

SANTIAGO, A COMMON LOCATION:

THE CITY IN POST-DICTATORSHIP CHILEAN CINEMA¹

When portraying the contemporary city, film has the capacity of proposing images that, due to the massiveness of the format, become common. Based on the idea that film generates discourse, this article analyses Chilean film production in a post-dictatorship period to seek for those images of the city that, by repeatedly appearing on the big screen, end up generating Santiago's common imaginary.

KEYWORDS · imaginary, identity, landscape, fiction, urban scenography

Since the return of democracy, film production in Chile has grown each year –with regards to the number of commercial releases²– accompanied by uncommon distribution. The recent prominence of Chilean cinema has been publicized through participation in international festivals, prizes, and nominations for prestigious awards³ as well as grants and funds from the government to foster movie production. And so commercial films have become part of the State agenda whose financial support ensures and guarantees a cultural oxygenation that not only contributes to generating a visual text about ‘the Chilean’ but also allows to recognizing collective identities and social heterogeneity. Thus, it is worth noting the effect that film production has had on the promotion of Chile’s image abroad.

The production and distribution of Chilean fictional films slowly went beyond conventional arguments. The growing number of local audiences witnessed this visual renewal –especially in the places filmed–. For example, during the end of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, in the age of global cultural exchange, Santiago was represented as the most common setting in Chilean cinema.

With the end of censorship, the appearance of previously forbidden subjects forged a path for free expression that maintained Santiago as a constant background in the majority of the stories told.⁴ Under the assumption that cinema is key to understanding the representation of reality as it operates by proposing a different world that references existing spaces, this article seeks to understand the relationship between film and the Santiago represented in Chilean cinematography, identifying the visual role the city has had in the rise of a creative industry where both production and public interest continue to rise.

The city and film can be considered as counterparts of an irreplaceable bond that forms the very substance of cinema. The urban question took on a

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2 From 1990 to 2013 there have been approximately 360 productions with an annual average of 23 movies released. In 2014 there were 45 releases.

3 In 2012, the movie *No* by Pablo Larraín was nominated for an Oscar from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in the USA in the category of Best Foreign Film becoming the first Chilean film to be nominated. Previously, *La nana* by Sebastián Silva had been nominated at the Golden Globes in the same category after receiving the Jury's Prize at the Sundance Film Festival in 2009.

4 This investigation studied 364 movies released between 1990 and 2012. Of these, approximately 65% correspond to urban stories. 43 films were selected according to different categories of analysis (public reception, quality measured by prizes and presence, and distribution in theaters, among others).

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different meaning once perceived and read from another scale made possible by its projection on the big screen. Movies allowed people to relate with their own world through moving images showing fragments of modern life in different places, on occasions unknown, far away, and removed from the viewer. So much so that, on certain opportunities, “filming the city meant filming those parts of the city that look like they could be in movies” (Comolli, 2002:22). In this way, the city is not presented as a mere decoration in cinematic work but rather obeys a chain of technical and production decisions that show a specific way of understanding and experiencing urbanity. All seems to be resolved as part of the common experience of citizens and spectators. Furthermore, if the film is considered discourse (Bordwell, 1997), this speech unfolds in a quite attractive proposal of visual experience for observing Santiago in genuine cinema.

PROJECTED SANTIAGO

In Chile, due to an almost non-existent film industry and an apparent disregard for conserving local film heritage, fictional movies reflecting everyday urban and architectural situations have become valuable records of Santiago. These films collect shots and scenes that require new readings, where audiences recreate or re-observe the places presented in film. For any local argument, a set of locations make up the image and visuality of the city the viewers inhabit.

City growth inhibits the complete experience of the inhabitants; it is then cinema that proposes and comprises images of the city where it can be grasped and rebuilt. Thus, the image of the projected city is neither casual nor obeys a simple, natural record. Rather, it mobilizes the viewer both in the ways it is presented and the ways of inhabiting the space. This is the starting point of an investigation focusing on filmed locations to explore this border zone in depth that, through the plot, gives the viewer common and recognizable spaces in the city, either real or manipulated.

The city settings –real spaces– are offered like a ruse, because once they are projected they take on new meanings. If certain urban locations are frequently used in successive films a common imaginary of the city begins to be built and reappears on the screen with the pretension of being shared as legitimate. This supposes that the viewer “feels the pleasure of imagining something more than meets the eye” (Tirri, 2012:22).

Thus, speculating on the relationship between the city and film today requires one to understand the forms of spaces in contemporary urban life. Sites in the city are converted into mirages of a reality beyond the storyline utilizing them. This acquires a subtle and profound relevance when considering not only the common urban settings recorded in Chilean cinema but also those that form part of our urban experience yet do not achieve a visual dimension for local cinematography. To give an example, existing materialities, famous buildings, neighborhoods, and icons of the city lack visual meaning in the eye of local film directors. As such, the imaginary city is fueled by both the present and the absent.

A country’s cinema offers identifying images where material references communicate its idiosyncrasies. Even when this can be understood as a fluid expression, it involves a series of tensions of another caliber: film presents an image of the city where its own icons (many times contrary to what is labeled as heritage coincide with a discourse on its material reality. The story and

characters, placed in spatial contexts, become a statement that provokes a metaphorical impact on the experience of viewer-citizens. Numerous buildings, urban volumes with a notable presence in several films are transformed into witnesses, icons, and evidence of a reality not always serving just the plot-line but manifesting certain indications of adjacent problems.

Thus, one would suppose that the record of different locations in the Chilean capital as part of that discourse of representation liberated from constraints or ties has a singular expressive development. However, the thesis of this investigation recognizes the opposite result: with more freedom to exploit the spatial and visual possibilities of the city, Chilean cinema today is concentrated on individual themes and reduces the tacit presence of emblematic sites in Santiago to accommodate intimate, emerging arguments in locations with an hermetic character. The precedents of this paradoxical finding raise key questions: what are the visual values of the elements making up the urban space of film in its contribution to the local imaginary? Are there differences between presenting the city as a mere backdrop projecting neutrality or urban hybridization as opposed to disclosing Santiago as a common global city?

A summary of the study on the projected city in Chilean cinema produced between 1990 and 2012 circumscribes this reflection in the face of the irrefutable proof of the urban record. It begins with a dominant portrait of the margins and peripheries of Santiago (*Caluga o menta*, 1990) and ends in closed spaces –mostly private– in which the city is only a context of difficult spatial identification and where the exceptional yields to the generic and common (*Gatos viejos*, 2010).

In this article, the projection of the city in Chilean film was addressed according to two dimensions of complementary analysis. The first covers the historical chronology of its representation and identifies the architectural elements that are highlighted and plotted as urban traces. The second outlines the creation of different imaginaries of the city recognized as spatial accounts of Santiago. Here a panoramic address of each of these dimensions will be laid out.

SANTIAGO IN CINEMA: A CITY IN CONSTRUCTION

The presence of the city in Chilean cinema coincides with the booming economic development of the post-dictatorship and a rebirth of cinema as a cultural industry. Its presence on the screen managed to increase and amplify itself or construct transversal references present in different films. However, from the identification of the visual references it is possible to find certain recurrences and discontinuities in the locations that can be distinguished and grouped into time periods between 1990 and 2012. A general approximation will be presented to describe the urban record, its evolution, the treatment of the city, and the connotations associated with Chilean cinematographic production that considers five analytical phases according to their commercial releases (1990 to 1995, 1996 to 2001, 2002 to 2007, and 2008 to 2012).

A) COMMON AND EXTREME SPACES

Between 1990 and 1995, foundational productions in Chilean cinema were released and referred to as 'post-dictatorship.' They present an urban visuality characterized by the duality of the city inhabitants' experience: scenes of the periphery versus the urban center understood as a landmark of economic policy in the eighties.

The everyday locations and shots of urban spaces present a tense city in which inhabitants and their daily experiences occur in a precarious landscape: housing blocks rooted on undeveloped expanses of land show the presence of a city of far off power. The dominant scene is that of semi-urban areas. One travels to a distant city where the citizen-character tries to establish basic living conditions, often problematically. It is interesting to note that in this period city-characters are lower class and removed from progress because modernization is presented fragmentarily and shown only in brief shots –like in *Caluga o menta*– or close-ups of Santiago –like in



FIG 1 1 y 2 *Caluga o menta* (1990); 3 - 5 *Johnny Cien Pesos* (1993). Composición de fotogramas por / Frames composed by Javiara Robledo.



FIG 2 1 *Historias de fútbol* (1997); 2 *Gringuito* (1998); 3 *El chacotero sentimental* (1999); 4 y 5 *Taxi para tres* (2001). Composición de fotogramas por / Frames composed by Javiara Robledo.

Johnny cien pesos-. In the group of movies selected one can observe how the city becomes invisible and intangible while the lower class habitat is set apart and consolidated (FIG. 1).

B) COLONIZED MARGINS

Between 1996 and 2001 several movies that deepened aspects of the treatment of the previously observed city were released. In these films, the two worlds confront each other again: the lower class setting and the urban expression of economic progress. The main differences with the films of the previous five years are expressed by the radicalization of the distance between these two types of cities. On one side, the condition of the half-built landscape that defines the precarious livability of the characters continues to be emphasized in the low-income locations. On the other, the booming city, distant and defined by contrast is shown mainly through the shiny new buildings that denote the presence of progress but which, however, have not been owned by the characters.

Santiago is shown with a sum of icons that create an impressive landscape, imposing its large size over the fragile landscape in which it sits. The stories show characters that wander –like in *Gringuito* or *Taxi para tres*– in front of these solemn architectures that modify their movements but not their daily lives. The city emerges as the center in panoramic shots that at the same time present it as an uncomfortable scene, an urban landscape that traces its skyline without reference to its fictional inhabitants (FIG. 2).

C) STRUCTURES AND FUNCTIONALITY

The cinematic releases between 2002 and 2007 depict a city characterized by a strong presence of urban volumes. Through the screen, viewers are transported from the lower class margins to other areas of the city identified with everyday life in Santiago. Large architectural structures as symbols of economic prosperity, yield presence to other metropolitan figures: high-density residential developments and modern, urban highways.

During these years, the scenes of the city project a city-body vision characterized by the combination of its structures reaching toward a compelling functionality. A city formed around the addition of architectural bodies built at different times where the characters try to establish the conditions of their own story (*Play*, 2005). The city is not shown as a harmonious organism, mainly due to the insistence of the camera in low-angle shots as in *Mirageman*, where one perceives a boundless city in relation to the people. Santiago, as a large machine metaphor, seems to acquire autonomy and establish itself as a body independent from its inhabitants (FIG. 3).

D) TWO-DIMENSIONAL COMPOSITIONS

In the films released between 2008 and 2012, the image of Santiago is subjected to another requirement: to filter urban spaces. The camera enhances its ability to be the subject of a beautiful photographic



FIG 3 1 *Se arrienda* (2005); 2 *El rey de los huevones* (2006); 3 *Radio Corazón* (2007); 4 *Miragemen* (2007); 5 *Play* (2005). Composición de fotogramas por / Frames composed by Javiera Robledo.



FIG 4 1 *La buena vida* (2008); 2 *Qué pena tu vida* (2006); 3 *Metro cuadrado* (2011); 4 *La nana* (2009); 5 *Gatos viejos* (2010). Composición de fotogramas por / Frames composed by Javiera Robledo.

composition. The panoramic shots of urban spaces no longer depict its history or conflict with respect to the different city experiences (*Qué pena tu vida*, 2010), but are staged as part of the complexities of the character that give depth to the story.

This process ranks the locations and orders them based on the interchange of two attributes: their recognizability (as an iconic reference) and their potential for being aestheticized through technique (framing, color, textures, composition). In this context, the image of the city becomes the background for recognizing the particular space in which the story occurs. However, the location does not necessarily refer to real coordinates. Thus, one experiences a city of partial views and quick postcards that show neither its livability nor the tensions existing in those spaces (*La buena vida*, 2008). In this way, the spaces yield to the character conflict, leaving the city to contribute only visually (FIG. 4).

CITY SCENES, FRAGMENTS OF A POSSIBLE WHOLE

Regarding the excess of images that surround ordinary citizens, Quintana says that the idea of the abstract prevails, arguing that time-saving to achieve a certain captured view (as well as concentrated) can provoke the attention of the viewer: “In the current audiovisual world it is important to combine material functionality with the aesthetic use of the texture of the planes” (Quintana, 2011:188). Therefore, the spatial framework that holds the fictional plot, the common city (containing the places both projected and off-screen) makes up a scene that mutates depending on the aforementioned time periods. However, in a context in which we are surrounded by images, it is difficult for a spectator to stop before a single one; for one to remain timeless and deep, we require a single shot: “(...) the film scene never ceases to be recovered as an automatic form of a discourse that seems to justify the vision of an entire film” (Quintana, 2011:199). So are we in conditions to abbreviate the representation of Santiago with more current uses? Through the operation of reassembly (with more iconic spaces) the function of cinema is consolidated as it is “rebuilt through the visual and cinematographic narrative that links memories to the present” (De los Ríos, 2013:116). To build an image of the common city from the selected movies,⁵ the unknown leads us to recognize the most significant images for the imaginary of cinematic Santiago. With these compositions their observers live, know, recognize and discover themselves in the most emblematic films.

Visual exploration allows one to identify three kinds of portraits of Santiago as a common location in Chilean film. While they possess a temporary charge that coincides with the development of cinematic production, they form identifiable and recognizable constants of the city systematically revisited by national directors.

THE EXCLUDED CITY

Freed from censorship Chilean cinema insisted on the vacant lot, revealing an absence and also an imperious need for common space for community use. The ‘*peladero*,’ an earthen plane that is neither intervened upon nor appropriate, is

⁵ Under the classification of categories a wider audience and dissemination, understanding these indicators as generators of a larger circuit, transit and appropriation of city images.

equally common and finds common, alternative uses (such as a football field or parking) and is also the only void that provides a relief from the interior crowding of the peripheral dwellings. In this carelessness, the plots of *Caluga o menta* and *El chacotero sentimental* expose an obvious contrast with the central areas of Santiago (FIG. 5).

The common architecture of the social housing blocks emerge as a group of transplanted geometries, in the same way that the figures of water towers and precarious slum dwellings are projected. In this period, a social outline of Santiago is exposed with an emphasis on the margins, in the outer city limits. It is in these spaces where the future plans and hopes for progress germinate so that they can coexist and be contrasted with the iconic silhouettes of a civilizing model of urban infrastructure (large projects for public use contrasted with the meager infrastructure of social housing) to generate a precise frame for the conflicts of the marginal characters.

In that context, this cinematic Santiago acts as a contrast and critique to the construction of the official city. The alleged city in development maintains an antagonistic visuality with the livability of the excluded. Therefore, the city is projected as incomplete and fragmented; the buildings are presented in a relationship that lacks integrity with its context; the unfinished inspires a break of the natural (the voids) with the presence of a functional urban organization without aesthetic additions. However, albeit with pessimistic tints, the excluded spaces cherish the dreams of an uncertain future like in *Taxi para tres*.

THE POSTCARD CITY

Overall, in the productions released between 2001 and 2010, several still shots create another projection of Santiago. Postcards of the wealthy neighborhoods, silhouettes of buildings, sunsets with bright colors, illuminated nights. The movies describe an urban silhouette consolidated with locations that depict everything from a made-up downtown (*La buena vida*, 2008) to the most prominent and sophisticated areas of the eastern sector (*Qué pena tu vida*, 2010). In this period, although the official city is visually present, Santiago is recognized through the continuous horizon with respect to the familiarity of the architectural silhouettes already filmed. However, this precious presentation has demonstrable intentions: the city is present but is only identifiable as a distant landscape. Santiago is shown through a discourse of estrangement where the representative elements of the city are replaced by of sectors with another urban scale and define the mountains as a reference in its cardinal focus: east, west, north, and south as they are revealed to the social classes they receive (FIG. 6).

The city is naturalized. Santiago is shown as figurative, and its expressive buildings (the majority glazed and mirrored) seem to create a second mountain range. As it happened in the first films released under democracy, the characters don't go to specific places, pause, or come together. They just wander through a common city assumed as an inherited context. In this style, Santiago is shown as a landscape devoid of meaning that is neither criticized nor exalted.

THE ABSENT CITY

The common seal of globalization, emerging in locations from previous films, has been accented in recent years. The settings smother the characters, reduce their dimensions so they lose their local characteristics to be projected as hybrid precincts that suggest urban alienation of individual introspection like that which occurs in *Metro cuadrado*. Martínez García states that "the space is no more than a projection of what occurs to the characters" (Martínez García, 2011:75), but even so the city as a background supplies implicit information of an anonymous environment, chaotic and somewhat threatening. According to Gardies "what is visible on screen is an assertive knowledge, while what is not visible, off screen, is of a hypothetical nature" (Gardies, 2014:115). In more recent movies, Santiago and its materiality are projected as a reflection of



FIG 5 Fotomontaje realizado a partir de fotogramas de las películas / *Photomontage based on frames from the following films: Caluga o menta (1990), Historias de fútbol (1997) y Taxi para tres (2001).* Elaborado por / *Produced by* Fernanda Martin.



FIG 6 Fotomontaje realizado a partir de fotogramas de las películas / *Photomontage based on frames from the following films: Play (2005) y Qué pena tu vida (2006).* Elaborado por / *Produced by* Fernanda Martin.

the conflicts of its characters and not as a reference to the city's emblematic buildings. The description of the urban spaces yields to the exhibition of the existential conflicts.

The screen gives proof of a new phenomenon that enables the perception of hazy or blurred scenes (*La vida de los peces*, 2010). Thus, the keys of Santiago in film seem to no longer be architectural or urban but of a dramatic nature. Consequently, the architecture of the city seems to be disappearing and is perceived only abstractly from the intimacy of the dialogues. This disappearance of the actual context in fiction ends up detaching the skyline or urban volumes from their condition of identity, and they lose the concrete references of their inhabitation.

When lacking plot information such as location or neighborhood details, recent Chilean films appeal to few real indications of Santiago in a new form of representation. As mentioned previously, the scenes are projected incompletely or suggestively, leaving out of the frame some elements the spectator should decipher and even complete, making appropriate to call this body of film as a kind of cinema "whose first subject would be ambiguity in which real space would be constantly put into doubt, in which the spectator could never orient themselves" (Burch, 2008:23). From this perspective, the absence of the identifiable on screen can be seen as a loss of the visual dimension of the architectural spaces to the cinematic eye. In this way, this deficiency accents the lack of significant experiences for their spectators.

Therefore, given the limited legibility of the city, one wonders if today the traditional and exhaustive selection of locations in the preproduction stage has been surpassed. Even considering that the technical possibilities determine that any site is a feasible stage, the frame is responsible for 'hiding' any recognizable sign of the city, leaving an open question about the chance that urban spaces would continue to be projected as key elements for the plot. That is, in the editing process Santiago is reduced to an inescapably common location.

The projected invisibility cannot be understood solely from the needs of the plot to construct a script, but they may arise as a revelation that mobilizes a direct critique over the presentation of the city for its own inhabitants and viewers. As occurred during a large part of film history, the city aims not to become a witness of its time but to project the insurmountable conditions of its inhabitants. This can be seen in the obstinate confinement of a woman and her later release on the street (*Gatos viejos*, 2010); in her senile wandering, Santiago is limited to the Santa Lucía hill, an urban topography that envelops the screen. To the public, the character's disorientation provokes the feeling that it is only possible to imagine the urban context because of the thunderous, all-encompassing noise. Thus, recent directors seem to avoid reconstructing Santiago so that the city does not condition the plot action nor that any local detail might harm the possible success of the global commercialization of their works (FIG.7).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The moving camera is still capable of acquiring more technical capabilities to continue offering unprecedented revelations and possibilities for the presentation of a city, be it real or cinematic; it is also a selective or critical eye



FIG 7 Fotomontaje realizado a partir de fotogramas de las películas / Photomontage based on frames from the following films: *La nana* (2009) y *Gatos viejos* (2010) y *Metro cuadrado* (2011). Elaborado por / Produced by Fernanda Martin.

of how urban daily life is built, enclosing the dreams of possible changes and accepting the circumstances of the inescapable reality.

This article reaffirms the idea that cinema continues to propose forms that think, call to think and, above all, rework multiple links. One of these is the common city posing at a crossroads between filmed spaces, real uses, and dramatic transcendence.

The Santiago that is projected as real does not always accommodate the one shown on-screen, and therefore any abstraction provokes the unmoving spectator. The cinematic inspiration of the creator –thought out, intentional, built, and projected– must be reinterpreted by the one receiving it, and it will be this return that will form the collective imaginary of the city. It is here that the observation of the presence of the city in the cinematic image generates questions that transcend the materiality of film and land close to those in charge of ‘making’ the everyday city (governments, architects, cultural and real estate agents) and its inhabitants: To what aim does cinema build a Santiago fashioned for the screen? What do the cinematic creators seek to trigger by strengthening a common image? This article demonstrated how in successive releases, Santiago was slowly disappearing from fiction and strengthening is off-screen presence. Or does an original way to project and reveal the contemporary city emerge in Chilean cinema? **ARQ**

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