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What is This?
Latent Image
Chilean Cinema and the Abject
by
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Central to the analysis of a corpus of films dealing with current psychosocial conditions in Chile and the challenges of communal reconciliation, are the concepts of collective memory and social trauma. Chilean cinema of the postdictatorship reflects a society whose channels of communication have been broken, in which the past continues to be a source of contestation and dispute. The neoliberal system imposed in the early 1970s has significantly contributed to an isolation and disaffection that limit the possibilities of social healing. Cinema has assumed the role of recovering a sense of community by disallowing the privatization of pain fostered by the hegemonic political practices and discourses of the period of dictatorship by returning this suffering to the social arena from which it originated.

Keywords: Chilean cinema, Collective memory, Neoliberalism, Privatization of pain, Social trauma

In the last 10 years, Chilean cinema has remained conspicuously distanced from subjects and situations that directly address the traumas of the dictatorship and the concomitant experiences of exile and return, even though these events underlie the realities presented onscreen. Far from constituting a form of escapism or an alignment with the ideology of success instituted by the political and economic elites in power since 1990, however, this cinema has attempted to reconstruct collective memory by gathering its scattered fragments lodged in the cracks of the neoliberal system and accessing the symbolic place the media has provided for the abject memories of a society subjected to 18 years of terror. This article focuses on a corpus of films that, from a variety of ideological and genre/artistic viewpoints, address the current state of Chilean society and the challenges it faces in reconciling with itself and its past. This analysis is based on Maurice Halbwachs’s concept of collective memory, which serves as the basis for communal cohesion insofar as its shared memories—those sanctioned by a given social group—allow...
members to think of themselves as being in harmony with and sharing an identity with others. When the links between these memories that enable their correlation and the negotiation of remembrance (recuerdos) and agreements (acuerdos) are broken, the memories of individuals become disassociated, and conflicts between factions attached to different social models are transferred to a symbolic and intellectual plane in which differing mnemonic archives counter each other. This puts in evidence the politics of memory, which are constantly being exercised but whose conflictive nature is exacerbated when traditional divergences (class, ethnic, regional, generational, religious) are compounded with political/historical conflicts. Chile exemplifies a case in which the channels of communication are broken, and it is in this context that the contributions of Trauma Studies to the reconstruction of collective memory after horrific historical/political experiences become pertinent. Political and sociological analyses of the impact of the neoliberal rationale on contemporary societies can help us understand the disaffection and isolation of present-day communal life, aspects that are all the more visible and dramatic in societies already affected by political and social schisms.

The end of the dictatorship was supposed to lead to an ideal opportunity for the collective purging of social trauma. However, this process coincided with the full implementation of a neoliberal state founded on the social and economic premises that the dictatorship had established at least a decade earlier. When Patricio Aylwin took over the presidency in March 1990, his administration found itself severely limited by the 1980 Constitution, instituted by the dictatorship. The 1978 Amnesty Law, passed by the authoritarian regime in order to safeguard the interests of the military and civilian factions that engaged in torture, forced disappearances, and the murder of political prisoners apprehended between September 11, 1973, and March 10, 1978, posed yet another obstacle. Given the political climate, Aylwin’s administration set out to “seek justice to the greatest extent possible,” a maxim that sums up the fragility of Chile’s transition toward democracy. The creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Comisión Verdad y Reconciliación, also known as the Comisión Rettig) in April 1990 sought to advance the process of social resolution and reconstruction by pushing the need for reconciliation and justice despite legal obstacles. This initiative continued to be pursued during Ricardo Lagos’s administration (1998–2006), leading to the creation of the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture (Comisión Nacional sobre Prisión Política y Tortura, also known as Comisión Valech) and the publication of its report on November 28, 2004.

In this sense, Chile’s social memory has had to face the judicial oblivion to which it had been relegated in order to avoid confrontations; above all, it has resisted the rationale behind the socioeconomic model imposed by freedom of consumption and competition—a type of social Darwinism that, far from assimilating citizens into cooperative structures, exacerbates ostracism and mistrust, dramatically postponing any kind of commitment to a communal process. On the discursive level, this individualistic logic has developed a questionable and convenient dissociation between “them,” the “victims,” and “us,” those who were not directly affected by the climate of fear. This separation is not necessarily conscious and has not been absent from academic discourse. Because of this ideological/linguistic operation, the legal, psychological,
and ethical aspects of the mechanisms through which victimization by state terrorism can be acknowledged continue to be addressed on an individual level (that of the “victims”), obscuring the historical and political basis of the conflict. For this reason, one of the main challenges facing contemporary Chilean society, which is in the process of regaining a sense of community based on genuine reconciliation, is to relocate this conflict in the public arena and consciousness.

As a result of this process of “privatization,” during the 18 years that have elapsed since the end of the dictatorship (the same amount of time the latter had to create the problems that now seek resolution), Chileans have created a vacuum of historical, cultural, and experiential information and an ethical and emotional distancing from their own condition as inhabitants and descendants of an authoritarian system. In addition, there is an indifference toward the most visible of the victims, those who carry the weight of a horrific memory on their bodies and lives: they have been left alone to face not only the burden of their pain but also the responsibility of preserving, in their own lives, the marks of a past that belongs to all Chileans. In fact, this empty space has been occupied by a sort of boredom with regard to the national past, a boredom that is nevertheless characterized by a lack of information, vacuity, and fragmentation that emerge during commemorative ceremonies or events such as Pinochet’s arrest in London in October 1998, the thirtieth anniversary of the September 11 coup d’état, and Pinochet’s death in December 2006. Such memories resemble a sleeping creature that at the least sign of unrest threatens the vulnerable harmony enjoyed by the inhabitants.

The heart of the problem lies, then, in strategies that privatize pain and demand forgiveness on the part of victims while simultaneously immersing the population in a consumerist and success-based ideology. Thus, those who “luckily” find themselves outside the circle of tragedy (assuming that they have not condemned those inside the circle with an explanatory “They must have done something”) can occasionally take a compassionate look (for how can an individual participate in the “other’s” pain but through the emotional medium of compassion?). As Gabriel Salazar (2001: 64–65) points out, “private memories have not been correspondingly and exactly reproduced in the sphere of public memory. . . . We still demand that, in the name of human rights, the public memory should coincide with the private one.” “Individual” traumatic memories must be acknowledged as shared social ones in order to allow not just the assumption of responsibility by the state and the consequent economic compensation and ritual honoring of victims in monuments and on walls but above all the acknowledgment of social pain, the distress of recognizing this shared calamity, and the collective nature, though varying in degree and in form, of that pain. The nub of this discussion is Chilean collective identity, the foundation upon which the national future is to be built. If the future of the past is being contested, it is largely because to some degree it prefigures the future. This is why now, more than ever, memory has become the locus of epistemological debate and political dispute.

Symbolic languages fill this vacuum if not with factual information (although this not been lacking) then with images of a memory that remains true to the feeling of key episodes and with the disposition and commitment required by this history. When factual information is made broadly available, it will be
possible for society to identify with it, to recognize itself in the partially veiled daguerreotype of this communal Chilean biography. For this reason, art has been identified as a key symbolic language through which to express unresolved social issues—to gather collective images and feelings that have yet to find a channel in the humanities or the social sciences, much less in political and economic discourse and practice.

In 1992, two years after the beginning of the democratic transition, the lawyer Jorge Correa Sutil, secretary of the Rettig Commission, commented on the ripples that the commission’s report created in political and legal circles (1995: 494):

Soon after the delivery of the [Rettig] report, politicians started discussing responsibilities for the crisis of the democratic government. Some talk addressed the issue of who was responsible for human rights violations. But the discussion about how Chileans involved themselves in sophisticated methods of torture or how Chileans could hate each other so much that such massive and gross human rights violations could take place were never seriously addressed. Chileans could not handle facing for too long the worst part of our collective history, except at the superficial, political level. . . . Perhaps it is too early to expect such a collective reaction. The time for the artists’ and the psychiatrists’ explanations will come.

The authors of Historia, política y ética de la verdad en Chile (Lira et al., 2001: 106) maintain that the amnesty law represents a kind of “judicial oblivion” and assign the responsibility of preserving this “memory of oblivion” to the arts and the humanities: “[This] might, perhaps, inspire future researchers—whether journalists, historians, novelists, filmmakers or others—and ensure that this psychologically fictitious judicial oblivion does not become factual and social.” Thus the responsibility for keeping collective memory from becoming de facto forgetfulness or preventing the current state of insensibility and estrangement from becoming permanent falls on (among other things) the narratives woven by symbolic languages, film being one of them.

The estrangement just mentioned has been resolved by the increasing popularity of a rhetoric of compassion directly related to what the George W. Bush administration termed “compassionate conservatism,” a privatization of feelings implemented in order to take on judicial and social commitments. In the Chilean context, this pious affiliation has the added effect of disowning an important group of individuals categorized as victims, which results in a kind of double distancing: it both distances the compassionate subjects from their own tormented condition as abject witnesses of terror by concealing it with an “other” who indeed suffers and allows them to display a certain superiority over the distanced victims. At the same time, if we assume that the compassionate subjects are not really part of the conflict, the discourse of solidarity further isolates the victims of atrocities and situates them in an “otherness” that demands condolence and compensation. Thus, the victims are doubly stigmatized: their condition is firmly located in the individual sphere—as if it constituted a personal fault—and is viewed as that of an anomalous, suffering “other,” an undesirable subject in a society that presents itself as healthy or at least aspires to healing. In this context, and no matter how affably the “infected” subjects may be viewed through the lens of the operative compassionate
discourse, they are still kept on the margins of the social nucleus. Moreover, Michael Humphrey (2002: 10) points out that a “politics of victimization” is

the corollary of the politics of atrocity. The spectacle of pain is replaced by the spectacle of suffering, the response of fear is replaced by the response of compassion and the voice of the perpetrator is replaced by the voice of the victim. In the same way that the politics of atrocity manipulates our sentient bodies through pain, victimhood draws on our compassion for another’s pain.

This divorce between victims and compassionate subjects able to display solidarity has been addressed by Dori Laub (1995: 66), who says that independent, uncompromised witnesses unaffected by the very act of witnessing and existing in a climate of terror are an impossibility. Referring to the experience of the Holocaust, Laub continues:

No observer could remain untainted, that is, maintain integrity—a wholeness and a separateness—that could keep itself uncompromised, unharmed, by his or her very witnessing. The perpetrators, in their attempt to rationalize the unprecedented scope of the destructiveness, brutally imposed upon their victims a delusional ideology whose grandiose coercive pressure totally excluded and eliminated the possibility of an unviolated, unencumbered, and thus sane, point of reference in the witness . . . someone who could step outside of the coercively totalitarian and dehumanizing frame of reference in which the event was taking place, and provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed. One might say that there was, thus, historically no witness to the Holocaust, either from outside or from inside the event.

In such circumstances, can anyone really claim to be in a position to exercise compassion while distanced from the moment of terror to the point of feeling unconnected to the accompanying political horror? To what extent is Chilean society as a whole (i.e., the political, intellectual, and artistic elites, as well as civilians in general) ready to begin confronting its past?

THE ABJECT: TERROR, CANNIBALISM, AND SPECTER

— Dude, that Indian [Lautaro] has a massive history, man. They say that when he was a kid he was so weird . . . that he was brought up by some wild dogs and when he grew up the fucking bastard ate them. And they say he’s the son of a disappeared guy!

— Now you’re back to the bloody politics! Your story was going so well!

— Hey man, you’re really ignorant, you, real slow. Don’t you see this is another kind of disappeared! The disappeared ones from the North are the ones that come back as spirits, man. Those who get lost in the desert . . . they say the guys turn up years later, right where they disappeared, but just like zombies, right? You know why? ‘Coz they saw the face of death, that’s right.

—Azul y blanco, directed by Sebastián Araya, 2004

Psychosocial contentions have found ideal media of expression in the reality shows aired on television and the radio, in sexually explicit films such as El chacotero sentimental (directed by Cristián Galaz, 1999), Sexo con amor (directed
by Boris Quercia, 2003), *Los debutantes* (directed by Andrés Waissbluth, 2003), *Mujeres infieles* (directed by Rodrigo Ortúzar, 2004), and *Gente decente* (directed by Edgardo Viereck, 2004), and in an emerging horror cinema. At the end of the first decade of the postauthoritarian era, the bulk of Chilean films continue to focus on and portray the ways in which society and especially the middle and lower classes have tried to adapt to the new forms of participation imposed by the neoliberal rationale while the past’s horrific psychological and social circumstances are vaguely evoked. One of the first movies of the postdictatorship era to portray events and struggles pertinent to the neoliberal context was Ricardo Larraín’s *El entusiasmo* (1998), which focused on somewhat eccentric characters belonging to an established middle class who move to northern Chile to build a sort of utopian society or refuge. A few years later we have Sebastián Alarcón’s *El fotógrafo* (2002), a nostalgic story set just before the 1962 World Cup, which was hosted by Chile. The movie elliptically portrays the dilemmas of a photographer seeking innovation and commitment through his art. Alberto Fuguet’s *Se arrienda* (2005) is a similar project. Set in the early 1980s, the film focuses on a generation of young artists and their ideological transformation when they become integrated into consumer society. While *Paréntesis* (directed by Francisca Schweitzer and Pablo Solís, 2005) and *La sagrada familia* (directed by Gabriel Díaz, 2005) do not address the current socioeconomic model, their characters do exhibit traces of a decadent society by portraying psychological syndromes such as isolation and ennui, a kind of vacuousness typical of industrialized nations in which privileges rather than economic problems seem to be the source of dissatisfaction. There is already a hint of this in Silvio Caiozzi’s film adaptation of José Donoso’s novel *Coronación* (2000), in which Andrés Abalos (played by Julio Jung) represents the rancid and decadent national oligarchy that coexists with the nouveau riche produced by neoliberalism embodied by Carlos Gross (played by Jaime Vadell). *Taxi para tres* (directed by Orlando Lübbert, 2001), *La fiebre del loco* (directed by Andrés Wood, 2001), and *Negocio redondo* (directed by Ricardo Carrasco, 2002) share this environment but focus on the lower strata of society.

The film that inaugurated political narration in the erotic sphere of the postauthoritarian era is the above-mentioned *El chacotero sentimental*. Here the sexual discourse serves as the basis for a memory-based confessional exercise on intimate feelings and actions of the bodies of the self and the other. In our role as spectators we are drawn by voyeuristic impulses to witness the displeasures of sex and the intertwining of culture, power, politics, the private and public spheres, and social/sexual behaviors. The film paradigmatically portrays some of the most significant problems in Chile’s postauthoritarian milieu by reclaiming a place for private memories in the social map and unveiling and publicizing traumatic and shameful histories, lies, and incest in the very heart of that “safe” space that could be either the family or the nation. Thus the confessions that have yet to take place in an institutional forum can nevertheless take place in other public spaces—television and radio, for example—filled with a flood of intimate histories that seek to fill the void left by those still waiting to be heard.

*El chacotero sentimental* is structured as a framed narrative. The context is that of the Chilean radio program of the same name that for several years was hosted by “El Rumpi” (Roberto Artiagoitia) on Radio Rock and Pop every day
at 2 p.m. The program was intended to provide an opportunity for people to talk about their sexual and amorous experiences. Situated in the context of a station devoted to rock music, it was similar to other confessional spaces that are “closer to anthropology than pornography in their focus on the discovery and explanation of sexual phenomena” (McNair, 2002: 88). Members of the audience would contribute episodes from their emotional and sexual lives, and, in order to avoid censure when delving into the details of those experiences, the program created a jargon that enabled people to talk about sex openly without incurring moral outrage or rejection. These sexual histories acquired a liberating character not only because of the attraction posed by the subject matter; in the Chilean context, the show also served as an escape valve for topics that had yet to be faced publicly (at the time, there was no divorce law, and the country still lacks policies that address abortion and AIDS). El chacotero became one of the first public spaces in postauthoritarian Chile in which the contemporary culture of the “striptease” (which in addition to the confessional space includes the above-mentioned reality television) began taking shape.

The film’s so-called three acts are based on three radio testimonies in which El Rumpi serves as moderator, controls the length of the stories, expresses opinions, and either offers advice or openly criticizes the speakers (the audience/witness, who must also play the role of judge, may agree with him). The order of the three stories follows the internal programming, and the film is technically divided into four parts: the three stories and the prologue that frames them. The first story (“Patas negras”) is a humorous introduction to the sexual theme, while the third one (“Todo es cancha”) provides closure and is also comical. It is the central story (“Secretos”), a tragic narrative told, in contrast to the other two, by a woman, that provides the discursive nucleus. Humor, then, serves as the context for narrating what Franco Rella (1992) has called “the time of precariousness,” the past lost to the present the recollection of which results in a new portrayal of subjective and collective temporality. The film traverses these ruins in placing the traumatic story—that of incest—at its center. The prologue participates in the recovery of this precariousness from the moment that it directly cites Patricio Guzmán’s documentary La memoria obstinada (1997). The mnemotechnical logistics of the film are not just the product of its racconto structure; they are also prompted by the structural and intertextual devices of the prologue and, as we shall see, appear in the central story.

The film begins with a traveling shot of the basement of a stadium reminiscent of the National Stadium in Guzmán’s film: a narrow, damp, and dilapidated space in which the sound of running water and sporadic cries evoke torture and create a hostile and somber atmosphere. Sensory anticipation is trumped when we cut to a medium shot of El Rumpi urinating and another subjective shot travels across the graffiti-covered wall. The cries become clearer, and it is now evident that they are not coming from victims of torture but from the audience in the stadium. And El Rumpi, who is engaged in pleasurable urination, is the source of the sound of running water. His eyes wander across the wall and meet texts that are not political in nature but an ever-expanding list of Chilean appellatives for the penis; he makes his own contribution to the collective task by adding “el chacotero sentimental” (the sentimental teaser) to the list. At this point, the humor becomes scatological, combining bodily substances, sexual references, and comedy as a means of purging, exteriorizing, and expelling waste.
The reference to Guzmán’s work provides a link with tradition and, moreover, with a much more explicit and representative attempt at retrieving this “lost time.” The humorous approach cannot erase the fact that this allusion has crossed into the most sensitive area of current Chilean life. The reaction that the film seeks to prompt attests to the psychic contemporaneity of the past, not because that time has been forced to move from yesterday into today but because it wanders lost, adrift, manifesting its subjective duration and its presence as, perhaps, what Derrida (1994) calls “the specter”—a certain phenomenological character assumed by the past. It is, likewise, evidence of a present that is out of joint and that, in order to recover a certain unity (which is possible only from its present disarticulation), appeals to the past either to confirm an alliance with it and thus neutralize hegemonic projects (e.g., the politics of amnesia) or to exorcise it in an attempt to gain freedom from the immaterial forces that always threaten to return. And yet, this conjuring act itself plainly manifests the postmortem existence of the corpse—its continued presence. The image of a stadium’s basement—erstwhile prison and torture quarters—has become a chronotope that is being revisited, with a certain insistence, by the national cinema. In fact, this image also serves to illustrate an area of historical and essayistic discourse in progress: the photograph of one of the prisoners held in the National Stadium accompanies two different texts, Jocelyn-Holt’s (1999) *El Chile perplejo* and Dorfman’s (2002) *Exorcising Terror*. “Perplexed” and “exorcism” are both good terms to describe this confrontation with a past that wanders through the disjointed present.6

The presence of the family and the community as teleological spaces is particularly relevant to the humorous stories in the film but not to the tragic narrative. The student protagonist of the “first act” flees an unbridled lustful relationship with his neighbor to travel to his parents’ house in southern Chile. The neighborhood (the owner of the newsstand, the postman, and the neighbor women) interferes with his life by either offering advice or expressing disapproval; in short, it engages in the traditional Chilean (or, for that matter, Latin American) gabfest that, for better or for worse, reinforces communal belonging. In the same way, the family house portrayed in the “third act” provides not only psychological refuge but a physical shelter in the absence of a privately owned living space. Neighbors act like an extended family, and the old head mechanic plays a putative fatherly role that temporarily helps to resolve the apprentice’s lack of sexual privacy. It is only in the central story that the family fails to fulfill its assigned role and that the community itself completely disappears.

“Secretos” is the testimony of a witness whose tale breaks with the humorous atmosphere created by the first story and then derails the programmatic order of her own family history. She thus acquires an undesirable profile and appears as a “traitor” who ponders over the genealogical waste, that which should not be said, and freezes the smile of the spectator/witness. This thankless role turns the protagonist into a “solitary and often desolate presence (a survivor of disaster)” (Brossat, 2000: 125). Carmen is overwhelmed by a flood of memories, an “involuntary memory that destroys the relentless linearity of classical temporality . . . and is presented, in the first place, as disorder” (Rella, 1992: 148–149). The flood is unleashed after a violent incident in which the narrator starts repairing a partly destroyed architectural model of
the house she lives in. This reconstruction process is undertaken by a pair of hands that lift up walls, restore furniture to its place, and wear a ring, the crowning gemstone of which is like a giant eye: the gaze of the witness. As with the abuses carried out during the dictatorship and testimonial memories, “it is women who announce the disappearance. In this process they are converted from objects (wives to, daughters of) to subjects of memory. Their tales persistently expose the rupture of bonds: with the husband, the father, the son” (Oyarzún, 2001: 22–23). The disappearance announced by Carmen is not the physical death of the father or the sister but their symbolic death, which evidences the end of the family as the basis for subjectivity, the fundamental locus of sociability and solidarity.

More than an act of violence, incest is an exercise in power. The father-daughter incest portrayed in the film is best approached through a feminist lens; Foucault’s notions of power serve as the basis from which to trace the relationship between power and sexuality and outline the patriarchal character of the family and the modern state (Bell, 1993). From this perspective, the father’s authority is like that of a sovereign whose judicial-discursive power prevents him from having recourse to violence insofar as the system that upholds his authority provides the necessary “legal” conditions to ensure that control is exercised within a framework of obedience and respect. The tale of incest is therefore a story of the abuse of power within the household, a well-kept secret maintained by the victims’ silence. The narrator’s impulse to rebuild the model house leads to a recovery of memory and the need to speak, giving her past a new meaning at the same time as altering her future. Unlike her sister, Carmen is not a participant witness but a testis, an observer of the fate of others. Even though that fate also affects her, this does not relieve her of her need and duty to bear witness—a model responsibility for that segment of the community that, despite not having experienced abuse directly, has been affected by it and must acknowledge its role in it. Unlike the other stories in the film, “Secretos” does not have a formal ending and is left unfinished as the narrator hangs up the phone. Carmen’s role as testimonial witness adds an ethical dimension to her narration and to the film itself. In Brossat’s (2000: 133) words, “The witness does not judge but makes judges of all of us.”

Another film that addresses the root of the collective damage to Chilean society is Andrés Wood’s Machuca (2004), which is set just before the coup and looks at this traumatic event from the perspective of a child. The film clearly echoes Louis Malle’s Au revoir, les enfants (1987), and Wood himself speaks of Malle’s influence on the DVD commentary track. Malle’s film, the testimony of a French boy who witnesses the persecution of a Jewish one, is an assertion of the victim’s historic, physical, and psychological absence: the Jewish boy, that most reliable of witnesses, has surely died in the gas chambers and can no longer give an account of what happened. Likewise, Wood’s film does not attempt to follow Gonzalo, the upper-class boy who serves as witness to the violence, into the post-coup world, and we know nothing about the physical or psychological fate of Pedro Machuca, although we are free to speculate about it. What is made clear in Wood’s film, in contrast to Malle’s, is that Gonzalo is a participating witness. He witnesses both the repression and the murder of the girl who “sweetly” initiated him into romantic-erotic relationships; the episode
of the condensed milk, a delicacy that could only be obtained on the black market in times of scarcity, illustrates an initiation into the socially (politically) forbidden. The affective encounter that drives Gonzalo to “mix” with the proletarian children ends in an act of betrayal when, in order to avoid suffering their fate, he uses his class status to escape.

In Carlos Saura’s *Cría cuervos* (1976), another classic in which a child gazes at the world during a time of political repression, the girl Ana is mourning the loss of her mother, and the film becomes a space in which she can free herself from her painful past and thus return to a routine that takes her back to school. In *Machuca* the film purges Gonzalo’s memories of atrocities to become a space in which the guilt for the denial of feelings (“Look at me! Look at me! I am not from here”) allows the children’s conflict to be considered beyond their personal capacities and responsibilities and makes it explainable only in the context of the social and ideological divisions that determine their experiences and encounters. They are both the victims of historical and social conditions that prevent one from bearing witness to the events while the other must pay his psychological, intimate, and social debt by narrating what happened. *Machuca*, then, portrays the context within which the traumatic event—the source of the social damage—takes place. It does so not from the point of view of the abject victim but from that of the surviving witness: the one who can give testimony and, in doing so, free himself from the weight of this atrocious history and return it to the social flux from which it originated.

The above-mentioned *Taxi para tres* paradigmatically exemplifies the dilemmas faced by a participant in a neoliberal society. This is clearly illustrated by the moment when the cab driver, Ulises, must decide whether he wants to be “volante o maleta” (steering wheel or trunk), an accomplice and participant in the crimes of his two captors or a victim of robbery (in which case, being locked in the cab’s trunk will excuse him from witnessing any of the illegal acts committed). Ulises resolves this ethical dilemma by choosing to serve as the criminals’ chauffeur—a decision prompted by the financial difficulties he is currently undergoing in trying to become the owner of the cab he drives. The man is, in fact, a zealous representative of a lower middle class with strict behavior codes that are seen as particularly applicable to the workplace: you must engage in hard and honest work in order to get ahead. While these norms serve to distinguish Ulises’s class from the more stigmatized popular sectors, he is lured by the prospect of easy money, all the more since he does not have to commit the robberies and can take refuge in a secondary and much less visible role.

Emotional bonds are an unanticipated consequence of this deal, as the crooks invade Ulises’s house, preventing him from dissociating his family and home from the social circle in which he now works. While he struggles to remain emotionally and socially distanced from his “captors,” his family, aware of the ties that bind them to the crooks, commit to them on both planes. While their fragile and multifaceted moral code allows his family to compromise with criminality because of empathy and the obvious material benefits, Ulises insists on remaining on the margins, pocketing the financial dividends but refusing to accept his own criminal condition. The affective rejection and social discrimination he displays toward his former captors serve as a sort of alter ego, a version of himself that he refuses to acknowledge. He engages in
a psychological subterfuge that allows him to benefit financially and occupationally (he can soon own his own cab) while overlooking the illegal source of these profits by invoking the need to support his family and the pressure exercised by the “real” criminals. When he finally betrays his associates to the police and portrays himself as a victim on a subsequent newscast, his family does not believe in his alleged innocence. Since his family members are the only people capable of recognizing this crude act of betrayal as such, Ulises, in contrast to his Homeric counterpart, can no longer return home: his fractured integrity makes this impossible.

Ulises’s moral collapse takes place in a consumer society in which the mark of integration and social participation lies in an individual’s ability to contribute to commercial transactions. This culture, which no longer possesses the work ethic that defined producer societies, has been characterized by Zygmunt Bauman (1998) as the regrettable result of evidence proving that a work ethic based on devotion, loyalty, commitment to one’s labor conditions, and the certainty of the evolutionary nature of those conditions does not provide a way out of poverty. Once it has become evident that one can be hardworking and poor, the ethical tenets that sustained labor conditions in a producer’s society give way to the socially determined character of poverty (1998: 1–2):

It is one thing to be poor in a society of producers and universal employment; it is quite a different thing to be poor in a society of consumers, in which life projects are built around consumer choice rather than work, professional skills, or jobs. If “being poor” once derived its meaning from the condition of being unemployed, today it draws its meaning primarily from the plight of a flawed consumer. This is one difference which truly makes a difference to the way living in poverty is experienced and to the chances and prospects of redemption from its misery.

Chile’s emerging horror cinema expresses a social unease that, despite being centered on individual experiences, serves to exorcise collective anxieties. Jorge Olguín’s Ángel Negro and Sangre Eterna (2001 and 2003 respectively) employ this genre to portray the kind of social fear and violence that continues to be perceived—socially and politically—as exclusive to the victims of torture and exile and the families of the disappeared. Fragmentos urbanos (2002), a film produced by the Escuela de Cine de Chile, combines the work of six young filmmakers and is littered with scattered body parts and anthropophagic behaviors that bear witness to an anomalous social condition. The mutilated body operates as a metaphor for real torture, death, amputation, and disappearance; the ingestion of body parts points to a society that, in accordance with consumerist values, consumes itself. This collective project, undertaken by people all of whom are under 25, restages the traumas caused by the dictatorship at the same time that it evidences the psychopathic character of a society sprung from transnational corporativism—a society in which, in the words of social economists, Homo sapiens has been initially replaced by “homo economicus” (Schor, 1998: 133) and later by “homo consumens” (Lane, 1998: 232). More than a memory, Fragmentos urbanos presents a reminiscence prodded by the constant presence, discovery, and ingestion of body parts: ears, fingers, hands, arms. The dismembered bodies evidence the
postmortem existence of the corpse and the fragmented mnemotechnical flux announced in the film’s title.

_El nominado_ (directed by Nacho Argiro and Gabriel López, 2004) is centered on televised horror and the violence portrayed, perpetuated, and instigated by the media, especially reality television. High ratings and their concomitant financial profits have become an incentive to profit from the audience’s repressed morbidity and violence. Whereas anthropophagic horror is directly related to the dismemberment of the bodies of the disappeared and consumption, gothic horror is linked to phantasmagoria—the elusive, fragmented, and achronological irruption of the past into the present, with its traumatic symptoms. Like incest, cannibalism is a taboo that evidences and radically embodies the stigma of the flesh. While incest overextends contact with filial flesh through the act of penetration, cannibalistic ingestion exceeds sanctioned contact with the other. Gothic literature and film have used cannibalism to create a construct that demonizes those who are socially, sexually, racially, and culturally different—to provide a narrative of the bestial and wild, the alien. In this sense, “whereas the cannibal is in the savage outside world, the vampire is here among us in folk superstition and literary imagination. . . . They both present nameless fears that informed an overarching imagination” (Petrinovich, 2000: 205).

Given the lack of a linear or chronological character and their elusive nature, the figures of the ghost, the specter, the spirit, operate as metaphors that allegorize the empirical nonsense, decontextualization, and dislocation of traumatic memories. As Caruth (1995: 4, my emphasis) puts it, one can come to “be possessed” by trauma when “the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event.” But the ghost is also the true witness, the one who did not survive the traumatic event because he died during the act of witnessing itself. In the case of the disappeared, the ghost is precisely that body without a grave.

Thus the Chilean cinema has been weaving a mesh of memories that assign meaning to the problems of the present and pertinence to the events of the past—those that judicial amnesty has sought to bury and that trauma has kept from being incorporated into the basis upon which future communal processes and projects are founded. Moreover, film has staged the traumatic experience itself and transformed it from an obstacle barring any imposed reconciliation into a process of assimilation, an intimate shared task that must address the root of the damage and the suffering. Caruth has pointed out the need to communicate horrific experiences in order to overcome trauma. We can say that Chilean cinema has certainly managed to express that pain, positioning the spectator as a sympathetic, willing listener. It also functions as a repository for a disjointed collective memory in the process of elucidation and as a locus for social encounter and deliberation. The performative character of listening—an act of empathy and identification with the experience of the victims—creates an opportunity for spectators, rather than pitying the fate of an unfortunate other, to begin to recognize their own condition and their role in the milieu that generates the abject other by relocating personal drama in its macro-social context of origin. This implies a recovery of the social character of
the damage, while self-identification provides the answer to ethical and affective estrangement. It is possible, then, to believe that another kind of future can be imagined.

NOTES

1. The etymologies of the two Spanish terms, from the Latin for “heart,” reflect the affective component underlying this process.

2. The first report focused on identifying the dead and the missing. It recorded 2,279 politically motivated executions and disappearances between 1973 and 1990. The Valech Commission heard the testimonies of 35,000 people, more than 27,000 of whom were formally acknowledged to have been victims of political torture and imprisonment.

3. The military’s official change of position came with General Emilio Cheyre’s “Ejército de Chile: el fin de una visión,” which was published in La Tercera and reproduced in La Nación on November 5, 2004. In it Cheyre acknowledges the institutional abuses that took place under the dictatorship and frames them in the context of the cold war. At the same time, the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture has clearly established that torture, imprisonment, and forced disappearance were institutionalized practices.

4. Alexander Wilde (2002) analyzes this aspect of Chilean life and explains it as “irruptions of memory” that have determined the human rights issues Chilean politics has been forced to confront.

5. Some of these symbolic acts include the Wall of Memory, which contains 950 photographs of the 1,192 disappeared, the Villa Grimaldi Peace Park, opened on March 22, 1997, in what was once a detention and torture center, and the declaration, in 2006, of August 30 as the Day of the Disappeared. The Rettig Report established an assistance fund for surviving family members, a reduction in schooling fees for descendants, health benefits, and, in the case of victims’ children, exemption from compulsory military service. The Valech Report assigned annual pensions of US$2,294–2,626 to victims of political torture and imprisonment; children born in prison or held along with their parents were assigned a single payment of US$6,779.

6. In addition to Guzmán’s documentary, Carmen Luz Parot’s Estadio Nacional (2001) deals with this topic.


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