it is essential to analyze other Neofilm films to support such an interpretation.

This research constitutes a first approach to the historical-pragmatic and textual-discursive analysis of the corporate films commissioned by Shell in Venezuela to Neofilm after the closure of UFSV in 1965, as a consequence of the adjustments made by oil corporations in their public relations policies and their media and discourse constellations following the announcement of the non-renewal of their concessions. The analysis of *Después de medio siglo* offers some clues about the continuities and ruptures that marked the transition from UFSV to Neofilm: although the main themes were maintained, the production of certain subgenres decreased; it can be inferred that there were alterations in some filmic configurations, as well as in certain practices and production processes, and finally, there are signs of a crisis in corporate rhetoric.

This article follows the line of research on corporate cinema by oil companies in Venezuela, initiated by González and Guilarte (1992), Filloy (1995), and developed by Colmenares (2019). But it also represents a step forward, as it is the first historical-pragmatic and textual-discursive analysis of a corporate film produced by Neofilm for Shell. From a theoretical and methodological perspective, the findings of this research confirm the productivity of studying corporate cinema of the oil industry and its connection with the field of petro-cultures. There seems to be a consensus among researchers in these two lines regarding the self-designation of oil corporations as modernizing agents on a global scale. This corporate identity permeates both organizational practices and the constellations of media and corporate discourses.

According to my analysis, the cessation by the Venezuelan petrostate in granting concessions seems to have placed the corporate discourses in crisis. From a symmetrical perspective of the relationship between the Venezuelan petrostate and the oil companies, this finding is not without interest. However, this paper represents only a first analytical approach to the Neofilm films produced for Shell Venezuela in the final years of its operations in the country. The possibility remains open to analyze the other five available films through a historical-pragmatic and textual-discursive approach, with the aim of deepening and further developing the study of the decline in Shell's corporate filmmaking production in Venezuela.

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