

Gonzalo Justiniano's Cabros de Mierda – The Santiago Times



Vladis (Elías Collado) is one of the breakout actors in 'Cabros de Mierda'.

Stephen Borunda/Special to The Santiago Times

In 'The Origins of Totalitarianism', Hannah Arendt explains that under a dictatorship, everyone has already been found guilty: "We are dealing merely with the arbitrariness by which victims are chosen [under an oppressive regime]...that they are chosen regardless of what they may or may not have done."

Gonzalo Justiniano's most recent politically charged film *Cabros de Mierda* (which roughly translates to "shit kids") explores such conditions and their effects through his film's fascinating look at life for impoverished Chileans under the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.



Daniel Contesse stars as the American missionary Samuel Thompson.

Set in 1983, the film takes the perspective of a young American missionary named Samuel Thompson (Daniel Contesse) who has just arrived in the barrio La Victoria in Santiago. While Contesse's acting holistically is moving, his English accent and intonations fail to come across convincingly as American. Nevertheless, Justiniano's decision to shape his script's dramaturgy around the perspective of an outsider provides non-Chilean audiences someone with whom they can easily sympathize. As Thompson learns and documents Chilean society, so do we.

The film's cinematography relies heavily on close-ups and the results are explosive. Through our deference to the close-up (or what Giles Deleuze coined as the "affective-image"), audiences quickly empathize with the people whom Thompson is also finding himself falling in love – a young boy named Vladis (Elías Collado) and his caretaker Gladys (the brilliant Nathalia Aragonese). Vladis is an innocent and charismatic boy who never neglects to remind the American characters that their President Richard Nixon killed Chilean President Salvador Allende, a belief likely inherited from his father who is communist agent.

One revelatory scene in the movie features Vladis playing a game similar to "rock-paper-scissors" while Pinochet delivers a harangue on the television – a common trope in the film. Eventually, Vladis' partners in

the game depart and he is left playing alone, suggesting that a dictatorship too will also continue to play its game of destruction until no opponents remain – and then it will imagine new enemies to destroy.

While the audience is charmed and astonished by Vladis, we – like Thompson – find ourselves seduced by Gladys.

Aragonese is mesmerizing both intellectually and physically as the leading woman. She leads the local communist party in the neighborhood but at home she and Thompson quickly fall for each other. However, her behavior seems more erratic the closer she and Thompson get to each other. We perhaps comprehend her anguish when she has sex with Thompson and she suddenly breaks down in tears. In this moment, the reality that in Pinochet's Chile was that everything and everyone could disappear at any moment becomes lucid. The film itself hinges upon the burgeoning relationship between Thompson and Gladys and the way in which Thompson's stay in La Victoria is consequently problematized. When he witnesses the terror of the military rule in the country, Thompson becomes involved in the communist movement alongside of Gladys – with tragic consequences.



Gladys (Nathalia Aragonese), left, shares an intimate moment with Samuel Thompson.

While the film becomes slightly convoluted near its denouement that redirects the story towards present-day Chile and philosophies grounded in collective memory and just vengeance for the Chilean “Desaparecidos,” we can admire Justiniano's attempt to make the film a complete one about the prolonged reverberations of state terrorism.

Indeed, the Chilean director has forged a film that is necessary for both Chileans and those of other nationalities to watch in order to better understand the impacts of living in a space and time where a loved one could vanish at any moment under the guise of the rule of law; we are also reminded that countless are still living under such conditions today all over the world.

The film is now screening in theaters across Santiago.