

The Perpetrating Victim: An Allegorical Reading of Pablo Larraín's *Tony Manero* (2008)

The dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) has been an important source of material for Chilean filmmakers. Notable examples of films concerning this period include *La frontera* (Ricardo Larraín, 1991), *Amnesia* (Gonzalo Justiniano, 1994), *Machuca* (Andrés Wood, 2004) and *Dawson Isla 10* (Miguel Littín, 2009). Pablo Larraín has based three films on this still-lingering past: *Tony Manero* (2008), *Post-mortem* (2010) and *NO* (2012). *Tony Manero*, set in 1978, won several awards, including Best Film in festivals at Buenos Aires and Istanbul in 2009. *Post-mortem*, set around the time of the death of Pinochet's socialist predecessor, Salvador Allende, won awards in Havana, Lima, Los Angeles and Cartagena. The critical and commercial success of the last film, *NO*, set during the 1988 plebiscite on Pinochet's rule, drew both on the worldwide fame of the lead actor, Gael García Bernal, and on Larraín's growing reputation as a young, up-and-coming director. According to Vaina Barraza Toledo, the films confront the dictatorship era by '[exploring] contradictions of memory haunting contemporary society, establishing a sort of dialogue between a present and the dreadful past by which this present is hounded' (2013: 59). In *Tony Manero*, the subject of this article, the violent protagonist, Raúl Peralta (played by Alfredo Castro), aims to win a contest on the television show *Festival de la una* (*The One O'Clock Show*) to find Chile's best impersonator of John Travolta's Tony Manero, the protagonist of *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), and to stage a *Saturday Night Fever* show in the cantina where he lives. I argue that the film's instances of violence represent an allegory of the actions of the Pinochet regime, especially in their acquisitive and emulative nature, and that, in its deployment of *Festival de la una*, the film contests the regime's discourse of unity. Larraín's telling of the past, I contend, is characterised by Walter Benjamin's notion of allegory as the 'facies hippocratus' of history (1928: 166), but equally relevant is Ismael Xavier's category of the 'pragmatic allegory' (2004) in which a national past is mined to make a comment on the present. Citing Idelber Avelar (1999), I posit that the 'dialogue' with the present mentioned by Barraza Toledo consists specifically of

a critique of the still prevalent, market-based, neoliberal principle that the new overrides the old.

An approach based on allegory invokes an array of parallels. Tânia Siqueira Montoro and Vinícius de Araujo Barreto (2015) build their analysis of allegory in *Tony Manero* on Rancière's 'ethical regime of images' (2005) and Xavier's understanding of 'horizontal allegory' (2004), arguing that there is a relation to be found between the content of the film and an off-screen reality. With reference to Jorge Larraín's work on Chilean identity (2001), they argue that the cause of Raúl's 'identity crisis' (16) is the incompatibility of neoliberal Western modernity with an alternative, more hybrid Chilean modernity. They posit that Raúl is in a 'spectatorial condition' and that his viewings of *Saturday Night Fever* confront him with a 'dilemma between being the Other or "remaining" Chilean' (17). Raúl thus personifies the condition of the country at the time of its setting, first in his 'desire to be the foreigner (the "gringo")' and, second, in 'his condition of atomised subject under the yoke of the dictator and the neoliberalism imposed by Pinochet's Chile' (17). My reading diverges from that of Siqueira Montoro and Araujo Barreto in four major respects. First, my study will consider how a supposedly collective effort in the form of the cantina's *Saturday Night Fever* show is undermined by Raúl's terminally dysfunctional and divided household, just as the project of unity propounded by Pinochet cannot gloss over the tensions and divisions of the nation. Second, whilst Chilean and non-Chilean cultures and processes (such as modernity) are also at play here, my intertextual analysis concerns *specifically* the ways in which Raúl uncritically absorbs the womanising masculinity of John Travolta's Tony Manero, and the differences between his moral development (or lack of it) and that of the Travolta character. Third, I demonstrate how Raúl's desire to copy goes beyond the emulation of Manero and is linked to a wider culture of imitation encapsulated by the TV show *Festival de la una*, pivotal to the film's plot though little-discussed by critics. Fourth, and most importantly, I present a more balanced orientation of Raúl in the victim-perpetrator continuum. Though Larraín himself argues that Raúl is victim as well as perpetrator, Siqueira Montoro and Araujo Barreto overemphasise his victimhood by ignoring the extent to which his violent actions mirror those of the state: he does represent a

violently repressed society caught between Western modernity and Chilean identity, as they say, but he also (paradoxically) represents the kind of violence which can be carried out with impunity by a repressive state. Violence, in their analysis, is 'only hinted at' in the film, which concentrates instead on Raúl's private world, 'poor and alienated from the politics of the country' (2015: 15). The 'perpetrator' aspect of Raúl's characterisation is too easily elided as a result. Their concentration on his intimate environment, together with frequent references to his 'identity crisis', indeed sails close to rendering him too much of a victim. Here, I take account of the allegorical nature of actions which, as I argue below, allude to compulsive and repetitive *state* violence, making Raúl as much *victimario* (perpetrator) as he is *víctima* (victim).

Benjamin's understanding of allegory as a representation of the *facies hippocratica*, or 'death's head', of history, identifies allegory with narrative in 'Allegory and Trauerspiel' (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928)). Symbol is the mode of a closer, more optimistic relationship between sign and reality, the language of history's 'winners', and for Xavier (2004) this can be equated to traditional filmic space-time in which there is a linear relationship between continuity cinema and a totalising view of history. Allegory, on the other hand, is a much more melancholic mode of representation in which history's 'losers' attempt to recover the meanings of an ever more distant past. Allegory is thus more given to a more modernist aesthetic for, as Xavier puts it, 'history [in Benjamin's reading of allegorical narrative] is a realm of suffering and permanent conflict, not a purely logical chain of constructive events, but a directionless piling up of violence' (345). Benjamin credits Friedrich Creuzer and Joseph Görres with 'the great romantic achievement' of introducing time into the consideration of representation and, particularly, allegory. His deliberations lead eventually to the oft-quoted statement that 'in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape' (166). The discussion of German tragic drama that follows cannot be rehearsed here but Benjamin's subsequent musings on the subject of allegory are certainly of interest, especially the statement that 'an appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory' (223). The 'transient' in Larraín's films are

precisely those ‘contradictions of memory’ mentioned by Barraza Toledo. In a study of Larraín’s trilogy by Nike Jung, the issue is posed as a question, ‘What should be remembered and how?’ (2015: 119), and part of the answer for Jung is corporality or ‘how meaning is created by the body-as-metaphor, and how the political drive of the films is tied up with aesthetic devices clustered around the body’ (121). Jung’s piece does not engage with the concept of allegory but it makes very clear that Raúl’s murderous behaviour ‘mirrors the conduct of the authoritarian regime’ and helpfully cites the recent docufiction *Pena de Muerte* (Tevo Díaz, 2012), which focuses on a real series of murders in 1980s Chile, to highlight ‘the issue of real, off-screen impunity’ (122).

The contradiction that concerns me most, the co-existence of *víctima* and *victimario* in one character, is particularly relevant to Benjamin’s ‘transience’. Raúl is certainly a class victim (one of history’s ‘losers’) but his murderous violence is associated with that of Pinochet, whose status as ‘victor’ following 1973 allows him to configure national history in ways which relegate such victims to ‘transience’. Raúl’s oxymoronic status as a perpetrating victim thus challenges a binary that drives much of post-dictatorship Chilean cinema. As Jung puts it, ‘remembering on both sides of the political-social spectrum has often been conducted along well-trodden and antagonistic narrative memory lines, each lined with its Manichean version of the past’ (119). Whilst Jung’s study is concerned with the body, as noted above, mine concerns an aspect of everyday history that is prone to oblivion: the social, political and ethical ambiguities of the ordinary Chilean citizen under Pinochet’s dictatorship; the stories not of direct perpetrators and direct victims during an antagonistic time, but of those who are in between. In a separate study (2017), I consider the fictionalised murder in *Post Mortem* committed by the protagonist Alberto Cornejo (also played by Alfredo Castro), the real-life coroner’s assistant during Allende’s autopsy in 1973. That study is concerned with the techniques of trauma cinema, specifically disruptions in linearity, and the way in which a film can tap into a collective ‘unclaimed experience’ (Cathy Caruth, 1996) by making its protagonist an ‘implicated subject’ (Michael Rothberg, 2013), neither direct victim nor direct perpetrator but an individual who is somewhere on a continuum between the two. Here, the protagonist Raúl is much more obviously

a perpetrator, even if there is a certain degree of victimhood. If allegory is the vehicle by which his victimhood is conveyed, in terms of the parallel between his identity crisis and that of the nation according to Siquiera Montoro and Araujo Barreto, I posit that - whilst that limited victimhood is indeed apparent - Larraín's allegory here is much less to do with Raúl as victim and more dominantly the mode by which his murderous actions are associated with those of the regime.

The etymological roots of allegory in Greek are *allo-*, other, and *agoreuein*, to speak (in the assembly, in public or in the open) As Davide del Bello explains: 'Putting the two together, we get the established meaning of 'speaking about the other (or "other speaking") but also of "incorporat[ing] more than one voice at the same time in a public discourse or narrative"' (del Bello 2005: 40).ⁱ Allegory is therefore very often described as 'speaking' but meaning something 'other'. The Greek word was appropriated and redefined in Latin. Cicero described it as 'a number of metaphors' and associated it with irony (Cicero 1954: 345). In my approach to it, allegory differs from irony - that other way of 'saying one thing and meaning another' (Jeremy Tambling 2010: 21) - principally because it consists of a narrative which is to be compared with another narrative. In this regard, the definition of the term given by M.H. Abrams is particularly helpful:

An allegory is a *narrative* in which the agents and action, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived so as to make coherent sense on the 'literal,' or primary, level of signification, and also to signify a second, *correlated* order of agents, concepts, and events. (Abrams 1993: 4; emphasis added)

Allegory therefore involves 'a continuous parallel between two (or more) levels of meaning in a story' (Baldick 6): the individual's story can be read as that of the collective, a private story as one of public significance, and a town's tragedy as a national one. Allegory obliges us to consider metaphors not in isolation but in the context of 'chain[s] of events' (Baldick 6), sequences, or greater narratives, first with (centripetal) reference to the narrative of the cultural text itself and second - more centrifugally - with reference to the narrative of history.

A major metaphor mobilised by the overarching allegorical narrative of *Tony Manero*, to be seen in context rather than in isolation, is the household in which Raúl lives. After a process of creation that took at least two years, Larraín reveals that ‘the conclusion we arrived at was to establish a metaphorical space’ (Koza 2009). This ‘metaphorical space’ is where Raúl lives: a cantina with a stage and an upstairs living area. In this ambiguously multifunctional space, the main characters eat, sleep, bathe and (try to) have sex but they also work, rehearsing and performing their dance show. The household relationships can be seen as atomised, as Larraín hints in another interview, conducted in Torino in 2008: ‘nobody is truly connected to [Raúl]. They’re all trying to save themselves [...] the relationships are quite utilitarian’ (Larraín 2008). The atomisation of the household is metaphorically representative of a national society in which the country is in thrall to a dictator who can, as a result, call all the (literal) shots. The way in which the women in this space hold Raúl in thrall, despite his impotence, echoes a certain kind of complicity with the patriarchal culture *beyond* the cantina. As Costa Moraes points out, ‘the women end up protecting the maintenance of established relations, helping to concretise the successful ideological manoeuvres of the regime’ (76).ⁱⁱ As noted by Jung, cited above, impunity – that of the state and that of Raúl – also forms part of the ‘metaphorical space’ in which text and context merge. According to Larraín, ‘his impunity is the impunity of Pinochet [...] his amorality is also that of the government’ (Larraín 2008). At the heart of this is a paradox since Raúl is a product of the society in which he lives but he also manages to evade its controlling mechanisms. He is described by the Chilean director as ‘extraviado’ (‘lost’, ‘stray’ or ‘having lost his way’), representing ‘the result of a society [...] which has forgotten him and his class’ (2008), a description which accords with the view of him as victim. Raúl’s obsession with the working-class New Yorker Tony Manero is a deluded attempt to transcend this class-related oblivion by association with a glamorous North American icon, what Costa Moraes calls a ‘progress symbol’ as much as a sex symbol (53). Thus Raúl metaphorically represents a forgotten underclass in Chilean society but his depiction is by no means sympathetic since, as both *víctima* and *victimario*, he is able to exploit the very oblivion in which he is held to commit his acts of violence, which are never

punished by a state more interested in political dissent. The personal-national parallel is tempting to make, though the film does nothing to underline it: Is the violence of Pinochet's regime also facilitated by a kind of oblivion in a world still obsessed with the cold war?

What seems more certain is that Raúl's acts of violence, rather than forming part of the 'metaphorical space', *are* an allegory. In the Torino interview, Larraín remarks as much, even if he confuses metaphor and allegory here: 'Raúl's violence is intended to be an allegory, a metaphor, for the violence of the government' (Larraín 2009). The conflation of allegory and metaphor in this statement reveals the complexity of associating *Tony Manero* with allegory, for the film can be *both* an (extended) metaphor in which two things are compared, namely Pinochet and Raúl, or the nation and Raúl's household, in the ways described above, *and* an allegory in which two *narratives* are at play, and that metaphors, extended or not, rather than standing in isolation, can support allegory's 'chain of events' (Baldick 6), just as the metaphorical space of the house, in this case, supports the allegorical narrative. The most obvious narrative connection between *Tony Manero* and 1970s Chile is quite simply the acts of violence which are repetitive and varied, exhibiting physical, cultural and psychological features. Raúl's relationship with the other occupants of the private-public space of the cantina is marked by very different kinds of violence: Wilma, the middle-aged owner, has her stage floor ripped up by a furious Raúl during a rehearsal whilst Goyo, who seems to be in his early twenties, and apparently unrelated to anyone else in the house, has his new white Tony Manero suit defecated on by Raúl before the televised contest which the latter is also entering. Furthermore, whilst he is ignored by the state outside, Raúl effortlessly exploits his status as the bearer of a hegemonic standard of masculinity within the gender regime of the household to inflict different kinds of gender violence on all the women in it.ⁱⁱⁱ He hits Wilma and fondles her breast; he makes Cony gag in a grotesque 'sex' scene in which she tells him that he is getting old and cannot achieve an erection; he openly hankers after, seduces and then fails to have sex with her less age-appropriate daughter.

Raúl's acts of gender violence are in line with those of his fictional hero Manero, if more extreme, but his impotence contrasts with the highly-charged

sexuality of the more youthful characters of *Saturday Night Fever*, in which car sex, attempted rape, gang rape and unwanted pregnancy feature. Raúl's veneration of Tony Manero, rather than any admiration of John Travolta (he is *clearly* not interested in Travolta's follow-up film), arguably represents a homoerotic attachment to an illusory virility which disguises his own lack, underscoring an economic relationship between Chile and the United States in which the former impotently apes the latter, as I shall discuss below. An important gap between Raúl and the idealised Tony Manero is the redemptive power of responsibility. From the very beginning, the 'real' Tony Manero is told that 'the future's gonna fuck you in the ass' if he fails to consider it. He seems to absorb this advice. Every time he makes a woman cry (first his mother, then his ex, Annette, then his dancing partner, Stephanie), Manero feels a guilt which manifests in spoken remorse and the film ends with Manero's promise to 'just be friends' with a woman on whom he had earlier attempted to force sex. It could be argued that Manero's redemption gives us a symbolic tale of North American class redemption in the 1970s, making *Saturday Night Fever* an example of the kind of optimistic, totalising narratives which feature a teleological, largely symbolic development towards integration (see Xavier 2004). In contrast, Raúl exhibits a complete absence of engagement with the feelings of those around him and for the consequences of his actions and this applies also to his murderous activity, which – along with the aforementioned acts of psychological, gender and physical violence – creates a character that the director says is marked by 'a death drive and a drive to repeat' (Koza 2009). This repetitive narrative of continued violence allegorically echoes the narrative of events in 1970s Chile. The particular five-year period between 1973 and the specific year 1978, when *Tony Manero* is set, was one of remorseless, violent repression: from the coup itself, to the murders and torture committed in the national stadium of Santiago, to the setting-up of concentration camps outside the capital, and the creation of a secret police which engaged in torture and murder, the Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional (DINA), all in the name of a declared war on the left, especially on those perceived to be communists.

Outside the house, Raúl commits three lethal acts of physical violence, which become less and less shocking as the viewer becomes inured to the

perversity of the character that motivates them: the murder of an old lady whom he has just protected from robbery by a group of young assailants; the killing of an old couple who run the cinema in which he views repeat episodes of *Saturday Night Fever*; and the murder of a lumber yard owner. Raúl's murders are motivated by acquisitive needs as he pursues his ambitions: in the first, he acquires a colour television which he later uses as part exchange for glass tiles on which to dance; in the second, he takes a perverse revenge against the couple who run the cinema and had the temerity to swap *Saturday Night Fever* for *Grease* (1978) in their schedule, and acquires the film reel of the former in the process; in the third he acquires the set of tiles he needs to create a lit stage floor in his bedroom. In each of the murders he uses a weapon that he finds in the victim's premises, either to commit the first blow or to finish them off. Each of Raúl's murders combines premeditation with a degree of spontaneity: even in the final, well-prepared crime, he uses a tool that he has found in the victim's bedroom. The calmness with which he opens a tin of tuna and feeds the cat after the first murder and the telling look of steely but somehow nonchalant determination on the bus in the final scene indicate that these murders are not the only three he has committed or will commit. The murders within the narrative are not gratuitous within Raúl's own terms, and this self-justifying violence allegorically parallels a government narrative that justifies the elimination of those that might be 'in the way of progress'.

And yet there is room for ambiguity even in this repetitive narrative of an unchanging Raúl as a cold-hearted murderer, according to the director:

I insist that he is a victim [víctima] who turns into a perpetrator [victimario]. It so happens that we as spectators are poorly trained by a certain type of cinema in which you see the process of change in characters; it's narrated and explained to you. We don't see that here. Hiding that creates an incompleteness in the tale that I found appealing. (Koza 2009)

That 'process of change' is here replaced with a narrative of changeless repetition. The 'incompleteness' of that narrative of Raúl's violence thus, lacks,

for example the redemptive thread of remorse in *Saturday Night Fever*. At the same time, though, this lack of character progression releases the possibility of a reading that invites a more sympathetic interpretation based on the fact that Raúl is a victim of his context. This is a reading that Larraín actively encourages: 'I think my film tries not to judge this character; it tries to understand [...] his behaviour starting from the place in which he exists' (Koza 2009). To arrive at a sympathetic reading of the egotistical, loose-tempered and womanising Tony Manero of *Saturday Night Fever* is not very hard, since he seems eventually to see the error of his ways; it is surely amongst those many films that, according to Larraín, 'manage [the viewer's] emotions' (Koza 2009). To sympathise with the unchanging Raúl as a victim depends on a degree of effort on the part of the viewer.

Any sympathy with Raúl must greatly expand on and nuance Siqueira Montora and Araujo Barreta's equation of his allegorically standing precariously between Western and Chilean modernity, if we are to make the case here for an instance of Xavier's 'pragmatic allegory' in which the past is used to comment on the present. Rothberg has opened the door to literary and filmic studies of traumatising periods of history with a perspective based on 'multidirectional memory' and 'the implicated subject' (2013). Within this paradigm, he encourages 'a commitment to exploring memories dialogically across allegedly distinct histories' (2013: 40). In the process, characters and viewers themselves become implicated in traumatising processes as 'bystanders, beneficiaries [...] and others connected "prosthelytically" to pasts they did not directly experience' (p.40). As mentioned above, I have explored the connections between Rothberg's theory of implication and multidirectional memory more directly in a study of *Post Mortem* (2017). Here, it would seem that Raúl is clearly a heavily implicated subject to the extent that he is a bystander and beneficiary of the regime if not a direct agent of it. But the notion of *viewer* implication is not irrelevant either since this film is also one of those that 'move us away from overt questions of guilt and innocence and leave us in a more complex and uncertain moral and ethical terrain – a terrain in which many of us live most of the time' (Rothberg: 40).

The key to this level of viewer implication is the theme of imitation of US economic and cultural models, a problem not limited to Raúl and 1970s Chile. As well as a filmic narrative of repeated violence mirroring a similar historical narrative of violence, we are also dealing with an allegory based on the narrative of a character vacuously copying an imported idol compared with that of a country, equally vacuously, importing economic and cultural models from the United States. There is a story behind this process, as Larraín suggests when he states that the film '[departs] from the perspective of a little story and a human being who, without knowing it, imports a cultural model' (Kozo 2009). Indeed, the whole film is based on this story of cultural obsession, which has its own beginning, middle and end. The very first shot, over-the-shoulder, is of his arrival at the studios of Televisión Nacional de Chile to participate in a contest to find the 'igualito' of Tony Manero in Chile in Don Enrique Maluende's *Festival de la una*, all of which – certainly in the context of the rest of the film – can be read as a reference to a governmental adoption of North American cultural models.^{iv} The rest of the film is a tale about his determination to achieve the aim of appearing on this show, which mirrors that of the government to pursue its own neo-liberal objectives, based on the politics and economics of the famous 'Chicago boys' for, as Larraín states, '[the] crucial moment is when Pinochet introduces the Chicago boys, five economists trained in the United States whom Pinochet took to the Ministry for the Treasury and Economy [...] in that very moment a great repression was started' (Kozo 2009). In the process, people are killed and tortured and, as Martha Richardson has stated, 'The taking of a life, by both Raúl and Pinochet's thugs, is akin to shoving an obstacle out of the way' (2009). In the end, he rejects the decision of a television audience, one that is rough-and-ready yet recognisably democratic in a country with no democracy, to plot the murder of his winning rival by initially following him, much as Pinochet's secret police would do, before inevitably – in Richardson's words – 'shoving [another] obstacle out of the way'. Thus, there is a narrative here of a personal obsession with a goal (a foreign one), its pursuit and the consequences of that pursuit, and that narrative bears comparison to the narrative of national obsession with foreign economic and political models.

In terms of viewer implication, the nature of this imitation is just as important. Raúl sits in the cinema and watches *Saturday Night Fever*, memorising parrot-fashion every word of the dialogue, incidentally in a manner that recalls how a policeman driver in the opening scene of the unrelated Ricardo Larraín's *La frontera* (1991) repeats English sentences delivered by his self-learning tape. A certain cinematic reflexivity is invoked here: to what extent do we as viewers also uncritically internalise modes of behaviour that we watch in US films, and how far do we externalise them? And to what extent do we – and society as a whole – still inertly practise neoliberal-friendly modes of vacuous consumption? The point for Raúl, of course, is not just to learn how Tony Manero behaves but to absorb that behaviour for the purposes of narcissism. This is evident not only when he performs as Tony Manero but also when he dances in front of his mirror in his underpants, not unlike the 'real' Tony Manero, but here to the Chilean singer José Alfredo Fuentes' North American pop-influenced 'Era solo un chiquillo' ('He was only a little boy'), a Chilean OTI Festival entry in 1976. This kind of self-absorption is evident also when he takes Pauli's hand to the tune of the popular, 1970s, all-female Chilean group Frecuencia Mod's 'Cállate, ya no me mientes' ('Be quiet, no more lies'), as he seems oblivious to the fact that he is driving an imaginary dagger through Cony's heart. Thus, the use of culture, whether North American or Chilean pop that is imitative of that of North America, is uncritical and thoughtless at best and cynical and manipulative, at worst, in a manner that can be compared to the official endorsement of North American-influenced shows like *Festival de la una*.

As the lynchpin of the plot, this variety show, considered a national treasure at its apogee in the 1980s, is a metaphor for the 'circus of appearances' of the state (Costa Moraes: 17), and specifically for its discourse of national unity. It featured 'comedy' sketches and competitions but also performances by musical groups and singers thus functioning as a shop window for some of Chile's cultural performers. It projected an image of a fun, undivided Chile across all generations, even if the audience was made up largely of middle-aged and elderly women charmed by Maluende, who was known as 'el rey de las abuelitas' ('the king of grannies') and 'el nieto de Chile' ('the grandson of Chile'), making him the darling of a kind of surrogate national family. It attracted younger

viewers too and most of the performers were much younger, and both male and female. It brought families together around the television set; a brief internet search will reveal the nostalgic glow in which the show still basks for some.^v The motto of the show was 'Hola, ¿qué tal?' (Hello, how are you?), followed by a chorus from the audience of '¡Festival!'. This catchphrase and its response underscored the sense of togetherness in the experience of watching the show, both on set and more broadly in the country.

Such a show of unity, of course, fails to stand scrutiny in any historical reading of 1970s and 80s Chile. In its treatment of *Festival de la una*, the film strongly alludes to this national charade. In *Tony Manero*, the household members expectantly sit down together and watch the show in a scene which would bring back fond memories for some Chilean audiences. In this sequence, though, Raúl suddenly unplugs the TV before it even gets going (with a Chuck Norris impersonation contest) and he meets no resistance from his fellow household members. He calmly coils the cable around the television and walks off with it having suddenly decided it will be useful barter in his quest to acquire glass tiles for his dance routine. This moment underlines Larraín's reconfiguration of a show which supposedly united the nation: here, it is the façade for a dysfunctional society and a dysfunctional household in which one man's whim holds sway, a mirror of the illusory unity projected by Pinochet's nationalist discourse, which disguises (and indeed foments) violence and tension. This deployment of *Festival de la una* is bound up with Raúl's behaviour. Not only does he engage in acts of murder, much as the state does, he also creates a simulacrum of unity in the household with a putatively collective project, much as *Festival de la una* does for the nation in its impersonation contests. In Raúl's case, this involves the staging of a *Saturday Night Fever* event that is actually little more than a self-centred show of masculine domination.

This theme of forced unity is underscored in the final sequences of the film. Maluende introduces a female Argentine model (a different kind of 'foreign model') on the show by invoking the Beagle dispute of the previous year (1978), a border conflict which brought Chile and Argentina to the brink of war that year: 'our country and Argentina were in a very bad diplomatic situation last year but fortunately that's all been resolved'. He then rather trivially introduces

Vanessa, the model, as a token of the extent to which relations have improved. Vanessa declares that everyone should learn to share. Maluenda's response is revealing of a rather strained show of togetherness between Chile and Argentina: 'Of course we should. Anyway, we're united, aren't we?'. Although this particularly instance relates to an international situation, the film's theme of forced unity has resonance *within* present-day Chile where, despite lingering political tensions in the country, the public is often urged to see and present itself as united, thus rendering this aspect of the film an example of Xavier's pragmatic allegory, the past being presented in a way that sheds light on the present. I shall discuss the film as pragmatic allegory in more detail below.

The theme of brittle façades of unity is apparent not just in the television show but throughout the film. Earlier in the film, when the four household members are arguing and Cony calls Goyo a 'comrade' ('compañero'), Wilma intervenes to calm everyone with the words 'We're all together here [...] we're not communists.' It is worth remembering, of course, that the most heinous acts of Pinochet's regime were directed largely against those he deemed 'communist' and that words like 'together' and 'united' transparently refer to a national stance constructed against the left in general. Here, therefore, a sense of unity is constructed from a negative: what the household is *not*, rather than what it is. In any case, Wilma is wrong since Goyo appears to be implicated in anti-Pinochet activities. Goyo himself uses the word 'united' in a pep talk to the rest of the crew just before the *Saturday Night Fever* show at Wilma's bar: 'We're gonna dance like we've never done before. Like a family. United.' Raúl's defecation on Goyo's white Tony Manero suit jars with any such messages of harmony and unity. Also running counter to such messages is the fact that Raúl deserts the household for the show just when the police come to beat Goyo up, and possibly to arrest Pauli too, who has apparently been informed on by her mother (of all people) due to her flirtation with Raúl. The façade of unity covering a disintegrating household is formally underscored by Larraín: the very aesthetics of the film, with jump cuts, out-of-focus shots, unexplained off-screen sounds and jerky camera movements, contrast with the polished, media-filtered projection of totalising unity and calm that emerged from programmes like *Festival de la una*.

The symbolic, linear relationship between this show and the supposed

unity of the nation is also challenged by a certain discontinuity in Larraín's formal approach that is characteristic of allegory 'as a fragmented and incomplete discourse [...] as an instance of discontinuity and opacity, incompleteness and ambiguity' (Xavier 2004: 347). According to Xavier, intertextuality breaks the continuity of symbolic illusion: indeed, the connections that the viewer must make between Manero and Peralta, between *Saturday Night Fever* and *Tony Manero*, and between *Festival de la una* and the events of the film encourage the viewer to critique the synthetic quality of totalising symbolic facades. Furthermore, the film revels in backstage action, displaying the very mechanics of television from the very start, laying bare the mechanisms of visual deceit in what Xavier would term a Godardian 'aesthetic critique of cinema itself' (2004: 348). There are also moments of almost surreal, but pointed black humour, for instance when the white-suited, Tony Manero-lookalike Raúl runs over corrugated roofs to escape the fate that has befallen his fellow household members. The contrast between a deluded attachment to Hollywood/the US and the Chilean reality of poverty and dictatorship could not be made more visually evident. Such images help to reinforce a reading based on Benjamin's view of allegory which, unlike symbol, as Xavier reminds us, 'refuses to provide humanity with an aesthetic redemption of the world in perfect forms, or beautiful totalities that celebrate an illusory sense of unity and harmony' (2004).

Returning to the motif of comparisons, we note that, throughout, repeated instances of a violent culture of importation are also apparent. The lumber yard owner is killed partly because the proceeds of the imported Seiko watch that Raúl stole from Goyo's contact help him to buy the bones with which to distract his dogs. Indeed, linked to this theme of importation is that of theft (the television that Raúl steals is bound to be imported too). Importing culture is therefore subtly associated with crime and violence of a particularly mindless and unthinking variety. Just as theft comes naturally to Raúl, so importing culture comes naturally to a country that has been doing it for years. Again, repetition is the narrative and viewer inurement is the result. The more he acquires (allegorically, the more the nation imports), the less surprised we are. The result of this narrative is that the viewer becomes less and less shocked by Raúl's murders and a culture of inurement to violence is projected from an

imagined Chile of the 1970s into the cinema of the present. If the film is read this way, even the thumping beat of the imported disco music, as well as Chilean songs which imitate North American musical trends, ends up becoming a repetitive hammering reminiscent of the manner in which Raúl beats his victims. And the very fact that a daily, state-sponsored daytime programme is chosen as the material for this film is suggestive, of the unexceptional, routine nature of divisive nationalist propaganda. But what we apprehend as viewers is not just the past, not just the dictatorship period: it is 'a history of violence that is *still* unfolding' (Rothberg 2013: 56; emphasis added). Although Rothberg is referring to a different subject in his 2013 essay, the work of South African visual artist Michael Kentridge, we might also wonder, given the repetitive nature of the acts of violence in Larraín's film, whether '[t]he very form of his work [also] reveals the present as always haunted by a chain of allegedly outmoded problems still awaiting address' (57). This returns us to the argument that Larraín's film is not only an allegorical representation of society under Pinochet in the 1970s, but also one which allegorises contemporary Chile in some way. As Carolina Urrutia puts it, Larraín observes the Pinochet era 'through a filter of twenty years of democracy' (2011: 69). For this reason, it seems pertinent to consider Larraín's trilogy within Xavier's category of 'pragmatic allegories':

[...] historical films which, while they represent the past, are taken as a disguised comment on the present. I refer to those narratives that can be seen as "pragmatic allegories", those in which the underlined analogies between past and present are taken as a piece of rhetoric, a form of raising a question about the present using the past [...] (354)

It is the 'concern to rescue' elements of a repressive past to question the present that Avelar discusses in the introduction of his influential work, *The Untimely Present, Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning* (1999). As Xavier reminds us, allegory is necessarily a mode which, through 'fragmentary utterances', emphasises 'what remains incomplete' and concentrates on 'historical fractures and violence', resulting in 'ruins that give a

fragmentary and devitalised testimony of past experiences' (345-6). In Avelar's work, the desire to 'rescue' Benjamin's ruins of the past is brought face to face with a specifically modern, neo-liberal impulse. Avelar posits that the latter seeks to erase the past with the new, 'without leaving a remainder' (2). The task of the intellectual is active mourning: 'to point out the residue left by every substitution, thereby showing that the past is never simply erased by the latest novelty' (2). The 'belatedness' (3) of this project creates its untimeliness, a sense of 'perpetually catching up with its own inadequacy' paradoxically creating a 'salvific relation with an object irrevocably lost' (3). There is clearly a 'salvific' impulse in Larraín's work, especially in his mining of the period of dictatorship: 'The socio-political logic of today originated there. The murder of a president in a democracy and the subsequent, systematic persecution of a group of the population gave rise to a bloody setting, populated by ghosts' (Koza 2009). The ghosts with which Larraín works are 'collectors of an unpaid debt, they represent the endless death of many who are not resting in peace because of the political decision to exclude them from the public debate' (Barraza Toledo: 170).

Larraín's present-day 'ghosts' cannot easily be divided into direct victims and direct perpetrators of state violence and the category of victims must include those who are subjected to Raúl's violence, for these are people whose stories remain even more incomplete than that of Raúl. Such ghosts certainly represent, almost literally in the case of Allende, what Benjamin referred to as the very face of the 'untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful': history's 'death's head'. The further Chile advances, chronologically at least, from that past, the more 'belated' the project appears and the more active the mourning process needs to be. As evidenced by his use of *desenfoques* and the director's comparison of the atmosphere created in *Tony Manero* to a 'blurred' dream (Koza 2009), the picture of that era becomes harder and harder to recapture. Larraín embraces this project of active mourning, despite his right-wing family background (or perhaps because of it) and despite calls to let bygones be bygones (passive forgetting, in Avelar's terms):

I'm amused by those opinions that appear on twitter, in blogs and certain parts of the written press, in which they talk about when people are going

to stop going on about Pinochet, or that we directors shouldn't get involved in all this, and so on. It so happens that it's a topic that hasn't been exhausted and it's more everyday than people think. (Rodrigo González 2010)

But Avelar's work has an even greater relevance to Larraín's pragmatic allegory if one considers further that aspect of his theory which deals with 'novelty':

The anachronistic, obsolete commodity, the recycled gadget, the museum piece are all forms of survival of what has been replaced in the market. These images of ruins are crucial for postdictatorial memory work, for they offer anchors through which a connection with the past can be reestablished (2).

The 'substitutive' logic of the market in replacing the old with the new is, of course, a characteristic of the Hollywood star system that commoditised, made obsolete and then recycled the star persona of John Travolta over his career but it is also helpful in understanding Raúl. The latter seeks to replace the old (Cony and his old Tony Manero suit) with the new/young (Pauli and his new Tony Manero suit) but seems unaware or unable to accept that he is also a cog in the wider machinery which has the final say in what is old (*Saturday Night Fever* and the Tony Manero contest) and what is new (*Grease* and next week's Julio Iglesias competition). If he is not a direct perpetrator or direct victim of the regime (in other words, one of the literally disappeared), he *is* both a victim and a perpetrator of a 'brand of oblivion' (Avelar: 1-2), manifested in the neoliberal insistence on the new which persists to this day, both within and beyond Chile. Even if his acts of violence generally make it impossible for viewers to sympathise with him, his brutal murder of the old couple who run the cinema for daring to replace *Saturday Night Fever* with *Grease*, significantly battering the head of the projectionist against the metal tube of the projector, suggests that he can only respond to the paradox of his powerful and powerless position with

such violence and that this is perhaps the tragedy of the individual who is, in the words of Larraín, both *víctima* and *victimario*.

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- ⁱ For a more detailed discussion of the etymological origins of allegory, please see del Bello, pp. 34-40.
- ⁱⁱ All translations from Costa Moraes' work are mine.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The topic of masculinities during the Pinochet era is explored by Wesley Costa Moraes in his unpublished thesis of 2013, which compares *Tony Manero* to Alberto Fuguet's 1991 novel, *Mala onda*. Whilst Raúl's masculinity is certainly of interest, it would be difficult for a critic to proceed beyond a reading of him as any more than the kind of unreconstructed and tyrannical figure already discussed by Costa Moraes. The relationship between his violence and a culture of imitation is of more relevance to my analysis.
- ^{iv} This is no idle assertion. Read the interviews in Michael Chanan (1976) for how this cultural importation began even before 1973. For more on the years that followed, see Caterina Preda's research on what she terms an 'omnipresent televised culture' in Chile by 1980 (2009: 240-2), consisting of entertainment shows, and particularly 'contests which reproduced North American models' (240).
- ^v Larraín's own comments on the show are significant: 'It was a fantasy of public broadcasting which depicted a progressive and happy country, whilst what was happening on the street was

terrible [...] [The show was] a metaphor for the whole country, a fragile, 'pop' stage design [...] a poor and sad circus.' (Koza 2009). Yet the show does bring back nostalgic memories for some. See the comments below the clip on *Festival de la 1 - Fírmese - Parte 1*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MNuidiSFIM> (accessed July 18 2014).