Within the Limits of the Visible: The Offscreen in Post-Dictatorial Chilean Cinema

Dentro de los límites de lo visible: el fuera de campo del cine chileno posdictatorial

Dentro dos limites do visível: o fora de cena no cinema chileno pós-ditatorial

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the limited representation of violence in Chilean productions from the early 21st century, as a reflection of the *democracy of agreements* promoted by the "Concertación" governments (1990-2010). The analysis focuses on how violence is often displaced off-screen in the works of three directors from different generations: Andrés Wood, Miguel Littin, and Pablo Larraín. From the films of these directors, two trends in representation are identified: one reproduces a consensual perspective on historical events, while the other aims to challenge the *democracy of agreements* by introducing new subjectivities into Chilean historical cinema.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la escasa representación de la violencia en las producciones chilenas de principios del siglo XXI, como reflejo de *la democracia de los acuerdos* de los Gobiernos de la Concertación (1990-2010). El análisis se centra en el desplazamiento de la violencia al fuera de campo visual en el trabajo de tres directores de distintas generaciones: Andrés Wood, Miguel Littin y Pablo Larraín. Del corpus de estos cineastas, se identifican dos tendencias de representación: las que reproducen una visión consensuada sobre los eventos históricos y aquellas que buscan elaborar una mirada resistente a la *democracia de los acuerdos*, para introducir nuevas subjetividades en el cine histórico chileno.

RESUMO

Este artigo examina a escassa representação da violência nas produções chilenas do início do século XXI, como reflexo da *democracia de acordos* dos governos da

Concertación (1990-2010). A análise se concentra no deslocamento da violência para fora da cena na obra de três diretores de diferentes gerações: Andrés Wood, Miguel Littin e Pablo Larraín. A partir do corpus desses cineastas, identificam-se duas tendências de representação: aquelas que reproduzem uma visão consensual dos acontecimentos históricos e aquelas que buscam desenvolver uma visão resistente à *democracia dos acordos*, para introduzir novas subjetividades no cinema histórico chileno.

KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE / PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Chilean cinema, military dictatorship, Chilean post-dictatorship, military violence, history / cine chileno, dictadura militar, posdictadura chilena, violencia militar, historia / cinema chileno, ditadura militar, pós-ditadura chilena, violência militar, história

"It's Not About 30 Pesos, It's About 30 Years" was the slogan of the 2019 protests that took place throughout Chile—not reacting to a rise in Santiago's subway fare, but in response to widespread social inequality persisting in post-Pinochet era. Theoretical discussions of Chile's post-dictatorship concur that the dominant politics of the democratic transition aimed to publicly deny or ignore the horror, violence, and human rights violations carried out by Augusto Pinochet's regime (1973-1990) (Moreiras, 1993; Richard, 2004, 2007; Stern, 2000), reducing discussion of such traumatic topics to the private sphere. Soon after the restoration of democracy, military repression under the dictatorship became a topic excluded from public debate. The goal of the Concertación democratic governments (1990-2010) was to look ahead, integrate the country into the global economy, and legitimize the market model imposed by totalitarianism—all while avoiding any attempts to reconcile with the traumatic past.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Chilean cinema experienced a major renovation, revealing the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers, aesthetic interests, and topics. Notably, between 2000 and 2015, the military dictatorship was rarely represented in 15 fictional films (Gozalo-Salellas & Dapena, 2020; Jung, 2020b; Morales, 2017), and when it was addressed, state violence was often omitted, merely suggested, or left off-screen. According to Berenike Jung, possible reasons for this omission:

> Range from institutionalised and internalised censorship, the historical experience of mediatic betrayal and collaboration, the discrepancy in economic risk in comparison to documentary, where such topics continue to dominate, lack of infrastructure and state support, to a perceived lack of audience (Jung, 2020a, p. 154; 2020b, p. 70).

As a result, the authoritarian past—largely excluded at the institutional level during the political transition—was also a topic avoided in Chilean filmmaking until the second decade of the century. This relationship between cinema and national history adopted a new tone and a revival around 2017, revealing a diversification in the treatment of the past.

This article focuses on the representation of dictatorial violence from the turn of the century, focusing on the works of three generations of filmmakers: *Machuca* (2004), directed by the prominent Andrés Wood (born in 1965); *Dawson, Isla 10* (2009) by Miguel Littin (born in 1942)—an established figure of the New Latin American Cinema; and the trilogy of the younger director Pablo Larraín (born in 1976), comprising *Tony Manero* (2008), *Post Mortem* (2010) and *No* (2012). The release timeframe of these films aligns with the conclusion of the Concertación government, marking a shift in how the past is represented in contemporary Chilean filmmaking. This evolution moves from a cinema that aligns with an institutionalized account of the authoritarian regime toward a more nuanced and personal portrayal of the military dictatorship. Interestingly, despite their numerous differences (in aesthetics, motives, and treatment of historical events and characters), these productions follow a common trend in the portrayal of the government's violent actions. While these films depict death, violence, and military torture, the plot does not overtly indicate that these events are politically motivated.

This article analyzes how the motivations for this violence are displaced offscreen or remain unrepresented in these productions. This narrative strategy in this cinema responds to the institutional negotiations addressing the past during the Chilean post-dictatorship. In the cases of Wood and Littin, this displacement can be perceived in line with the *democracy of agreements* and the reconciliatory tone that characterizes the post-dictatorial period, as noted by Nelly Richard (2004, 2007). In contrast, Larraín's *oeuvre* reveals a form of post-transitional resistance to the *democracy of agreements*, introducing new subjectivities into this historical cinema.

Post-Dictatorship: On Transition and Post-Transition

The timeframe of the democratic transition and, consequently, the beginning of an alleged post-transition remains unclear. One view designates 1998, the year that Pinochet was arrested in London on allegations of human rights violations, as the completion of the political transition and the beginning of the post-transition. It is worth noting that Pinochet wielded significant political influence as Commander-in-Chief of the Chilean Army until 1998, subsequently becoming a senator-for-life under his 1980 Constitution.

Other viewpoints, however, suggest that the post-transitional period begins later,

marked by events such as President Ricardo Lagos's 2005 amendment of Pinochet's Constitution, which coincided with the Riggs Bank investigation. This investigation uncovered financial corruption, damaging the image of the former dictator as a righteous leader among his supporters. Pinochet's death in 2006, coupled with the election of a right-wing pro-Pinochet coalition in 2010, is seen as signaling the end of the post-dictatorship era.

Although the span of the Chilean political transition is arguable, historians, sociologists, and political scientists agree in describing the period as an incomplete—neither fully consensual nor public—process (Drake & Jaksic, 1999; Garretón, 1991; Godoy, 1999; Jocelyn-Holt Letelier, 1998), because the Concertación governments focused on repressing "una historia que muchos habían preferido 'olvidar' o ignorar" [a story that many had preferred to "forget" or ignore] (Winn, 2007, para. 1), to whitewash the Chilean past (Moulian, 1997). This "silence pact" (Hite, 2005, p. 57) or "consensus conspiracy" (Wilde, 1999, p. 476), repressing "una memoria como una caja cerrada" [a memory like a closed box] (Stern, 2000, p. 17), became institutionalized practices of oblivion concerning traumatic history.

Nelly Richard characterizes the post-dictatorship as a time in which there prevailed a "consensual model of a 'democracy of agreements' propelled by the Chilean government of the Transition [namely, Concertación administrations] that marked a passage from politics as antagonism [...] to a politics of transaction" (Richard, 2004, p. 15). This "politics of transaction" develops into several negotiations concerning traumatic memories, as reflected in contemporary historical cinema, which made the military regime into a critical topic for the reclaimed democracy and the intended national "reconciliation."

Except for limited symbolic acts of memory restitution—i.e. the investigations held by the National Commissions on Human Rights Violations (Informe Rettig in 1991; Informe Valech in 2004 and 2010), and the Museum of Memory and Human Rights (MMDH) in 2010—the violent authoritarian repression faced by Chilean citizens was largely overlooked by the Concertación governments.[1] Furthermore, the current neoliberal socio-eco-

[1] In 1990, President Patricio Aylwin (1990–1994) appointed the Comisión Nacional de Verdad y Reconciliación [National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation] in order to gather information on human rights violations (particularly deaths and forced disappearances) executed by the military regime. The results of the investigation, chaired by former senator and diplomat Raúl Rettig, were released in 1991. However, because the Rettig Report did not include cases of torture and political imprisonment, President Ricardo Lagos (2000–2006) created the Comisión Nacional sobre Prisión Política y Tortura [National Commission on Political Prison and Torture], led by Monsignor Sergio Valech, in 2004. During President Michelle Bachelet's first term (2006–2010), the Valech Commission was reopened in 2010, adding new cases of human rights violations. The commissions found that over 2000 people were killed or disappeared for political reasons, and more than 38 000 individuals were imprisoned by the military regime. President Lagos ordered that the testimony remain classified and be kept secret for 50 years.

nomic system in Chile is often viewed as a legacy of the dictatorship, leading many to perceive the democratic governments post-Pinochet as a continuation of the military regime. The 2019 nationwide demonstrations forced looking back at the effects of the dictatorial regime, focusing not merely on the authoritarian period, but also on the impunity and the economic model legitimized by democratic administrations. What is now scrutinized is not only the dictatorship itself, but also the two decades of Concertación governance, which are seen as a continuation of totalitarian principles in both economic policy and the regime's culture of impunity (Barraza, 2018).

Consequently, the general lack of interest in social issues and history displayed at the beginning of the century in film production (and reception) can be seen as a result of this democracy "en la medida de lo posible" [to the extent possible], as stated by President Patricio Aylwin (Otano, 2006, p. 131). This suggests a deliberate post-dictatorial politics of disengagement rather than a mere random or unmotivated detachment (Barraza, 2018).[2] In this context, around 2003, there was a revision in public opinion about the military regime, coinciding with a social and cultural resurgence that included a new mass media perspective in the past—indicating the onset of a post-transitional period.

The Politics of Detachment and Allegories of the Post-Dictatorship

In 2003, Chile commemorated 30 years since the coup, and a combination of political and cultural issues promoted an interest in looking back. As Jacqueline Mouesca explains, the Unidad Popular period stopped being demonized, and the image of President Salvador Allende's government (1970-1973) emerged with all its historical dignity: "Los detenidos desaparecidos dejaron de ser entes 'supuestos', y los crímenes de la dictadura pasaron a ser admitidos hasta por quienes habían sido sus encubridores o cómplices" [The disappeared detainees

[2] Contrary to this, documentary makers have been significantly more active than fiction filmmakers in focusing overtly on the past or discussing social issues. According to Berenike Jung, "while the national past continued to dominate in documentary, Chilean narrative film had all but avoided the topic, except for a brief spike in the early 1990s, immediately after the return to democracy" (2020b, p. 73). Indeed, young documentary directors have presented notable pieces exploring the impact of dictatorship on their lives, as children (Tiziana Panizza, René Ballesteros, Lorena Giachino Torréns, Macarena Aguiló, Sebastián Moreno, Germán Berger, and Antonia Rossi). Others have made innovative use of visual resources to display political events, incorporating an experimental and/or collective perspective on the period (Marcela Said, Jean de Certau, Bettina Perut, and Iván Osnovikoff). Informed by the affective turn in film studies and attentive to the particularities of the documentary form as a filmic medium, Elizabeth Ramírez-Soto (2019) introduces the concept of the *cinema of affect* providing a comprehensive study of documentary production between 1990 and 2011. Accordingly, new filmmakers partake in a post-memory, described by Marianne Hirsch (1997) as the relationship of the second generation to powerful experiences that they did not themselves live through, but which nonetheless constitute their own memories. In this view, documentary makers have been more successful in articulating subjectivity regarding the past than narrative filmmakers.

ceased to be "supposed" entities, and the crimes of the dictatorship began to be admitted even by those who had been their cover-ups or accomplices] (Mouesca, 2005, p. 81). An institutionalized reconciliation with the past brought an updated discourse regarding the official history.

In cinematographic terms, the Concertación governments performed two emblematic acts endorsing an hegemonic view of the military government. President Ricardo Lagos (2001-2006) attended *Machuca*'s avant-premier, symbolizing a state reconciliation with a repressed past, in 2004. At the screening, Lagos avoided any significant political comment, describing Wood's production as a *great movie*: "Es una forma distinta de mirar la historia, de cómo protagonistas tan jóvenes la mimetizaron y la vivieron, pero por sobre todo yo diría que es una gran película" [It's a different way of looking at history, of how such young protagonists mimicked it and lived it, but above all I would say that it's a great film] (*Lagos dijo que "Machuca" es una buena muestra del nivel actual del cine chileno*, 2004, para. 4). The film was later Chile's official submission to the 77th Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film, and for this reason, *Machuca* has been regarded to some extent as a drama that conveys a hegemonic discourse that "politiza la memoria e infantiliza la historia" [politicizes memory and infantilizes history] (Tal, 2005, p. 137).

A second expression that provided an institutionalized view of history was subject to controversy when Miguel Littin's movie *Dawson, Isla 10*—a story of the imprisonment of President Allende's former cabinet members on a southern island—was selected by the government as Chile's official submission to the Oscar Awards in 2009. The critics' and the public's favorite that year was the dark comedy *La nana*, by the young director Sebastián Silva, and the imposition of Littin's movie as the candidate for an Oscar became emblematic of the official envisioning of the past. Indeed, Littin described his production as "una película allendista, pero de reconciliación" [an Allende film, but one of reconciliation] (Littin, as cited in Ivan, 2009, para. 8), suggesting an adherence to the covenant project of the Concertación governments. As discussed here, this conciliatory tone—found both in *Machuca* and *Dawson, Isla 10*—is ultimately a projection of the *democracy of agreement* when depicting state violence.

Media-Memories

At the same time, by 2003, mass media began playing a new role in the production of historical imagery, becoming stakeholders in the elaboration of a collective memory that had previously been excluded from public debate. At the turn of the decade and into the 2010s, television programs such as *Los ochenta* (Contardo, 2008–2013)—a remake of the Spanish series *Cuéntame*—and *Los archivos*

del cardenal (Acuña, 2011 and 2014)—a drama based on the work of the Vicariate of Solidarity in defending human rights during the dictatorship—were extremely popular.

These broadcasts fictionalized, for the first time on Chilean TV, historical events discussion of which had been displaced to the private domain not only by the dictatorship, but also by its democratic successors, producing an "atomisation and privatization of pain" (Jung, 2020a, p. 99). The small screen began to reflect these traumatic memories, bringing up an aesthetics dominated by the *society of spectacle* (Debord, 2006) and minimizing the contradictions of memories that were in dispute (Jelin, 2002), while simultaneously making such imagery accessible to Chileans born after the return of democracy.

Although scarcely represented on the big screen during the post-dictatorship, three generations of Chilean filmmakers (those who were adults in 1973, those who were children at the time, and those born later with no first-hand memories of the coup) addressed the military period with diverse success during the first decade of the 21st century. Among the films produced by the generation of those who were adults in 1973, *Dawson, Isla 10* (2009), by the experienced and internationally recognized filmmaker Miguel Littin, was well received by the local audience (93 829 spectators).[3] Littin, a key figure of the New Latin American Cinema movement from the 60s and 70s who continued his career in exile, had already portrayed the effects of the authoritarian regime in the documentary *Acta general de Chile* (1986) and the film *Los náufragos* (1994), before directing *Dawson*. Later, his production honoring President Salvador Allende and dramatizing his overthrow in La Moneda Palace, *Allende en su laberinto* (2014), had a chilly reception (33 000 viewers).

Machuca (2004), by Andrés Wood, was an unexpected success, receiving both local and international recognition, and turned out to be the top-grossing movie in the country (656 000 viewers) (Salinas & Stange, 2006) the year that the film was released. As part of the post-coup generation of those who were children in 1973, Wood (born in 1965) introduced in *Machuca* the perspective of a group of children witnessing Allende's overthrow. The film, as acknowledged by the director, includes part of his own personal childhood experience. Contrary to Wood's success, films addressing the military dictatorship by other post-coup filmmakers—i.e. *El baño* (Cohen, 2005); *Fiestapatria* (Vera, 2007); *Un salto al vacío* (Lavín, 2008) and *Lecciones privadas* (Daiber & Lazo, 2009)—received little to no attention from local audiences.

[3] This and the following numbers of viewers—except for *Machuca*—are drawn from the Cámara de Exhibidores Multisalas A.G. (CAEM) reports (2009-2014).

By the same token, a number of movies from a younger generation, directors born in the '70s or during the dictatorship were practically ignored by the public, e.g. *Lucía* (Atallah, 2010) (13 viewers), *La pasión de Michelangelo* (Larraín, 2013) (8218 viewers), *Miguel San Miguel* (Cruz, 2012) (9149 viewers), *El tío* (Iribarren, 2013) (9701 viewers), and *Carne de perro* (Guzzoni, 2012) (795 viewers). In contrast, *Mi mejor enemigo* (Bowen, 2005) had a more positive reception (115 154 spectators).

On the other hand, Pablo Larraín, who is today one of the most important Chilean film directors, shot a notable trilogy on Pinochet's regime, achieving great renown among critics and at international film festivals, but his project barely had 86 000 viewers for *Tony Manero* (2008) and 20 500 for *Post Mortem* (2010). Regarding this cold reception, this Tzvi Tal notes:

> El éxito en festivales y la crítica profesional favorable, contrapuestos con los escasos [... espectadores] en las salas de cine de Chile, testimonian la vigencia del discurso hegemónico, que veinte años después del retorno a la democracia continúa prefiriendo los productos culturales que evitan explicitar encarnadamente la gravedad de los hechos cometidos por la rebelión de Pinochet, así como la profundidad de las brechas ideológico-políticas [The success at festivals and favorable professional criticism, contrasted with the few (... spectators) in Chilean movie theaters, testify to the validity of the hegemonic discourse, which twenty years after the return to democracy continues to prefer cultural products that avoid explicitly stating the seriousness of the acts committed by Pinochet's rebellion, as well as the depth of the ideological-political gaps] (Tal, 2012, para. 23).

No (2012), instead, surprised with 209 000 viewers, and it was the first Chilean film nominated for Best Foreign Language Film by the American Academy Awards. Unlike Wood and Littin, this filmmaker was born after the coup, and his political cinema offered a new perspective of the past.

In fact, Larraín is the son of right-wing politicians—members of Pinochet's supporting political party, the Independent Democratic Union (UDI)—and he did not inherit any disturbing memories resulting from traumatic events directly affecting his family. Nevertheless, in his film trilogy the director has assimilated a traumatized collective memory, articulating a remarkable narrative of the darkest years in Chilean history.

This brief review of the Chilean post-dictatorial cinema shows that, until the end of the Concertación governments, only three historical movies dealing with the military dictatorship (*Machuca*, *Dawson*, and *No*) out of a total of 15 productions achieved significant responses from local audiences. The inconsistent public

reception indicates that the military regime was a difficult topic for the public to engage with until the end of the second decade of the 21st century.[4]

Berenike Jung's study on the relationship between experiences of torture, their visual recording, and their enactment. She explores what often remains unseen in memory, history, and contemporary media to develop a political film critique that transcends traditional representation and identification approaches. Jung focuses on films by Fernando Guzzoni, Pablo Larraín, Tavo Díaz, and Patricio Guzmán that "point precisely to what is hidden, disappearing or inaccessible about the past. They highlight the intrusive organisation of a narrative agency, the mediation of history, the scepticism towards visual evidence" (2020a, p. 167). This connection between the presence of absence in historical Chilean cinema is evident in the films made during the political transition at the turn of the century. Consequently, analyzing the works of Wood, Littin, and Larraín reveals structural invisibilities —what remains offscreen—of the post-dictatorship within their narratives.

The following discussion of the representation of violence in their filmmaking provides a case study of the negotiations —the *politics of transaction* as described by Richard—between film directors and the politics of detachment during the Chilean political transition period.

The Displaced Violence in *Machuca* (2004)

Machuca succeeds because it avoids denouncing human rights violations of the military dictatorship as politically motivated. This story of two children who, despite their social origin, become friends through an educational project carried out in a private school, offered a new perspective on 1973 Chile. The film's point of view, dominated by the affluent young student Gonzalo Infante (Matías Quer), provided an unprecedented perspective on a dividing issue for Chilean collective memory, when the film was released.

[4] Since 2017, several productions have readdressed the past, examining impunity as seen in *Los perros* (2017), by Marcela Said; *Penal cordillera* (2023), by Felipe Carmona, and in the gothic dark comedy *El Conde* (2023), by Pablo Larraín. Alongside personal historical fictions such as *Cabros de mierda* (2017), by Gonzalo Justiniano; *...Y de pronto el amanecer* (2017), by Silvio Caiozzi; and *Sapo* (2017), by Juan Pablo Ternicier, the dictatorship started to be represented through the horror of suspense, as seen in *Trauma* (2017), by Lucio Rojas; and *El taller* (2018), by José Tomás Videla, respectively. Military repression has also been revisited by way of adopting gendered perspectives or civil complicity in films including *La última frontera* (2019), by Fernanda Abarca and Andrés Opazo; *Tengo miedo, torero* (2020), by Rodrigo Sepúlveda; or *El príncipe* (2019), by Sebastián Muñoz. Productions such as *Matar a Pinochet* (2020), by Juan Ignacio Sabatini; *Pacto de fuga* (2020), by David Albala; U*n lugar llamado dignidad* (2021), by Matías Rojas Valencia; and *La mirada incendiada*, by Tatiana Gaviola (2021), focus on major events from this period that shocked the public opinion.

Notable auteur feature films of these recent years include *Araña* (2019), by Andrés Wood, Manuela Martelli's *1976* (2022), and Dominga Sotomayor's *Tarde para morir joven* (2018), the latter representing, from an intimate yet detached perspective, the beginnings of the democratic transition.

The plot revolves around Gonzalo's social and urban experience during the last months of Allende's government. He goes with his new classmate and friend Pedro (Ariel Mateluna) to the latter's shantytown home to learn about the underprivileged. The boys experience an amazing journey to downtown Santiago selling cigarettes and flags at both leftist and fascist demonstrations. Gonzalo, it turns out, also has a crush on Silvana (Manuela Martelli), the neighbor of his friend. Viewers never see Pedro on his own, underscoring the film's focus from Gonzalo's bourgeois perspective.

The last quarter of the storyline deals with the military coup and the early days of the dictatorship. In one scene, Gonzalo sees Hawker Hunter aircraft heading to bomb La Moneda Palace, an event that alerts the spectator to Allende's immediate overthrow. The air attack on the Presidential building is a well-known tragic event that is portrayed with brief television inserts at Gonzalo's house, recounting the bombing.[5] Claudia Bossay's scholarly research suggests that the now-iconic original films documenting the bombing of La Moneda were actually released later in the year (2003), rather than on the same day, as portrayed in Wood's film. Still, it is important to note that the attack on Gonzalo's television set represents one of the first visual depictions of this event in the history of Chilean fiction cinema.

Machuca's decisive moment occurs when, amidst the upheaval, Gonzalo goes to the slum where the army is raiding the neighborhood. Upon his arrival, the boy witnesses some soldiers breaking into Silvana's house, and beating her father, Willy (Alejandro Trejo). In an attempt to protect her father, Silvana is tragically killed in front of her friends. The scene is shocking and devastating. The sound is briefly muted, and the camera focuses on Gonzalo, who is paralyzed by fear, unable to react. Suddenly, a soldier notices Gonzalo watching the scene and threatens to arrest the young boy. Gonzalo calls attention to his own upper-class origin and leaves. This moment marks the end of the dream to overcome inequality and, ultimately, the friendship is lost.

However, in political terms, Silvana's death demands a second look. Willy is a small entrepreneur who sells political party flags at demonstrations on both sides for and against Allende. He does not express his political opinions and appears to be disengaged from politics. Therefore, his daughter's murder does not stem from obvious political motives; rather, it seems to be an accident in a chaotic situation, and it is unclear whether the soldier intended to kill the young girl—she was not a direct political target.

Without any doubt, death is overwhelming, and the murder of a child is dev-

[5] A similar sequence is presented in Larraín's *Post Mortem*, in which the camera does not even show the airplanes. The audience, briefly, can hear the jets flying when the character is taking a shower.

astating, even in a fictional representation. In *Machuca*, it symbolizes the end of innocence, the end of the dream of educational integration, and the end of Allende's political project. Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that, in Wood's film, the most appalling loss remains almost unnoticed and is certainly underdeveloped by the plot. When the army breaks into the Saint Patrick's school, a minor character, Lisandro Toro (Luis Bascuñán)—a student who, like Pedro, participates in the educational program that integrated poor children—is detained in the courtyard of the school for insulting the soldiers. The scene is brief: a panning shot captures the faces of his peers looking at the incident from the window of the classroom before the teacher calls them back to their seats and the classwork continues.

Nothing else is revealed about the fate of the young boy, who, in terms of Irina Dzero (2025), embodies inconformity and defiance. Although previous sequences signal his political activism (Gonzalo sees him marching in a leftist demonstration; at school, he does not seem to be interested in or convinced by the educational program), Lisandro has no lines in the script before his arrest and his fate remains offscreen. Some viewers might guess his ending, but this is not evident for the schoolchildren, or for an uneducated audience.

Lisandro is not called by his name in the movie. The character is listed as part of the cast in the credits. Because the young boy is relegated to a background role, the political violence he suffers is obscured in the story. In Wood's film, it is not clear for broader or younger audiences that Lisandro is a political *desaparecido* (a *disappeared person*).[6] Lisandro's secondary role mirrors the secondary role of political violence in the movie. Consequently, Lisandro's disappearance is, literally, reenacted—both in historical and narrative terms—within the storyline, transforming *Machuca* into a piece of nostalgia that diverts addressing human rights violations under Pinochet's dictatorship driven by political motives.

The Institutionalized Representation of Violence in *Dawson, Isla 10* (2009)

In the same way, although *Dawson, Isla 10* is one of the most graphic films of this corpus, Littin also adopts several subtleties to address violent situations. Through the point of view of a former Allende minister, Sergio Bitar (Benjamín Vicuña) —named *Isla 10* at the Dawson Island detention center—viewers learn about the abuses suffered by collaborators and members of Allende's cabinet, who were isolated in the world's southernmost concentration camp, which operated between 1973 and 1974. They are victims of soldiers' mistreatment through verbal

[6] This elusive stylistic choice to represent forced disappearance during Pinochet's dictatorship is also suggested in the movie's last scene, when Gonzalo rides his bike to Pedro's slum to find a wasteland.

humiliation, confinement, and forced labor. However, while the harassment of ministers and supporters of Allende on the inhospitable far-southern Dawson Island is quite explicit, Littin's movie does not represent overt torture or murder by superiors of the military forces.

Indeed, debriefings run by Commander Jorge Sallay (Sergio Hernández) are presented as personal interviews with detainees, carried out with some tension but with a respectful tone, and registered by a typist with a typewriter. Moreover, during the individual dialogues held with Orlando Letelier (Andrés Skoknic), José Tohá (Pablo Krögh), or Edgardo Enríquez (Raúl Sendra), the prisoners are standing up, while Sallay is seated on his desk, asking questions about their roles as cabinet members. In each scene, the low-angle shot places the interviewed at a higher level compared to the Commander, a visual perspective that not only suggests the higher morality or superiority of the inmates but also softens the perception of a military interrogation scene. Furthermore, in the meeting with Enríquez, Commander Sallay—who offers a seat to the detainee—apologizes to his former Navy instructor for having him imprisoned on the island. This type of dynamic is distant from the well-known torture methods used by the regime to obtain information, humiliate political prisoners, or break the person's psyche.[7] In particular, Littin avoids representing state violence exerted by high-ranking officers, instead constructing them as arbitrary procedures led by individuals such as Lieutenant Labarca (Cristián de la Fuente).

In fact, physical aggression is depicted as experienced outside the island, as a distant and unclear occurrence. This offscreen representation of the government's violence is evident when detainees are joined by a small group of new prisoners, who, because of torture, arrive semi-unconscious. In the scene, just a few close-ups provide some details of the harm suffered by one of them. However, using a narrative omission, similar to *Machuca*, details about their previous incarceration and their fate are erased because, soon after, Isla 10 explains that the group never saw these prisoners again.

This division between what is happening in Chile and on the island is apparent one cold night, when the isolated inmates fix a small television to see, as in Wood's film, brief inserts showing what is happening on the mainland: the bombing of La Moneda Palace, general destruction, tanks and soldiers on the streets, illegal arrests, etc. The prisoners are shocked by the images, revealing that they are quite

[7] Details about human right violations and torture can be found on the report by the Comisión Nacional de Verdad y Reconciliación (*Informe Rettig*), in the section "Algunas formas de violación de los derechos humanos" (Comisión Nacional de Verdad y Reconciliación, 1991) and by the Comisión Nacional sobre Prisión Política y Tortura (2004, *Informes Valech* I and II, Chapter V: "Métodos de tortura: definiciones y testimonios").

unaware of the effects of Pinochet's coup. Eventually, the scene reinforces how *Dawson, Isla 10* frames the horror suffered by other nationals as something filtered, perceived sideways, occurring somewhere else or as part of a TV series.

The major physical repression portrayed in the film is epitomized by the arbitrary punishment of three prisoners who—after making an ironic comment about the food they are eating at the concentration camp—are confined in solitary boxcells by Sargento Figueroa (Luis Dubó). Upon their release, one of them has gone crazy. He runs, falls, and keeps running while laughing at the soldiers and his fellows. The subjective camera angle conveys the insanity of the man by flipping upwards. However, instead of expressing the emotional trauma experienced by the individual because of the isolation and the harsh conditions on the island, the sequence becomes a pitiful spectacle for the other characters and viewers. The lunatic is unable to see his own condition, which turns the effects of violence into a distant exhibition.

When discussing the representation of the Holocaust, in his book *Prisms*, Theodor Adorno states "to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric" (Adorno, 1967, p. 34), questioning the possibility of depicting horror or the irrational from a logical perspective, without distorting the true nature of the events. In *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning*, Idelber Avelar paraphrases this statement, alleging that, after the military interventions in the region, "escribir ya no es posible" [writing is no longer possible] (1999, p. 232), pointing to a sense of defeat and loss in a so-called "mournful literature" that becomes allegorical due to the difficulties of representing a traumatic past. Undoubtedly, there is no *appropriat*e or *best* language to articulate the trauma. Suffering violence is a personal and intimate experience inexpressible, perhaps, through linguistic means. Still, although the coup d'état made all representations impossible and unintelligible (Richard, 2007), the repression perpetrated by Pinochet's government in Wood's and Littin's productions avoids gathering this oppression as a systematic violation of human rights carried out as state policy.

In *Dawson, Isla 10*, this oblique view of reality is also displayed when José Tohá is notified that he is being released from detention center due to his precarious health. Sallay tells Tohá that he will be back home soon. Allende's former Minister is surprised and moved. He says goodbye to his friends and departs. The character is not further seen. The uneducated part of the audience—along with Littin's characters detained on the island—develops some hope with Tohá's relocation. Nonetheless, most viewers know that this political figure was tortured and killed, after being transferred from Dawson Island. Moreover, a brief note in the final credit

reports that Tohá was hanged, a victim of a *member of the repression* at the Military Hospital in 1974. The next paragraph of the final credits states that Orlando Letelier died in a car attack committed by *members of the Chilean repression* in Washington D.C., in 1976. In both cases, the movie plot does not discuss the murder of these relevant politicians, and their offscreen executions are not depicted as acts of state terrorism, since they were committed by individuals—members of the Chilean repression—not necessarily ordered or supervised by the military government that dominated the country for 17 years.

This is how Littin[8]—a director known for actively participating in the political commitment that marked New Chilean Cinema movement—negotiates not only the overt representation of violence in *Dawson, Isla 10,* but also exempts the Army and the military regime from direct responsibility for human rights violations. Ultimately, in this film, violence is exerted by intermediate officers (Lieutenant Labarca, Sargento Figueroa), but not necessarily with the approval or the knowledge of commanding officers. Indeed, Coronel Sallay is reluctant to follow Sargento Barriga's (Pedro Villagra) suggestion to assassinate all 400 prisoners (the colonel explains that they do not have the *technical conditions* to do so) and confronts Army Coronel Valenzuela (Mario Bustos), who arrives at the detention center with the special assignment of eliminating the detainees. Consequently, Coronel Sallay seems to be unaware of the inmates' mistreatment and appears to be genuinely interested in preserving their lives.

The fact that *Dawson, Isla 10* does not depict human rights violence overtly is not the problem. The entire story centers on the harsh conditions and mistreatment of prisoners on the island. However, it arguably represents military repression for political reasons at the hands of some individuals, and not as part of an institutional endeavor. As noted above, there is no *better way* to portray trauma, but Littin ultimately adjusts the image and the responsibility of the Chilean Armed forces in addressing the physical and emotional repression that political prisoners experienced under Pinochet's regime.

From Darker Sides of the Repression to the Upcoming Happiness in Pablo Larraín's Trilogy (2008, 2010, 2012)

In contrast, Pablo Larraín mainly adopts a different rhetoric by using individual psychotic characters to portray dictatorial violence. In both *Tony Manero* (2008) and *Post Mortem* (2010), repression is

[8] Littin, who drafted the *Manifiesto político de los cineastas de la Unidad Popular* (Cineastas Chilenos, 1970), was appointed director of Chile Films in 1971 by President Allende's government (1970–1973). The manifesto aimed for national, popular, and revolutionary cinema (King, 2000), understanding militant cinema as an art that "nace de la realización conjunta del artista y del pueblo unidos por un objetivo común: la liberación" [is born from the joint realization of the artist and the people united by a common goal: liberation] (p. 174).

displaced into other domains, while, in *No* (2012), it is almost absent. In *Tony Manero*, Raúl Peralta's (Alfredo Castro) distorted psyche is a projection of the brutality and the irrationality of the military regime. Set in 1978, the movie depicts the man's obsession with the eponymous protagonist of *Saturday Night Fever* (Badham, 1977), portrayed by the American actor John Travolta, and he strives to compete in a celebrity look-alike contest on the television program *Festival de la una*.

Peralta's existence is driven by endless viewings of Badham's movie in an empty theater, mimicking sounds and lines from the script and imitating Manero's dance style. At the rundown boarding house where he lives, he leads a group of residents who rehearse musical numbers from the film and perform them at the in-house bar. He has no other interest in life but to personify Tony Manero, and he will become a serial killer and a thief to achieve this goal.

His random and arbitrary murders—including that of a woman (to steal her TV set), the owner of some glass blocks (to steal them to build a disco dance floor), or the managers of a movie theater (to punish them for substituting a new release for his favorite film)—point to other crimes. These violent acts serve as indirect references to death off-screen, such as the killing of a man distributing political flyers, who is detained by the secret police. After his assassination—implied rather than shown—Peralta steals the man's belongings. Such violence is also suggested offscreen when soldiers break into the boarding house, arresting the team members of Peralta's rehearsal group, and viewers can only listen to the physical aggression, meanwhile the protagonist escapes through a window.

Hence, *Tony Manero* portrays cruelty on different levels to create a complex interrelationship between visible and unseen brutality. Raúl Peralta overtly performs violence, but aggression is not explicitly displayed at the hands of the police or the military forces. Simultaneously, this violence is apparent in Peralta's indifference to others' suffering and mistreatment. His subjectivity lacking empathy for his peers turns the protagonist into a malicious person, a psychopath, developing another expression of cruelty and—a distanced—subjectivity. In this way, Larraín's representations of violence and terror remain in the space of the other, in the dark psyche of the character, as the uncanny or the sinister, becoming an experience that cannot be entirely assumed in visual terms by the audience. In Oudart's terms (1990), a cinematographic suture, that is to say, a reverse angle complementing the hearing perception, is missed in *Tony Manero*, displaying violence as an overheard and emotional threat.

Post Mortem (2010) deepens this unseen experience. The story unfolds a couple of days before the coup and revolves around

the monotonous life of the unexpressive Mario Cornejo (also played by Alfredo Castro). The film's pale color palette reinforces the idea of the flat existence of this man, who works as a recording officer at the morgue. He is obsessed with his neighbor, Nancy Puelma (Antonia Zegers), a vaudeville dancer, soon fired at her workplace by the theater manager fired by the theater manager for being too thin and aging. Mario's routine is first interrupted when he meets Nancy, initiating a singular rapport between them; later on, once the military upheaval begins, and amidst the numerous corpses delivered to the morgue, he suddenly finds himself having to transcribe President Salvador Allende's death report.

Carolina Urrutia, using Giles Deleuze's theory of the cinema, discusses Larraín's movies in terms of what she calls "un fuera de campo fantasmagórico" [a ghostly offscreen] (Urrutia, 2011, p. 69). To exemplify this concept, her analysis highlights two scenes that convey this unseen metaphysical threatening presence. In the first one—taking place the morning of the coup—Urrutia notes that Cornejo takes a shower that prevents him from hearing the soldiers break into Nancy's house, kidnapping the woman's family. In this *mise-en-scène*, and as already seen in *Machuca*, the protagonist briefly hears Hawker Hunter aircraft heading to La Moneda Palace, indicating Allende's immediate overthrow, but does not pay further attention to this noise. Additionally, Urrutia underlines:

> Cuando los cadáveres se acumulan en la morgue de Santiago [...] se instala la idea de que hay algo mucho mayor sucediendo, pero no hay una panorámica que les permita a los personajes, desde su propia individualidad, acceder a una visión global [When the corpses pile up in the Santiago morgue [...] the idea is established that there is something much bigger going on, but there is no panoramic view that allows the characters, from their own individuality, to access a global vision.] (Urrutia, 2011, p. 70).

In this manner, she concludes, this visual outflow moves the perception of violence toward the margins; another type of offscreen.

In fact, Cornejo does not react to the corpses in the morgue, nor to the autopsy performed on President Salvador Allende, "thus the film's violence serves not to awaken or elicit a political response, but to deaden the senses of the viewing subject, to induce a sense of apathetic hopelessness" (Ledesma, 2020, p. 102). His only moments of anxiety arise when he can't find Nancy after soldiers raid her home. Mario is distressed with her disappearance to the point of ignoring the horror, the political unrest, and the violence of the military regime. Eventually, he locates Nancy hiding in her backyard shed. Mario comforts her and provides food, trying to alleviate her grief for her lost family. However, when he returns

to the shed, he finds her hiding with her boyfriend, Víctor (Marcelo Alonso).

Mario promises the couple food and protection, but contrary to his words, he starts blocking the shed's exit. A still camera, in an extremely long shot lasting more than six minutes, records Cornejo's actions, stacking furniture and objects in front of the door. The torturous scene announces the upcoming slow and isolated death of the lovers. In keeping with an aesthetics of omission, *Post Mortem* refrains from showing the woman's suffering; viewers are left to imagine it. Yet an early scene in the film, portraying the everyday tasks of the main character, shows the autopsy of a woman, shortly thereafter named Nancy Puelma by Dr. Castillo (Jaime Vadell), whose cause of death was starvation. Mario, undisturbed, writes the report. Here too, as seen in *Tony Manero*, the protagonist embodies a wicked, sadistic—and displaced—expression of the violence that surrounds him.

In contrast to these disturbing representations of violence, in *No* (2012), Larraín entirely avoids addressing the dictatorship's military repression, when telling the story of the 1988 referendum on Pinochet's presidency forced on the regime by international pressure. This aesthetic preference is in line with René Saavedra's (Gael García Bernal) marketing campaign against the Pinochet government, broadcast for the national referendum that eventually rejected the extension of Pinochet's government.

The film was mainly appraised for its representation of the past when originally released. Raquel Olea harshly criticized *No* for neglecting the social struggle that made possible the people's victory in the referendum. Nelly Richard agreed with this perspective, pointing out that the film worked as an instrument to defuse recalling. She argued that, instead of being a critical-transformative means, demanding a creative-reflexive response from the spectator, the film promoted viewing the past as continuous with the present and static, deconditioning and deactivating memory for *una mirada impasible* [an impassive look] (Olea, 2012, as cited in Bongers, 2016, p. 118). In particular, she considered that the technique of juxtaposing contemporary and past images without establishing a temporal distinction between them indicated an overcoming of ideological antagonisms, with no room for collective action and contesting utopian projects. Interestingly, Larrain's highest-grossing film has generated the most critical debate.

Saavedra's campaign, based on the slogan "Happiness is coming," offered hope and the idea of a better future for voters. At the same time, the TV spots omitted overt references to the regime's human rights violations, disavowing the social and political resistance movements that led to the democratic transition: "Examined from a contemporary viewpoint the campaign jingle announces an empty dream, and analyzed from a socio-economic perspec-

tive, the protagonist therefore incarnates the neoliberal model introduced during the dictatorship and maintained by democratic governments in Chile" (Barraza, 2013, p. 169).

When René first presents his proposal to an emerging Concertación coalition, Ricardo (Alejandro Goic), an irritated leader of one of the opposition political parties, states: "No voy a ser cómplice de algo que la historia nos va a pasar la cuenta" [I'm not going to be an accomplice to something that history will hold us accountable for], to then boisterously abandon the meeting. Thus, Ricardo's words, can also be seen as a reflection of Larraín's stance on his production. He suggests that, while the coalition will be blameworthy for excluding the topic of military abuses from public discourse—essentially for negotiating the political transition process—as a filmmaker, Larraín recognizes the limitations of his historical portrayal in the film. Hence, when Ricardo states that history will later hold the Concertación accountable for their decisions taken in 1988, the director is simultaneously acknowledging the responsibility for stereotyping the past, highlighting the omissions and shortcomings of his internationally acclaimed movie. The film ultimately recognizes its limitations.

No has recently been the subject of critical examination concerning its political implications within the realm of the arts. Informed by Jacques Rancière's concept of the *distribution of the sensible*, Susana Domingo Amestoy presents a compelling analysis of what she terms the *aesthetics of impunity* inherent in the film's unseen or unrepresented elements. This concept arises from the use of cinematic techniques that intentionally disrupt the traditional interaction between the viewer and the visual imagery presented onscreen, "creating a propitious distance for questioning the visible or the pretension of the visible to become all there is to see" (Domingo Amestoy, 2020, p. 162). At the same time, Domingo Amestoy's highlights how the film questions so-called popular cinema, along with the role that politics plays in cinema, and the aesthetics of politics itself.

Informed on Walter Benjamin's aestheticization of politics and Jacques Rancière's discussion on aesthetics politization, Ignasi Gozalo-Salellas and Xavier Dapena observe that Saavedra/Larraín's can be read ambiguously, as a project that

> proposes an imaginary in the order of representation that seeks to escape from state violence, and at the same time allows the occupation of space, identification of commonalities in the process of differentiating the ordering of bodies, the forms of visibility for those who are not visible. [...] While Benjamin seeks an aesthetic solution for two systems of political thought, and Rancière attends to regimes and their order and visibility, the film pro-

> blematizes the concept of politicization, both in its machinic nature and as a sum of agencies and their aesthetic strategies (Gozalo-Salellas & Dapena, 2020, p. 138).

For this reason, Larrain's *aesthetics of politics* in *No*—rather than being simply a historical film—works as a trigger to think about the effects of the past in the present. It is both a critique of the political transition of the 1990s and its consequences (Barraza, 2013), as more recently reflected in the 2019 outburst.

Still, there are a few references to state oppression in *No*. Some appear in scenes of demonstrators being arrested and beaten (including Saavedra's ex-wife) in the street or the police department. In addition to these, and as part of René's TV ads, a fragment of the 1988 political campaign shows a police officer hitting an individual during a protest "reducing the political contestation and armed resistance represented by Verónica to a mere aesthetic gesture in a campaign design" (Gozalo-Salellas & Dapena, 2020, p. 134). There are vague references to the *disappeared* and censorship. Indeed, the film insinuates violence when the protagonist is threatened, finding written scratches at his house or getting anonymous phone calls. However, the film avoids direct references to the state of terror that the entire country experienced during the military regime. The displaced and menacing violence displayed in Larraín's *Tony Manero* and *Post Mortem* is reduced to a formulaic repression in *No*.

Conclusion: What Is Still Owed to Memory

To conclude, 21st century Chilean historical cinema offers limited overt representation of human-rights violations committed by the military regime. Directors' aesthetic choices often avoid confronting state repression, opting instead for a reconciliatory tone that aligns with the political transition period. This approach can be observed in the works of filmmakers like Wood and Littin, who showcase a perspective that seeks to bridge divides rather than highlight past grievances. Conversely, directors such as Larraín explore alternative aesthetics to depict state violence, though often without engaging directly with the underlying issues of institutional oppression. *Machuca* and *Dawson, Isla 10* epitomize a conciliatory view of the past (regarding the military regime), reinforcing the negotiations of *the democracy of the agreements*, and tending to obscure the political motivations behind the human rights violations perpetrated by the authoritarian regime. This cinema, more aligned with official discourse, prefers to sideline the collective trauma of the country, excluding the systematic repression instigated by state institutions, which further diminishes the visibility of the suffering endured by individuals and communities. This results in a portrayal of history that prioritizes po-

litical stability and reconciliation over the acknowledgment of past atrocities.

Larraín, on the other hand, first developed an approach in which violence emerges as a complex experience, embodied by psychotic individuals. *Tony Manero* and *Post Mortem* offer an intimidating version of viciousness yet avoid a visual spectacle, instead exploring a sensorial perception of violence. In both films, memory and subjectivity are challenged, evoking discomfort, anguish, fear, and trauma; neither film garnered a wide audience in Chile. In contrast, *No* revolves around the Concertación's democratic transactions that refuse historical memory of the trauma of the dictatorship. At the same time, it became a film welcomed by the Chilean public and also achieved unprecedented international recognition. The commercial achievement of *No* ironically mirrors the economic success of the Concertación governments. Overall, Larraín forged a new language to convey the horrors and traumas of the past, laying a crucial foundation for current cinema's efforts to restore Chilean memory.

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