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Mediated discourses of Chilean national hiStor(ies)

Interpretations of recent Chilean history are distributed and contested throughout Chile, especially with the assistance of different types of media. In particular, three significant time periods – the democratically-elected socialist government of 1970-1973, General Pinochet's dictatorship of 1973-1990, and the transition to democracy, beginning in 1990 and continuing to the present, are discussed from distinct perspectives in different forms of media – television, radio, documentaries, feature films, the Internet, and the printed press. Oftentimes, *how* these stories/histories (in Spanish, the word *historia* means both story and history) get told is determined by *who* gets to tell them. In recent years, a larger number of diverse voices have had the opportunity to communicate through the media, but some media are more open to these voices than others. Likewise, different sectors of the Chilean public have various degrees of access to these various types of media. Institutional and socio-economic factors still have a tremendous impact on the circulation of these national histories.

Media descriptions of key cultural figures and moments in Chile often reveal the perspective shared by producers of that media. For example, September 11 has been a significant anniversary for Chileans for over thirty years. On that day in 1973, the military coup which ended President Allende's democratic government took place and began General Pinochet's dictatorship. During the dictatorship, September 11 was celebrated in the censored media as a day of 'national salvation'. Today the media includes other interpretations as well that offer a much bleaker interpretation of that historical moment.

In October 1998, former dictator General Pinochet registered into a London hospital, The Clinic, for minor back surgery while taking his annual vacation trip to England. To his surprise, as well as that of the rest of the world, his hospital recovery room was stormed by British police officers who pronounced him under arrest, charged with crimes against humanity by Spanish Judge Baltasar Garzón, who wished to have him extradited to Spain. Suddenly, a story which had received very little attention -- Pinochet's visit to England -- was making front page news in TV outlets and newspapers across the globe. With great interest and much caution, Chilean media began to cover this story as well. In fact, one group of young people was inspired to create their own periodical called *The Clinic*.

While Pinochet's immunity from prosecution was being challenged in Europe, the climate was entirely different back in Chile. Simply discussing Pinochet's detention was touchy, especially if the discussant suggested that England and Spain were justified in their actions against Pinochet. Even Socialist presidential candidate Ricardo Lagos argued that Pinochet should be returned to Chile, that this was a domestic issue, and that Chile should take care of its own affairs. During Pinochet's detention in London, the office of the Chilean Commission of Human Rights in downtown Santiago, was robbed. The Commission's sole computer containing important records about what happened to the victims of Pinochet's dictatorship was stolen. The timing of the event is more than suspicious and illustrates the power that Pinochet still had eight years after the return to democratic rule in Chile as well as the degree to which information about the dictatorship was still restricted.

During the dictatorship General Augusto Pinochet, the self-proclaimed President, shut down Congress, banned all unions and political organizations, and supervised the actions of the military and police personnel who detained, tortured, exiled, and killed thousands of people. All

media centers, schools, universities, and hospitals were run by military leaders. There was absolute censorship and civil liberties were abolished. In 1990, Chile returned to a democratic form of government, although Pinochet remained the Commander of the Armed Forces until 1998 and a self-designated senator until 2002.

In order to prevent a return to military rule, civilian political parties – no longer banned – formed an alliance called *Concertación*. Throughout the 1990s, politicians and other government and professional leaders cautiously proceeded with Chilean democracy. Life under military rule was rarely mentioned, and then only in hushed tones. The military still held enough power to pose a threat – in fact, on a couple occasions, they actually did threaten, quite explicitly, to intervene – and many Chileans just wanted to put the dreadful past behind them by ignoring it and moving on.

1998 was a turning point with Pinochet's international detention. Ultimately, Pinochet was released from England and returned to Chile in 2000. Subsequently, the Chilean courts tried to prosecute him in his own country; in the meantime, special judges were appointed to deal exclusively with cases of the detained-disappeared. In August 2002, the Supreme Court deemed Pinochet unfit to stand trial for reasons of health and mental ability. Just when it appeared that he would never be prosecuted, the Santiago Appeals Court stripped Pinochet of his immunity.¹ Despite the stripping of his immunity, each case that involves Pinochet is reviewed by the courts on a case by case basis, and a recent decision by the Supreme Court to uphold his immunity in a high profile case involving the 1974 assassination of Pinochet's predecessor suggests that the saga is destined to continue.

¹ Thanks, in part, to his former ally, the United States. An interview that he gave to a Miami based television station demonstrated that he was mentally fit to stand trial, and the U.S. Congress revealed that Pinochet had held millions of dollars in secret bank accounts under false names at Riggs Bank in Washington, D.C.

Until November 2004, most Chilean media coverage of dictatorship-era human rights violations² was limited to the cases of the detained-disappeared and executed. Part of the reason for this focus on the disappeared and the executed is due to what the Chileans call the Rettig Report, known internationally as the report of the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, released in 1992 and based on testimony of individuals from the military, human rights groups, and other members of Chilean society. While the Commission acknowledged that torture was systematically used on most of the estimated 300,000 political detainees during the dictatorship, it made clear that this would not be addressed in the report; neither would issues of exile, job blacklisting, and other secondary effects of state repression. Their report focused only on the politically executed and disappeared, and in so doing set the parameters for what types of judicial procedures could take place in post-dictatorship democracy. In November 2004, however, the Chilean government released the Valech Report, an extensive document that reveals where torture centers were located in Santiago and the rest of Chile, what methods of torture were used, and the names and identification numbers of former political prisoners who have testified to being tortured in these detention centers. The report is available on the Internet through the website of the Chilean communist paper *El Siglo*. Torture, a formerly taboo subject that in fact affected a much larger number of Chileans than the disappearances and executions, is a subject that is now also circulating through the Chilean press. This kind of exposure may lead to judicial procedures against those who committed torture as well.

Historical memory scholars emphasize how key cultural moments and their representations offer framing devices and perspectives for interpreting history through memory and at the same time point out that individual responses to these moments and representations

² When I use the terms human rights and human rights violations, I refer in particular to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights chartered by the United Nations in 1948.

will vary according to the individual's background and experience. This argument -- that individual responses to media texts will depend on background and experience -- has been made as well by media reception scholars such as David Morley, Tony Bennett, Annette Kuhn, Janet Staiger, Barbara Klinger, and Jostein Gripsrud.

Annette Kuhn has looked at the role of memory, including post-traumatic memory, in our interpretation of media texts. Although she was born after World War II, she feels as if the war has provided an enduring legacy for herself as well as many other British citizens. As an adult, Kuhn revisited the movie *Mandy* that is about a girl and her experiences during the London Blitz of World War II. As the adult viewer, Kuhn was surprised by how strongly she reacted to the film emotionally. She also realized that the film was not exactly as she had remembered it, and that some of her own life memories had merged with representations that she had seen in films. Kuhn describes memory as having personal and collective aspects, and she suggests how memories can change over time.

In her article on "Enduring Fandom," Kuhn continues to investigate memories that span a lifetime. She analyzes the oral interviews she conducted among women mostly over the age of seventy who were fans of the Hollywood star Nelson Eddy. She parallels their discourses with the narrative of one of their favorite 1930s Eddy films, *Maytime*. In the film, a young couple meets briefly at the beginning of their lives and creates memories that last until the end of their lives, when they meet again shortly before one of the characters dies. As in the movie, latent memories and experiences that these women had when they were younger lasted until they could reunite with other fans and Eddy movies available again on videotape. They describe their inner, "true" selves as the younger versions of themselves. Those initial experiences remained vivid in their memories, and it is those experiences that they hold onto most strongly.

Anyone who has seen Patricio Guzmán's documentary, *Chile: Obstinate Memory* (1997) has witnessed the same process at play as Chileans in contemporary post-dictatorship Chile watched and reacted to Guzmán's 1970s documentary trilogy, *The Battle of Chile* (1975-9). Many Chileans who experienced the years of Popular Unity and then the military coup that led to Pinochet's dictatorship also hold onto vivid memories of these historical moments that sometimes feel even more real than their present. Those defining moments were formative in the construction of their identities, and the realities that they experience today are filtered through their experiences in those crucial earlier years.

Marita Sturken takes the idea of subjectivity as social construct and pays particular attention to the role of visual media and cultural texts in the cultivation of historical memory.

Camera images – photographic, cinematic, televisual, documentary, and docudrama – play a vital role in the development of national meaning by creating a sense of shared participation and experience in the nation... It does not follow, however, that the collective experience of watching “national” events on television leaves all viewers with similar and singular interpretations. Rather, in watching national television events, viewers engage with, whether in agreement or resistance, a concept of nationhood and national meaning (Sturken, 24).

In *Chile: Obstinate Memory* we see various responses to the representation of historical events that range from criticism of the bias evidenced in *Battle of Chile* and support for Pinochet's actions to utter desolation and grief for the victims of the dictatorship and its legacy in Chile. All viewers watched the same footage, but their reactions depended on their various backgrounds and subjective experiences.

According to Steve Stern, there are four emblematic memories that have competed for dominance in Chile: the memory of salvation,³ the memory of an open wound,⁴ the memory of a

³ Pinochet is remembered as the savior from the “catastrophe” of 1964 to 1973 Chile.

⁴ The open wound is the physical and psychological trauma inflicted on victims of Pinochet's repression.

test of democracy and ethical values,⁵ and the memory of a closed box.⁶ He describes memory as a process, using the metaphor of *memory knots* to describe how certain events, groups, and ideas can stir up memories. Stern identifies three types of memory knots: human groups, actions and dates, and locations or physical remains. For example, exposure to a workers' union, a political party, or a human rights organization – any group of people in which individuals have shared a collective history – may trigger memories. So can anniversaries of historical events such as the military coup or the date of a loved one's disappearance or departure from the country into exile. In addition, memory knots also emerge when observing military parades or police officers monitoring a contemporary street protest, and also in the National Stadium, once used as a concentration camp, and at a memorial site for the disappeared. All three types of memory knots elicit multiple memories and “demand the construction of bridges between collective memory and forgetting” (13). Clearly, the media can play a special role in bringing these memories to the forefront of a nation's consciousness when that which triggers memories is represented and addressed in the media.

Stern's research suggests that we could expect to find more media coverage of issues related to the former dictatorship during those moments he identifies as capable of triggering *memory knots*. Indeed, I can offer several examples of this. In 2002, Chilean Judge Juan Guzmán Tapia requested key witnesses in the Charles Horman disappearance case to come with him to the National Stadium to reenact what they saw during the days when Horman was believed to be there. On the evening news, excerpts of former prisoners' testimony were included along with clips of the Hollywood movie about Charles Horman *Missing* [Costa-Gavras, 1982]. A story that had been silenced since the early 1990s when President Aylwin

⁵ This is a memory held by those who attempt to maintain a more distanced, analytical, and philosophical perspective on the dictatorship.

⁶ This is the memory of amnesia or forgetting, which Stern describes as actually full of memory (2000, 17).

pronounced at an event inside the stadium that ‘never again’ could Chile allow for human rights violations like those that occurred immediately after the coup to take place -- the systematic detention, tortures, and executions of thousands of Chileans in the two large sports stadiums of Santiago during the first three months of the dictatorship -- suddenly re-emerged in the nation’s consciousness, filtered through the framing of the Charles Horman case.

The memories that we and our media choose to express reveal our identities in relation to concepts of community, nation, and the global community. Our ‘memory remains,’ as Sturken describes them, which are often largely determined and dispersed by the media, offer up different versions of the past. But when memories from various sources contain certain consistencies, they increase in significance, suggesting an element of the national consciousness that a critical mass of citizens consider important. Since we cannot travel back in time, we depend heavily on the articulation of that time through our media in order to make sense of that past and see its relationship with our present and future. As Sturken explains,

The original experiences of memory are irretrievable; we can only “know” them through memory remains – images, objects, texts, stories. Saying that memory is changeable does not imply that it is only constructed through the agendas of the present. Rather, it shifts the discussion of memory, in particular cultural memory, away from questions of truth and toward questions of political intent... What memories tell us, more than anything, is the stakes held by individuals and institutions in attributing meaning to the past (9).

In the case of Chile, certain images and sounds, circulated with the assistance of the media, have withstood time to become ‘memory knots,’ as Steve Stern describes them, in the nation’s consciousness. The bombing of *La Moneda*, the Presidential Palace, on September 11, 1973; the four commanders of the military junta, including an austere General Pinochet in uniform and sunglasses, who pronounced on TV later that same day that they were compelled to enact the coup for the sake of the fatherland; the mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters of the detained disappeared, with photographs of their loved ones pinned to their chests, holding signs that read,

“¿Dónde están?” In recent years, these mediated memory remains have been joined with new ones: a frail Pinochet in his wheelchair in London; Judge Juan Guzmán Tapia uncovering graves of the disappeared throughout north, south, and central Chile; military commanders being flanked by journalists as they enter and leave the Tribunals of Justice. How do these shifting emblems of national memory suggest appropriate actions for the nation’s leaders, activists, and governing bodies to take in the process of achieving truth, justice, and reconciliation?

Elizabeth Jelin looks more broadly at the role of historical memory in relation to the legacy of human rights violations in the Southern Cone region of South America. She describes the early 1990s as a grim period at the political and judicial level in the post-repressive regimes of these countries, while historical memory was still engaged through cultural and artistic venues, a phenomenon which she suggests helps to explain the resurgence of these issues at all levels of the public sphere in the late 1990s and beginning of the twenty-first century:

In fact, at the level of state institutions, the first half of the 1990s was a low point in actions and initiatives related to human rights violations during dictatorship in South America.... At the societal and cultural level, however, there were fewer silences. Human rights movements in these countries have maintained a significant presence, linking the demands to settle accounts with the past (demands for justice) with the founding principles of democratic institutions. Those directly affected by repression bear their suffering and pain, which they translate into various types of public action. Artistic expressions in film, narrative, fine arts, theater, dance, and music often incorporate that past and its legacies (Jelin, xiv-xv).

Jelin approaches the study of historical memory according to three principles:

First, memories are to be understood as subjective processes anchored in experiences and in symbolic and material markers. Second, memories are the object of disputes, conflicts, and struggles. This premise involves the need to focus attention on the active and productive role of participants in these struggles. It is they who generate meanings of the past, framed by the power relations in which their actions are embedded in the present. Third, memories must be looked at historically; that is, there is a need to “historicize” memories, which is to say that the meanings attached to the past change over time and are part of larger, complex social and political scenarios. There are also variations in the place assigned to memories in different societies and cultural settings and across the distinct spaces in which political and ideological struggles take place (xv).

Jelin's articulation of historical memory complements that of Stern when she describes historical memory as a power struggle that is performed by competing groups of people with different experiences and backgrounds that fight to impose their perceptions of a given historical moment on the larger public sphere. She argues,

In every case, *once sufficient time has elapsed to make possible the establishment of a minimum degree of distance between past and present*, alternative (even rival) interpretations of that recent past and its memory occupy a central place in cultural and political debates. These interpretations constitute an inescapable subject for public debate in the difficult road toward forging democratic societies. These memories and interpretations are also key elements in the processes of (re)construction of individual and collective identities in societies emerging from periods of violence and trauma (xviii).

Also, just as Stern describes historical amnesia, or the closed box, as actually full of memory, so does Jelin: "Slogans such as 'memory against oblivion' or 'against silence' hide an opposition between distinct and rival memories (each one with its own forgetfulness). In truth, what is at stake is an opposition of 'memory against memory'" (xviii). In my larger research project, I highlight this struggle to articulate competing historical memories as it plays out through the arenas of media production and distribution as well as through the various responses I have received from individual media audience members and producers.

Just as our memories, and in the case of Chileans, their traumatic memories, operate in convoluted and unexpected ways, keeping certain themes submerged at times and releasing them at various moments for reflection and articulation, so too does our media, reacting to what is happening in the larger culture and responding to it through direct address, tangential mentionings, or structured absences. In our modern world, we can no longer distinguish between our 'authentic' memories and those offered through our media. Whether we are conscious of it or not, our sense of ourselves, our nation, and our history is entwined with the images and words offered to us through our media.

Observing the dialogues, political reforms, and judicial procedures, all influenced by the circulation of media discourses, that have taken place in Chile from 1998 to 2005 suggests that despite the enormous constraints imposed on a post-repressive society and its globalized, capitalist media system, there are many ways through which significant topics, such as the violation of human rights, can circulate. The media plays a crucial role in the articulation of a nation's historical memories as well as the promotion of social and political change.

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