

Unwieldy matter: Liquid landscapes of memory in postdictatorship Chilean film

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Abstract

*This article considers the haunting presence of the Pacific Ocean in two films about Southern Chile that respond to the aftermath of the Pinochet dictatorship (1973–90). I build from the premise that the heterogeneous materiality of landscapes can provoke reflection on multiple entangled histories, memories and hauntings, potentially enabling a counter-hegemonic form of historiography. Water itself is rarely analysed as ghostly matter. Its liquid materiality resists the emplacing of memorials or the accumulation of human-made debris. And yet, in the documentary *El Botón de Nácar* (The Pearl Button) (2015) and the narrative film *La Frontera* (The Frontier) (1991), water is the agglutinating presence that places different pasts in dialogue. Through my analysis, I explore the films' engagement with the complex temporalities and cultural connotations of the ocean in Southern Chile – the cyclical movement of tides, the inevitability of catastrophic tsunamis and the enduring currents between islands that are invisible to the tourist gaze. I argue that in engaging with these temporalities, the films open alternate ways of thinking about time, history, truth and justice in the Chilean 'transition to democracy'. This disruption makes room for histories of Indigenous survival, transnational solidarity, natural disaster and ecological destruction that are often absent or erased from postdictatorship memory culture.*

Keywords: haunting, Pacific Ocean, Patricio Guzmán, Ricardo Larraín, Indigeneity, water, cultural memory

Introduction

I had been the hostel's only guest for three days. It was a timber house, overlooking the Bay of Valparaiso, in central Chile. The proprietor, a woman in her eighties, had taken to eating meals with me in the front room. We occasionally spoke of her husband, now passed, who had worked throughout his life for the police, and whose absence she strongly felt. His uniformed figure stared back at us from family photographs hanging throughout the room. For the most part, we chewed our food in silence while listening to the radio, which was only turned off late at night. One afternoon she stated that 'they used to throw bodies into the sea from helicopters.' I nodded, in quiet surprise. 'That sea', she continued, pointing out of the window at the glittering Pacific. Before I had time to respond, she changed the subject, and we never spoke of the helicopters again. In that moment, the ocean transformed into a spectral space of memory that can neither be memorialized nor built over, a floating signifier of crimes that have not been accounted for. A moment later, it had resumed its status as 'the view'.

Water is rarely analysed as the stuff of memory. In its liquid form, it resists the emplacing of memorials or the permanent accumulation of material evidence. The simultaneous monotony and fluidity of its surface has made it a metaphor for oblivion, for the impossibility of return, for the forgetting of forgetting, exemplified by the River of Lethe (the river of forgetting) in Greek mythology. At the same time, water is a ubiquitous presence in the postdictatorship memory cultures of Latin America's Southern Cone, even when unacknowledged. In Santiago, the bodies of some of the Pinochet dictatorship's first victims were thrown into the Mapocho River, sightings of which generated initial rumours of human rights violations ([Stern 2006](#): 115). Subject to regular flooding, the concrete banks of the Mapocho have become a space of dissent, free from commercial development, where graffiti artists create political murals and memorials ([Palmer 2016](#); [Morrison 2020](#)). Those who supported the leftist movements of the 1960s and 1970s have been described as *náufragos*

(‘shipwrecked’), a metaphor in which the sea represents a neo-liberal political landscape that is at once malevolent and indifferent.^[1] One sculpture in Buenos Aires’s Memory Park depicts a figure standing partially submerged in the River Plate, referencing the death flights that dropped living prisoners into its muddy waters. The lapping waves and dappled light that partially obscure the figure evoke the spectral temporality and visuality of disappearance, moving perpetually between presence and absence, visibility and invisibility. Water might therefore be seen as an uncanny or deconstructive substance that traverses both remembering and forgetting and problematizes the distinction between them. It is the substance in which bodies were disappeared, while also providing the conditions for their remembrance and reappearance. It is a symbol of social amnesia, while encircling and bringing together those who were shipwrecked.

This article considers two films that draw explicitly on this deconstructive power: Ricardo Larraín’s narrative feature *La Frontera* ([‘The Frontier’ 1991](#)) and Patricio Guzmán’s documentary *El Botón de Nácar* ([‘The Pearl Button’ 2015](#)). Both reckon with the crimes of the Pinochet dictatorship (1973–90), and both focus on the coastal landscapes of the Chilean south, specifically Araucanía and Patagonia. These are politically contested landscapes, in which claims from outside (Argentina) and inside (Indigenous peoples) threaten the legitimacy of national territory. They are also watery landscapes, estuarine and archipelagic, in which land and sea are inextricably intertwined. Responding to the vernacular materials of place, the films are drawn to water as a refracting lens with its own intrinsic materiality and temporalities, through which connections between seemingly disparate social subjects and stories might be established. My aim is to analyse how the interaction between land and water constructs, and unsettles, an alternate landscape of memory in Chile, in which the crimes of the dictatorship are read within a wider constellation of state and corporate violence. The ‘unsettling’ of landscape might refer to empathic-affective ruptures in subjectivity, provoked by encounters

with the trauma of others ([LaCapra 2001](#)); to the unsettling of land that has been appropriated by settler-colonialism ([Barnd 2017](#)) or to the unsettling of postdictatorship temporalities, in which the democratic transition is conceived as a linear progressive movement towards the predetermined ends of liberal democracy and neo-liberal capitalism ([Richard 2004](#): 23).

My approach is informed by theories of haunting and landscape. Unlike narrativized memories that unfold in the past tense, haunting refers to memories, traces and affective atmospheres that signal an unacknowledged loss or an enduring injustice. Observing patterns of behaviour around colonial ruins in Argentina, Gastón Gordillo describes it as ‘a particular habitual disposition that is historically constituted’ ([2014](#): 41), in which the lines between historical periods become blurred. At the same time, haunting can point to the repression of a latent possibility that threatens the status quo. In Avery Gordon’s words, ‘[f]rom a certain vantage point the ghost also simultaneously represents a future possibility, a hope’ ([2008](#): 64). In this respect, haunting describes a feeling of temporal dislocation, in which pasts that have been deemed over or obsolete emerge unexpectedly to signal a path not followed that remains – what Gordon calls, a ‘something to be done’ ([2008](#): 139). As spectral traces are not tethered to the past tense, haunted places are intrinsically plural, containing an assemblage of non-contemporaneous pasts that poses a problem to narrative modes of modern historiography.

In search of a spectral mode of representation, scholars have consistently been drawn to the concept of landscape as a term that encompasses multiple senses of place, including the material, the affective, the mnemonic and the representational ([Wylie 2007](#); [Keller 2016](#); [Hudson 2018](#)). From one perspective, landscape is a cultural medium problematically wedded to a European tradition of painting, and a capitalist or colonial subjectivity ([Cosgrove 1985](#); [Mitchell 2002](#); [Andermann 2023](#)). W. J. T. Mitchell famously described landscape as the ‘dreamwork of imperialism’, a medium traversing film, photography, painting and literature which gives shape to ‘fantasies of the perfected imperial project’ ([2002](#): 10) as well as

unresolved conflicts and ambivalent emotions. Despite, or perhaps because of, this compromised past, it has also been theorized as a medium in which fantasies of ownership and domination can be unsettled by encounters with different biographies, visions, sensibilities and materialities, in which the blind spots of the singular gazing subject are made apparent ([Wylie 2006](#): 533). In film, this aesthetic of unsettlement might be enacted through interactions with figurative ghosts, drawing on the conventions of horror or fantasy ([Lim 2001](#)). But what interests me here is the filmic conjuring of a haunted ‘structure of feeling’ ([Gordon 2008](#): 8) through the narration of multiple seemingly disconnected histories within a single text, producing a plural landscape that defies feelings of control and certainty.

Specifically, I am interested in how the films utilize the unwieldy materiality and semantic instability of water to enact this plural landscape, taking an imaginative leap into the more than human that is unusual in postdictatorship culture. If haunting typically revolves around spatially bounded artefacts and places, can water provide access to a more expansive field of memory, disappearance and responsibility? How might film look beyond the ocean as a surface, or view, and consider what lies in its depths? And what are the risks of investing meaning, or searching for answers, in this more-than-human matter?

I begin with *La Frontera*, exploring how the aesthetic of the eerie is evoked through the imminent presence of tsunamis in the past and future – a fatalistic metaphor that nonetheless points to emergent ties of solidarity in the context of repeated catastrophes. Here I consider the imaginative possibilities of oceanic allegories as a means of reimagining the concept of justice, and the significance of the island setting as a space of encounter between disparate social subjects. Next, I turn to *El Botón de Nácar*, focusing on how it uses water to subvert the discourse of the sublime and conjure a plural landscape of disappearance and resistance. This involves critical reflection on the use of Indigenous testimonies to re-signify the landscape, describing ways of life that are at odds with the terracentrism of director, and western

modernity more broadly. Through my analysis, I address both the preferred meaning of the texts, and the unreconciled tensions, contradictions and fissures with them; in the ways they both haunt hegemonic narratives and are haunted by that which they exclude.

Eerie landscapes and waves of violence

La Frontera forms part of the hesitant revival of Chilean cinema following the return to democracy in 1990, a revival in which the imperative to expose the crimes of regime was paramount but perilous (see [Cavallo et al. 1999](#)). These films often used allegorical forms and centred on a politically ambivalent male protagonist who struggles to situate himself within the social order, a template within which *La Frontera* fits. What sets this film apart is the plurality of pasts and social subjects that the filmic landscape acknowledges, in which the dictatorship exists alongside memories of the Valparaiso tsunami of 1960, the Spanish Civil War, the Chilean war of independence and marginalized but enduring Indigenous Mapuche cultures. This multidirectional perspective is made possible through imaginative engagement with the Pacific Ocean, drawing on both its cultural connotations and intrinsic material qualities. At times, the ocean seems to point to new political assemblages of resistance, but it also provokes ambivalence towards narratives of emancipation and progress.

The story centres on Ramiro, a university maths professor who is sent into internal exile for signing a letter condemning the arrest and disappearance of a colleague. His place of exile is an island in the south of Chile, the population of which is recovering from a *maremoto* ('tsunami'), which destroyed the town and disappeared many of its inhabitants. There is no clear causal narrative structure. Rather, we follow Ramiro as he adjusts or submits to the various characters and rhythms of the landscape. He is subject to the authoritarian whims of the local delegate, whose power is limited to determining how often Ramiro must sign in. He sleeps in the church, where he encounters the town priest, an English-speaking foreigner. He goes to a bar, where local men drink and dance in a melancholic embrace. He meets and

befriends a diver who spends his days on a quixotic search for a hole connecting two oceans. He becomes ill and is healed by a Mapuche machi ('traditional healer and religious leader'). And he develops a romantic relationship with Maite, an exile from the Spanish Civil War, who lost her mother and son to the tsunami, and now runs the town's library. After Ramiro receives a letter stating that he is free to return home, the island is struck by another tsunami and the townspeople gather in a cemetery perched atop a hill, with Maite, her father and the diver having been taken by the sea. In the final scene a national news team interviews Ramiro, during which he stares into the camera and repeats, without emotion, his denunciation of the 'internal war' and the abduction of his colleague.

The name of the island is never disclosed nor the region where it is located, but from the outset the landscape bears the recognizable iconography of Araucanía, a southern region that was colonized by the Chilean state in the 1880s, following centuries of armed resistance by the Mapuche community ([Rioja 2023](#)). Ramiro arrives in this contested territory as if on a road trip. He sits in the back seat of a car travelling south on the mainland, the habitual direction of travel for *santiagoños* visiting 'the south'. Two non-uniform police accompany him, for whom the journey appears to be a pleasure trip from the centre to the periphery. They stop to take a Polaroid self-portrait in front of a flowerbed planted in the form of the Chilean flag and have a heated discussion comparing the merits of the flag and the national anthem. The further south they travel, the more rural the landscape becomes, including unpaved roads and ubiquitous fields of grass and gorse. The island itself is reached via a rudimentary cable ferry, further compounding a feeling of isolation. As the car crosses, a local man totters drunkenly towards one of the windows and is shooed away with threats of violence. One of the officers snaps a Polaroid photo of the ferryman, who is dressed in yellow rubber overalls, subjecting him to a gaze that is both touristic and disciplinary. In this sequence, the landscape and its inhabitants appear as picturesque and peripheral; however, we are also made aware that

peripherality is an imposed hegemonic discourse. The centre–periphery dynamic remains throughout the film, maintained by the positionality of the protagonist; however, as the narrative progresses, we become sensitive to other geographies, subjectivities and temporalities through which the dichotomy is challenged.

Much of the film’s symbolic and affective charge derives from the island setting – a place that appears to be at the edge of the nation but also serves as a microcosm of it. Islands often have a mythical function in Latin American cinema, providing a *mise en scène* for utopian world-building fantasies, as well as allegories of social collapse ([Gómez and Adrián 2022](#)). Notably, they serve as spaces in which diverse social actors can be placed in contact. As Gómez and Adrián write, ‘the islands of Latin American cinema perform as “contact zones” (Pratt 1992) or laboratory spaces for the staging (and, sometimes, resolution) of conflict between individuals and groups with different social, ethnic, racial and national affiliation’ ([2022](#): 18). The island of *La Frontera* offers one such ‘contact zone’, prompting interaction between a priest, a despot, an exile and a Mapuche machi, among others. Within this mythic space, the first tsunami can be read as a thinly veiled metaphor for the military coup of 1973, which has left the island-country in a state of mourning and ruination. While the violence of the dictatorship is not pictured, the allegorical island-space enables reflection on the more insidious and pervasive afterlives of authoritarianism – social atomization, a culture of fear and silence and the resurgence of a patriarchal militaristic nationalism as a governing ideology (see [Corradi et al. 1992](#); [Garretón 1992](#)). Thinking spatially, Haase argues that the island liberates dictatorship memories from sites of detention and highlights how violence forms ‘a constitutive part of the social normality’ ([2011](#): 306, translation added). In this reading, the frontier becomes a mirror through which the nation is defamiliarized, drawing attention to social transformations that are less visible than forced disappearance and harder to memorialize.

The idea that the tsunami represents the coup, and the island the nation, is compelling, but there is something singular and regionally specific about the wave that induces one to read it on its own more-than-metaphorical terms. First, it refers to a real event. In 1960, the south of Chile was hit by the strongest earthquake recorded in world history, resulting in a tsunami that destroyed coastal towns, killed approximately 5700 people and led to the disappearance of 3000 more ([Kronmüller et al. 2017](#): 239). Tsunamis might be dateable in chronological time, but they are also an ever-present possibility on the Chilean coast, an inevitable but unforeseeable disaster in both the past and the future. The knowledge that the sea once covered this dry land (and will do so again) renders the landscape with an eerie atmosphere. Fisher defines the eerie as a cultural mode or ‘aesthetic experience’ ([2016](#): 61) that revolves around an unresolved enigma within the landscape that represents a challenge to western empiricism. He argues that this experience can be provoked by encounters with forces and rhythms that ‘lie beyond common experience’ (Fisher [2016](#): 61) or agencies that should not be where they are (Fisher [2016](#): 68). Read metaphorically, the spectral presence of the ocean *where it should not be* provokes awareness of repeated waves of violence in the Chilean south that precede and exceed the crimes of the dictatorship. This eerie landscape haunts narratives of Chilean exceptionalism that frame the coup as a hiatus in an otherwise exemplary history of peace and democracy, while also drawing awareness to non-human forces that are indifferent to the powers and territories of the state.

There is a feeling of fatalism here, particularly in the final scene, when the town is once again destroyed, and history seems doomed to endlessly repeat itself. For Haase, the tsunami metaphor potentially implies that human catastrophes are inevitable and risks obscuring the real social, political and material conditions that made the coup possible ([2011](#): 308). If the root cause of the catastrophe is unknowable, how can we ‘learn from the mistakes of the past’? At the same time, the carceral presence of the sea in the final scene adds caution to transitional

narratives that the ‘dark past’ has been overcome to be replaced by liberal democracy, which is habitually represented as process of liberation of ‘opening-up’ ([Draper 2012](#): 6).² It also pushes against the empirical focus of the field of transitional justice, which prioritizes unveiling the truth of the traumatic past as part of the process of ‘moving on’ (see Bevernage and Colaert 2014). By harnessing the eerie, the core empirical questions of transitional justice ‘what happened and why?’ become unmoored, and the methods through which they might be answered remain unclear.

The protagonist’s/spectator’s guides to the eerie landscape are Maite, the Spanish exile; Hilda, the Mapuche machi, and the unnamed diver, all of whom have a distinct relationship with the sea. The diver spends his days on the ocean floor in search of a hole that he believes is the cause of the tsunamis. He is an absurd figure in that he searches for causes, meanings and solutions in a realm that appears indifferent to human action. At the same time, the diver is one of the few people in the town who seems optimistic about the future, always claiming to be on the verge of solving the enigma. After his assistant dies from alcoholism, he recruits Ramiro to his cause and they take turns sinking to the sea floor, where they come across heterogeneous human debris. Visually, these scenes have a radiant quality. As they sit in an open fishing boat, the sun shines brightly, reflecting off a gently agitated grey-green sea. This is a stark contrast to the rain and mist that shrouds much of the narrative, in which water makes the landscape inhospitable, compelling the characters to remain indoors and isolated. The underwater world is calm and enticing, strange, but not malignant, and always charged with the possibility of discovery.

The literary theorist Killian Quigly describes the ocean floor as a multidirectional space in which artefacts from different eras become entangled and encrusted with life. In his words, ‘[w]recked leavings are at once generous, vital, and disorderly contributors to the stories seas are heard to tell’ (Quigly [2023](#): 16). In line with this vision, Ramiro and the diver find an

assortment of objects, including a crumbling metal statue memorializing the *abrazo de Maipú* ('the Maipú embrace'), an emblematic moment of solidarity between Chilean and Argentine forces in the war of independence against Spain. Encountered in pieces, this uncanny object resists the military's attempts to align itself with the nation's 'founding fathers', while also containing an anachronistic trace of anticolonial solidarity. In her reading of the film, Deborah Shaw suggests that the ocean the diver explores is not a symbol of violence but of time itself, and Ramiro's dives can therefore 'be seen as a metaphor for his entry into history' (2003: 95). While they are fated to never find the source of history's ills, it is implied that the act of searching in solidarity has value in and of itself.

The character of Maite, the Spanish exile, reads the sea through a more pragmatic, albeit mournful, gaze. Upon arrival, she helps Ramiro find lodging in the church and takes him on a 'guided tour' of the island. During this tour, she visits the ruins of her family home, destroyed by the last tsunami, and she sarcastically points out the island's 'main touristic attraction', the skeleton of a church steeple that protrudes from a beach. Again, the spectator is made uncomfortably aware of the touristic quality of their gaze and of the fetishization of ruins as symbols of loss. Maite's presence on the island is a reminder of solidarity between Chile and Republican Spain. She and her family arrived as refugees on the SS *Winnipeg* in 1939, a journey that was made possible by the diplomacy of the poet Pablo Neruda ([de la Ossa Martínez 2015](#)). While she mourns her family, she is not defined by that loss, or rendered ghostly, as is often the case in representation of women survivors ([Cubilié 2005](#): xii). She runs the town library, where her time is devoted to researching Mapuche mythology and acts with a decisiveness that contrasts with the lethargy or incompetence of most of the town's men. Through her subject position the sea is perceived as an agent of disappearance but also as a means of escape and an object of knowledge through which transnational and cross-cultural ties of solidarity might be established. Her decision to be taken by the waters at the end of the

film is an act of despair, but it also resists a heteronormative narrative resolution in which a better future is embodied in a heterosexual coupling.

Ramiro's third guide to the landscape is Hilda, the Mapuche machi, who is depicted as a marginal but revered figure who subtly challenges the power of the military and the Catholic Church. She is peripheral in the narrative, only appearing in moments of crisis, but the advice she offers is life-saving. When Ramiro falls ill, it is Hilda who is called upon to nurse him back to health, using a tea composed of medicinal herbs. Prior to the second tsunami, she warns the priest of the coming disaster, a piece of advice that he is reluctant to accept. This moment reflects Lafkenche-Mapuche collective memories of the 1960 tsunami, in which it is said that the machi foresaw the tsunami in dreams ([Kronmüller et al. 2017](#): 242). In the final scene, she addresses the villagers in untranslated Mapudungun, while the priest delivers the Lord's Prayer, pointing to the endurance of different belief systems within a nation state that is outwardly Catholic. The film's engagement with Mapuche mythology is superficial, but Hilda's presence at least begins to acknowledge other ways of knowing the landscape and the histories that shape it, informed by collective memories and emplaced knowledges to which most audiences do not and cannot have access.

Far from being trapped in a cycle of traumatic repetition, these characters point to an island landscape of speculative freedom. Shaw argues that Maite and Hilda are depicted as the 'rightful lay and spiritual leaders of their communities' ([2003](#): 92) and in this respect the frontier provides a space in which to imagine the fraying of military and patriarchal power. This is not a space of unencumbered emancipation, and we are not encouraged to interpret the island as a utopian alternative. Rather, the perspectives of Maite, Hilda and the diver open an emotionally ambivalent, temporally complex and semiotically ambiguous landscape of loss, trauma and resistance that decentres the coup as a moment of foundational rupture, while pointing to other ways of knowing the land and sea. If the concept of transition implies the

promise of a route out, of a return to normality, this island and the waters that surround it do not provide it. Rae argues that the power of the sea as a literary device lies in ‘the potential of uncertainty and the inability of humans to fully know or comprehend the ocean’ (2022: 63). It is this polysemy, or unwieldiness, of water that makes this filmic landscape critically unsettling, refusing to point to a single crime or single solution.

Documentary chorography and watery ethics

Patricio Guzmán began his career making documentaries that celebrated and critically interrogated the ‘Chilean road to socialism’ in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Since the coup, he has lived in exile and his films have been devoted to the afterlife of the Unidad Popular, while also critiquing the social changes provoked by military rule and neo-liberalism. Moving beyond this foundational rupture, his recent films have been drawn to longer histories of state and corporate repression in Chile, including extractive industry and settler colonialism. This shift has involved a move towards non-urban landscapes, including the Atacama Desert and the Andes Mountains. Guzmán’s approach to landscape is multifaceted. His gaze is exilic, often explicitly in search of a homeland, and in some respects these ‘natural’ landscapes offer that homeland. They are scenes of continuity in a country that has changed almost beyond recognition. Accompanying the nostalgic impulse is a forensic gaze that depicts landscape as an archive of material pasts that unsettle the centrality of the nation and the human – what David Martin-Jones calls a ‘physical archive’ of ‘universe memory’ (2013: 713). Finally, the films are drawn to different technologies of vision through which landscape is represented and interrogated: painting, maps, drawings, archival photographs, telescopes, satellite imagery and, of course, moving pictures.

Bearing these diverse approaches to landscape in mind, I read *El Botón* as an example of documentary chorography, a hybrid mode that represents a specific geographical region through a combination of aesthetic forms and draws attention to multiple registers of place,

including the visual, the sonic, the affective and the spectral. While cartography refers to the practice of mapping using an aerial geographical perspective, Casey describes chorography as a ‘qualitative mapping of regions’ (2002: xvii) that incorporates different perspectives and scales. Considering Indigenous narrations of place, Michel Tawa aligns chorography with choreography, emphasizing that movement between different registers of place can elude a ‘visual sense of the whole’ (2002: 48–49). In the case of *El Botón*, chorographic mapping is enacted through water, a ubiquitous material within the Patagonian landscape. It is a mass grave where many political prisoners were disappeared; it was and is the means of sustenance and surface of travel for Indigenous peoples; and it is a substance that is fundamental to all life on earth and possibly in the wider cosmos. It thus serves as a tool for mapping and contemplating the region, while situating it within a global or universal context.

To appreciate Guzmán’s intervention, it is important to consider the cultural and political significance of Patagonia within national and colonial imaginaries. On a standardized map, it is the fraying edge of the Southern Cone, a place in which national territory loses continuity and coherence. Focusing on Argentine Patagonia, Gordillo describes the archipelago as a sparsely inhabited region that historically threatened national territory, due to the ‘haunting absence of civilization, state power, and capitalism’ (2014: 66). Haunting, here, is not the return of the repressed but a disruptive awareness within hegemonic cultures that radically different ways of life exist and endure. The colonization of Patagonia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suppressed this discomfiting knowledge and opened the region to extractive forms of capitalism, such as sheep farming, hydro-energy and the tourism industry (Andermann 2007; Coronato et al. 2015; Mendoza 2018). Throughout the colonization process, Indigenous groups, such as the Aónikenk, the Haush, the Kawésqar, the Selk’nam and the Yagán, have been subjected to violent repression by the Chilean and Argentine states, as well as European settlers, including campaigns of forced resettlement and extermination (Briones and Lanata

[2002](#); [Marchante 2019](#)). With these present pasts in mind, Patagonia can be thought of as a nationally peripheral place that is imaginatively and strategically central to the consolidation of the nation state, achieved both through military force and cultural discourse.

When *El Botón* first introduces Patagonia, it is a realm of the sublime, an uninhabited land of rock and ice, viewed from a moving ship. Mountains are reflected in a smooth wake; snow whips off sharp peaks; gnarled trees cleave to exposed shorelines. As in traditional western landscape painting, the artist/creator is not pictured in the frame but exists as an unseen observer, at once rational and romantic. The horizontal landscape view is accompanied by satellite imagery, in which the archipelago is abstracted and clarified into patches of green, white and brown, striated with blue-black water. Much of the visual pleasure of the film is derived from the consumption of these spectacular ‘empty’ landscapes, occupying the position of a tourist adventurer. When Guzmán’s voice informs us that ‘it is a timeless place, an archipelago of rain’ (2015), the spectator is transported to a place outside of modernity, in which nature can be encountered in its pure unmediated form.

Such pictures resonate with imperial imaginaries of Patagonia, in which it is depicted as a sublime landscape at ‘the end of the world’. Analysing British travel writing in the 1800s, Peñaloza ([2008](#)) argues that Patagonia has consistently been depicted as an uninhabited land that exists outside of modern progressive time, which both astonishes and threatens the onlooker. In some respects, the sublime recognizes feelings of incomprehension in the face of an unfamiliar and unsettling place. However, it also centres the figure of the western traveller/explorer as the bearer of the gaze who is best positioned to appreciate immensity and excess (Peñaloza [2008](#): 171). The aerial cartographic perspective is integral to the European imperial conquest in Latin America ([Craib 2000](#)). Looking from on high, we appreciate the vastness of the terrain, but it is also made legible and obtainable. The film’s affective power is derived from the reproduction and unsettling of these ethically compromised ways of seeing.

As the film progresses, we become increasingly sensitive to lives and perspectives that seethe beneath the sublime surface, challenging the spectator's, and Guzmán's, authority to read, apprehend and comment on what we are seeing.

The unsettling of the gaze begins with performative self-reflection by the director. Guzmán is fascinated by the imaginaries of European imperialism. Through narration, he recalls that as a child he was enthralled by the novels of Jules Verne but admits prior ignorance about the 'people of the South'. His entry into the histories of the Patagonia's Indigenous peoples is through the writings of Fitzroy and Darwin, who describe purchasing an Indigenous Yagán man for the price of a pearl button, to which the film's name refers. As such, even when addressing the erasures of history, he remains reliant on the colonial gaze, what Hill (Tuscarora) calls, 'the view from the ship' ([2018: 141](#)). Central to the director's positionality is a profound terracentrism and ingrained fear of the sea, which he claims is common to all Chileans, despite the country's vast coastline. His turn to the sea can therefore be read as an admission of complicity with the disappearance Indigenous lives and a subjective opening up to ways of life that had previously been inconceivable.

To give shape to these ways of life, the film presents three Indigenous testimonies. Cristina Calderón, of Yagán heritage, provides translations of specific words from Spanish into her native language, resignifying the seascape by stating the first names of seals and whales. Martín G. Calderón, Cristina's nephew, recalls crossing Cape Horn in a canoe with his father, navigating currents and waterways that are invisible to both the tourist gaze and modern navigational systems. Standing aside a canoe he has constructed, he laments that he is prohibited from paddling the fjords in the present, as the Chilean navy consider the waters too treacherous for a small boat. If the film's opening sequence associates open water with freedom, the image of Martín's dry-docked canoe is a reminder of the phantasmal power of the state to define freedom and who has access to it. Gabriela Paterito, from the Kawésqar

community, describes a nomadic way of life oriented around diving for shellfish and moving between sources of fresh water. She remembers the sea not solely from above, as shining surface, but from below, as source of sustenance and entry point into adulthood. When asked if she feels Chilean, she swiftly replies ‘no, in no way’. Part of her testimony is delivered in the endangered Kawésqar language, adopting a story mode to recount a 1000-km journey throughout the archipelago. ‘I know the way’,³ she says, before starting her story, the present tense pushing against the allochronic tendencies of ethnographic cinema.

In the sharing of these stories, the landscape transforms from a scene of sublime beauty to a place of active and ongoing disappearance. The spectator is made aware that our reading of this place is partial and disembodied, reliant on visual discourses and technologies of vision that perpetuate disappearance. Simultaneously, we are confronted with Indigenous ways of knowing and narrating the landscape that endure. As Gómez-Barris writes, ‘[t]hrough these submerged perspectives, the viewer is able to consider the spaces where Native imaginaries continue to reside, despite these intense histories, and the restricting control of the Pacific and Patagonia’ (2018: 96). In line with Gordillo’s conceptualization of haunting, that which haunts is not crime or a malevolent spectre but a whole way of life that continues to threaten the power of capitalism and the state, as well as leftist imaginaries of social emancipation.

The next step in Guzmán’s chorographic project is to consider the physical properties of water as a medium of memory. He draws attention to the fact that we are all largely composed of water, uniting us with all other living things. Citing an unnamed oceanographer, he states that the act of thinking resembles the ocean, because water ‘is always ready to adapt to everything’. Díaz (2021) describes this as an emergent ecological perspective in which water provides new spatial and temporal scales for thinking about the interconnectedness of history. Like *La Frontera*, this perspective moves against the tendency to read the dictatorship as an isolated event in chronological time and prompts reflection on multiple entangled pasts,

processes and social structures. However, while *La Frontera*'s 'message' is ambiguous, *El Botón* sets out an explicit watery ethics, based on the principle of boundless responsibility. This is expressed most clearly by the poet Raul Zurita, speaking to camera towards the end of the film, who says that:

[w]hen you watch the sea, the water, you're watching all of history, all of humanity [...] At the end of the day, we all, in a world of victims and victimisers [...] we are each responsible for everything, for the victims and the victimisers. Each human being, no one in particular.

These words resemble recent calls in decolonial theory to read water as a space of 'radical relationality' ([Yazzie and Baldy 2018](#): 2) that draws attention to the interdependency of all living things and challenges the hegemony of 'property-centric, landlocked liberal individualism and settler colonial governmentality' ([George and Wiebe 2020](#): 505). At the same time, the pasts to which Guzmán is drawn are resolutely human, paying scant attention to the more-than-human lives and human impacts on them. The film's watery ethics is therefore a confluence of different world-/water-views, in which a leftist understanding of injustice remains predominant.

In addition to providing a medium for memory, the Pacific is also portrayed as a container of human debris with a temporality of imminent, if unpredictable, return. The central image of the film is of a button, discovered on the sea floor, that belonged to one of the disappeared – one of those people thrown from helicopters who haunted my host in Valparaíso. It is filmed in extreme close-up, assuming the status of, what Quigly calls, a 'sea sculpture' ([2023](#): 2) – a framed object co-produced by human hands and the preserving-corroding-enmeshing conditions of the sea floor. Our eyes caress the corroded iron of the rail in which it is embedded, used to weigh the body down, and I am pricked by the image's punctum – a few strands of nylon that remain from the shirt to which the button was attached. This object is material evidence of a crime, a military pact of silence, and a life cut short, while also providing a multidirectional link to Orundellico, the Indigenous man who was taken by Fitzroy. Crucially,

it challenges prevalent perceptions of the sea as a space of oblivion and points to its preserving and archival properties. Towards the end of the film, Guzmán recalls a day when the body of a disappeared woman washed up on the shore in the 1970s, stating that from that day, ‘people began to suspect that the ocean was a cemetery’ (2015). This scene describes the transformation of the sea into a haunted space. It is a cemetery, but one in which bodies might return unannounced. It is an unruly site of memory, a space that is beyond the human control but might, nonetheless, be essential to the pursuit of justice.

Guzmán’s combination of different histories of injustice has received numerous critiques, with which I partially agree. Merchant highlights that, despite the film’s stated openness to plural voices, it remains reliant on white male authority figures to make the seascape legible, thereby reproducing neocolonial ethnographic practices of looking and listening (2022: 22).^[4] Carvajal (2020) argues that Guzmán inadvertently reproduces colonial narratives and visualities, in which the idealization of Indigenous lifestyles denies their coevalness. This is particularly apparent when Guzmán says that he and Gabriela lived in the same country, ‘but centuries apart’. Carvajal also questions the framing of Indigenous lives as one chapter in the violent history of the Chilean state, while implying that the chapter is over. In the process, he argues that the Fuegian peoples are reduced to a tool in support of Guzmán’s political agenda (Carvajal 2020: 91). These arguments resonate with critiques of ‘multidirectional memory’ (Kékesi and Zombory 2023), which highlight that solidarity based on memories of trauma can erase historical specificity and asymmetrical power dynamics. Rothberg himself, who coined the term, concedes that uncritical comparison can lead to ‘competition, appropriation, or trivialisation’ (2011: 524). In the case of *El Botón*, the picturing of an expanded landscape of memory risks equating political repression against the left with the attempted annihilation of an entire world, while temporally confining that world to an event in the national past.

The film's allochronic rhetoric is symptomatic of the difficulty of thinking outside of the regime of modern historical time. However, despite its issues, the memories of water that it contains remain critically unsettling, especially when we read Guzmán's narration against the grain. Running throughout is an emergent awareness of landscape's resistance to linear narrativization. The explicit aim of *El Botón* is to read the violence of the dictatorship alongside an *earlier* history of Indigenous genocide. Guzmán states explicitly that these are two chapters of the same story, 'a story of extermination' (2015). And yet, there is an irreconcilable tension in this story. Guzmán states that he is Chilean, and he reads Patagonia as a part of Chile. The Socialist project that he mourns was nation-centric, often existing in tension with Indigenous political demands (Carter 2010). Guzmán's gaze is exilic – it longs to find and return to the country he left in the 1970s, to his homeland. However, when Guzmán asks Gabriela Paterito if she feels Chilean, her answer is no. She refuses to be part of Chile's story, despite her community being catastrophically affected by it. In this moment, she produces a landscape of radical simultaneity, in which the temporal coherence of the present is unsettled. In their testimonies, Martín, Gabriela and Cristina do not focus on the end of their peoples but on enduring practical and embodied knowledges of the archipelagic landscape – a landscape of currents and eddies and places of refuge that still exists. 'I know the way', says Gabriela, not 'I knew the way'. There is a budding awareness here of what Berber Bevernage, drawing on Koselleck (1985), calls the 'non-contemporaneity of the present' (2016: 20) – the knowledge that groups and individuals can hold radically different horizons of expectation and spaces of experience that problematizes the idea or desirability of a national simultaneity. The memories of water that Guzmán encounters actively resist interpolation into the national story, yet they are present in the landscape. They, thus, haunt the eloquent narrative of mourning and inheritance and straightforward empathy and point to a 'something to be done'.

Guzmán's voice might be dominant, but the multifarious form of *El Botón* entails an implicit unravelling of his subjectivity and political identity. This unravelling, Wylie argues, is a crucial component of any critical form of (western) landscape representation. He insists that 'a landscape cannot be a homeland' (Wylie [2016](#): 2) because if we pay attention to different perspectives on place, our feelings of ownership or comprehension start to dissipate. 'This is home-not-home', he says 'inducing the suspicion that there never was a first home to begin with' (Wylie 2017: 12). Once *El Botón* relinquishes its search for a homeland, it prompts reflection on how non-contemporaneous ways of life and horizons of expectation might find a place in the present. It seems that the 'road to socialism' that Guzmán traversed and documented in the 1970s has been replaced by an alternate metaphor – something more fluid and heterogeneous in which the ends are multiple and the surface is not asphalt.

Conclusion

Water has always coursed through memories of the Southern Cone dictatorships, often unnoticed. What interested me here is what happens – politically, ethically, imaginatively – when it becomes the centre of our attention. Specifically, how do filmic engagements with the Pacific Ocean enable and unsettle a plural landscape of memory, disappearance and social resistance? The two films I focused on are made in different filmic modes and were released nearly three decades apart. Nonetheless, there are key resonances between them. Both turn to water in search of other geographies and temporalities of state violence. In *La Frontera*, the eerie promise of the sea's return prompts awareness of cyclical waves of state violence in the past and future, thereby disrupting the triumphalist accounts of the democratic transition as a linear movement towards peace and reconciliation. The social subjects affected by these waves point to still more histories of oppression that extend beyond Chile's borders, or seethe from within, including the Spanish Civil War and Mapuche histories of struggle and survival. In *El*

Botón, the Pacific is an irrevocable reminder of state terror – a space in which disappearance was enacted that continues to be policed by the Chilean armed forces.

Faced with these cyclical, irrevocable and enduring injustices, both films are striated with feelings of melancholy and despair, drawing on and reinforcing wider cultural narratives about the sea as a harbinger of death. From this perspective, water as ghostly matter can point to an ever-expanding and potentially overwhelming web of injustice to which audiences are relationally bound in different ways. When we remember with the sea, there is a distinct sense that violence, and material evidence of it, will return cyclically, inevitably and often unexpectedly. The sea is thus imbued with a temporality of non-teleological anticipation, in which we must remain attentive to unexpected arrivals and unlikely connections, but there is no single act or event through which justice might be restored.

While violence and melancholy lie at the core of both films, they are not imprisoned by them. Both remain open to the semiotic and *affective* ambiguity of the sea, imagining archipelagic and island landscapes in which the hegemony of capitalism and state power is threatened. In *La Frontera*, the act of searching the disordered landscape of the ocean floor is an almost euphoric act of resistance. The island itself is governed by two female figures whose power and knowledge points to incipient bonds of feminist-Indigenous-exilic solidarity, bonds that materialized more concretely during the *Estallido Social* of 2019 (see [Gordon-Zolov 2023](#); [Peña-Pincheira et al. 2023](#)). In *El Botón*, Indigenous testimonies push back against terracentric fears of water by recalling, or making present, a maritime way of life based on intimate and embodied knowledges of place. These testimonies resist tendencies within dominant discourse to render Patagonian landscapes as sublime and indecipherable. In Gabriela Paterito and Martín Calderon's accounts, the landscape is knowable and narratable, albeit via languages, stories and systems of knowledge that have no place in the context of capitalism.

The risks of following water indefinitely and uncritically are manifold, and both films contain problematic elements that must be reckoned with. First, the director-narrator-protagonists who explore the landscape are men in positions of relative privilege, whose subjectivities sustain the centre–periphery binary. This binary might be problematized, but the films still rely on initial identification with a male metropolitan perspective. Second, though the diffracting lens of water promises a decentring of history, both films orbit primarily around the foundational rupture of the military coup. It thus bears noting that the construction of an expanded landscape of memory always risks co-opting groups into political imaginaries that they do not recognize or have agency over. Third, although there is an ecological dimension to these filmic landscapes, they rarely acknowledge the non-human animals and plants that inhabit the sea and its edges, whose presence and perspectives could disrupt human-centric conceptions of place and time. Finally, when watery metaphors are interpreted literally, they can have a decontextualizing, or dematerializing, effect, in which real political, economic and ideological conditions are erased, or dissolved, by the opaque and unpredictable depths of the ocean.

And yet, the ocean is still there, outside of the window in Valparaiso, and to ignore its imaginative pull would be to ignore the real ways in which it interacts with and haunts collective memories. These are two prominent attempts to utilize and reckon with the ocean on its own terms that begin to challenge hegemonic imaginaries of truth, justice and national identity. There may be irreconcilable tensions between the pasts and world-views that they bring into dialogue, but these tensions can also represent a *something to be done*, conjuring emergent plurinational political imaginaries that are both speculative and already here.

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Filmography

El Botón de Nácar, 2015. Directed by Patricio Guzman. Chile/ Spain/ France: Atacama Productions/ Valdivia Film/ Mediapro/ France 3 Cinema.

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Tierra sola, 2017. Film. Directed by Tiziana Panizza. Chile: Domestic Films.

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Notes

1. For example, the narrative feature *Los Náufragos*, directed by Miguel Littín (1994)
2. It bears noting that while *La Frontera* was released in 1991, following the return of democracy (1990), the film was made and is set during the dictatorship. The narrative ambiguity of the final scene is shaped by the way the film straddles this historical event.
3. I have used the subtitle translation in the interest of clarity. The original Spanish is ‘*hasta ahí, si. Por ahí conosco todo, hasta llegar a Golfo Penas*’.
4. Merchant critically compares the film to Tiziana Panizza’s documentary *Tierra sola* (‘Solitary Land’ 2017), analysing how they both use the ‘oceanic archive’ (DeLoughrey 2017) to explore the entanglement of ‘postcolonial and ecological concerns’ (2022: 7).

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