Affect, Spectacle, and Horror in Pablo Larraín’s *Post Mortem* (2010)

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**Abstract**

*Post Mortem* by Chilean filmmaker Pablo Larraín challenges traditional cinematic conventions of affect and spectacle through a narrative of spaces and bodies that is neither realist, comedic, nor melodramatic. This chapter draws upon affect theories that study the spectacle of cinematic spaces and political bodies in Latin American film. The protagonist of Larraín's film is an inconsequential morgue clerk who transcribed the details of Salvador Allende’s autopsy after the president’s death in the 11th September 1973 coup d’état. *Post Mortem* intentionally abstains from an explicit political commentary or sentimental release. The plot and cinematic technique combine to paint an uncomfortably naked image of evil, without guilt-ridden or heroic characters. The systematic dislocation, defamiliarization, and desecration of spaces sacralized by the collective memory allows Larraín’s film to trespass the affective boundaries of political melodrama. Spaces that should have been familiar appear eerily distant and strange, morphing into dystopic versions of themselves as hospitals become morgues and body dumpsters, city streets turn into empty battlefields, and homes are now targets, prisons, or tombs.

Chile has produced relatively few films about its seventeen-year dictatorship (1973–1990). Unlike the many blockbusters that filmmakers from Spain and Argentina have dedicated to their own civil conflicts and dictatorships, most Chilean films on the subject have had limited viewership, with the notable exceptions of Andrés Wood’s *Machuca* (2004) and Pablo Larraín’s *No* (2012).1

Unsurprisingly, a comparison of audience size shows that more theatergoers

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1 Barraza Toledo states that from 2003 to 2013 there were only a handful of Chilean films that depicted or focused on the Pinochet era. Andrés Wood’s *Machuca* (2004) became “an unexpected success, the top-grossing movie in the country (with 656,000 viewers).” The film also received acclaim abroad. On the other hand, films such as Gregory Cohen’s *El baño* (2005) and Alex Bowen’s *Mi mejor enemigo* (2005) were not as well received by “their local audience.” Miguel Littin’s *Dawson Isla 10* (2009) did better by its local audience, with 93,829 spectators. Finally, Pablo Larraín’s saga was acclaimed by both critics and international film
respond to realistic melodramas that contain a strong component of nostalgia, while films that deviate from this recipe tend to fare worse at the box office. Two examples of films that drew poorly but gained critical acclaim and wide recognition on the film festival circuit are the first and second in Larraín’s historical trilogy, *Tony Manero* (2008) and *Post Mortem* (2010), which only had 86,000 and 20,500 spectators respectively (Barraza Toledo 2013, 160). The high profile of Chilean filmmakers like Larraín—whose films are often low performers at the box office—paints a picture of a national film industry and market conditioned by socioeconomic inequalities that prevent many lower-class Chileans from going to the theater. Ignacio Sánchez Prado and Roberto Trejo Ojeda have identified this issue of access in the neoliberal film market—not only in Chile, but also in Mexico and other Latin American countries—as one of the main causes for the predominance of cinema aimed at the middle and upper classes, as well as for the investment in films made for the international festival circuit and for an elite audience. Taking into consideration the exigencies of Latin American neoliberal markets, therefore, traditional crowd-pleasing films that tend toward melodrama have been deemphasized in recent decades (cited in Page 2017, 273). Joanna Page observes that “the absence of credible alternatives to the neoliberal model in Chilean films is particularly striking if recent production is compared to post-2001 filmmaking in Argentina, which has seen a remarkable swell of interest in the politics of insurgency, and in collective organizations, lifestyles, or projects that circumvent the market or directly confront its power” (2017, 282). Page argues, however, that the political approach of Sánchez Prado and Trejo Ojeda disregards the fact that films may themselves encroach upon, and collide against, commercial demands and money-driven market regulations. Additionally, the critic stipulates, “an overwhelming focus on the middle-class urban experience may also be put to the service of self-critique” (2017, 274). Thus, Page concludes that, “it is by focusing on the middle-class spheres and individual experience, rather than collective projects, that a number of recent films have been able to explore new, insidious forms of control and governmentality that start from the redefinition of the individual within neoliberal regimes” (2017, 274).

*Post Mortem*, the focus of this chapter, is a somewhat anomalous example of the type of national cinema described above. The protagonist is Mario Cornejo (Alfredo Castro), an inconsequential coroner’s assistant whose furtive voyeuristic pre-coup glances, it has been argued, adumbrate the ways in which a new
aggressive ascent has begun to take hold of the Chilean social space (Galindo 2017, 164). He is charged with transcribing the autopsy of president Salvador Allende on the day he died. This is highly significant because Post Mortem revolves around the most potentially sensationalistic motifs possible for a Chilean audience interested in its own past: the 1973 military coup and Salvador Allende’s death. Larraín himself stated in an interview, “The original autopsy is published by the Allende Foundation,” says the director. “And it’s amazing. For me, it’s the autopsy of Chile” (Matheou 2015). The long-standing question—until a few years ago—of whether Allende committed suicide or was assassinated, makes Allende’s corpse a highly charged lieu de memoire for the Chilean left. The film’s unconventional plot and technique combine to paint a bizarre story where guilt-ridden or heroic characters are absent. Larraín could have chosen to make Allende, or his body, the protagonist in a film laced with longing and nostalgia focused on the martyred president’s last stand, the controversy around his death, and the tragic national nightmare that ensued. Larraín, however, de-emphasizes the highly charged narrative of the president’s body. Post Mortem contains all of these powerful elements at its core and yet stays away from storytelling devices that would facilitate a sentimental release. This oblique approach produces, in a Lefebvrian sense, a unique representational space for Allende’s death in the Chilean consciousness.

As much as it forces viewers to remain on the margins—hindered from being in command of the whole story—Post Mortem also provides a tangential centrality for its protagonist, an individual who appears to be disengaged from events (Harvey 2017, 539–40). Referring to the film’s focalization through the character of Mario Cornejo, Larraín asserts that “nobody knows him, nobody cares about him, but he was there. Sometimes very ordinary people, people who are invisible in society, get to be at these momentous moments in history. I wanted to see what happened through those eyes, rather than the eyes of the main protagonists” (Matheou 2015). The somber protagonist remains an ambivalent character throughout, underscoring the film’s leaning towards an aesthetics of banality (Harvey 2017, 540). In this manner, the film exhibits the markers of an elliptic work made for an elite audience: a dramatic baseline, non-linear structure, actors who are recurrent faces in these kinds of films, the

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2 Larraín and his collaborators thoroughly researched the period, to the point of shooting in the actual mortuary where Allende’s autopsy took place. “We used the same room. The same table. They are untouched,” he explains. “It was crazy, actually. The autopsy was the last scene we filmed. When we brought the ‘body’ in, it was shocking for everybody, and mostly for the older people. And some of the team had met Allende. There was a very powerful feeling that day” (Matheou 2015).
absence of an extradiegetic music track, mundane characters at the margins of history, sparse dialogue, artsy photography, use of off-camera shots and unusual frames, and an eccentric tone and style overall.

*Post Mortem* also challenges expectations of affect and spectacle—even for art-house films—through a narrative that departs from realist drama as it weaves in elements from other subgenres, including post-apocalyptic horror. The representation of spaces and bodies in *Post Mortem* relies primarily on the use of horror motifs in juxtaposition with elements of estrangement that mediate their impact on the viewer. This combination proves to be particularly effective at desacralizing memorialized spaces in the Chilean imaginary and, in doing so, it challenges the affective pillars of sanctioned narratives about the past. The film thus intentionally sets itself apart from other portrayals of the coup by avoiding the most common traits of historical and political cinema in Latin America. Although Mark Jenkins classifies *Post Mortem* as “a dark drama with traces of black comedy,” he also notices that, in the film, “everyone appears to inhabit a city of the living dead, a place that seemingly could not get grimmer” (2012). For her part, Maria Delgado notes that “the film’s washed-out colour scheme provides echoes of a zombie movie ... as the coup turns into an endless night of the living dead ... a metaphor for the intellectual stupor and stagnation that Pinochet’s dictatorship brought with it” (2017, 457). Public and private spaces morph overnight into dystopian versions of themselves, as former hospitals, streets and homes become morgues, battlefields and prisons. An unmanageable mountain of corpses piles up obscenely on screen, some of them still breathing, to the horror of characters and audience alike.

One of the most important debates in recent Latin American cinema asks whether its commercial success is dependent upon a lack of serious engagement with prior exercises of collective memory and the absence of specific and clearly articulated political positions. Laura Podalsky’s work provides a particularly important reference point for our appreciation of the role of affect in film. This author focuses on how critical it is for us to consider the way in

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3 Jenkins expresses that *Post Mortem* literally dissects the protagonist’s ulterior motives: “Mario fears that Nancy will never love him, even after he hides her from the authorities who seek to arrest her for the crime of having leftist relatives and friends. Mario’s romantic doubts may seem a petty concern at a time when other Chileans are simply trying to avoid torture and execution. But Mario’s extreme final action shows how much his fixation has overtaken control of his instincts. Chilean writer-director Pablo Larraín introduces Mario as a gray man living in a beige house, a color scheme that matches the pallor of the bodies he coldly watches Dr. Castillo (Jaime Vadell) examine. The colors aren’t much brighter at the vaudeville theater where Nancy performs. Everyone appears to inhabit a city of the living dead, a place that seemingly could not get grimmer” (Jenkins 2012).
which films “solicit particular emotional responses and/or stimulate more diffuse, affective reactions.” Further, Podalsky notes, we must explore “how films invite viewers to feel through their formal properties, their modes of address, and their engagement with contemporary socio political discourses” and, ultimately, “how films contribute to the articulation of new sensibilities” (2011, 7). Along the same lines, Page indicates how other critics have zeroed in on cinema’s advantageous position “as a space of encounter and a form of affective labour” (2017, 278). Steven Shaviro, for his part, draws attention to the corporate quest to “commodify and market pure virtualities, in the form of events, experiences, moods, memories, hopes, and desires.” For Shaviro, films, like other media, “are ‘machines for generating affect’” (cited in Page 2017, 278). Nevertheless, Page comments that this affective labor can also produce new modes of agency; as a consequence, films do not only reflect but also construct new ways of feeling and knowing (2017, 279).

Podalsky underscores how Latin American films of recent years can be adept at awakening our ability to perceive things from a fresh, different angle, especially in “a moment of epistemological crisis where the visual record is rendered insufficient to the task of registering past experiences and their influence on the present.” In this context, many recent films from this region engage with the question of “how we know what we know” in film (2011, 19). One of the many examples of this type of questioning in Post Mortem is the opening frame at ground level, with the camera situated under a rolling tank. The symbolic function of this shot is to raze our audiovisual and cognitive expectations and prior assumptions, as the film does not allow its audience to witness the transformation of space through the violence of the coup and its aftermath, much of which occurs off-camera. Post Mortem counts itself among many Latin American films that “problematize the relationship between the ‘knowable’ and the visible by toying with the traditional treatment of the image track as transparent window into another world.” Films’ disruption of the visual is thus achieved through techniques that promote a kind of visceral or corporeal knowledge (Podalsky 2011, 19–20). Larraín’s use of a Russian lens from the 1960s, the predominance of beige and grey tones in the color palette, the frequent use of off-camera shots, dissonance in the relationship between image and sound, and unusual compositions during crucial moments in the narrative exemplify the types of disruptions and problematizing that are present in Post Mortem.

Critics have highlighted the use of similar techniques by other influential Latin American filmmakers, like the Argentine Lucrecia Martel. Jens Andermann observes that, in Martel’s films The Swamp (2001) and The Headless Woman (2008) “the often uncertain relation between foreground action and
its spatial surroundings ... [underscores the] characters’ aloofness and lack of consideration for the world surrounding them, which in result becomes enigmatic and vaguely threatening” (2017, 144). Andermann’s analysis focuses on an unusual spatial representation as the main device to portray lack of empathy or awareness among members of the upper-middle class and children/adolescents. A similar analysis and interpretation are applicable to Larraín’s portrayal of Mario Cornejo, a middle-class, middle-age man-child who perceives reality in a limited, colorless, and affectively dissonant fashion, sometimes off-screen, as if he were absent from the surrounding turmoil when, ironically, he is at its center. In this regard, Larraín’s film would be a perfect example of the kind of recent Chilean films that, according to Urrutia Neno, are mainly focused on the relationship between subject and space or, as this author puts it, “how individuals inhabit and move through space.” These films are no longer interested in portraying the individual as a trope for the collective, whether this is the nation, a specific social class or group, or the world, but in exploring how individuals perceive their environment. For this reason, such films emphasize character construction and focalization in the form of “observation, ramblings, perspective and introspection” over dramatic events (cited in Page 2017, 279). However, Page continues to underline that “understanding the affective work of cinema allows us to reread these sequences not as an expression of individualism, but as foregrounding film’s particular capacity to generate shared encounters within a virtual space” (2017, 279).

If we are to argue that *Post Mortem* generates this kind of “shared encounter,” we must also concede that Larraín’s film exemplifies an unusual mode of representation of the past as a communal space. This is because most similarly themed films in the Ibero-American context have been, in general, conventionally realistic or unmistakably fantastic, with the latter often attempting to point out the epistemological shortcomings of the former. In this regard, José Colmeiro refers to a type of domestication of the past for consumption purposes:

4 Colmeiro delineates that “Ghosts, as embodiment of the past in the present, destabilize the accepted notions of history, reality, and self, and the clear demarcations that define them. Their here-but-not here borderline existence, between the dead and the living, blurs the binary divide that constructs our perception of reality. Ghosts remind us that we need to confront our past if we want to move ahead and construct a better future” (2011, 31).

The unproblematic transparent mimetic representation of the past ... and traditional linear structure, effectively sutures the discontinuities of the fragmented past, made out of silences and voids ... [This] paradoxically
seems to replicate the straight and smooth official historical narratives that avoid challenging the status quo. Thus, many of these sanitized representations of the past dangerously follow the officially sanctioned discourse of reconciliation without apologies or reparations, and the erasure of potentially destabilizing counter-discourses, reinforcing the *pastness* of the past and its irrelevance to present day concern (2011, 29).

When the past appears as “a haunting, rather than as a reality immediately accessible to us” we come to terms with the onerous task of perceiving the past (Labanyi 2007, 112). *Post Mortem* is neither an orthodox realistic piece nor a ghost story. Instead, this analysis argues that the film is a veiled zombie tale framed as a dark drama with elements of the absurd. It would seem that *Post Mortem* uses a traumatic historical event in Chile only as an excuse to explore larger universal themes through horror, such as the ordinariness of evil, for the benefit of a global audience. However, the apparent detachment from Chile's affective locus is an intentional strategy. Centrally, Larraín chooses the language of post-apocalyptic horror for *Post Mortem* because it is ideally suited to capture the unreal atmosphere and pathos of spaces that have ceased to be recognizable after the coup. As one of Larraín's interviewers observes, *Post Mortem's* “attention to detail suggests realism. But with its twisted characters and scenes of *grand-guignol* horror, all observed with an icy distance, the film plays like Theatre of the Absurd” (Matheou 2015). Everything in this film—the plot, narrative structure, photography, soundscape and acting—is disturbingly distant, cold, asphyxiating and above all, strange. In affective and emotional terms, it is impossible for the audience not to feel repugnance and dread in response to Larraín's horrifically dark portrayal of the end of the world as Chileans had known it on September 11, 1973.

1 **Body as Space: Horror Sensorium, the Abject and the New Man**

In his work about affect in horror cinema, Xavier Aldana Reyes explains that “affect should simply be extended to cover all the elements that have an influence on viewers’ perceptions of given scenes and of entire films (representation, but also the use of special effects, the cinematic tricks) ... and the ways in which films generate both emotional states and somatic responses” (2016, 8).

5 In this regard, *Post Mortem* bears more resemblance to Victor Erice's *The Spirit of The Beehive* (1972) as its director intended it, that is, as an opaque remake of James Whale's *Frankenstein*, from 1931 (although it can be argued that Erice's film can be read as a zombie tale of sorts).
Aldana Reyes also clarifies that his exploration of affect in horror film focuses specifically on somatic or corporeal responses, a position that is consistent with “a strong and sustained stream of publications by phenomenology-influenced scholars (who) started making a case for the need to appreciate the position and value of the human sensorium within the filmic experience and to celebrate the sensual nature of the viewer-film encounter” (2016, 10). An overriding reason for this emphasis is the starring role of the body in horror films during the entire history of the subgenre, with a visible intensification starting in the 1970s and 1980s. Angela Ndalianis’s conceptualization of the ‘Horror sensorium’, according to Aldana Reyes, “feels more intuitive and empirical” precisely because it raises the issue of the connections between the human body’s sensory mechanism and its intellectual and cognitive functions (2016, 13). In this sense, the sensorium “is a space where the medium and the human body collide; where they meet and affect each other in very real ways that play themselves across and deep into the mind and body of the spectator.” For Aldana Reyes, then, Ndalianis underscores how in contemporary horror there is “a general drive towards foregrounding corporeality both inside and outside of the film,” meaning that its “violence continues to be played out off-screen and across the body of the spectator.” What this means for Ndalianis is that, in certain types of horror films, bodies “are strategically exploited to put forward very specific messages about an apocalyptic society in decay” or other political issues. For these films, ideological matters successfully filtrate through spectators’ minds when films target their senses (Aldana Reyes 2016, 14).

Through the horror sensorium, the autopsy of a skeletal female corpse in *Post Mortem* becomes a space of encounter. To be sure, the concepts of horror sensorium and the abject may be deployed to explain the affective significance of the main autopsy scenes in *Post Mortem*, as well as other scenes in which the human body is the object of mutilation or violence in any form, thus provoking an empathic reaction of fearful disgust in viewers. The audience eventually learns that the body belongs to Nancy Puelma (Antonia Zegers), the neighbor who worked as an exotic dancer and who was the object of Mario’s unrequited

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6 Aldana Reyes reflects upon the extensive use of the body in horror films: “Regardless of specific filmmaking contexts—for example, the heavy use of special effects and prosthetics in the 1970s and 1980s—the body has always remained an important part of Horror. Images of corporeal harm are more ubiquitous, graphic and explicit because the genre has evolved and because such images now encounter less stringent censorship laws. The number and intensity of violent and explicit scenes has also grown because of changes in our perceptions of human subjects and our experience of the world, as well as the gradual secularization of the West. The body, in many ways, has become more evidently somatic and phenomenologically present” (2016, 11).
obsession. As shown in a haunting final scene, Mario takes revenge for Nancy's rejection and betrayal by burying her alive—alongside her lover Víctor (Marcelo Alonso) and her dog. During an eight-minute-long static shot, Mario builds a sort of barricade to block the small room behind a cupboard where Nancy and Víctor are hiding from Pinochet's soldiers, effectively condemning them to death by starvation. Because both occupy the same space and are filmed similarly, Nancy's emaciated, abject and disposable female body is the counterpart of Allende's historically important male corpse. Both are likewise inspected by the eminent doctor Castillo (Jaime Vadell), a friend of Allende's. However, while Castillo shows professional indifference when he examines Nancy's body, he can barely hide his emotion in the presence of the dead president. More importantly, the film utilizes both bodies to represent the abject in a manner that is specific to horror films, in which abjection creates a specific form of affect, that is, fear in relation to disgust. In this regard, we must separate the fearful disgust prompted by the abject from the mere sensation of disgust. (Viewers also experience disgust without fear through other images that do not evoke physical harm, but may cause them to squirm or giggle, as they watch Mario and Nancy's unusual sex scene, the greasy rat tail on Nancy's balding boss, or Mario spitting in the lunchroom.) In order to be so, abject images must represent the vulnerability of the body and, ultimately, our own mortality (Aldana Reyes 2016, 51).

The structure of the film introduces the corpse of one of its main characters, Nancy, before we meet her as a living body. In this regard, her living, moving image functions as a kind of cinematic zombie. Similarly, albeit in reverse, the onscreen body of Allende appears in macabre contrast with the iconic images and sounds of a living Allende in the audience's mind. These two connected 'living dead' are the film's faces for the thousands who still live in the individual and collective memories of Chileans. The blurring of the lines between living and dead is intensified when Mario's coworker, Sandra (Amparo Noguera), finds someone who is still alive among the corpses and manages to secretly transfer the wounded person to another hospital wing with assistance from Mario and an anonymous helper on the other side. When this body inexplicably reappears among the pile of corpses, Sandra loses control of her emotions, which prompts a soldier to start shooting at the bodies to shut her up. To understand the corporeal impact of these images on the spectator, we must consider Aldana Reyes's definition of horror in a filmic setting as “the emotional state of threat, of feeling either directly attacked by the film (in the startle effect) or by extrapolation via alignment with the body on screen” (2016, 16). The blurring of the lines between the living and the dead in the film's world, as well as the construction of these scenes, are designed to provoke empathy on a somatic
level: “Empathy, like the concept of abjection ... does not depend on sympathy or the specificities of the body in question, but on corporeal intelligibility.” On this, scenes of mutilation performed on dead or live bodies “have a corporeal and somatic underpinning that relies on the human capacity to comprehend pain and physical harm, especially its potential sensations and effects.” For this reason, Aldana Reyes concludes, “viewers naturally align themselves with the harmed or tortured body almost independently of sympathetic allegiances” (2016, 17). Thus, through Mario’s cold eyes, audiences can feel the palpitating threat of imminent death and post mortem mutilation, and consequently they empathize with the harmed bodies onscreen.

Watching from a corner, Mario Cornejo is the complicit witness of murders by the new state and the scribe of the new official autopsies—which are mostly theatrical, as the coroner is ordered to speed things up and simply to confirm the military’s version of Allende’s death by suicide. The zombification of the revolutionary prototype of masculinity, embodied by corpse-like Mario Cornejo, signals the conformist ‘new man’ of the Pinochet era. More significantly, Mario embodies the disturbing monster that often emerges when ordinary people find themselves in the midst of normalized horror. As Larraín himself notes,

> From today’s perspective it’s very easy to know who was good, who was bad ... But if you go back, people were confused. They didn’t know what to do, what to think. And Mario takes the easy way ... It’s not that he’s a fascist or anything; he’s in transit. He is a conformist in a way.

MATHEOU 2015

One must wonder if the seemingly detached tone of the film points a finger—accusatory yet cynical—at the audiences who share the spectacle with Mario, a passive and seemingly harmless weirdo who eventually turns into a killer. Therefore, *Post Mortem* utilizes Allende’s autopsy to perform a fictional dissection of the zombie-like ‘new man’ at the dawn of the Pinochet era. Mario is the lifeless opposite of the prototypical revolutionary new man in Salvador Allende’s political discourses, which Castillo mentions in a pre-coup scene. Mario’s position in it, sitting on the periphery of the group that surrounds Castillo, signals his condition as an outsider and forebodes his slide into the other side. As Larraín claims in an earlier interview, Mario is “also typical of the lower middle

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7 “Gaunt, sharp-faced Mario (Alfredo Castro) is a loner with long, lank hair.” The protagonist is “an unnerving figure, no less so when he’s trying to be sociable than when he’s brooding alone” (Jenkins 2012).
class in the early seventies. He's shy. He's not very smart. He probably started off as a kind of a regular person and then became quite singular after his solitude. But he carries this country on his shoulders, and for me that's a symbol of the situation. He's mixed up." The director goes on to reflect that “Mario is the product of an entire society when its morals fall away” (Lucca 2012).

Mario's object of affection, Nancy, is an aging cabaret dancer who seems more interested in superficial, material pursuits than in the momentous events that are happening around her. According to Larraín, “Nancy is someone who doesn’t care about politics or much of anything. Nancy represents the new world, the country that will now become the real country” (Lucca 2012). Thus, Nancy’s shallow and manipulative character symbolizes the consumerist and oblivious society that much of Chile would become during the 1970s and 1980s. Larraín also recounts that, when his team met with real-life dancers at the cabaret where Nancy works in the film, they learned that “some of them came from left-wing families who felt ideologically compromised by their line of work: dancing almost naked to be ogled by an audience of men who represented the bourgeoisie, the patriarchy. Everything that these women did was completely antithetical to socialism, so it would cause shame for their families” (Lucca 2012). Consequently, Nancy’s corpse is the embodiment of the ideological demise of the left, which would eventually return to power and maintain many of Pinochet’s economic policies and legislative mechanisms. At the end of the film, the audience understands that Mario’s spectral figure and Nancy’s corpse represent the herd of ‘living dead’ who inhabit and rule the spaces that have become nightmarishly abnormal after the coup.

2 Chilean Gothic: the House as Liminal Space

The house represents one of the most important spaces in gothic and other kinds of horror fiction. Contemplating the representational space of zombies and the displacement of the dead in contemporary films and television, Marko Lukić observes that, in George Romero’s Night of the Living Dead (1968), the famed horror director enters into a dialogue with the well-established tradition of representation of the house in both European and American cinemas. The house is “a relevant topos which acts as a catalyst or a set of symbolic values necessary for the further development of a particular storyline.” In contrast with European castles, “imbued with the symbolic meaning of family, bloodline, and history” Romero’s house becomes a “re-defined gothic space.”

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8 Lukić points to the spaces established by Romero where the gothic reveals itself. Individuals join one another “to find a safe location where to regroup, organize, and potentially
In this manner it becomes an “allegory whose purpose is to provide a symbolic articulation of the American dream and the initial phases of its deconstruction, the disappearing post–World-War-II ‘family values’, the impeding sexual revolution, and the brutally obvious racial issue” that permeate the late 1960s (2017, 81–82).

Mario’s house takes shape through narrative, visual and sound effects which give it the form of a liminal and threatening space that exists in a bubble outside of space and time—a common and unsettling motif in horror films. It can be argued therefore that Mario’s lower middle-class house is a similarly re-defined gothic space, devoid of warmth or color, and filled with relics of a deceased mother. Such a reconfiguration may also conceal a symbolic value within the context of the Chilean coup. This characterization puts Mario’s house in sharp contrast with the house of the Puelmas, his neighbors across the street. However, Nancy’s visits and her manipulative relationship with Mario complicates any simplistic view of the two houses as a symbol for the divisions that erupted in Chile at this time. Mario’s appearance and behavior belong to a middle-age man in a state of arrested development from an affective, social and sexual standpoint. He lives alone, appears to have no friends or family, has a low-level clerical job, and appears to be invisible to almost everyone. As reviewers of the film have observed, Mario’s obsession with his neighbor Nancy seems adolescent and creepy. He is also unable to establish a relationship with his colleague Sandra, who appears to be mildly interested in him, although she is also sleeping with doctor Castillo. Nancy enters Mario’s house for the first time during a political meeting that her brother and father are hosting at her home, thus bridging the gap between adjacent but separate domestic spaces, one immersed in the political unrest of the period and the other one isolated. They are the spatial allegory for a divided country, which from this point on splits into two groups: those whose political views made them suspects and potential victims of the state’s terror, and the many others who ignored the disappearances of their fellow citizens out of denial, fear, apathy or complacency. This spatial concept is reinforced during the scene where Pinochet’s men rationalize the apocalyptic events surrounding them. The house, however, initially specifically defined as a safe location that will separate the unfortunate characters from the surrounding horrors, soon becomes a limiting space, forcing the (purposely) contrasting characters to face each other, which allows Romero to construct a meticulous social critique” (2017, 82). In this manner, the house’s “rich symbolical tapestry” does not transcend “the topographic simplicity of a safe location,” mostly by Romero’s perseverance on characterizing the house as a place symbolizing society’s alienation after World War II (2017, 82).
take away Nancy's family. A long, static, shot from a fixed camera facing the living-room window shows Mario walking in and out of the frame, partially or totally, first rinsing the sidewalk with a water hose and later taking a long shower, ignorant of the tragedy that is unfolding off-camera across the street and everywhere else in his country. While Mario's house remains untouched throughout the coup, the neighbor's house is ransacked by Pinochet's forces and its interior appears destroyed when Mario enters after the episode. The only survivor of the violent raid is the family's dog, which Mario takes home and later kills alongside its owner. In contrast to Mario's grim but unsullied home, the Puelmas' ravaged house is the true image of the horrific space that the city and the entire country have become in just a few hours.

Sound is also an effective estrangement device in the realm of Mario's home. As Duncan Wheeler observes, “the sound design of Post Mortem is carefully calibrated—imbuing, for example, boiling water for a meal-for-one egg or the moving of furniture with a tragic foreboding pathos while featuring a pathetic sex scene in which the viewer sees the female body but then hears what appear to be male groans” (2017, 207). In this regard, Larraín takes a page from Lucrecia Martel's book, creating a dissonance between sound and image, and occasionally favoring sound over image, in a direct challenge to the epistemological primacy of the visual. In relation to the symbolic use of music in the film, Wheeler notes that “the only two musical moments are constituted by the cheap comic accompaniment to a chorus line appearing on a television show following the appearance of a decidedly unfunny comedian, and a plaintive elegiac piano score over the closing credits” which the critic perceives as a “conflation of musical and political silence” (2017, 207–208).

These visual and sonic dissonances in Mario's house make it an uncanny and disturbing space, in some ways similar to the classic gothic dwelling of vampires and other monsters who lure and consume their human victims. A number of the scenes in this space are charged with morbidly erotic undertones. When Nancy or her younger sibling or other outsiders enter Mario's house, the audience cannot avoid a feeling of eminent danger. Mario's strange gestures of affection toward the child, for example, hint at a potential pedophilic attraction. Moreover, his adolescent crush on the exotic dancer, and his inability to present himself convincingly as a functional adult man, complete the portrait of someone who lives a secluded and liminal life. Mario's pallor and strange behavior reminds the audience of a specter and fitting companion to the dead bodies in the morgue. Throughout the film Mario inhabits a similarly ambiguous space in relation to the forces that are violently occupying his street, work place, city and country, until he finally takes sides by decisively killing Nancy and Víctor.
A common element in contemporary post-apocalyptic films is the fictional transformation of real, well-known spaces into dystopia. In science fiction and disaster subgenres, films’ sensory and affective appeal often relies on a global audience’s familiarity with iconic images of urban spaces. Most disaster films produced in Hollywood take place in New York City or Los Angeles. If the premise of the film is a global epidemic or alien invasion, other world cities may be shown, preferably in Western Europe (London, Paris) and East Asia (Hong-Kong, Tokyo, Beijing), although they are most commonly in the background, because the protagonists in the films tend to be American city-dwellers. Urban spaces such as avenues, shopping malls, restaurants, offices, parking lots and schools transform before the audience’s eyes and become the stage for harrowing tales of destruction, survival and heroism. Cities in post-apocalyptic movies of various subgenres often become grimy, devastated battlegrounds for the struggle between a group of more or less diverse human survivors and non-human others, who can be extraterrestrial or terrestrial aliens (e.g. zombies, robots, foreigners, the infected or possessed, etc.). A parallel trend in American horror films is to bring the monster to suburbia or to the rural ‘heartland’, often portrayed as idyllic communities in which familiar and communal spaces are ravaged by different kinds of others. When filmmakers from other parts of the world tackle and challenge these cinematic models, their films often contain a critique of Hollywood’s ethnocentric portrayal of space, as well as a questioning of the national symbols and lieux de mémoire that lie behind local, urban and rural settings.

According to Lukić, “to question space within gothic or horror narratives means attempting to understand the concept of the failure of the map,” a concept that draws upon the fact that “gothic narratives invariably manage to manipulate and play upon the reader’s or viewer’s attempts to locate the narrator, protagonist, or to a certain extent themselves within the space at hand” (2017, 79). For this reason, the gothic or horror genre is able to offer new or reformulated narratives through its use of new or reconfigured spaces. The urban spaces that appear in the first half of Post Mortem are for the most part limited to the sites where Mario Cornejo goes or works. As audiences are allowed into the more familial space of the protagonist, the film problematizes the representational spaces of the city beyond Mario’s house. Interestingly, Mario is off-camera or absent during two crucial moments: when he takes a long shower in his house during the violent arrests across the street, and also when he walks out of the camera frame after sealing the entrance of Nancy’s hiding place. For the most part, the camera restricts our gaze to the view from his window (an
empty street in a residential area of Santiago), his drives to the seedy theater where Nancy works, the morgue, or the deserted Chinese restaurant where Mario and Nancy go for dinner. This view of Santiago is starkly different from the one shown in Andrés Wood’s *Machuca*, where the young protagonist roams the streets teeming with marching crowds, sees the fighter jets on their way to bomb the presidential palace, and witnesses the soldiers’ pillaging of the slums, as well as the murder of one of his young friends. Immediately after the coup, Mario only sees the Puelmas’ ransacked and deserted home and the burned cars in front of the theater. After that, Pinochet’s soldiers escort Mario, his boss and colleague to a principal hospital in the city, which has become an emergency morgue. Their mission: to perform and transcribe the autopsy of the former President of the Republic. Once again, the audience’s gaze is framed by what Mario is able to see, first in the military truck where they transport him, and later at the hospital.

*Post Mortem* is partially devoid of the kind of doomed itinerancy that is common in contemporary post-apocalyptic zombie fiction in cinema and television—where active characters travel from place to place looking for safety and a new home where they can rebuild civilization; that is, the same violent and exploitative neoliberal state that has just collapsed. However, there are aspects that allow us to establish some important parallels. For example, there is no saving *peripeteia* that will alter Mario’s fate and make him the hero of this tale. His efforts to find and protect Nancy are driven by his strange obsession with her, and his agreeing to help Sandra may have similar motives. Mario’s movements in the post-apocalyptic city are limited by his own pusillanimity and petty preoccupations. The smallness of the character’s vision—literally and figuratively speaking—is conveyed by the way in which Larraín uses the camera’s frame so tightly that the city beyond Mario’s limited view becomes almost invisible. This creates another form of distance for the spectator, particularly for Chilean audiences, who do not get to see a single iconic space from other visual accounts of the coup. Spatially speaking, *Post Mortem* acts as a photographic negative of Patricio Guzmán’s epic piece, *The Battle of Chile* (1975–1979). Similarly, the only home-like structure that Mario is able to produce is a wall, in this case a deadly barricade that will condemn two people and a pet to starve and die on the other side. As Lukić observes in his analysis of contemporary zombie narratives—exemplified by the popular television series *The Walking Dead*—“the space constructed by the surviving (anti)heroes conforms in structure to neoliberal space, or state.” After the apocalyptic event, the characters are unable to find their original space or (re)build “what they could claim as their place of home.” This occurs as the audience realizes “the obvious otherness of the characters, primarily based on their
use of violence” and, more importantly, their inability to “emotionally relate to anything or anyone” outside their group. The destructive ‘us versus them’ or ‘me/we first’ mentality becomes patent every time that the main ensemble encounters similar groups (2017, 90–91). Eventually the survivors realize that they are the true other or zombies, as a result of their downward spiral into inhumanity and violence. Similarly, Mario’s spectral figure walks away from the barricade-tomb—and out of the camera frame—into nothingness, a true living dead. The audience is left with the certainty that the invisible city, also off-camera, is not just 1973 Santiago. Through the long final shot, Larraín’s Post Mortem exposes by omission the same neoliberal space that most viewers inhabit, as there is no escape from it.

4 Conclusion

Larraín’s Post Mortem was released in April of 2010, one year before the body of Salvador Allende was exhumed for a second autopsy that confirmed the official report from 1973. This was seen by many as a symbolic final step in the closure of a national wound. However, this real-life development does not take away from the unexpected mix of mordancy and poignancy that sustains the fictional recreation of Allende’s first autopsy in the film. Larraín’s intent was to recreate the atmosphere of pathos, confusion and absurdity of a historical moment in Chile, and to try to understand how it reverberated, affectively speaking, in the dictatorship and post dictatorship periods. To be sure, Post Mortem revisits the coup and its aftermath from a post-dictatorial lens, filtered by decades of democracy; the dictatorship ostensibly escapes in a phantasmagorical and metaphysical offscreen (Urrutia and Bouchet 2011, 69). The Chilean filmmaker alludes to this aspect in an interview:

those days remain a sealed box, and it’s absolutely impossible to open. So maybe this is a way of trying to open it. The absurd thing is that the more I dig into that time period, the farther I am from it. I feel that there’s something absolutely unexplainable about it, and for some reason I want to get close to it. It’s archeological.

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These words condense the essence of Larraín’s oblique filmic approach to the days of the coup, in which he carefully stays away from trite modes of representation of the past and aims instead at the terrible mystery of how ordinary people succumb to the horror of normalized violence and inhumanity as
they seep into their everyday spaces. To this end, Larraín opts for a cinematic language that employs the codes of horror, although filtered through a variety of estrangement techniques, much as the film's images that are refracted and (dis)colored by vintage camera lenses.

Revealingly, a *sui generis* film like *Post Mortem* pays special attention to affective mechanisms in horror cinema that are designed to provoke a sensorial or somatic response in the viewer. Such an examination stems from studies that depict how cinematic affect becomes a shared space of encounter for contemporary Latin American (and global) audiences—often eliciting some sort of visceral response. With this in mind, a critical exploration of Larraín's film must look at the significance of affect for its representational space of horror in different forms: the dead body, the house and the urban space. In the film's phantasmagorical city, there occurs a blurring of the lines between the living and the dead in the individuals that inhabit Larraín's city. Living characters have a spectral appearance or are mistaken for dead, and, certainly, the iconic corpse of Allende comes back to haunt viewers of every ideological stripe.

Larraín frames his film so that we can barely see anything beyond the protagonist's scope of vision, although the glaring exceptions are moments of maximum violence in which the protagonist moves partially or totally off-camera. In this regard, Mario Cornejo shares a number of important traits with the traveling (anti)heroes of contemporary post-apocalyptic films and television shows. The most important similarity is the characters' inability to find or create a new home that is not yet another iteration of the neoliberal space, order or state that initially caused the apocalyptic event. The preferred trope for this proposition is the realization that the survivors have become the true *other* through violence and lack of human empathy for anyone outside themselves or their group. Without any characters to carry the torch of humanity, much less any idealized political legacy, Larraín uses his cinematic scalpel to cynically dissect the zombie society that primed Pinochet's dictatorship and its neoliberal economic ‘miracle’. In this manner, it can be argued that *Post Mortem*’s critical view invites its audience to look at the past through the visceral lens of horror to offer them a chance to critique and redefine the individual’s relationship with the neoliberal space in the present.

References


