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Chilean Television and Human Rights Discourse: The Case of *Chilevisión*

In this paper, I am looking at the manner in which Chilean television discusses human rights violations committed during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet from 1973 to 1990. During Pinochet's regime an estimated 3,500 Chileans were "disappeared," assassinated, or executed, and approximately 300,000 Chileans were detained, tortured, and exiled. This dictatorship constituted a rupture in the nation's history, which has needed in some way to be addressed by families who suffered the trauma of torture, disappearances, executions, and exile. This historical rupture has needed to be addressed by the nation as well, as it struggles to move from a repressive totalitarian regime to a democracy. Through an intricate interplay of censorship, remembrance, and protest, television has played a key role in structuring how Chileans today conceive of this moment. It is with television's role in alternately silencing and re-presenting trauma during times of social upheaval and flux, as well as with how audiences respond to these re-presentations, that my paper is expressly concerned.

In October of 1998, Pinochet was placed under house arrest in London. Spanish Judge Baltazar Garzón wished to extradite Pinochet to Spain to be tried for human rights violations. This incident opened the floodgates to an international dialogue regarding the role of the international community in holding human rights violators accountable when they cannot be properly judged and punished within their own nations. This event also revived the global community's awareness of the legacy of Chile's dictatorship and the lack of progress the country has made in dealing with its recent past. In Chile, Pinochet's arrest in London and the subsequent international news coverage caused the domestic media to speak more frankly and openly about the dictatorship. When Pinochet was ultimately returned to Chile, some of these domestic media discourses stopped, but others did not. The "untouchable" dictator was now a mere mortal – a man who could be challenged and perhaps even punished for what he had done in the name of the "fatherland."

In the case of Chile, global, national, and local media flows have been sharing discourses since the start of the dictatorship. Just as recent international attention sparked commentary

about Pinochet in Chile, hundreds of *arpilleras*¹ sewn by families of the ‘disappeared’ and many documentaries comprised of footage smuggled out of Chile, first raised international awareness and solidarity for the Chilean people during Pinochet’s regime. Perhaps no documentary was more globally influential than Patricio Guzmán’s *The Battle of Chile (1977-9)*. Yet, thirteen years after the end of the dictatorship, *The Battle of Chile* is hardly known within Chile itself.

Television, in particular, played a crucial role in the transition from the end of Pinochet’s regime to Chile’s return to democracy. With the eyes of the international community upon him, Pinochet was forced to allow the political opposition to his regime fifteen minutes of TV coverage a day in the months leading up to the plebiscite of 1988. During those segments of time, slick, upbeat commercials promoted the “No” campaign against Pinochet, and current President Ricardo Lagos first achieved national recognition with a fiery speech he addressed to General Pinochet, looking straight into the camera.

The media’s central role in structuring knowledge about history involves not only representation, but a lack of representation that ensures the strategic absence of certain topics. Today, discussion of themes linked to dictatorship-era human rights violations tends to be found only in the domain of non-fiction – the news, news magazines, special documentaries, and programs of debate. News coverage addresses judicial investigations involving citizens who ‘disappeared’ during Pinochet’s regime. Yet there is virtually no coverage or discussion of the systematic use of torture, including electric shock treatment, beatings, rape, and the deprivation of food, water, air, and sleep, that was practiced on the hundreds of thousands of citizens, many who are still living, who were detained during the dictatorship. Only infrequently is there a story about the individuals and families who have been affected by internal or external exile.

The reasons for the selectiveness of television coverage regarding these themes and issues are multiple. One factor could be the Rettig Report, known internationally as the Report on National Truth and Reconciliation, composed by a government-appointed committee in the early 1990s. In the report, a mandate was written that all that was possible should be done for the families of individuals who were killed or disappeared during Pinochet’s regime. When possible, the perpetrators of the deaths and disappearances were to be prosecuted. The report also acknowledged the large number of individuals who were tortured, but did not suggest that

¹ *Arpilleras* are textiles sewn with scraps of cloth onto burlap that tell stories in their images. Women of the Association of Relatives of the Detained-Disappeared sewed them with support from the Catholic Church, which smuggled them abroad at great risk.

any action should be taken for those victims who were still living. As a result, the report suggested an agenda to be followed, detailing what was to be addressed and what was not.

Another possible reason for the avoidance of certain themes on television is that these issues may be considered too sensitive and still too ‘alive’ since the survivors of human rights violations must still face those who committed violence against them, and the perpetrators of the violence need to face their victims, every day. The living survivors must continuously re-live the horrors that they experienced, and those who often had to commit the violence against their own will must face their own guilt. Furthermore, many who survived torture were spared their lives because they revealed names and information to their captors that led to the tortures and deaths of their friends, families, and colleagues. As a result, these victims feel shame and remorse for what may have happened to people they knew because of what they revealed to their torturers.

In some cases, TV coverage tends to be more thorough when the story can take on an international dimension that gives some distance to the local and national situation. In May 2002, when Judge Juan Guzmán, in charge of all human rights violations cases that may implicate Pinochet, was investigating the case of Charles Horman, an American journalist who disappeared in Chile shortly after the coup, coverage was vast. Clips were shown on the news from the movie *Missing* (1983), the former US ambassador to Chile was asked by reporters about the role the US played in supporting the coup, and the National Stadium, where thousands of citizens were detained and tortured, and hundreds were executed, was visited, with former prisoners explaining to the judge what had happened there in 1973. However, coverage like this is unusual.

Perhaps an anecdote from the prestigious Chilean filmmaker Silvio Caiozzi may help to illustrate the cryptic and disjointed manner in which human rights issues get covered in the Chilean media. In 1998, Caiozzi released a documentary about the discovery and identification of the remains of a ‘disappeared’ victim of Pinochet’s regime called *Fernando ha vuelto* (*Fernando Is Back*). After its initial screening at a film festival in Valdivia in the south of Chile, media response was positive. When Caiozzi returned to Santiago, he was asked by journalists to hold another screening of his documentary. He obliged, and approximately thirty-four journalists from various media outlets confirmed that they would attend. Mysteriously, only three showed up. Then Caiozzi sent copies of the documentary to all three major networks. When Caiozzi called them to confirm that they had received it, they claimed they had not. Only

after a year of vocal outcries of censorship on the part of Caiozzi did his documentary get on the air, and then only parts of it did. *TVN*, the national network of Chile, aired an interview of Caiozzi with clips *Fernando* in the middle of the night.

When given the opportunity, television can play a crucial role in raising awareness and expediting procedures for bringing perpetrators of ‘crimes against humanity’ to justice. In the case of Chile, television influences the ways in which members of a divided society choose to deal with a traumatic past and negotiate their competing historical memories. However, television is expensive, limited, and tightly controlled. Sometimes the constraints imposed on journalists, TV producers, and networks seem insurmountable. Censorship and self-censorship are normally the rule. Nonetheless, certain discourses regarding crucial subjects normally considered taboo sneak through, and it is what happens through these gaps and fissures in the television industry that can offer hope in Chile where the silences are often more pronounced than the spoken.

In Santiago, watching TV without cable leaves you a handful of choices – *Red TV* on 4, *UCV* from Valparaiso on 5, *TVN* on 7, *Mega* on 9, *Chilevisión* on 11, *UC* on 13, and *Andres Bello* on 22. The big three networks are 7, *Televisión Nacional de Chile*, 11, *Chilevisión*, and 13, *Universidad Católica*. This paper will concentrate on the newest of the big three networks: *Chilevisión*. Despite the constraints that we would expect to find on any commercial network, as well as the nuanced restrictions imposed on Chilean television that are unique to Chile’s recent history, current coalition government, and the still watchful eyes of its military, this network has managed to get some truly revolutionary ‘reality’ TV programming on the air.

Unlike the escapist ‘reality’ TV programming available in the United States at a time when this country’s government administration is exerting enormous power around the world with little critical feedback from its own citizenry available on TV, in Chile this programming confronts its nation’s real societal problems and engages large, diverse segments of the Chilean public – allowing them to have a voice in a mediated, semi-pluralistic public sphere. While we can vote in to our reality shows by phone or email on who we believe should become the next pop music icon, Chileans are voting in to their reality shows on how effectively their government has controlled smog in Santiago, and whether their police forces have succeeded in hunting down pedophiles, and if these same police forces use excessive violence during street protests and demonstrations. Furthermore, one Chilean reality show hands out cameras to its viewers and

encourages them to go where they want to go and interview who they want to interview, and the program then airs these discussions during primetime TV.

El Termómetro: the pulse of the Chileans on Chilevisión: Tu Mirada (your viewpoint)

One program on *Chilevisión* that offers a unique opportunity on mainstream television for the discussion and debate of often significant and sensitive topics is *El Termómetro (The Thermometer)*. *El Termómetro* is a debate show aired Monday through Friday from 8:00 to 9:00pm, leading into Chilean television primetime (9:00pm to midnight). All three major networks have news from 9:00 to 10:00pm, followed by features, documentaries, specials, or other programming hits. The network heads of *Chilevisión* wanted to attract larger primetime audiences by offering a live show in the 8:00 to 9:00pm lead-in slot. The other major networks air soap operas or *telenovelas* during that time.

El Termómetro is hosted by Iván Nuñez, a charismatic young journalist with a peppy personality, slicked hair, and fashionable yuppy-style clothes and shoes. The shoes he wears on behalf of one of the show's sponsors – Cardinale Shoes. Each evening, four guests are invited to participate. According to Pablo Alvarado, the journalistic editor for the show, they try to form a panel that is evenly matched – two progressives and two conservatives. However, the panels tend to lead more to the conservative side. The panels also tend to have more men than women. Most panelists are repeat performers. They come back every couple weeks. All are prestigious professionals – mayors, representatives from Congress, journalists, lawyers, business owners, filmmakers, and pop stars.

In addition to the four panelists, others have the opportunity to participate as well through phone calls and email messages. Iván dedicates some time to every show taking calls and sharing emails. In addition, every show has a poll in which you can vote on a yes or no question through the phone or internet. Results to the poll are revealed at the end of the hour.

Several episodes that aired between January and June of 2002 contained at least elements of a controversial nature with issues that addressed human rights. One episode aired in response to international news about the priests who were under investigation in Boston for allegations of child sexual abuse. Chile has many priests who have been accused of child sexual abuse as well. In fact, several priests who had been accused of sex abuse in the United States had been sent overseas to countries like Chile. The most emotional moment in this episode of *El Termómetro* came when an adult in his fifties called to say that he had been sexually abused by a priest when

he was a young child, and that he was still damaged and traumatized by that experience. The priest had never been punished, and his parents agreed not to cause any trouble. This phone call, in effect, ended the debate for that day regarding how seriously these accusations against priests should be taken. After the call, the four panelists stopped arguing and came together in consensus and solidarity.

Another episode addressed the police search for the leader of *Colonia Dignidad*, a German commune in Chile, who has been accused of sexually abusing dozens of children from the commune as well as the neighboring communities who had attended the school or been treated at the hospital on its grounds. During the dictatorship, the leaders of *Colonia Dignidad* sympathized with the leaders of Pinochet's regime. A torture center was even located on their land, in underground caves. While most of the debate addressed the child sexual abuse and the Chilean police force's inability or disinterest in finding and capturing the leader, the role that the commune played in the tortures and disappearances of many victims of Pinochet's regime was also mentioned.

Other episodes have addressed the legacy of Pinochet and his regime. For example, one program dealt with the purchase by the mayor of Providencia, a *comuna* or borough of Santiago, of the dining room table that Pinochet used when he was under house arrest in London. The question was whether the mayor had the right to use public funds to purchase this table, but mention was also made that the interest in purchasing this table at all was disturbing. In another episode, a young man was interviewed who had been assaulted by the grandson of Pinochet when he was coming out of a night club. The question for the panelists and the viewers at home: Is justice the same for everyone in Chile? So, while this case purported to be about justice being served to the grandson on behalf of the victim of the assault, the question could also be interpreted as being directed towards Pinochet himself.

Another program addressed the alleged excessive use of force and violence of the *carabineros*, the Chilean police forces, during public protests and demonstrations. On May 21st, 2002, President Lagos gave his annual state of the union address to Congress in Valparaíso. Political groups, unions, and university students marched and protested in the streets outside of the Congress building. Some protestors became violent – looting stores, spray-painting graffiti, and throwing Molotov cocktails at the police water cannon trucks. Several people were injured as the police tried to barricade streets and protestors tried to break down the barricades.

Hundreds of people were arrested. During the program's debate, emphasis was placed on police actions in contemporary times. However, the issue was also portrayed as a legacy of the dictatorship, when those who dared to demonstrate were routinely beaten, humiliated, imprisoned, and sometimes killed.

When opposition to the administration of President Hugo Chávez in Venezuela attempted a coup to topple his regime, *El Termómetro* covered it. Several times, Iván and panelists referenced Chile's own coup in 1973, suggesting that the events in Venezuela had much in common with those that had taken place in Chile. By making the analogy, they warned that the future did not bode well for Venezuela. They even suggested that the United States was probably involved in this attempted coup as well. They froze an image from news footage that showed a man shooting into a crowd with a handgun and suggested that he was a member of the CIA, trying to instigate trouble and cause violence that would be blamed on Chávez's security forces.

These examples demonstrate that a program such as *El Termómetro* allows a space on network TV for the airing of sensitive topics and an opportunity for members of a diverse audience to express their concerns in a public forum. Indeed, *El Termómetro* seems to offer an opening for truly participatory dialogue on network television that does not even exist in the United States. Rather than Chilean television being subjugated to the whims of US media imperialism, the US is more often an entity to criticize – whether it be in response to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, pressures exerted on Latin American countries to cooperate with US policies in order to receive free trade agreements, or unilateral decisions and actions taken by the United States against other countries that have not received the approval of the United Nations. Yes, the influence of the United States is still detectable, especially in many TV commercials that promote American consumer products, but the influence is not monolithic. More ads promote Chilean products, and others promote products from other countries. *El Termómetro* offers a model for a democratic debate program that could be emulated by networks in the United States.

Nonetheless, *El Termómetro* is not a utopia for public discourse and freedom of expression. For every individual who joins the panel, airs her opinion on the air over the phone, or gets his email read aloud by Iván, there are countless others who do not. Never has there been a member of the Association of Relatives of the Detained-Disappeared on the panel. Never has

there been a member of the Communist Party on the phone. Most voices are screened and silenced. Furthermore, host Iván often becomes the good-natured harmonizer, with his twinkling eyes and broad smile, soothingly coaxing the contending panelists to calm down and not be so ‘extreme.’ Also, now that the show has achieved higher ratings, more advertisers are interested in placing commercials during the hour. As commercials have increased, the length of the actual program has decreased, reducing the depth of discussion and debate.

Perhaps the constraints imposed on *El Termómetro* and other network programming was never made more explicit than in another daring program on the same *Chilevisión* network called *Ciento*, which airs on Monday nights from 10:00 to 11:00pm. The Spanish word *ciento* means 100, in the case of the TV show, signifying 100% since the show reveals statistics about the Chilean people. However, spelled with an s, *siento* also means “I feel”, which is just as relevant for the show since it poses questions to the Chilean public through surveys as well as one-on-one interviews conducted by amateur videographers.

One episode of *Ciento* that aired in February 2002 was titled, “Who rules in Chile?”. Among the individuals interviewed in this episode were host Iván Nuñez and journalistic editor Pablo Alvarado of *El Termómetro*. When approached, Iván turned his back on the camera and the questioner. He refused to answer at first, and when he finally did, he replied light-heartedly that Alejandro Guillier, the anchor for *Chilevisión*’s nightly news as well as his boss, ruled. Pablo Alvarado was more forthcoming. He identified Chile’s powerful economic groups as ruling Chile, and he insisted that there was not freedom of expression in Chile.

Partly in response to this episode, I decided to talk with individuals from *El Termómetro* as well as *Chilevisión*’s news anchor Alejandro Guillier. Following are the transcripts for my interviews with Pablo Alvarado, journalistic editor for *El Termómetro* and Alejandro Guillier, news anchor and director for *Chilevisión*’s nightly news as well as editorial director for the daily newspaper *El Metropolitano*. Incidentally, in one editorial cartoon published in *El Metropolitano* in 2002, an anonymous journalist is writing a story entitled, “human rights,” and an anonymous boss takes the page away from the journalist, who cries out, “Wait! I wasn’t done with that!”

Pablo Alvarado, journalistic editor, *El Termómetro*, April 4, 2002

KS: How did *El Termómetro* get started?

PA: *El Termómetro* started as a programming decision of *Chilevisión* network; something to attract people for news and primetime; make a live program to compete against taped *telenovelas*. It's now one year old. We're experimenting with a type of journalism; there's been nothing like this in a long time; it's evolving.

KS: How would you describe the point of view or perspective of the show?

PA: The show offers critical thinking towards everything; there isn't one ideological perspective.

KS: How were you able to convince the network heads to let you create this show?

PA: It was not difficult to convince network heads, because it was their idea. It was more difficult to convince the public to watch this rather than soaps. To convince them of more serious journalism that's not as "light." *Chilevisión* is not political or religious like other channels. It was not an ideological decision, but a commercial decision.

KS: Where does *El Termómetro* get its funding? Who sponsors the show?

PA: Funding comes from the network. Yes, sponsors like *Telefónica*. It's cheap to make; enriches the channel. News generates money. They hope the show will attract more money by attracting more prestige for the channel.

KS: How are debate topics chosen for each program?

PA: We don't choose frivolous topics. We bring forth discussions going on in the country; news. We try to bring more topics to discussion; have some point of conflict. Social and political. Where is justice? Corruption. Responsible citizenship. From phone calls, emails. International politics, the economy, human rights. A pulse on what Chileans are discussing.

KS: Who is invited to the show? How do you choose your panelists?

PA: People are usually invited before topics are chosen. We make a panel with both poles. From conservative to liberal. Right to left. Some people ask to be on the show, but we have absolute freedom to choose.

KS: Who are the viewers? Do you know much about your audiences?

PA: Upper classes like the show, watch, participate. We are receiving some information on who is watching. Mainly about socio-economic groups; to allow a better choice of themes; we need to cater to the audience.

KS: Do you receive pressures or threats from different sectors of society in response to the topics you have addressed on the show?

PA: We receive very few pressures.

KS: Is there freedom of expression in the media?

PA: *Ciento* has dealt with this topic. No, there isn't. The media is controlled by only one class, one economic group; they're not interested in certain themes. We're trying to establish more. The written press is very strong. It's only controlled by the right. When you maintain a free market, there's inequality. No critical press. No investigative journalism. It's difficult to have freedom of expression if there is no free, liberal journalism. How do you define freedom of expression in the press? Truthful reporting. There is a social role of journalism; to raise consciousness. It's not clear to readers what perspectives you get in the news. For example, consider what has

happened to Andrea Matús² with her *Negro libro de justicia chilena (Black Book of Chilean Justice)*. Serious investigations can only be written in books, but not in papers. You can mention certain things, but only things on the periphery. If one goes to a press conference and asks critical questions, the respondent and other journalists will get angry.

KS: In last Thursday's episode you dealt with sexual abuse in the Church as well as the case involving the grandson of Pinochet. Wasn't that dangerous? You didn't receive any threats or pressures in response to the show? I know that at one point during the broadcast you were on the phone with the son of Pinochet.

PA: We had no problems with the broadcast. Some people got angry because it was Holy Thursday (before Easter Sunday). Others didn't think it was an appropriate time for discussion. We have certain public enemies, but we don't bow to pressures. We called the son of Pinochet for his response during the broadcast. He didn't want to talk. It was more dangerous for Iván to go into the neighborhoods of *La Legua* (author's note – known for its community of drug users) for the other story shown that day; to be with the drug addicts.

KS: What responsibilities do the media have to discuss human rights?

PA: Ideally, they should discuss human rights. I don't share the idea of the *Concertación*³. There needs to be justice; the media need to inform. Studies show that people aren't interested in this. In the beginning of the 1990s, the climate was more favorable. Now society doesn't want to confront this anymore. The *mesa de diálogo*⁴... This would be serious journalism – how the military plays games with relatives of the detained-disappeared., etc. There is no historical truth.

KS: If you could change one thing about the Chilean media and press, what would it be?

PA: It should be not to have fear over this theme. We need to convince people that more critical journalism is necessary. We need more consciousness of the social role of journalism. To lose the fear. People are no longer afraid of Pinochet, but they're afraid of the economic groups. Lose the fear of those with power. If everyone plays games – politicians, journalists – who will address this?

² Andrea Matus is a Chilean journalist who was fired and temporarily exiled from Chile after the release of her book that critiqued the Chilean justice system. She has been a panelist on *El Termómetro* as well.

³ *Concertación* is the name of the coalition government comprised of moderate left to right wing political parties that has ruled Chile since its return to democracy in 1990.

⁴ *Mesa de diálogo* refers to the roundtable discussion held in 2000 by members of the military, human rights groups, and government leaders to address human rights violations that were committed during Pinochet's regime. At the roundtable discussion, the military handed over a list of names of 'disappeared' Chileans who they claimed they dumped in the Pacific Ocean. Since the roundtable discussion, the remains of some of the victims on that list have been excavated and identified on land, confirming for critics of the military and human rights workers, that the military cannot be trusted and has no sincere interest in cooperating.

**Alejandro Guillier, news anchor and director of *Chilevisión Noticias* and editorial director of the daily newspaper *El Metropolitano*
April 8, 2002**

KS: How would you describe the media's role in addressing human rights violations that occurred during Pinochet's regime?

AG: In Chile, there's an old tradition of journalism that was even evident during the dictatorship. There were opposition magazines⁵. People were very informed of human rights violations. After the first few years of the return to democracy, when there had been much dealing with human rights, especially after 1994, we said okay, we know what happened; now we need to move on; change themes. Now only occasionally, like when Pinochet was in London, with the discovery of human remains, or something going on in the courts, do you hear about it. At least the judges are doing something. Until 1994, coverage had a political effect. Now everyone knows; no one is going to change opinions. There is more space to tell stories. A critical public.

KS: Why is there mostly only coverage of the detained-disappeared and not coverage of the tortures which affected more people, many of whom are still living?

AG: We're more sensitive to cases of finding the detained-disappeared. It's not an editorial decision, but a sensation that with the tortures, twenty years later, we're not going to have a way to resolve them. It's a defensive, psychological instinct, a tendency to concentrate on what happened with those killed, less on those still living. There are some stories on torture, but they're more occasional. Perhaps it's due to the *mesa de diálogo*, which said that we will seek justice for the detained-disappeared, but said nothing about torture cases.

KS: How can you explain to foreigners who have trouble understanding why more members of the Chilean military who committed human rights violations have not been punished why these individuals are still free? Why have they not been brought to justice?

AG: The military regimen was successful in many aspects. The economic and political power supported Pinochet. They negotiated the transition to democracy. There were tacit agreements, not written, about what would be discussed and done, and what would not. We knew that Pinochet would not spend time in prison. When Pinochet was in London, the right strengthened itself. Current President Lagos is not former President Allende. The Pinochet case radicalized the people. Manuel Contreras⁶, Espinoza, etc. There is more symbolic justice, certain cases, and then they close the issue.

KS: Does the media have a responsibility to address these issues?

AG: We need historical memory. People are tired of the theme now, but eventually it will arise again among younger generations. There was a show that dealt with the attack on *La Moneda*⁷. Different people telling their stories. There is a moral responsibility. We need to make documentaries – if not for now, they need to be saved for later. For the moral and political responsibility.

⁵ Alejandro Guillier worked with Abraham Santibañez on the opposition magazine *Hoy (Today)* during Pinochet's regime.

⁶ Manuel Contreras is the former director of the *DINA*, Pinochet's secret police forces responsible for the abductions, tortures, and disappearances of thousands of Chileans during the early years of the dictatorship. He has been prosecuted in the courts and now lives in an upscale prison for high-ranking officers and officials.

⁷ *La Moneda* is the Presidential Palace of Chile. Socialist President Salvador Allende died there on September 11, 1973, when the Chilean Air Force bombed it during the coup.

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