

Neoliberalism as seen by young Chilean filmmakers

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Abstract

In addition to the many demonstrations that have multiplied around the country since the return of democracy in Chile, Chilean filmmaking seems to make a point of denouncing the neoliberal system and its effects on society. Thus, the new generation of filmmakers, born during the dictatorship and thus witness to systemic implementation of neoliberalism, denounces a system inherited from an authoritarian regime, which glorifies individualism and tends to whitewash the violation of human rights committed during the dictatorship. This article aims to analyse the relationship of these new filmmakers with neoliberalism through the study of various fiction films, but also through their production practices.

Keywords

neoliberalism, « novísimo cine chileno », Chilean filmmaking.



Introduction

Eager to leave behind its old reputation of a violent, authoritarian regime, the first Chilean democratic government took advantage of an unprecedented growth in the GDP to present Chile as a modern, stable, peaceful nation, where the violation of human rights was nothing more than an old memory. The country, before the coup of 1973, was stuck in its underdevelopment and in an economic crisis that seemed to never end, but it emerged from the dictatorship (1973-1990) transformed and allegedly reinforced. Milton Friedman even spoke of a « Chilean miracle » [1]. The neoliberal system, established at the beginning of the dictatorship and legitimated by the constitution of 1980, deeply transformed Chilean society, to such an extent that some researchers, such as Tomás Moulián or Manuel Gárate, spoke of a “capitalist revolution” [2].

In this work, I use the word “neoliberalism” as Michel Foucault used to, that is a “project of society” where the State facilitates the complete freedom of the market [3]. Beyond the economic reforms usually associated with neoliberalism, it is also and mostly a political and social project [4]. In other words, the neoliberal “revolution” not only implies consequences on every part of society, but also a radical transformation of the way of doing politics. As Naomi Klein points out in *The Shock Doctrine*, the implantation of neoliberalism in Chile went hand in hand with the establishment of a repressive system of terror, based on the systematic violation of the fundamental rights of thousands of citizens [5]. This double “innovation” of the military regime – the neoliberal system and the violation of human rights – gave way to what, in democracy, official history remembers as *la teoría del empate* – the theory of the draw: if the regime has murdered and tortured, it has also pulled Chile out of its underdevelopment. Such is the official discourse.

In 2019, a series of massive demonstrations shattered the image of a peaceful and stable Chile and claimed that neoliberalism is responsible for a social malaise that has only grown with time [6]. The young Chilean filmmakers (born during the dictatorship and thus witnesses of this “capitalist revolution”) started foreseeing this malaise associated with neoliberalism since 2005, when critics identified the birth of a new generation of filmmakers: *el novísimo cine chileno* (the very new Chilean cinema) [7]. In this paper, I aim to analyse the bonds between these filmmakers and neoliberalism, a bond that can be seen in their films, but

also in their practices of production.

Nuevo Cine Chileno vs Novísimo Cine Chileno



To understand who these filmmakers are, one must go back to the 1960s and their political and cultural context. Indeed, the 1960s are a period of political tumult: every field of society is politicized and polarized, and maybe most especially the field of art and culture. All this leads to the birth of a militant cinema, thought of as a tool of social change, supposed to fight cultural imperialism [8] by developing a truly Latin-American cinema ready to reveal to the world the reality these countries are experiencing. That cinema is the *Nuevo Cine Chileno* – the New Chilean Cinema. The audience, not used to this kind of cinema, is rather indifferent to these films [9]. However, if they are unsuccessful in Chile, the films are celebrated in foreign (mostly European) film festivals and thus Chilean Cinema makes its first appearance on the international scene.

Of course, the coup puts an end to this artistic tumult. The new regime sees a threat in these practices and immediately decides to end them: making films in Chile has become practically impossible [10]. Facing this new reality, most filmmakers go into exile and, from abroad, they keep working on a cinema that has now become a weapon of resistance [11] and that relies on a transnational web of cooperation. This new filmmaking, though, will remain essentially in European theatres, as censorship was severe in Chile.

The establishment of neoliberalism in Chile has obvious consequences on cinema. Production is now fragmented whereas in the 1960s production was rather centralized. In 1984, there were 57 production companies, even though practically no film was produced [12]. The little theatres disappeared quickly from each neighbourhood in favour of big multiplexes where Hollywoodian productions monopolized the screens. Unprotected by the state, the Chilean producers were forced to diversify their production and turn to television (which was quickly becoming essential in Chilean society) and publicity.

It is in this context that the novísimos filmmakers were born. Even though

critics have identified these filmmakers as a new “generation”, the filmmakers themselves have never made part of their will to belong to a group, to a movement (artistic or political), nor even to a generation [13]. However, a few common points between these filmmakers stands out. All of them were born after the coup and therefore grew up in an authoritarian context where access to culture was complicated. Still, they seem to share common influences (a mixed influence of Hollywood – Spielberg, Lucas, Scorsese, Coppola – and auteur Chilean and International Cinema – Ruiz, Littin, the Dardenne Brothers, Jarmusch, Kaurismäki, etc.) [14] and common preoccupations. Thus, they seem fascinated by the “intimate space as a territory of conflict” [15] and in consequence they explore issues such as the disintegration of social bonds (La Sagrada Familia, Sebastián Lelio, 2005); the alienation of individuals (Carne de Perro, Fernando Guzzoni, 2012 ; La Nana, Sebastián Silva, 2008); criminality (Tony Manero, Pablo Larraín, 2008 ; Matar a un Hombre, Alejandro Fernández Almendras, 2014); the incompetence of the political class (Aquí no ha Pasado Nada, Alejandro Fernández Almendras, 2016); or the impact of the collective trauma the country experienced during the dictatorship (No, Pablo Larraín, 2012 ; Los Perros, Marcela Said, 2017) [16].

Finally, regarding the reception of their films in Chile, it is similar to that of the films of the 1960s – that is, celebrated abroad and largely ignored in Chile. However, the growing recognition of Chilean Cinema abroad, and most specifically in the most mainstream festivals in the US (the Academy Awards), seems to have created a feeling of collective enthusiasm regarding certain local films, such as Pablo Larraín’s No, the first Chilean film to be nominated to an Oscar, Sebastián Lelio’s A Fantastic Woman, the first Chilean film to win said award and, more recently, Maite Alberdi’s Agente Topo, the first Chilean documentary film to be nominated.



The novísimos at neoliberalism’s service?

The apparently apolitical stance of the *novísimos* led some researchers to accuse them of being one more agent of neoliberalism. Thus, Carlos Saavedra [17], Nelly Richard [18], Roberto Trejo [19], or Ximena Póo, Claudio Salinas and Hans Stange [20], denounce the individualistic side of the films, where the collective fights of the 1970s are omitted, in favour of representations centred on individuals. In that sense, there

would be no critical position regarding the neoliberal politics and the social inequalities, that divided the country and allegedly ignored, to highlight the “little worries” of everyday life: romantic breakups, unrequited love, and dysfunctional families – the misery in which many Chileans still experience becoming, according to these researchers, not much more than a simple décor.

Thus, Carlos Saavedra states that, in a few decades, Chilean cinema has experienced a shift from a realistic and politically committed filmmaking centred on the historical context and a collective and continental project of construction of the Latin American identity, to an intimist and subjective filmmaking which, according to Saavedra, offers a depoliticized, acritical, and ahistorical version of reality. In that sense, the characters are so obnubilated by their own issues, that the historical reality the country is experiencing disappears: the social subject of the 1960s becomes an individual “I” – multifaceted and completely disconnected from the public sphere, in tune with the neoliberal context [21].

The rise of the individual in the *novísimos*’ films goes hand in hand with a work on affects. I use this concept in the same way Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari did – not so much as a *feeling* (personal and individual) as the capacity to affect and be affected [22]. In the films of which I speak, the characters are affected by the historical context in which they evolve – they are anguished, depressed, lonely – and, at the same time, the works try to affect the spectator using a series of techniques I will detail later. For Nelly Richard, this is an issue because this affective cinema trivialises extremely complex historical processes, thus participating in the depoliticization of the Chilean citizens by refusing to question the official discourses regarding neoliberalism, but also (and foremost) regarding the recent past of the country [23]. The goal would thus be simple: to depoliticize the understanding today’s spectators have of their country’s recent past, since films are meant to be massively consumed., [24].



Neoliberalism: the resurgence of the traumatic past in the *novísimos*' films?

This opinion is, however, questionable. Using the example of *No* (Pablo Larraín, 2012), it cannot be denied that the film rejects the official version of the history of the referendum (in 1988, a referendum is called to know if Chilean citizens want to keep Augusto Pinochet as head of State, which will result in the fall of the dictator and the return of democracy), which tends to present it as a heroic fight of the Chilean people [25]. However, the film shows that the referendum was nothing more than a mediatic construction built within the neoliberal system, with the tools made available by neoliberalism [26]. Larraín understands the referendum – organized, let us not forget, by General Pinochet – as a pact on which Chilean democracy will be built [27]. Far from showing the inexistence of popular resistance, Larraín aims to show that the political parties and the media hold the power and kept quiet, as they had done during the dictatorship. Numerous atrocities were committed during the seventeen years of Pinochet's dictatorship, including the establishment of an economic system which amplifies social inequalities [28]. Such is the first criticism towards neoliberalism found in the film: the referendum is organized and led by white, privileged men, all in favour of neoliberalism, while the popular classes, the indigenous communities, and the minorities were excluded from the political and economic decisions taken in democracy [29].

It is undeniable that the *novísimos* make films centred on the figure of the individual. Nevertheless, I read in this aesthetic, not so much as a vindication of individualism but as a representation of the extreme loneliness in which these characters are forced to live, in the context of neoliberalism [30]. Since neoliberalism is an economic system that implies drastic political and social measures [31], it has transformed the behaviours and has favoured the development of that individualism the *novísimos* aim to represent. They stage isolated characters who practically never interact with others. They are represented alone, but also trapped, isolated, victims of the violence inflicted by extreme loneliness as a result of the complete transformation of society following the establishment of neoliberalism [32]. On the screen, this gives way to a feeling of imprisonment, which often goes hand in hand with a feeling of claustrophobia that suffocates the characters, stuck in extreme close-ups [33]. A relatively abundant use of blurred images and an often-disturbing

soundtrack allow for the representation of a deliberately fragmented (sometimes even deformed) reality, just as they push the spectator and force them to wonder about what is happening on the screen, in a process of detachment similar to that used by Bertolt Brecht in theatre [34]. This technique of detachment, at least as Brecht understood it, was first and foremost a political act that drew away from a trivial representation of history, at the same time as it did not necessarily reject affects and, instead, forced the spectator to question themselves regarding their own affective reactions while watching the piece [35]. In other words, an affect-centred representation is not necessarily apolitical.

These various techniques highlight the destruction of social relations, as a result of the dictatorship – which banalized violence, fear, denunciation – but also as a result of neoliberalism – which corrupted these relations by favouring rentability and productivity over empathy and solidarity. Far from offering a vindication of individualism, the films illustrate the need to create a tolerant society where minorities would have a voice, to create laws that would protect everyone's wellbeing, and to listen to the feeling of discontentment regarding an economic system that has increased social inequalities. Thus, if it is true that the films stage individual characters, they nonetheless acquire a collective dimension [36]: these glimpses into individual sufferings suggest that these personal experiences are endlessly repeated in a country that has not been able to deal with its traumatic past [37]. As individuals completely unable to communicate take the front of the stage, the films take, without a doubt, an affective aspect. The feeling of claustrophobia we mentioned earlier is everywhere in the *novísimos'* films and adds to a feeling of frustration, despair, anguish, regret, guilt, and fear, all these feelings suffocating the characters and affecting the spectator [38].

If the films take an interest in the way all this affects the individuals, they also take an interest in the causes of such effects. The *novísimos* seem to identify two causes: the weight of a traumatic past that has not been assimilated and the drastic transformations society experienced after the establishment of neoliberalism. Thus, and using Slavoj Žižek's typology of violence, the films illustrate the way subjective (visible and identifiable) violence, symbolic violence (held in language), and systemic violence (associated with the consequences of the political and economic system) [39] are interconnected. This violence and the emotions it creates are thus not trivial and illustrates, instead, a feeling of malaise that goes beyond simple characters to embrace the whole of Chilean society. In

that sense, the novísimos seem to claim the pertinence and the power of emotions in historical processes [40].

Criticizing the neoliberal system from inside



Independently of the ideological discourse held in their films, the novísimos produce in Chile – a neoliberal state, inserted in a global context - showcases the population suffering from the neoliberal dogma. The main difference with the previous generation – openly anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist – is that today’s filmmakers do not seem willing to escape the neoliberal practices that are the basis of the current film industry. On the contrary, they seem willing to use to their benefit the tools neoliberalism offers them.

The most revealing example of this is, without a doubt, that of Pablo Larraín, who does not hide his desire to attract a big audience. For each of his films, a considerable part of his budget is meant for marketing and distribution – two aspects largely monopolized by the majors in Chile, and still essential in a neoliberal context [41]. Thus, *No* was co-produced by Participant Media – an American independent production company specialized in films that hold a social content – which, without a doubt, has facilitated the film’s nomination at the Academy Awards, the film’s huge promotion (unprecedented in Chile) and, eventually, the film’s commercial success [42]. The United States – the former enemy of the previous generation – therefore became attractive for this new generation, who sees in the giant of the North the hope of a commercial success of which the previous generation could not even dream of achieving. One of the main characteristics of this new generation is its transnational aspect [43]. *Carne de Perro* was co-produced by Chile, France, and Germany. *No* is a Chilean, Mexican, and North American co-production. Larraín cast Gael García Bernal, a Mexican star largely recognized in Hollywood, for the main role in *No*. Fernando Guzzoni joined the *Résidence*, a programme organized by the Cannes Film Festival that aims to help the young filmmakers “of the world” in the making of their first long feature by bringing them opportunities with French producers and opening the doors to the European circuit of festivals [44]. All this highlights the fact that it is a highly transnational cinema, which has generated a few doubts

among academics who wonder what the pertinence of such a filmmaking in terms of the construction of national identity is.

However, the transnational aspect of the *novísimos* might not only come from a desire to produce a globalized cinema but also and mostly of a need to find means to produce their films. Even though the Chilean State does participate in the production of many national films, its investment is quite minimal and only includes the production stage (thus disregarding, among others, the primordial stage of distribution) [45]. Making a film as a co-production thus allows Chilean filmmakers and producers to access foreign financings that are not comparable to what they can get in Chile. Thus, in France, filmmakers and producers can get grants for the making of the original soundtrack, scriptwriting, special effects, distribution, etc. In addition to having access to these various grants, the filmmakers also have access, through the system of co-production, to a foreign public and up their chances to access the circuit of festivals where the film will acquire a prestige hardly accessible in Chile [46].

In other words, practices of production, deeply anchored in neoliberalism, do not prevent the *novísimos* from producing a discourse that is highly critical of the neoliberal system.



Conclusion

The different analysis highlighted in this paper reveal tensions that have perdured in the Chilean society: the opposite opinions regarding the *novísimos* seem to be the reflection of a generational rupture between, on the one hand, a generation that has experienced a Chile organized around the idea of community and, on the other hand, a generation that has grown in the context of an economic system that has tried, as Pierre Bourdieu used to say, to destroy community [47]. Still, the *novísimos* wonder about the creation of a society in which the economy thrives and yet, people are unhappy. They ask themselves why and how neoliberalism was established in Chile and search for the consequences of such a model, not so much on an economic, political, and social aspect, but mostly on an emotional level. To do this, they actively use the means that neoliberalism offers – at the same time as severely criticising the neoliberal system.



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