

Described by Benacerraf as “un gran poema” (a great poem), *Araya* (1959) continues to inspire filmmakers and scholars alike. Often compared to Italian Neorealism, it was a precursor to the Latin American New Cinema of the 1960s. A trailblazer of feminist cinema in Latin America, Benacerraf also founded Venezuela’s National Cinémathèque, cementing her role as a key figure in the region’s cultural history.

Originally spanning three hours, the film was edited down to 90 minutes for its submission to the Cannes Film Festival in 1959, where it won the Superior Technical Commission Award and the International Critics’ Prize. Shot by a two-person crew—Benacerraf and Italian cinematographer Giuseppe Nisoli—and originally narrated in French by Laurent Terzieff, *Araya* was not screened in Venezuela until 1977, due in part to the country’s political situation. That same year, celebrated Venezuelan playwright José Ignacio Cabrujas recorded the Spanish narration. The version screened today is the result of restoration work completed in 2009 by Milestone Films to commemorate the film’s 50th anniversary.

From dawn to dusk, *Araya* captures the life of a salt-mining community on the arid peninsula of Araya in Northeast Venezuela. The vast desert landscape, rendered in dazzling black and white, spills out from the screen, immersing us in its intense heat and dryness. The story opens with the cannons of a ruined colonial fortress. Perched atop a hill, the structure silently bears witness to the miners’ toil, underscoring the unbroken continuity of this extractive labour since the 1500s. Benacerraf then turns to three fictional families—played by local residents—offering an intimate portrait of how the extraction-based economy shapes their daily lives. Regardless of age, most of Araya’s inhabitants spend their days piling salt under the relentless Caribbean sun. The resulting pyramids of “white gold” tower imposingly over the rural landscape, where the only other buildings on sight are *bahareque* houses and the crumbling Spanish fortress.

Benacerraf began shooting in the wake of Marcos Pérez Jiménez’s military dictatorship (1952 – 1958), a regime that pursued rapid, state-driven modernisation, bulldozing rural landscapes to make way for concrete skyscrapers and highways—projects financed by Venezuela’s foreign-controlled oil industry. This “spectacular modernisation,” as Lisa Blackmore (2017) describes it, is poetically evoked in *Araya*—not only through the ephemeral salt structures that mirror the regime’s monumental architecture but also through the abrupt industrialisation that, by the end of the film, displaces the families and their traditional way of life from the screen.

As explosions and bulldozers consume the film’s final moments, Benacerraf puts these machines in dialogue with the Spanish cannons that inaugurated the story. In doing so, she draws a powerful parallel between colonial exploitation and Venezuela’s “black gold” modernisation, revealing them as two sides of the same extractivist coin.

PILAS is proud to present *Araya* nearly a year after Benacerraf’s passing in May 2024. This screening honours her legacy as one of Latin American cinema’s most influential figures. By presenting this screening alongside Andrés Prypchan’s restoration of the film’s unseen offcuts, and artist Ronald Pizzoferrato’s work on Venezuela’s migration crisis, we reflect on the links between colonial and neocolonial extractivism and the current political, economic, and displacement crises affecting Venezuela and the region. At the same time, we highlight the power of art in confronting these issues and inspire the imagination of alternative futures.

We hope you enjoy the screening and invite you to stay for a conversation with film restorer Andrés Prypchan after the film.