The Brigada Ramona Parra and the art of muralising protest during the Pinochet Regime

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1. Abstract
In 1946, while demonstrating in support of a group of striking nitrate workers, a twenty-year-old female communist named Ramona Parra was shot to death by police in Santiago, Chile,[1] in what has come to be known as the Bulnes Square Massacre. A product of political marginalisation, the details of Parra's life are sketchy. But for fleeting mentions in art history books she is otherwise a mystery.[2] Her death, however, has had a far-reaching significance, for she became and remains a martyr symbol of the Chilean struggle against oppression. In particular, her name was proudly taken to identify the artistic movements of the muralist brigade of the Chilean Communist Party (CCP), the Brigada Ramona Parra (BRP) in 1968.[3]

On September 11, 1973, Chile, and with it the CCP, was thrown into turmoil. The country that homegrown poet Pablo Neruda once described as a 'long petal of sea, wine, and snow' was transformed from Latin America's foremost social democracy under Salvador Allende to the region's darkest dictatorship under the military regime of Augusto Pinochet.[4] The latter ushered in a period of widespread torture and the murder of an estimated 3000 Chileans. Furthermore, the regime carried out an assault on culture that saw the erasure of swathes of leftist literature, film, music, and art, which included the whitewashing of BRP murals that had for five years colourfully decorated and secured Santiago's streets for Salvador Allende. As Geoffrey Hutton stated in the immediate aftermath of the coup, 'Now, a bullet through the head is more effective than a vote in the ballot-box'.[5]

In the process of writing a brief history of the BRP collective, this article contextualises the violence imposed on Chile by Pinochet's Military Regime; and in doing so documents how members of the left perpetuated modes of artistic expression and protest at home and in exile throughout dictatorial rule. By attributing meaning to the murals of the BRP, the aim is also to contribute, if only moderately, to the reconstruction of a fragmented, distorted, and, in part, whitewashed (i.e., destroyed) past. Interwoven is an acknowledgment of the role the BRP played in the 1988 'No' campaign; in this respect, the efforts of the BRP, which are largely without recognition, to paint and ultimately reclaim Santiago's streets served as an essential subsidy to the widely lauded and successful savoir-faire TV campaign orchestrated by Eugenio García.

1 - Muralising Protest during Dictatorial Rule in Chile

On September 11, 1973, the Chilean military led by General Augusto Pinochet overthrew the democratically elected Unidad Popular government of Salvador Allende, bringing forty years of democracy to an end in Chile.[6] As troops blasted buildings and helicopters sprayed bullets into the top floors of the British Embassy, the Presidential Palace was ablaze following a direct-hit from an aerial strike. The country was in the final throws of 'self-managed socialism' and Salvador Allende in the midst of the epilogue of his reign.[7] The Marxist experiment, or as some have labelled it, the initiation and implementation of radical and social reforms, crashed to a violent and bloody end.[8] In a single day, a lifetime of work and dreams was torn asunder in a campaign of random violence and terror.

Of the many images captured on that day, few remain. But one that has survived is of Allende, dressed formally, sporting a military helmet as he exits the presidential

palace, flanked by armed guards and cabinet aids. He is seen looking up to the sky, seemingly unperturbed, as Pinochet's jets circle overhead.[9] A few hours later, after returning to his office, he would once again exit the Presidential palace, but this time as a dead man. Battle-hardened, resilient and defiant until the last, Allende was an obstinate man with a bone-deep belief in his socialist policies. This is principally why he refused to flee the country when the option was presented to him as armed forces moved in.[10]

Figure 1: Santiago, Chile. A helmeted Salvador Allende accompanied by his inner circle, emerges from the La Moneda presidential palace in Santiago during the military coup of 11 September 1973[11]

Today, Allende holds a unique place in history. Born into a diverse family of freethinkers, medical practitioners and freemasons, Allende was a product of the young people's revolt of the late sixties that was built on the dropping out of the bourgeois establishment.[12] He would die as the world's first Marxist leader of any nation to freely attain power via the ballot box.[13] He was also more significantly one of the first victims of Augusto Pinochet's tyrannical regime - a regime that marshalled in an emphatic shift of power that ultimately gave rise to a seventeen-year period of torture, murder, and heavy political and historical censorship that in differing ways impacted the entire Chilean population.

Within hours of the coup's beginning, newspapers across the globe – in particular El Mercurio, the New York Times, and the English Guardian - began running stories pertaining to the imprisonment and murder of leading leftists and government officials.[14] At the same time hordes of soldiers assaulted Santiago's impoverished poblaciones (urban slums), forcing tens of thousands of Chileans from their homes.[15] Elsewhere, visible symbols of Allende were removed and destroyed; squads of workmen and right-wing students from the Catholic university scraped the city's walls of pro-Allende posters and painted over leftist murals that decorated many buildings. They even went as far as to pull down a statue of Ernesto Che Guevara.[16]

The process of excising 'the Marxist cancer' from Chile's body politic, as the regime would come to refer to it, was in full flow long before the flames billowing from the presidential palace had been extinguished.[17] Acts of rape, kidnapping, torture and murder, in most instances carried out by military personnel, began on the morning of September 11 and remained prominent for many years.[18] Hundreds of travellers, foreigners, and aid workers visiting or residing in Chile at the time of the coup were not exempt from proceedings. And on occasion, factions of the right-wing Chilean media urged the public to denounce leftists and 'foreign subversives' of any creed and nationality.[19]

Insofar as interest in the coup and its aftermath is great, the bulk of historical studies on the period have tended to focus primarily on Chile's central government and the country's economic struggles.[20] Interest in Chile's working classes and impoverished provinces is often a mere footnote in the grander scheme of proceedings. Principally, this is because there are several difficulties in constructing histories of the everyman's struggle. For many years the coup remained largely undocumented. Only over the last twenty years have investigations with a view to bringing perpetrators to justice been carried out with any real purpose.[21] And even this process has proved to be and continues to be problematic as a result of the stringent historical censorship, fragmentation, and erasure implemented by the Pinochet government.

In addition, a lack of congruity between media reports, political commentaries, and declassified CIA documents have provided a wealth of competing narratives that have buried any semblance of a dominant voice: human rights atrocities are denied, death toll figures are inconclusive, and reports of torture appear in one document only to be denied in another. And when these factors are considered in conjunction with witness testimonies, some of which fall

victim to 'false memory syndrome' - i.e. what is denied or repressed in a lapse of memory does not disappear, it returns in a transformed, often disfigured and disguised manner' - the problem becomes one of how to connect to a period in Chilean history when the links to it – source material – consistently hinder rather than help.[22]

Today, documentary films, memorials, peace parks, and visual art serve as representations of past political suppression. But these areas of interest also contain important clues about the afterlife and memory of violence. These are the media of memory where the persistence of the past makes itself felt in the present.[23] In view of the problems of reconstructing the history of ordinary Chileans during the reign of Augusto Pinochet, cultural production must be seen as productive artefacts and sites of social meaning where members of Chilean society deal with, contest, struggle over, represent, and continue their journey through rupture. The notion of collective memory as a shared enterprise that is performed in cultural production is integral to the process of reconstructing the past.

In the introduction to the 2004 political documentary 'Salvador Allende', director Patricio Guzman opens with a whitewashed stone wall. As the camera pans back, a caption informs the viewer that the wall in focus is situated a short distance from Santiago airport. As Guzman, rock in hand, begins to chip away at the age-worn paint, he slowly reveals small bursts of colour, primary clashes outlined in black. He soon declares that the image concealed is a mural work by the Chilean street art collective the Brigada Ramona Parra, painted 34 years earlier during the Allende reign. In one respect, this wall, with its plain facade and hidden myriads of paint, is a physical representation of two opposing ideologies: the Unidad Popular and the Pinochet regime. But in another respect, its broader references point to Chile's tumultuous era of murder, destruction, and suppression. As Guzman states, 'The appearance of the memory is neither comfortable nor voluntary, it's always staggering'.[24]

This article contextualises and analyses the actions and impact that the Chilean muralist group, the Brigada Ramona Para had from 1970 to 1988. The BRP were the everyman: workers, students, and school children; residents of Chile's shantytowns first and muralists second. The intention is, thus, through the telling of their history and interpretations of their compositional works, to offer perspective on the universal struggles of ordinary, working class Chilean leftists both at home and abroad—taking into consideration the actions of those forced into exile. While the BRP features prominently in art history textbooks, such works are principally limited to the exploration of their work: its styles, use of colours, framing, dimensions and so on. insight on a detailed retrospective level that encompasses their efforts to counteract dictatorship are limited and in need of exploration.

2 - The Return of the Brigada Ramona Parra

Latin America as a region has been defined as unique in literature and other forms of representation.[25] Chile's geographical position at the southwest edge of the world, separated for most of its length by the Andes from neighbouring countries, leads to cultural eccentricity: remoteness often breeds uniqueness, even originality as English author, editor and culture critic, Justin Wintle states.[26] For Chile, eccentricity primarily comes out in the form of chilenismos: intentionally silly-slang terms and double entendres unique to the country.[27] Less amusingly though there is much black humour. Marginal and marked by extremism, Chile is a country with distinct approaches to culture and politics, though in many cases the two are interwoven; the appliquéd and stitched political narratives by the famous Chilean arpilleras, women from families of prisoners or the disappeared during the Pinochet regime, are a notable case in point (Figure 2).[28]

Figure 2: Mural from unknown Chilean Arpilleras[29]

For over a century, poetry and literature has been a focal point of Chile's cultural identity. Creative writing was the first medium in which Chileans made a world-leading contribution. Vicente Huidobro's creationist experiments of the 1930s brought a cosmic dimension to Chilean culture: he articulated a philosophy of poetry that rejected the criollista focus on nature and the natural.[30] And from the 1950s onwards, Huidobro's transcendental visions and Pablo Neruda's erotic poeticism, both of which, conversely, derivative of Chile's landscape, were considered great national works of enduring artistic uniqueness; Huidobro's in the sheer scale of the Andean cordillera and seemingly infinite Pacific horizon, Neruda's in the almost indecent fecundity of Chilean vegetation, notably its flora.

In dictatorships, art, both textual and visual, aspires to achieve the construction of alternative worlds and in doing so deconstruct officially constructed worlds; in this instance, the imposed brutality of dictatorial rule. The survival of history in fiction, art, imagination – the protest song, the political painting, the humanitarian film and so on – takes on the form of a cultural voice (related to the social movements and the cultural forms that help to shape them) of resistance to the central power.[31] The Brigada Ramona Parra, much like Huidobro and Neruda, have a far-reaching cultural expression that transcends history, politics, and sociolinguistics. As a movement, its place in Chile's past turmoil and its present successes can be seen via a historiographical genealogy of intense politicisation delivered in cultural mediums: graffiti, murals, and mosaics.

The makeup of the BRP was as unconventional as it was, at times, radical. But for a handful of members, including Roberto Matta, they were a collective of untrained artists. Factory workers, slum residents, university students and even high-school children contributed,[32] making use of sub-standard materials (Figure 3). In most instances, these materials – second-hand overalls, used brushes and palettes - were stolen from local factories where members worked. Furthermore, household paints, being cheaper than permanent materials, were consistently used, often meaning some murals deteriorated rapidly.[33] While the BRP shared wall space with other muralist groups – the Brigada Elmo Catalan of the Juventudes Communistas, and the Democracia Cristiana – owing to its committed, militaristic approach the BRP were the most established, organised, innovative, and effective muralist group in Chile.[34]

(Figure 3) Arguably, the strength of the BRP over similar groups lay in their military-like mentality.[35]

In 1970, at the height of their prominence, the BRP consisted of one hundred and twenty groups, made up of an estimated three thousand members. Each group was uniformly structured. Consisting of Trazadores (designers), Fileteadores (outliners), Pondeadores (backgrounders), Rellenadores (fillers), and Guardias (the lookouts), as a unit they worked quickly and efficiently.[36] So much so that in one evening prior to the 1970 general election, the slogan 'with Allende we will win ¡Popular Unity!' was painted on the walls of Chile fifteen thousand times.[37] As 'Mono' Gonzalez, a longstanding member of the group, stated, what the BRP did was 'conquer the streets for Allende'.[38]

Ultimately, their eccentricity as a group, the use of unconventional materials, and regimented, militant-like organisation gave the Brigada Ramona Parra a distinct personality, both in terms of collective makeup and the work they produced (Figure 4). They were an affordable and alternate means of communication to the standard channels of radio, television, and the press for the purpose of political diffusion. Armed with brushes and spray cans, their distinctive slogans were urban headlines. They were a social response from the left to the political dominance of the right. Their slogan 'Contra La Dictadura Pintaremos Hasta El Cielo!' (We'll paint against dictatorship until we reach heaven) was a literal rallying cry of organised resistance.[39]

Figure 4: Members of the Brigada Ramona Parra securing the streets for Salvador Allende in 1970 [40]

Their work posits a bold use of revolutionary language in paint to support or denounce political ideologies, notably those of the Pinochet regime. To this aim, they have claimed, appropriated, and re-appropriated public sites for the use of democratic dialogue and political debate, often against a backdrop of threats, censorship, and persecution. Under Pinochet their allegiance to Salvador Allende and socialism in general rendered them 'the other' both politically and socially. But the BRP have always existed on the periphery of societal norms; they are a public in their own right. As Carlos Motta notes, 'The secret is that there is more than one public in Chile: the public forced to exhibit its private life in the street and the public that calls the police to clear the streets'.[41]

In this sense, the history of the BRP can be viewed as two distinctly unique chapters. Under Allende's Popular Unity government from 1970 to 1973, they were encouraged to express in visible symbols of vibrant colour the coming of a new era in Chile. As Allende stated in his first post-election address to the Chilean Parliament, one of the tasks of his new government:

is to engage the will of the Chilean people to dedicate our hands, our minds and our feelings to the reassertion of our identity as a people, in order to become an integral part of contemporary civilisation as masters of our fate and heirs to the patrimony of technical skills, knowledge, art and culture.[42]

Recognising its importance to his overall cause, An early Allende's policy was the legalising of graffiti and street art. Within weeks of his ascension, the dull, often dilapidated walls of Santiago and other cities across Chile became awash with primary colours and positive slogans. (Figure 5). But this 'golden era' as Allende referred to it was short lived.[43]

Figure 5: An example of the style and size of work produced by the Brigada Ramona Parra in 1973[44]

The rapidity with which Pinochet moved to implement new strategies, one of which was the eradication of all references to the Popular Unidad party and its socialist blueprint was unprecedented.[45] Within twenty-four hours of the coup, little in terms of visible representations of Allende and his fallen party remained. Pinochet mobilised the military, Chile's police, squads of workmen and right-wing students from Santiago's Catholic University to pull down statues, flags, and significantly 'cleanse the walls of Chile' (Figure 6).[46] Posters that exhorted soldiers 'to disobey their officers and revolt to fight side by side with the people',[47] and artwork that praised Allende, much of which had been painted by the BRP, were targeted first.[48] The aim was ultimately to manifest the change in ideological tone of the streets from Marxist to militarist.

Figure 6: Civilians cleansing the streets of Santiago during the afternoon of September 11, 1973 [49]

The regime of censorship comprised several prohibitive measures affecting cultural production that definitively suppressed the links between ideas and people linked to the Unidad Popular ideological system. Censorship was rolled out across the arts. In addition to the widespread burning of literature deemed pro-Allende, the mention of violence, sex, and poverty in the fine arts was prohibited, and there was an absolute intolerance of political criticism in music, literature, and the press. In its most savage form, Pinochet's policy toward culture took on the form of assassinating, jailing, and deporting thousands of people. Innocent civilians were murdered en masse by the military and in extreme cases, untrained civilians (Figure 7).[50]

(Figure 7) Erasing the past: Soldiers burn books on the streets of Santiago, Chile. Date believed to be Sept. 12, 1973. Koen Wessing[51]

To highlight the brutal nature of the regime's desire to excise the left from Chile, in addition to desecrating, burning, and bombing the country's streets, exhibition halls, and theatres, some of its most iconic figures were targeted.[52] Singer, Victor Jara, poet, Pablo Neruda, and leading Marxist thinker, Antonioletti, to name but a few, were murdered and publicly displayed either in physical form or in news media. Chile was paralysed; the set of norms and logic that were applied to everyday life were gone. A generation of artists who carried the rich accumulation of Chilean artistic development and its collective memory were cut off from their role as creative thinkers, teachers, political activists and performers.

The regime's repressive approach to culture can be seen as one of the reasons why art historians cite the disappearance of muralist brigades across Chile for the best part of a decade following the coup.[53] In 2009, the Harvard Library purchased the slides of photographer Andrés Romero Spethman. Spethman, who from 1971 to 1990 worked alongside artists and muralist brigades representing political parties such as the Partido Socialista and the Izquierda Cristiana photographed over five hundred different murals in Chile.[54] Of particular significance, the collection doesn't contain a single image for a seven-year period beginning September 1973, suggesting that the regime in those early years were largely successful in nullifying artistic and expressive forms of opposition.[55]

However, based on interviews with 'Mono' Gonzalez and Roberto Matta, two prominent figures in the BRP, it is clear that group have existed in several collectives in Chile without interruption since their inception.[56] As Gonzalez stated, he chose to remain in his native land and risk his life by opposing Pinochet along with many others; in this respect, unable to display their opposition to Pinochet regularly, underground groups intermittently emerged to continue the BRP's fight until the time when they could reclaim the streets outright.[57] Whether by stealth at home or by diversification in exile, the BRP's struggle is one that speaks to how dissident art can be produced under dictatorship and how protests outside of it can assist in the manipulation of the cultural, social and intellectual life of a region.

The main point of origin for the BRP was Santiago's, poblaciones: urban slums. Allende and Pinochet viewed the poblaciones quite differently and therefore employed

two radically divergent approaches when dealing with them. For Allende they were the strongest opportunity for re-election and the preservation of his socialist dream. The shantytown movement was in one respect a unique take on community; it was built on sporadic self-help assembly projects, and on occasion more contentious forms of activity such as land seizures and occupations—there was little in the way of legitimacy. Nonetheless, it was no accident that the first point of Allende's forty-item electoral platform was a promise that the state would provide a free half-litre of milk to every Chilean child on a daily basis—they were after all, the future.[58] In Chile of 1971 that was a revolutionary proposal.

In contrast, to Pinochet the poblaciones posed the greatest threat to his grip on power. If civil unrest was going to take hold in Chile during his reign, the resolve and will of shantytown dwellers – including members of the Brigada Ramona Parra, the Civic Assembly, the Copper Workers' Confederation, and the Democratic Movement - would be pivotal. Pinochet acknowledged that it was these groups and others like them that had achieved power for the popular Unidad Party in 1970.[59] On the morning of the coup, Pinochet's military forces swept into these areas and evacuated residents (Figure 8). After a poblacione had been cleared, tanks were sent in to flatten makeshift homes. Anders Wood's 2004 film, Machuca depicts the events as a procession of fear, resistance, murder – children and women were not spared – and savage destruction.[60]

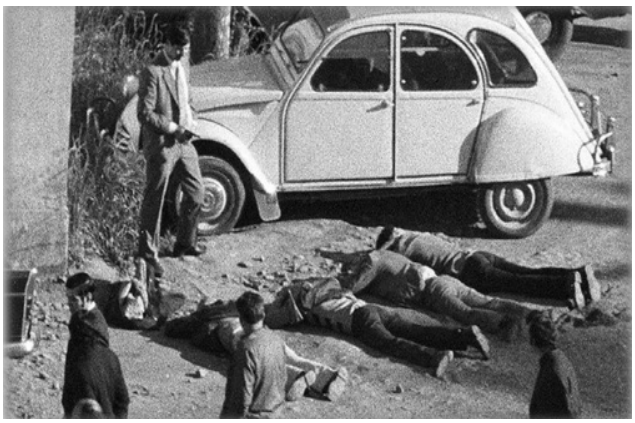

Figure 8 - Residents of Chile's Poblaciones are held by a civilian operating on behalf of the Military junta[61]

This left residents from the poblaciones with limited options. Understandably, some – including Ariel Dorfman, Jose Balmes, Nemesio Antunez, Roser Bru, Guillermo Nunez - chose to flee Chile and live in exile, while others, some through a lack of financial means, remained and lived life in hiding. Others disavowed with the death of Allende and unwilling to live under the Pinochet regime joined civilian resistance groups and battled the military down on the streets. As individuals, such people are difficult to trace: their actions, imprisonment and deaths were rarely catalogued by the Junta. Moreover, newspaper reports detailing events across Chile, as a result of Pinochet's newly imposed censorship laws, meant much of what was written was veiled or lacking credence.

Moreover, in the wake of the coup and stringent censorship laws, members of the left were deemed largely inconsequential by authorities and Chile's press. As such, they were simply lumped into catchall groups developed by news media such as 'Chile's poor',[62] 'Chile's radicals',[63] and 'Chile's Marxists'.[64] Members of the BRP that evaded capture, through whatever means necessary, maintained an appropriated form of community on the margins that was built on the foundational fanaticism propagated by the group from 1968 to 1973. This, along with the burning sense of injustice felt following the fall of Allende, was the impetus for continued action. The BRP were, after all, a collective formed out of resistance and a desire to contradict the stranglehold of the right. Struggles, whether intellectual or violent, were their lifeblood.

The coup, in its stringency, had systematically dismantled and suppressed the verbal and textual languages and models of signification by which experiences could be shared during a time which was a 'real crisis of intelligibility'.[65] To combat this, the BRP appropriated conceptual art into code—an interpretive language, fashioned in peñas: underground networks. The peña tradition started in Latin America in the early sixties (under Alessandri and in opposition to Montalva). The main idea, developed especially by Chilean composer and singer Violeta Parra, was to have a gathering place where artists of all disciplines could share a cultural space in response to an institutional culture that did not provide the means for other creative forms to exist.[66] Peñas during the Pinochet dictatorship, as Robert Mata asserts, provided the means to preserve cultural forms and create new ones. (Figue 9)[67]

Figure 9: Together as One: the Brigada Ramona Parra were a population in their own right [68]

Struggles at home were dependably complimented by the actions of those in exile. In the immediate aftermath of the coup, mass exile was viewed by Pinochet as integral to his aim of achieving and maintaining absolute, uncontested control. So much so that many exiles left Chile through normal channels on scheduled flights, with papers in order. The regime thus viewed exile as voluntary. But those who left were not allowed to return without the written permission of the interior ministry. Many were denounced as traitors and subversives, or foreign agents. They were referred to as 'Marxist turncoats' responsible for the campaign of calumny. The narrative propagated was that exiles were not against the regime but rather Chile. As such, exiles carried the bitterness of being forced from their homes, feelings of guilt for leaving behind jailed, dead, or disappeared comrades, as well as memories of torture. Denied the right to a voice in their native land, exiles made a point of undermining Pinochet's political aspirations from abroad. Upon arriving at their exile destinations, militants of the primary Unidad Popular parties, the Socialists and Communists, along with the MIR and smaller parties established local units wherever a handful of members could be found. In a matter of months, the Chilean left had been replicated in dozens of countries around the world, with the overarching aim being to deny Pinochet's regime the legitimacy it sought throughout the western world.[69]

Alongside reformed political groups, Muralist brigades were also established. Notably, the Orlando Letelier Brigade (U.S);[70] the Victor Jara Brigade (France);[71] and the Salvador Allende Brigade (Mexico).[72] As Shafira M. Goldman noted, in exile 'Chilean culture continued to be Chilean culture, between a new culture of external exile and that of internal exile'.[73] Freed of the constraints that hampered their fellow members at home, exiled surrealists, muralists, and other artists produced a body of work that made Chile its centre of protest and anguish. The work as a whole is eclectic but there are certain shared characteristics that appear prevalent, in particular a common vision of denunciation and warning.

A notable example is the work of abstract painter, Guillermo Nunez, who went into exile in France in 1975 until his return in 1987. He was arrested by the military in 1974 and held hostage for five months, his eyes blindfolded; as an artist, Nunez's torture was ultimately the denial of visual absorption—the denial of visual communication. Upon his arrival in France, he became influenced by the surrealist, often abstractly powerful themes of BRP member, Roberto Matta (also living as an exile in Paris), and he began to document his ordeal in paintings, collages, sculptures and more.[74] Macarena Gomez-Barris stated that his art 'speaks to a past that recalls the defeat of socialism in a present when neoliberalism seems unchallenged'.[75]

Nunez's bold, avant-garde and nonfigurative works are commanding because their violent nuances deftly present brutalisation in abstractness. Themes such as blood, bound bodies, teeth, entwined limbs, beastly creatures with howling mouths, and flies crawling over purification attack the viewer on a visceral level (Figure 10). His works, in theory, are not meant to be enjoyed. They are meant to assault us at the level of the nightmare with a view to capturing a sense of the horror that befell him and his fellow Chileans. Moreover, his creations exist as an accusation and denunciation of the world at large to the Chilean condition during the worst years of Pinochet's dictatorship.

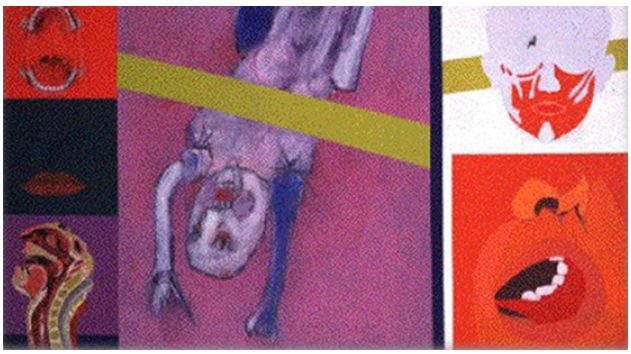

Figure 10: The concealment of the eyes in the image top right speak of Nunez's personal torture but also that of not wanting to bear witness [76]

While there was no contending source of power in Chile capable of forcing the hand of the military regime during the nineteen-seventies, there was by the mid-eighties signs that change was afoot. Having decimated the poblaciones, the lack of adequate solutions to housing continued to generate opposition; the intermittent protests of the previous decade gave way to more forthright and structured efforts. Seeking to appease the Chilean people, Pinochet had in 1980 allowed for a watered-down democratic process to take place on the basis of a national plebiscite: a straight 'yes' or 'no' vote on the continuation of his rule. There was, however, no opposition candidate; and Pinochet did not afford his critics the opportunity to express their views through the media, nor did he permit rallies. He ultimately stifled the abilities of the opposition to reach voters and had no difficulty in prevailing.

Another plebiscite, however, was granted and took place on October 5, 1988. Seemingly buoyed by rumblings of eight years of further discontentment many Chileans, including Nunez and Matta, returned home in the preceding year to join the growing opposition. In one respect, this was a daring move because the number of reported kidnappings, instances of torture and politically related killings under Pinochet had reached its highest level in 1987. In one particularly ugly case a doctor had been dragged from his car by armed men who tied him to a tree, carved a swastika on his forehead and simulated an execution before ordering him to leave Chile. A symbolic act, the message of the regime was clear, and yet there was the vaguest sense of hope building among Chileans, young and old.

This was principally because Pinochet's overconfidence provided a glimmer of opportunity. Proving he could be fair, to a certain extent, when he wanted to be, Pinochet had promised the 1988 'No' campaign (which comprised a ragtag group of 16 left and right-wing parties) fifteen minutes of free television airtime every day during the build-up to the vote to present a case. Scheduled to go out late at night, he didn't think the programmes would make much impression on the voters. And, besides, the government controlled every other programme on television and had the rest of the day – as well as its own official fifteen-minute slot every night – to pump out its propaganda.

The 'No' campaign was spearheaded by 36-year-old Creative, Nunez Garcia, who had made award-winning commercials for Sony and various Chilean confectionery brands. His approach was one of positivity: the campaign was underpinned by the ideas of what could be rather than what had been. Prospective 'happiness', featuring children, i.e., Chile's future, smiling and dancing in the street was given prominence. While this tactic struck some Chileans, those with designs on justice and retribution, as hopelessly lightweight and deeply disrespectful towards Pinochet's victims, it ultimately worked. Garcia's use of vibrant colour and positive sloganeering harked back to the muralist campaign of the 1970 election that had swayed the popular vote in Allende's favour. As Garcia notes, "La alegría!" Joy! That was the slogan: "Chile, la alegría ya viene" Chile, joy is coming (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Citizens of Santiago embracing the 'No' campaign orchestrated by Eugenio Garcia in 1988 [77]

In conjunction, but to some degree removed from TV approach, the stance of the BRP on the street was to document the spirit, force, and iconography of political protest and the desire of Chile's people to come to terms with and overcome traumas by freeing themselves through campaign and the ballot box. Mono Gonzalez remarked in 1973 that 'the walls of Chile were of the people'. In 1987, this became true once again. The BRP, in seeking to appease hard-line Chileans, ensured that the 'No' campaign was underpinned and ultimately legitimised as more than a quest for freedom; they advocated the need for recognition of a tumultuous past that had all but been erased by the regime. While many of the murals painted were removed as expected soon after their creation, the consistency with which they appeared ensured that voices that had been silenced for fifteen years were now being heard.

Common pictorial themes that appeared in BRP murals supporting the 'NO' campaign were those of personal suffering, imprisonment, the Moneda Palace in flames, images of president Salvador Allende, and murdered icons, Víctor Jara and Pablo Neruda, and Jesus Christ (Figure 12).[78] Themes that brought to mind the Chilean struggle drew parallels between historical injustices, oppression and suffering with the treatment and anguish experienced by Christ. In this respect, the BRP figuratively reframed images of Victor Jara, Pablo Neruda, and many working-class Chileans, and transformed them into profound martyrs in the religious sense.

Figure 12: Emerging from the rupture: in honour of the Chilean working classes and the oppressed [79]

After fifteen years of sanitised streets and one firm political narrative, the sudden return of imagery and slogans that posited the idea of an alternative Chile was uplifting. The appropriation of public space into a canvas for politicisation was viewed as something novel, something fresh, and for the younger generation altogether new. The colour, iconography, and powerful messages of the works displayed compelled the viewer to engage with the ideas presented. Murals acted as visual, tangible, and temporal reference points for what was and what could be; and where once the swift removal of leftist iconography and visuals had symbolised defeat, in 1988 their removal, which only served to emphasise the themes of oppression in some of the works, galvanised the people.[80]

Street art, when allowed to stand, takes on a conventionalism and in time begins to blend into the broader makeup of the landscape upon which it's imparted. This ultimately has the effect of limiting its appeal in terms of lasting impact. The more it is viewed, the softer its underlying/overt message becomes; familiarity in this respect dilutes. Thus, when the regime whitewashed images of Victor Jara in 1988, however, they subjected the Chilean people to a double oppression. By killing him in 1973 they had silenced his voice, which spoke to and for many Chileans, including those from the Poblaciones, on terms that they identified with; and by erasing murals in homage to him circa 1987 and 1988, that brought to mind striking notions of imprisonment, torture, and murder, during the 'No' campaign the regime denied those inclined the right to memorialise him. (Figure 13)

Figure 13: Shackling is offset by the vibrancy of blue sky, the imminent flight of a bird, and the word 'renacimiento' – renaissance; or simply put, the rebirth of Chile [81]

On September 5, 1988 at 10:45 pm, the first broadcast from Garcia's campaign was aired. It began, in true artistic fashion, with the image of a painted rainbow and the word 'No' set to a soundtrack of upbeat, lively music that mirrored the intentional vibrancy of the opening.[82] This gave way to Patricio Bañados, who had been one of the country's favourite news readers until he was blacklisted by the regime. 'Chile, joy is on its way', he said. The theme song then struck up again and the screen was filled with interspersed images of Chileans showing their support for a 'no' vote: a taxi driver waving his finger back and forth in time with his windscreen wipers, a chef turning around to show a 'no' emblem on his back, and more.

Garcia's first broadcast, watched by millions of Chileans, was electrifying. And it completely caught the regime off-guard. Television may not have played a big part in elections past in Chile, but a lot had changed in the intervening 18 years since the 1970 election. Moreover,

the 'Yes' campaign was, somewhat befittingly, hopelessly old-fashioned, out-of-touch, and subdued. Where the 'No' campaign projected positivity and energy, the 'Yes' campaign espoused the heavy-handed nature of its rule by taking a steamroller (metaphorically used to symbolise the left) and driving it over a television, then a set of table lamps, and then a baby's pushchair to represent the supposed threat to people's lives posed by a return to the idealism of old.

Fearing the worst, Pinochet resorted to tactics of intimidation and threats, harassing those known to be behind the 'No' campaign and those pushing for its success. There were inauspicious phone calls, the homes of individuals of interest were observed, and many people were followed. But this was no longer simply a Chilean story, it was a global one; those in exile, who had kept issues at home relevant abroad, had ensured that Pinochet's actions were an international subject. While in Chile, the decision of so many people to stand up publicly and oppose the regime, from the actors who appeared in the commercials, to the screenwriters, and on to the artists who fought tirelessly to reclaim the streets, inspired the nation. Their defiance, often underpinned by fear and adrenalin, was the counter-offensive that stirred change.

On the day of the referendum, millions of Chileans made their way to polling stations. A democratic election, a rarity in Chile, was treated as a special occasion. Men and women, dressed in their Sunday 'best', queued patiently, in some cases for several hours, to vote. By the close of polling, a total of 7.2 million ballots had been cast – the highest number in the country's history. Of those 7.2. million, 3.96 (54.7 percent) tipped the balance in favour of the 'No' campaign. It was a resounding victory for the opposition. The next day, colour in the form of flags, rainbow t-shirts, and confetti lit up La Alameda, Santiago's main street. People were dancing, embracing, shaking hands and hugging. It was a carnival. Grudgingly, but peacefully, Pinochet handed over power in 1990 to a democratic civilian government. To the eternal disappointment of the relatives of his victims, however, he never faced charges for his crimes; he died in 2006.

At home and in exile the transition from Allende to Pinochet can be seen as one of extremes for leftist Chileans, especially the art and culture communities. In 1970, the purposeful efforts of the BRP to project Allende's socialist message to a national audience, a message largely ignored by the mainstream media,[83] gave the group a level of fame akin to that of modern western figures such as Banksy and Shepherd Fairy. The walls of major cities became the canvas of revolutionary language and symbolism. However, under Pinochet those same walls took on a new significance: they became Chile's killing fields.[84] Quickly whitewashed, Allende supporters were lined up against them and shot, and the painting brigades of the previous government and the march toward Allende's peaceful revolution was seemingly forgotten. But the BRP survived; for many years as a barely visible subterranean stream until it could, 'Push inch by inch beyond the limits of authority'.[85]

Assisting, political activists in the 'external front' contributed sizeably to the resistance movement. The success of Chileans abroad in keeping the crimes and restrictive policies of Pinochet's regime in the news and a consistent feature in the public consciousness is testimony to the dedication, perseverance, and skill of the Chilean left. As Melvin Ember notes, 'of all the South and Central American exiles of the 1970s and 1980s, Chileans stand out for their political organisation, commitment, and activism'.[86] As Salvador Allende remarked in his final speech:

'I say to you that I am sure that the seed that we now plant in the dignified conscience of thousands and thousands of Chileans cannot be definitively buried. They have the power, they can smash us, but social processes are not detained, not through crimes nor power.'[87]

3 - Conclusion

The Brigada Ramona Parra, faithful to their belief in the building of a great 'utopia', a term often used by Allende in the election campaign of 1970, has featured prominently – witnessing and participating – in arguably the most optimistic and the darkest periods in Chile's history. Their unique work expressed and continues to express the views of a generation of Chileans, visually representing the historical depth and repressive nature of class society. The post-millennial mural tunnel Saqueando nuestra historia, for example, presents, in swathes of primary colour, a chronological narrative of the pilfering of Chilean history from the perspective of dominated groups: starving Indians, landless peasants, and exploited workers (figure 11).

The double doorway that features at the end of Saqueando nuestra historia, in a literal sense provides an escape;

Figure 14: Saqueando nuestra historia [88]

but figuratively they also facilitate the emergence from darkness, from repression and the coming of a new era—feelings present for many Chileans when Allende took office in 1973 and Pinochet relinquished power in 1990. Furthermore, significantly, two portholes one on either door, cast light upon the walls and light the way. In a metaphoric context, they also give the effect of eyes focused on the country's turbulent past. Whether intentional or not, this is powerful in its metaphoric value for it implies that Chile and perhaps even the world are still waiting for an adequate response to a history in desperate need of reconstruction.

Ultimately, with their paint pots, brushes and collective spirit the BRP have fashioned a powerful and effective medium for communicating with the world. And while much of their work was destroyed by the Pinochet government, the small number of murals that exist in photographs enable us to piece together a fragmented and thus partial past. But it is a past that is visible enough to allow envisioning of their struggles and those of other Chileans who likewise suffered under and because of Pinochet's rule. Today, the BRP's struggle is mainly that of speaking out against the consequences of neo-liberal globalisation and of a false democracy. But their greatest fight of all, the call for justice and the acknowledgment of suppressed memories is ongoing.

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