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David S. Sipprelle

Trinity College, david.sipprelle@trincoll.edu

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Cinema Remembers: Forming a Collective Memory of Military Dictatorship

[Paper translated from Spanish to English]

David Sippelle

I. INTRODUCTION

The coup d'état conducted by General Augusto Pinochet's junta not only ruptured Chile's democratic trajectory by ousting the first democratically elected socialist president in Latin America, but it correspondingly squashed the possibility of free artistic expression in the public domain. Pinochet's imposition of foreign doctrines such as neoliberal capitalism and strong national security were euphemisms for crimes against humanity, state-sponsored violence, and the suppression of the rights of speech and expression. In spite of these violations of customary law, Pinochet's dominion prospered without intervention, given the United States' Cold War era anti-communist machinations. While the regime silenced the political left and forced them to Chile's social margins, they fearlessly responded by encrypting their voices in art. Such art was refractory and rebellious; it was the artistic construction of a multiplicity of voices and discontinuities that sought to document the civilian experience of living under Pinochet's rule (Richard, 4). In doing so, this Pinochet-era "refractory art" (Richard, 21) rejected orthodox styles of cultural production while shedding light on a sociopolitical reality marked by violence, concealed truths, and immense trauma.

When Chile transitioned to democracy following the Pinochet plebiscite in 1989, an empty space that yearned for artistic cultural production emerged. However, right-wing censorship was no longer a looming threat. Cultural theorist Nelly Richard delineates the impact of this transition in her book, *The Insubordination of Signs*: "the democratic reaperture [in Chile] normalized the conditions of production and sociocultural communication by revitalizing formats for public intervention" (Richard 68). Principal among these new formats of artistic communication was film: a symbolic language with the groundbreaking audiovisual capacity. Chilean film is a cultural project that welcomes the artistic contributions of different social classes, ethnicities, religious groups, and generations by allowing them to "negotiate memory" (Pino-Ojeda et al, 134) on a "symbolic and intellectual plane" (Pino-Ojeda, 134). Various contemporary Chilean films have gained international recognition for their contribution to the cinematographic

effort of recreating the memory of civil violence. By confronting the themes of dictatorial violence, truth, and trauma, contemporary Chilean film precipitates a collective memory of civil violence.

II. VIOLENCE: SUBJECTIVE, SYSTEMIC, AND SYMBOLIC FORMS

The new mode of composing Chilean art is often characterized by its meticulous focus on a particular theme: violence. Chilean cinema has recognized that the most effective means of responding to violence is by rendering it in an audiovisual language. However, to understand exactly what constitutes violence, the term must be dissected. Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek provides a comprehensive typology of violence in his work, “Violence: Six Sideways Reflections.” He establishes that the average human being only recognizes the traditional conception of violence: subjective violence (Žižek 1). Subjective violence is physically actuated by “a clear, identifiable agent,” and is marked by “the obvious signals [...] acts of crime and terror and civil unrest” (Žižek 1). Yet he also identifies two objective manifestations of violence: systemic and symbolic violence. One cannot attribute systemic violence to a social agent because it is the violence executed by an “ideological abstraction” (Žižek 12), reflected by institutions and socioeconomic stratification. The most often referenced example of systemic violence is capitalism: a “self-engendering monster that pursues its path disregarding any human or environmental concern” (Žižek 12). In regards to Pinochet’s dictatorship, his adoption of a neoliberal alignment and free-market embrace resulted in raw GDP growth and unprecedented participation in international markets, but it also resulted in unspeakable economic inequality, a reduction in “most social expenditures” for the poor (Cordevilla 130), and political repression. The third type of violence referenced by Žižek is symbolic violence, or the “social domination reproduced in our habitual speech forms” (Žižek 2). These three modes of violence each manifest themselves thematically in the works of contemporary Chilean artists.

Pablo Larraín’s films grapple with subjective, systemic, and symbolic manifestations of violence, symbolically rendering the irreversible footprint of violence left on the Chilean social fabric. In *Post Mortem*, the plot unravels during Pinochet’s coup, and a militaristic climate permeates the streets. Public demonstrations, gunfire, and countless deaths litter Chile’s urban sphere. Mario, an assistant and typist in a morgue, confronts death on a daily basis. As the story progresses, the frequency of corpses exponentially grows. Eventually, Mario is tasked with inspecting the body of Salvador Allende himself. The grotesque audiovisual representations of Allende’s body speak to a now maimed, bloodless, cadaverous democratic Chile. Here we see how Larraín employs cinematographic techniques in order to visually (but symbolically) reproduce violence. Dealing with death on a routine basis, Mario progressively transforms into a living corpse, grayed and deprived of

emotional energy. Further, he demonstrates a “bizarre, unnerving desperation [...] with a detachment that borders on cruelty” (Scott). Through Mario’s generally perturbing profile, Larraín communicates subjective violence’s corrosive psychological impact on Chile. Moreover, Mario’s home and the buildings in his neighborhood correspondingly decompose throughout the film; a pointed representation of Chile’s infrastructural and institutional decay following Pinochet’s rise to power. The use of lighting is limited as Mario’s turgid existence is viewed from behind a brown camera filter. The only accentuated colors are browns and grays, communicating Chile’s perpetual rot. Through these cinematographic representations of violence, *Post Mortem* reflects how Pinochet in fact murdered Chile’s national spirit through violent usurpation, sucking the life and color out of society. The film is, in fact, a post-mortem analysis of Chile.

Larraín’s *Tony Manero* thematically centers on systemic violence under Pinochet. The 2008 film paints a picture of Chilean society that lacks its own national culture following Pinochet’s levy of a neoliberal-capitalist alignment. The central character, Raúl, is infatuated with *Saturday Night Fever* and preoccupies himself with reenacting Tony Manero’s dance numbers. This serves to reflect Pinochet’s imposition of Western cultural norms and institutions through neoliberal capitalism. Instead of pioneering its own artistic culture, Pinochet’s capitalist Chile adopted Western popular culture as its own. Through the character of Raúl and his “zombie” obsession with Tony Manero, Larraín succeeds in communicating an “extremely dark meditation on borrowed cultural identity” (Holden). Raúl demonstrates a void of human emotion, rejecting the affections of both his wife and child, and is entirely incapable of performing sexually. His existence is enslaved by Western cultural production. This, of course, is a remnant of systemic violence. Moreover, his consumption with *Saturday Night Fever* dampens his moral framework, driving him to commit robberies to finance his Tony Manero act. His obsession even inspires him to commit senseless acts of subjective violence. In one scene, he slaughters an elderly woman in a scheme to rob her television set.

In *Machuca*, the coup and its violent legacy are witnessed through the eyes of children. However, these boys represent two opposite poles of the socioeconomic spectrum. On the one hand, Gonzalo is sheltered by a family of wealthy conservatives. On the other, while Pedro Machuca is awarded with the opportunity to attend private school, his life is marked by abject poverty, left-leaning politics, and the omnipresent threat of military repression. Therefore, in a sense, their blooming friendship crystallizes how Pinochet’s regime exacerbated Chile’s income (and ideological) gap with its systemically violent designs. As young boys, Gonzalo and Machuca extract their understanding of the political conflict from snippets of adult conversations, television media, and public strikes and demonstrations. The film illustrates a

Pinochet-era Chilean “society driven by class and ideology” (Scott), and how these divisions provoke violent consequences. The film ends with a violent military incursion in Machuca’s poverty-stricken neighborhood, echoing how Chile’s socialist-sympathetic destitute classes lacked social safety nets or security blankets to shelter them from Pinochet’s ironhanded rule. At the same time, the film explores the confusion and agitation characteristic of the transition to adolescence against a backdrop of Chile’s confused and turbulent transition to “cruelty and terror” (Scott).

El Chacotero Sentimental, a 1999 film directed by Cristián Galaz, serves as an allegorical rendering of systemic violence. According to Juan Poblete, a professor of Latin American Literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz, the film helps the “so-called marginal sectors of society grapple with the neoliberalization of society [...] and through a strong allegorical process, it make[s] [the] bourgeoisie politically responsible” (Poblete 215). The film divides itself into three separate phone-calls made to a radio DJ nicknamed “Rumpi,” and each of the three calls confesses an intimate, personal tale from one of Santiago’s three social strata: the middle class, the upper class, and the lower class (Vergara-Mery 182). Each narrative represents a starkly different personal reality under Pinochet, to the point that it is impossible to imagine the three callers sharing the same Chilean city. The first narrative is entitled “Patas Negras” (“Black Paws”). Here, viewers bear witness to a comedic love story told in the framework of a “traditional Bildungsroman” (Poblete 216). The confessional depicts a love between an upper-class youth and a woman named Claudia. The youth, Juan, possesses a single problem, a problem that pales in comparison to many of the atrocities that afflicted the Chilean citizenry under Pinochet. Juan’s dilemma is that his romance with Claudia is a clandestine relationship, and he fears stigmatization for his love of an older woman (Galáz). The second call, entitled “Secretos” (“Secrets”) relates a violent, bone-chilling story of a middle-class woman named Carmen. Carmen’s call reveals a gravely unsettling past, in which her mother commits suicide and the family fosters a secret: her father’s incestuous relationship with her sister. The visual imagining of Carmen’s past is captured in blacks and whites, and the only use of color is to highlight images of blood. It seems evident that Juan’s story involves an agreeable problem (Vergara-Mery 183) that radically contrasts with Carmen’s individual history (Vergara-Mery 183). Additionally, the domestic violence that marks Carmen’s existence is an allegorical reflection of the Pinochet regime’s subjective violence. Pinochet’s regime is symbolized by a brutal incest enacted by right-wing extremists against fellow countrymen “in which the casualty turned out to be democracy and the [Chilean] offspring” (Poblete 219). The third phone call, labeled “Todo es Cancha,” presents a husband and wife that struggle to maintain their marital intimacy against a backdrop of destitution and a lack of privacy, as they share their apartment with fellow penurious

Chileans. Through painting an image of how neoliberal dictatorship hostilely eradicated the middle class and yielded immense socioeconomic inequality, the subtext criticizes Pinochet's invocation of systemic violence. Despite how these three phone calls dictate stories with emotional weight and significance, Rumpi exercises emotional indifference, and merely continues with his show (Vergara-Mery 184), publicly exploiting the secrets of Chilean citizens. At times, he slips into fits of vulgar laughter, testifying how Chile has internalized symbolic violence in its popular culture.

III. TRUTH

Another formative theme in the Chilean cinematic movement is truth. *El Chacotero Sentimental* grapples with questions of truth telling during the Pinochet regime. In a sense, DJ Rumpi's program allegorically parallels the Chilean National Commission of Truth and Reconciliation (also referenced as the Rettig Report). The callers expose their own traumatic testimonies (even though each testimony possesses a different level of gravity and solemnity), and Rumpi sifts through each testimony in an attempt to distinguish the truth from fiction. He coaxes each caller into revealing intimate, and often sexual, secrets against their will. But, in spite of his hunt for truth and his corresponding attempts to reconcile all sectors of Chilean society over the airwaves, Rumpi does not provide emotional support or financial compensation for the testimonies. In this sense, the film contains a metanarrative that is quite critical of the Chilean truth commission's frailty. The commission was an ignoble exploitation of Chileans of all social classes and political affiliations.

In *Machuca*, through its deployment of marginalized perspectives (a boy of few resources and a timid upper-class child), we witness the rendering of history uncorrupted by political or ideological interests. It is an authentic history understood by youths that crystallize "moral innocence" (Scott). Furthermore, their friendship effectively expounds upon how Chilean ideological and socioeconomic divisions were artificial, and friendship has the rare ability to erase these boundaries. But after the fruition of Pinochet's coup, we see two friends that are again separated by artificial partitions and relegated to distinctive social spheres. This serves as a testament to how Pinochet's regimen reinforced ideological and economic distinctions, impeding reconciliation or national unification.

NO, the most recent film of Pablo Larraín, tells the story of the 1989 plebiscite from a unique vantage point. An employee of an advertising agency, Rene, accedes to working on a campaign for the "no" option on the Pinochet plebiscite (a vote for "no" would effectively expel Pinochet from the presidency). Ironically, Rene employs a positive message to accompany an ad campaign for dissent. Rene transforms "a want [freedom] into a need with rainbows, white-faced mimes, dancing girls, smiling children, a basket

of baguettes and a catchy jingle” (Dargis). While Rene initially served as an agent of neoliberalism, crafting advertisements for products imported to and from powerful Western markets, he is now appointed the role of advertising liberty as a consumer product. The film challenges the orthodox history, or the “dominant narrative,” (Richard 19) that had long been misconstrued as truth. This “dominant narrative” was one replete with rigid value dichotomies. For example: “yes” versus “no,” “perpetrator” versus “victim,” “good” versus “bad,” etc. This film challenges these arbitrary dualities to uncover a historic truth. In the film, “no” is no longer a term associated with a marginalized political left, but it is a term identified by liberty and felicity. Furthermore, in terms of cinematography, the film is spelled out with a granular, antique graphic quality, as if it were a real panoramic view of 1980’s Chile. This effect was produced by the use of a “couple of rebuilt vintage Sony U-Matic video cameras” (Dargis). Therefore, the film expresses itself as if it were a historical artifact.

Patricio Guzmán’s *Nostalgia For The Light* also confronts the theme of truth, but in the documentary format. The film crystallizes Guzmán’s efforts to analyze “the complex relationships between time, memory, and absence in postdictatorial Chile” (Blaine 114). Guzmán employs documentary as his form of recreating credible historical memory, given that the documentary bears “a vocation for reality, a connection to reality” (Aufderheide 23). But at the same time, the works of Guzmán (particularly *Nostalgia for the Light*) implement “personal narrative and devices more commonly seen in literary fiction” (Blaine 114). In the film, Guzmán establishes two parallel narratives. Both narratives intend to work to find truth about the dictatorship. On the one hand, women scour the arid Atacama Desert in order to unveil the truth about their parents by finding their remains. Through the unearthed bodily remains, the daughters have to reconstruct memories (or their own imaginative “truths”) of their loved ones (that had died decades earlier). The other narrative dictates the search of astronomers for cosmological truth: the galactic inquiries for signs of light. Guzmán explains that when someone uses a telescope to peer into the distant universe, they technically are looking into the past (due to the logistics of the speed of light) (Guzmán). The film thus affirms that the search for the truth about Chile’s dictatorial past is still a relevant theme for the Chilean people. Society can only heal its wounds upon finding it.

IV. TRAUMA

Nostalgia For The Light also explores a third theme that has proven paramount to Chilean cinema and national culture: trauma. Guzmán conveys this theme most clearly through his use of color, particularly through rigorous contrasts between darkness and light (the darkness of the sky in contrast to the persistent light of the barren desert). This contrast points to the polarity

between the traumas of the past and the hope for the future. It also indicates the conflict between an uncertain past and an inevitable truth. The individuals that uncover bodily remains in *Nostalgia for the Light* strive to learn the truth in order to avoid the traumatic state of not understanding or knowing. On another note, the theme of trauma is incarnated by the architect Miguel: a survivor of a Pinochet-era concentration camp. His traumatic memory of imprisonment remains vivid and visceral, to the degree that his architectural sketches materialize as recreations of concentration camp edifices and structures (Guzmán).

Trauma is also a prevalent topic in *NO*, and it constitutes one of the subtle sub-textual commentaries of the film. The movie contains a marked disconnect between time and place; the scenes expand into a multitude of physical spaces that do not comply with linear time. This technique sends the message that there is no temporal discontinuity from a traumatic past. When the “no” vote wins the plebiscite, the military officials (or ‘agents of trauma’) still remain in the public sphere. Furthermore, Rene does not exemplify enthusiasm during the celebrations because he appears to know that the wounds of dictatorship are permanent. The film concludes with the continuation of normalcy: the beginning of another advertising campaign. Hence, in spite of the transition to nominal democracy, trauma haunts Chile.

In painting a vision of a decadent Chile, and by stressing the notion of the death of ‘free Chile’ under Pinochet, Larraín also responds to questions of trauma in *Post Mortem*. The film begins with a black screen and plays with imagery of “detritus” (Smith 12), “smoking ruins” (Smith 12), and the omnipresence of military tanks and planes in a decomposing urban milieu. The audience does not receive direct access to Mario’s psyche, nor does it necessarily understand how his daily exposure to corpses affects him. We only see his progressively deteriorating external profile, his blank gaze, and the institutional and infrastructural putrefaction that surrounds him. A scene in which Mario and Nancy spontaneously break into tears points to a trauma provoked by civil violence, yet a trauma that is impossible to articulate.

V. CONCLUSION

In Nelly Richard’s *The Insubordination of Signs*, she discusses a refractory, marginalized artistic movement that resisted both orthodox modes of art and also the modes of cultural production practiced by traditional socialist artists. This movement, which she refers to as the “Avanzada” or the “Nueva Escena,” executed a “radical dismantling of the institutional notions of representation” (Richard 44) by “using images and words as zones of symbolic fracturing in the official codes of cultural thought” (Richard 44). Chilean film, an artistic dimension that prospered in the post-dictatorial period, fiercely exemplifies a cultural code that challenged the dominant historical accounts and the traditional modes of artistic representation. The language of Chilean

film is comprised of symbols and cinematographic techniques, both of which investigate themes relevant to the memory of dictatorship: violence, truth, and trauma. Each of the canonical films discussed espouses particular symbols and discourses in order to fracture “the official codes of cultural thought” (Richard 44) and add texture to the collective memory of civil violence.

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