

▷ Reviewing the Present in Pablo Larraín's Historical Cinema*

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Abstract: Pablo Larraín's film trilogy about the Chilean dictatorship *explores the contradictions of memory haunting contemporary society, establishing a dialogue between a present and a dreadful past. The protagonists of Tony Manero (2008) and Post Mortem (2010) symbolize traumatized subjects embodying a dual temporality, becoming the living dead in a lifeless society. They belong to the domain of between two deaths, returning to collect an unpaid symbolic debt. Both characters bring back the memory of an inconvenient past to Chilean society reporting a haunting history. Hence, Larraín's movies review the political transition as a tension between oblivion and the incomplete postdictatorial task of mourning. This essay analyzes the figure of the undead epitomizing the debt of Chilean society to its history.*

Keywords: Pablo Larraín; Postdictatorship; Trauma, Memory; Film; Chile; 20th-21st Century.

Resumen: La trilogía cinematográfica de Pablo Larraín sobre la dictadura chilena *refiere a las contradicciones de una memoria en acecho sobre una sociedad contemporánea, para establecer un diálogo entre un presente y un pasado ominoso. Los protagonistas de Tony Manero (2008) y Post Mortem (2010) simbolizan sujetos traumatizados que encarnan una temporalidad dual, transformándose en muertos vivos de una sociedad sin vida. Pertenecen al dominio de entre dos muertes, regresando para cobrar una deuda simbólica impaga. Ambos personajes traen el recuerdo de un pasado incómodo para la sociedad chilena, al reportar una historia que se manifiesta de manera acechante. Por lo tanto, los filmes de Larraín revisan la transición política como una tensión entre el olvido y el trabajo de duelo incompleto de la posdictadura. Este ensayo analiza la figura del no muerto que encarna la deuda de la sociedad chilena con su historia.*

Palabras clave: Pablo Larraín; Posdictadura; Trauma; Memoria; Cine; Siglos XIX-XX.

Pablo Larraín's (Santiago de Chile, 1976) film trilogy about Pinochet's dictatorship (1973-1990) examines the immediate and the enduring effects of the Chilean political repression. Rather than being historical tales, these *movies explore contradictions of memory haunting contemporary society, establishing a sort of dialogue between a present and the dreadful past by which this present is hounded. Tony Manero (2008) and Post Mortem (2010) — the main foci of this essay — explore the madness, the violence, and the trauma experienced*

* Research for this essay was made possible, in part, by a Professional Development Assignment (PDA) awarded by the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Memphis in the spring of 2013.

by the Chilean population during the harshest years of the authoritarian regime, although *No* (2012) represents the end of the process, announcing the return of democracy.

The characters of Raúl Peralta and Mario Cornejo (both played by Alfredo Castro) symbolize traumatized subjects embodying a dual temporality — approaching past and present —, whereas in *No*, René Saavedra (Gael García Bernal) represents skepticism regarding a postdictatorial Chile. At the height of the repression, the protagonists of *Tony Manero* and *Post Mortem* are obsessed respectively with John Travolta's starring role in the motion picture *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham 1977) and the *Bim Bam Bum* vaudeville dancer Nancy Puelma (Antonia Zegers) to the point of ignoring the horror, the political unrest and the violence of the military regime. A second look at Raúl's fixation reveals that his ultimate goal is to create a fantasy after experiencing the destruction of his reality, while Mario loses all possibility of harbouring any illusions with the arrival of the coup. Both men represent subjects expelled — in Lacanian terms — from the Real, becoming automatons or the living dead in a lifeless society. Hence, the anxiety of these individuals can be seen as a crisis of meaning (Richard 1994) in a hopeless and senseless world.

This type of figure, in Žižek's terms, belongs to the domain of 'between two deaths,' representing "collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt" (1991: 23). According to this view, it can be argued that the protagonists of these films bring back the memory of an inconvenient past to Chilean society: they embody a haunting history. Consequently, Larraín's movies review the political transition as a tension between oblivion and the allegory of mourning as a result of the traumatic experience of the military dictatorship. In particular, this essay discusses how Larraín's works employ the character of the undead to represent the symbolic debt of Chilean society to its history.¹

Media, memory and history

A limited number of Chilean films that depict or take place during the military regime have been produced since 2003.² *Machuca* (2004) by Andrés Wood was an unexpected success, receiving great international recognition, and turning out to be the top-grossing movie in the country (with 656,000 viewers) the year that it was released (Salinas/Stange 2006: 27). However, other pictures such as *El baño* (2005) by Gregory Cohen and *Mi mejor enemigo* by Alex Bowen (2005) received less attention from their local audience. In contrast, *Dawson Isla 10* (2009), by the experienced and internationally recognized director Miguel Littin, was well received by the local audience with 93,829 spectators. In turn, Larraín's saga, a project that achieved great renown among critics and at international film festivals but barely had 86,000 viewers for *Tony Manero*, 20,500 for *Post Mortem* (CAEM 2012: 27-28), and — surprisingly — 209,000 for *No*,³ completes the series of historical fictions.

1 For discussion on historical oblivion, see Moulian (1997), Wilde (1999), Stern (2000), and Hite (2007); and for further arguments regarding the allegory of mourning see Moreiras (1993), Avelar (1999), and Richard (1994, 1998, 2007).

2 Actually, not many political movies were produced during the previous decade either.

3 The movie was the year's second hit at the local box office. Source: Ultracine in *Newsline Report* 23.239 (2012): 100.

The small number of audiovisual productions and the checkered response from the public reveal that the military period is still an elusive topic within Chilean society, even 20 years after the return of democracy. Indeed, during the years immediately following the end of the dictatorship, films avoided tackling the historical past, and the national cinema, first dominated by a high auteurism, eventually gave way to romantic dramas and sex comedies, partly because

Cineastes and producers understood that movies containing an open political position about the coup could be accepted by part of the audience, but at the same time could be rejected by the other, thus the political representation of the Chilean cinema during the '90s was limited by the interest of not reducing the potential market of the movies. (Tal 2012: no pagination)⁴

In addition to the commercial constraints, the fact that domestic filmmaking, and particularly the socio-political commitment of the New Cinema, was crushed by the regime (i. e. after 1973 only four feature films were released over the rest of the decade)⁵ was also relevant. Ultimately, it takes more than one generation to articulate a trauma narrative (Caruth 1991: 7), to discuss events such as the destruction of democracy, violations of human dignity, and state terrorism.

The turn of the century brought with it unprecedented official rituals of memory. In 2003, the country was commemorating thirty years of the coup, and a combination of political and cultural issues promoted an interest in looking back.

There was a real avalanche of public craving to remember, to know, and to open the pages of a history that until then was kept with silences and distortions of the 'official history'. In a large part, the demonization of the Unidad Popular ceased, and the image of Salvador Allende emerged for the first time with all its historical dignity, the disappeared stop being 'supposed' entities, and the dictatorship crimes came to be recognized even by those who had concealed them or by their accomplices. (Mouesca 2005: 81)

For instance, President Ricardo Lagos (2001-2006) and members of his government attended *Machuca's* premier, symbolizing a state reconciliation with a repressed past. For this reason, to a certain extent, Wood's has been regarded as a film that conveys a hegemonic discourse "politicizing the memory but infantilizing the history." (Tal 2012: no pagination).

In this context, mass media began to play a new role in the production of historical imagery, becoming placeholders in the elaboration of a collective memory that had been excluded from public debate up until that time. By the end of the decade, television programs such as *Los ochenta* (Canal 13, 2008-2013) — a remake of the Spanish

4 All translations from Spanish are mine. See also: Lillo (1995: 35); Mouesca (1992); Carreño Mora (2010).

5 The four movies are: *A la sombra del sol* (1974), by Silvio Caiozzi and Pablo Perelman, *Gracia y el forastero* (1974), by Sergio Riesenberg, *Julio comienza en julio* (1979), by Caiozzi, and *Vías paralelas* (1975), by Cristián Sánchez and Sergio Navarro. Sánchez also directed *El zapato chino* (1979), a movie without an official release date, although Miranda's essay suggests that it was presented on a "jueves cinematográfico" (November 22, 1979) because Enrique Lihn wrote a review of the film (Miranda Colleir 2009:140).

series *Cuéntame* — and *Los archivos del cardenal* (TVN 2011) — a drama based on the work of the Vicariate of Solidarity defending human rights during the dictatorship — were extremely popular, and although the miniseries *Amar y morir en Chile* (Chilevisión 2012) did not enjoy particularly high ratings, all these broadcasts fictionalized for the first time on local TV historical events that were relegated to the private domain not only by the dictatorial but also by democratic governments. Therefore, the small screen began to reflect traumatic memories — certainly with all the consequences by which this ‘society of spectacle’ (Debord 2006) could be accompanied — and simultaneously it opened up an imagery for those Chileans who were born after the return of democracy.⁶

Contemporary filmmaking and the past

Although not participating in a ‘spectacularization’ of the past, Chilean cinema has been experiencing significant renewal with young directors exploring new topics and alternative means of producing and distributing their work, creating a so-called ‘independent cinema’ (Larraín 2010: 161). These filmmakers have dissociated their work from the political activism of previous generations (that arose between the late ’60s and the ’80s) which focused mainly on exile experiences, the historical documentary and the representation of popular and working classes, to develop their own subjectivity through “emergent aesthetics that combines and substitutes the influence of classical cinema by introspection, hybridization and invention.” (Flores 2007: 7) The group, distinguished by a significant heterogeneity, has been called the *novísimos* (Cavallo/Maza 2011) or *Generación 2000* (Parada Poblete 2012).

Working on diverse subjects, adapting, and/or crafting their own visual language, this new breed of cineastes is revitalizing the established representational system. Above all, their productions, which are characterized by great creativity, illustrate diverse types of otherness, standing for a presence that was negated until recently (Maza 2010: 58). On a content level, even though it is not possible to classify this filmmaking under a common banner, movies by directors such as Matías Bize, Fernando Lavanderos, José Luis Torres Leiva, Alicia Scherson, Sebastián Lelio, Rodrigo Marín, Alejandro Fernández Almendras, Elisa Eliash, Niles Atallah, Pablo Carrera, Christopher Murray and, of course, Pablo Larraín share an interest in narrating intimate stories dealing with themes such as love, solitude, estrangement, abandonment, oblivion or connection.

In particular, documentaries have shown a remarkable originality in addressing social problems, political movements, and historical facts. Young directors including Tiziana Panizza, René Ballesteros, Lorena Giachino Torrén, Macarena Aguiló, Sebastián Moreno, Germán Berger, and Antonia Rossi have presented notable pieces exploring the impact of dictatorship on their lives, displaying a nostalgic view of the relationship between

6 The bicentennial celebration of independence (2010) renewed television’s enthusiasm for representing the past. Not only were soap operas set in the colonial period (*La doña*, Chilevisión), the nineteenth century (*Martín Rivas*, TVN) or the early twentieth century (*El señor de la Querencia*, TVN), but also two reality shows (*1810*, and *1910* Canal 13) were set in the past. In 2007 Canal 13 also produced the TV movie series *Héroes*, portraying the life of national heroes such as Bernardo O’Higgins, José Miguel Carrera, Manuel Rodríguez, Diego Portales, Arturo Prat, and José Manuel Balmaceda, and TVN broadcast *Grandes Chilenos de Nuestra Historia* during 2008. Recently, in 2010, Megavisión televised the miniseries *Adiós al séptimo de línea*.

memory, the audiovisual, and the past. Similarly, Marcela Said, Jean de Certau, Bettina Perut and Iván Osnovikoff have made innovative use of visual resources to display political events, incorporating an experimental and/or collective perspective on the period.⁷

As I have already stated, narrative films have not been as active as documentaries in overtly focusing on the past. It seems that the latency needed to discuss traumatic experiences — the forgetting process according to Caruth (1991: 187) — has led to creative forms that evoke factual events, but this progress has not been as successful in fictionalizing critical historical events. Still, feature-films are showing great concern for the impact of social and economic conditions in post-dictatorship Chilean society, expressing this uneasiness indirectly.

Estévez identifies a “cinematographic melancholy” in several movies, which is comprised of an aesthetic that combines the senseless feeling of the subject in contemporary society, accompanied by dissatisfaction resulting from the incomplete task of mourning that took place in the country after the authoritarian regime (Estévez 2010: 18). By the same token, Donoso notes that some productions “do not refer directly to the dictatorial periods, neither to the democratic reconstruction, but they precisely address this subject from tangential points.” (Donoso Pinto 2007: 26). Given this drifting to portray a sort of malaise, Urrutia (2010) suggests that although these fictions cannot be related to an explicit ideological discourse due to their primary focus on intimacy and everyday life, their alienated representation of life turns into a political feeling of unease. In consequence, some recent film productions have been developing ciphered strategies for criticizing and/or expressing apprehension regarding sociopolitical conditions in today's Chile; so the apparent indifference to depicting the past, in fact, reveals great concern regarding the present.

Accordingly, new filmmakers partake in a postmemory described by Marianne Hirsch as the relationship of the second generation to powerful experiences that they did not themselves live through, but which constitute their own memories:

Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generations shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. (Hirsch 1997: 22)

In this view, contemporary Chilean filmmakers share a childhood and adolescence dominated by the effects of an earlier historical event that affected the lives of relatives in various ways.

Pablo Larraín — the son of right-wing politicians, members of Pinochet's supporting political party the Independent Democratic Union (UDI) — did not inherit a disturbing memory resulting from a stressful event that affected his family; nevertheless, in his movies, the director has assimilated a traumatized collective memory, articulating a remarkable narration of the darkest years in Chilean history. Film critics have praised his trilogy highly: *Tony Manero* had its world premiere during the Cannes Directors' Fortnight (2008), won several awards at various film festivals (Torino, Istanbul, Buenos Aires, Manila, Rotterdam, Havana, Warsaw) and was Chile's submission to the 81st Academy

7 Specifically, Janet Walker (2005) studies documentary films and videos that adopt catastrophe as their subject matter and trauma as their aesthetic to discuss the representation of traumatic history and memory.

Awards for the Best Foreign Language Film. *Post Mortem* competed at the Venice Film Festival 2010 for the Golden Lion statue, receiving top film awards in Cartagena, Havana, Lima and Los Angeles. With *No*, Larraín's work was selected once again in Cannes, this time winning the C.I.C.A.E. Award, and in addition to its international recognition (in Hamburg, London, Oslo, São Paulo and Tokyo), the film was nominated for the 2013 Oscar competition in the category for Best Foreign Language Film of the Year.⁸ In short, Larraín has proven to be a respected international filmmaker while establishing a new aesthetic for viewing and reviewing the Chilean present through the past.

Narrating the unsayable

A well-known Adorno dictum states “to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric” (1967: 34), introducing suspicion about any representation of the Holocaust. In other words, Adorno wonders how it is possible to write about horror or the irrational from a logical perspective without distorting the true nature of the events represented. In *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning*, Avelar paraphrases this statement, alleging that after the military interventions in the region “writing is no longer possible” (1999: 232), and observes a sense of defeat and loss in a ‘mournful literature,’ that becomes allegorical due to the difficulties of representing a traumatic past.⁹ Southern Cone dictatorships not only vanished utopias, democratic systems and individuals, they even transformed social life to the point that language itself became insufficient to describe reality. Following this view, Richard notes that because of the coup d'état local cultural production suffered a crisis of the unintelligible. Consequently, the regime made all representation impossible; thus, Richard points out that the dictatorship not only denotes

the failure of a specific historical project—the Unidad Popular—but also to the end of an entire system of social and cultural references [...]. Once history is disarticulated and the organic entity of the social subject is broken, everything will have to be reinvented, starting with the intercommunicative texture of the language that, having survived the catastrophe, does not know how to name the objects. (Richard 2007: 15)

The democratic rupture completely interrupted the narrative of historical progress represented by Salvador Allende's government, the nation's traditional landscape of expression, and the possibility of collective comprehension of the traumatic experience.

For those who suffered during the political repression, the military coup erased all resources for expressing reality. Hence, from a Lacanian perspective, it is possible to state that Pinochet's dictatorship destroyed the imaginary dimension of the subject — the mirror identification as the threshold of the visible world (Lacan 1986: 735) — along with the symbolic order for understanding human existence. In the Chilean case, the relationship

8 Larraín's first feature film, *Fuga* (2006), received some attention at international film festivals (Cartagena, Montréal, Málaga, Trieste), but the story and the audiovisual work did not convince the local audience, nor Chilean critics.

9 See Moreiras (1993) for an interpretation along this line.

between the individual and his reality was torn apart as if the mirror — the “armour of an alienating identity” (Lacan 1986: 736)—was broken into a thousand pieces.

This critical experience, as a “meaning catastrophe” (Richard 2007: 15), turned upside down all resources for understanding the world. During the dictatorship, immediate or secondary victims of human right violations were thrown — using Lacanian terms — to the Real, to the domain that resists symbolization or verbalization, to the unsayable. As a result, the “impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the Symbolic, and impossible to attain” (Lacan 1988: 4) took control over the individuals provoking psychotic mental experiences.

Larraín's protagonists embody those individuals who have been ejected into the domain of the Real and are searching for a mirror, for a realm from which to identify, to fantasize, and to rearticulate a symbolic order. In *Tony Manero*, Raúl Peralta aims for an illusion, initiating a quest to create his own imago, while in *Post-Mortem* Mario Cornejo loses all possibility of dreaming.

***Tony Manero*: it's too late for dreaming**

Set in 1978, *Tony Manero* portrays Raúl's obsession with the protagonist of *Saturday Night Fever*. The first sequence follows Peralta to an audition for the celebrity look-alike contest organized by the television program *Festival de la una*. Raúl, a man in his fifties, enters the set but an assistant tells him that the competition will take place a week later. During the few seconds the character is in the studio, the camera goes of focus, adopting a subjective point of view to reflect a bunch of blurry lights, shapes and colors, suggesting that Raúl perceives a quite distorted reality.

Peralta's existence is driven by endless viewings of John Travolta's movie in an empty theater, mimicking the sound of his lines and imitating his dance style. At the boarding house where the man lives, he leads a group of residents who rehearse musical numbers from the film and perform them at the 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.

In this way, the silver screen emerges as Raúl's mirror or filter for seeing and understanding the world, ignoring the Chilean reality, or as a tool to compensate for the crisis of meaning provoked by the authoritarian regime. So, even though he is not a direct victim of the military repression, the character represents a subjectivity that borders on the psychopathic; he unsuccessfully tries to recuperate a symbolic order by idealizing a motion picture. Yet, this imaginary is a ready-made projection.

Following this view, this mimicry of the subaltern, as a bad or as an incomplete copy of the original (Bhabha 2004), in fact reveals a lack, an emptiness, a necessity for fantasy. A song performed in the movie begins by asserting “It's too late for dreaming”, synthesizing Peralta's hopeless world, referring at the same time to Chile's situation as depicted in the film with soldiers on the streets and CNI (Pinochet's secret police) agents detaining people for having political flyers or eliminating them under bridges.

Žižek summarizes Lacanian psychoanalysis, emphasizing the fact that “what constitutes reality is the minimum of idealization the subject needs to be able to sustain the horror of the Real” (Žižek 1997: 66). For this reason, the sense of reality is given by fantasy, which serves as a frame or phantasmatic screen for organizing a disorganized

universe that would be unintelligible, chaotic or nightmarish without this phantasmagoric support. Nevertheless, the relationship between fantasy and the reality that needs to be concealed is yet more ambiguous, because fantasy may conceal horror and simultaneously create in a disguised form that which “it purports to conceal, its ‘repressed’ point of reference” (Žižek 1997: 7). So in *Tony Manero* all props intended to fulfil a fantasy — the movie, clothing, Travolta’s character — finally reflect the horror from which the protagonist is intending to escape.

Raúl’s own crimes are reflections of the outside realm; his wickedness, then, is a synecdoche of the tyrant. Subsequently, instead of the apparent, Raúl’s fixation with the motion picture indicates an absence of imagination and desire in his life.¹⁰ Indeed, women admire him, and although he tries to have sex, he cannot get an erection because the Chilean Tony Manero is actually impotent.

Therefore, Raúl Peralta has no dreams and he puts all his efforts into having one. This is evident, first, when he destroys a mirror to make a disco ball with the broken pieces, and it is also revealed through his mania for creating a dance floor, which he eventually manages to craft in his room by assembling glass blocks and neon lights. In a really intimate and disturbing scene, Raúl rests on the flashing floor and dances ecstatically as well. He is close to fulfilling a fantasy, but in the end, the cracked mirrors, the disco floor made out of blocks and the blinking lights are all fragments, incomplete reflections or discontinuous realities reproducing the protagonist’s disintegrated world.

In this view, these split particles reproduce and deform the Real, revealing that the true desire of this character is clinging to an illusion, but as the song says it is not feasible to dream anymore. The Symbolic order has been fractured and it is no longer possible to overcome the crisis of meaning. Ultimately, a younger and more charismatic participant wins the contest, opening the doors for Peralta to unleash his psychosis.

Post Mortem: cracking a dream

Contrary to Raúl Peralta, Mario Cornejo has a dream that will be soon destroyed. The first shot places the camera beneath the wheels of a tank moving along its destructive path; right after that, the movie introduces Mario in his living room, behind the window looking at the house across. The glass symbolizes a screen for Mario’s imaginary: he is in love with Nancy Puelma, his neighbor who dances at the *Bim Bam Bum* cabaret.

This idealized representation of the woman is reinforced in the next sequence, as the action begins framing a picture of burlesque dancers located at the entrance of the theater. Here, the spectators can see Mario’s reflection over the crystal that covers the photograph of the performers (as a new type of frame-filter). The man adjusts his glasses in order to identify Nancy within the group. He wants to see her on stage (another space that allows the main character to fantasize about his neighbor), but the woman is not performing that evening, because at that moment she is being fired by the theater manager, who alleges that she has lost her beauty — she is too thin and is getting old. As announced in the first scene of the movie, Mario’s projections will be cracked.

10 Pinto Veas (n.d.) observes that, in fact, the phantasmagoria of the lights, disco music and Travolta’s character allows the protagonist to project a commoditized desire.

Opening a couple of days before the coup, the story portrays the monotonous life of this unexpressive man as a voyeur and as a recording officer at the morgue. The pale color palette reinforces the idea of a flat existence. During one autopsy, there is a brief allusion to Nancy's death by starvation, but there is no further explanation of this prolepsis. Mario's routine is first interrupted when he finally meets his neighbor, initiating a singular rapport between them; and secondly, once the military upheaval begins, and amidst the numerous corpses delivered to the morgue, suddenly Mario finds himself having to transcribe Salvador Allende's death report.

The protagonist becomes involved in a relationship with Nancy, although it seems as though the woman is more interested in having someone, anyone, by her side. The love story is therefore essentially located in the main character's imagination, rather than being a real romance. The audience can once again perceive the man's desire for fantasy when the couple eats in a Chinese restaurant: a glass separates their table from a dark artificial garden with several birds flying around. With this simulated and exotic background, Mario proposes to Nancy, and in response she asks him what his name is, his occupation, his type of employment; he's a stranger to her.

Larraín establishes a deep contrast between the protagonist's mental projection of Nancy, and the absence of his point of view regarding historical events. The morning of the coup Mario is taking a shower that prevents him from hearing and seeing the military break into his neighbor's house. Afterwards, the audience, along with the character, will observe the ruins left by the soldiers: the furniture has been destroyed, the house has been devastated, and the entire family has disappeared. Urrutia (2011) points out that this lack of overt representation insists on the experience of 'the not seen' suggesting that, we—the contemporary viewers—have seen everything: "When corpses are piled up in Santiago's morgue [...] the idea that something bigger is happening sets up, but there is not a panoramic view that allows the characters, from their individuality, to have access to a global vision of the events." (Urrutia 2011: 70) Hence, *Post Mortem* avoids the depiction of violent actions with which the spectators are familiar, in part because they belong to a critical memory (and postmemory), and certainly to elude the imagery publicized by the spectacularization of memory that took place in Chile after 2003.

Still, the fact that the protagonist creates his own illusion around the woman and seems to be unaffected by the military upheaval does not mean that he is disconnected from reality as is the case with Peralta. Specifically, the character is aware of the historical events in which he is forced to take part, but expresses barely any reaction to them:¹¹ after Allende's autopsy, in a short dialogue with Sandra (Amparo Noguera) — the colleague who is in love with him —, Mario considers that the head of state committed suicide, although the woman concludes that he was assassinated.

The debate surrounding Allende's death has lasted years because part of the Chilean left-wing maintained, for political purposes, that the president was killed during the Moneda Palace occupation. However, an international forensic team performed a new autopsy of Allende's body in 2011 as part of an official investigation that reopened the case, and eventually the Legal Medical Service confirmed that the death was suicide.

11 During Allende's autopsy, the coroners work with an automatic typewriter, but because of the shocking situation the employee is unable to use it; his superiors therefore designate a soldier to transcribe the report. This suggests, then, that the records of the former president's death were written by the military, introducing suspicion about the accuracy of the account.

So, Mario keenly understands reality, but Nancy's betrayal right after the coup, as she hides with another man in a small storage room in the back of her house, will destroy his imaginary and the Symbolic realm that organizes his world. This definitively introduces Mario to the horror; in spite of the fact that the bodies piled up at the morgue do not seem to move him at all. He can no longer sustain his fantasy and the character will release his anger and psychotic tendencies, blocking the exit to her shelter.

A ghostly revision of the past

As already suggested, Raúl Peralta and Mario Cornejo embody the living dead in part due to their acting and to their proximity to death, but also because they bring back traumatic memories of an unresolved past. Without the possibility of fantasizing, these individuals are lost in the Real, and — using Žižek's terms — they are pure drive without desire. Indeed, *The New York Times* called Peralta a sociopath with the soul of a zombie (Holden 2009: 6; Maza 2010: 58).

According to Žižek's view:

the funeral rite exemplifies symbolization at its purest, through it, the dead are inscribed in the text of symbolic tradition, they are assured that, in spite of their death, they will 'continue to live' in the memory of the community. The 'return of the living dead' is, on the other hand, the reverse of the proper funeral rite. While the latter implies a certain reconciliation, an acceptance of the loss, the return of the dead signifies that they cannot find their proper place in the text of tradition (1991: 23).

Larraín's characters, the undead, return to demand a place for the unsayable within Chilean history, a pending debt to those who were tortured or eliminated by the regime.

In fact, improper funeral rite references those who disappeared under authoritarian repression, whose bodies and remains continue to be identified by the Legal Medical Service today. Additionally, the ghostly figure is also found in the recent exhumations, in 2011, of respected politicians such as the former president Eduardo Frei Montalva (1964-1970), and more recently, of Allende's minister José Tohá. Furthermore, the prestigious poet Pablo Neruda's decease is currently under scrutiny. In this context, Allende's new autopsy 38 years after his death, and his three funerals (in 1973, 1990, and 2011) confirms the inadequacy of his burial ceremony, revealing an unsolved treatment of the historical past. Hence, although democracy was restored in 1990, Chilean society has not definitely overcome or discussed the traumatic memories that still haunt the present.

Consequently, even though produced more than 35 years after the coup by a young director who certainly did not experience traumatic events, Larraín's movies review "the consensual model of a 'democracy of agreements' formulated by the Chilean government of the Transition (1989) that marked a passage from politics as antagonism [...] to a politics of transaction" (Richard 2004: 15). Therefore, these film productions confront the viewers with "a history that many had preferred to 'forget' or 'ignore'" (Winn 2007: 3).

The undead characters of this cinema demand a response to the oblivion consensus to whiten the Chilean past (Moulian 1997), 'the silence pact' (Hite 2003) or the 'silence conspiracy' (Wilde 1999) as institutionalized practices of forgetfulness with regard to

traumatic history.¹² In this line, Stern uses the metaphor of memory as a closed box to describe an oblivion full of memory that

the usefulness of oblivion and the things that are worth forgetting. It also defines the dangers and the insurmountable conflicts that should be remembered. [...] It is, rather, about getting amnesia voluntarily, about a more or less conscious will to put aside certain memories that have been considered insuperable and dangerous. (Stern 2000: 17).

Thus, Larraín's ghostly figures seem trapped in Stern's memory box, knocking from an afterlife to demand proper memory rituals.

Reviewing the present through historical films

Rather than symbolizing a traumatized subject, the protagonist of *No* represents a dystopia of contemporary Chile. The apolitical René Saavedra and his colleague Lucho (Alfredo Castro) respectively lead the "Yes" and "No" television campaigns for the historical 1988 national referendum that actually rejected the extension of Pinochet's government. Although rivals in politics, 'the business of business' keeps both publicists working together on advertising campaigns to sell microwaves, sodas and soap operas.

Similarly to the main characters in *Tony Manero* and *Post Mortem*, Saavedra does not express any interest in the social or political situation of the country, but his main difference from these characters is his relationship to fantasy: René designs a happy campaign with the slogan "Happiness is coming", offering hope and the idea of a better future for the voters, but at the same time depoliticizing the social movement that led to the democratic transition. Examined from a contemporary viewpoint the campaign jingle announces an empty dream, and analyzed from a socio-economic perspective, the protagonist therefore incarnates the neoliberal model introduced during the dictatorship and maintained by democratic governments in Chile.

In fact, President Patricio Aylwin Azócar (1990-1995) and Patricio Bañados, the campaign's anchorman, play themselves when preparing to go in front of the TV cameras (without make-up so that they look younger), and then the movie shows the original footage from 1988. Hence, the film suggests a sort of immobility, permanence or stability in the political class, the happiness that was supposed to come, and the country's socio-economic progress. Indeed, this fixity reflects that not many things have changed since Pinochet left. For this reason, *No*'s very first line is the same as the last: "What you're going to see now is in line with the current social context," suggesting not so much a cyclical story as a stationary history.

To conclude, this cinematography depicts the effects of the Chilean dictatorship as the loss of a phantasmatic realm traduced into delusion, and psychopathic responses in the characters of Raúl Peralta and Mario Cornejo. The horror exerted by the regime destroyed all possibilities of understanding the world as if the symbolic mirror were totally cracked. The exposure to the Real, then, triggered the necessity for fantasy as seen in the worshipping

12 There is still a on-going debate on the interpretation of the Chilean past as discussed by Stern (2000), Waldman (2009), Winn (2007), Wilde (1999), or Hite (2007).

of a movie star in the case of Peralta, and also represents the destruction of an illusion as discussed for Cornejo's.

Nevertheless, both protagonists not only describe a traumatic past but they incarnate the living dead connecting past and present. As collectors of an unpaid debt, they represent the endless death of many who are not resting in peace because of the political decision to exclude them from the public debate. In this way, these ghostly specters inhabit a limbo between memory and oblivion, waiting for their proper inscription into Chilean history.

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