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THE (IM)POSSIBLE REPRESENTATION OF NATIONAL HISTORY: NATIONAL IDENTITY, MEMORY AND TRAUMA IN *MEMORIA VISUAL DE UNA NACIÓN* BY MARIO TORAL[1]

ABSTRACT

This article presents an analysis of the mural titled Memoria Visual de una Nación (Visual Memory of a Nation) with a focus on its panel Los Conflictos (The Conflicts) , by renowned Chilean artist Mario Toral. The representation of divisive events in MVN raises the following questions: Why did Toral include conflictive issues in a mural representing national identity and memory? And, how did Toral deal with national identity and its demand for unity when faced with a divisive and traumatic history? The article deals first with the interconnectedness of meaning-making and social and political context and then addresses the tension between the realm of the political -or antagonism- and the realm of hegemonic politics -or order- in search of a deeper understanding of this work of art and its representation of Chilean history and identity.

KEYWORDS: collective memory, visual analysis, identity, divided society/trauma, politics/ the political

(Ne)mogoča reprezentacija nacionalne zgodovine: nacionalna identiteta, spomin in travma v *Memoria visual de una nación* Maria Torala

IZVLEČEK

Članek predstavlja analizo murala z naslovom Memoria visual de una nación (vizualni spomin naroda – VSN) s poudarkom na panelu Los conflictos (konflikti), ki je delo priznanega čilenskega umetnika Maria Torala. Reprezentacija razdvajajočih dogodkov vizualnega spomina naroda poraja naslednja vprašanja: zakaj je Toral vključeval konfliktne teme v mural, ki reprezentira nacionalno identiteto in spomin, ter kako se je Toral ukvarjal z nacionalno identiteto in njeno zahtevo po enotnosti ob soočanju z razdvojeno in travmatično zgodovino? S ciljem globljega razumevanja Toralovega umetniškega dela

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in njegove reprezentacije čilenske zgodovine in identitete se prispevek v prvi vrsti ukvarja s povezanostjo tvorjenja pomena ter družbenim in političnim kontekstom, nato pa naslavlja trenja med poljem političnega – oziroma antagonizma – in poljem hegemonske politike.
KLJUČNE BESEDE: kolektivni spomin, analiza vizualnega, identiteta, deljena družba/ travma, politika/politično

1 Introduction: Mario Toral the painter and *Memoria Visual De Una Nación*

This article presents an analysis of the mural titled *Memoria Visual de una Nación* (Visual Memory of a Nation, henceforth *MVN*) with a focus on its panel *Los Conflictos* (The Conflicts), by the renowned Chilean artist Mario Toral. The article deals with national history, identity, and the memory of divisive events as represented in *MVN*, in particular in the panel *Los Conflictos*.

Mario Toral (1934-) is a talented painter, visual artist and writer. He studied in Santiago (Chile), Montevideo (Uruguay) and Paris (France), and from a young age traveled throughout Latin America, Europe, and the United States. He has successfully taken part in several art biennials and has won various international awards. His works have been exhibited around the world and have been bought by some of the most important museums and collectors. During the Pinochet government, he lived in New York and Spain, and only returned to Chile in 1992, where he became involved in forming new generations of artists at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile and Finnis Terrae University.

MVN is a monumental mural painting located in the *Universidad de Chile* metro station, one of the most important and busiest in Santiago, covering its main walls. It is the largest work of this type in Latin America, measuring more than 1,200 square meters. Faithful to the Chilean neoliberal model and the related principle of the subsidiary state, the production of this art work was made possible by a public–private partnership called *MetroArte*. This raises another question: can an art work such as *MNV*, located in a public space and financed through a public–private partnership, be critical or at least present a critical edge?

Our first methodological challenge is to outline the relevant context for and the influences on the art work under study. *MVN* is recognized as an important contribution to Chilean *muralismo*, and its immediate context is modern and contemporary Latin American mural painting. Latin American *muralismo* has important historical precedents dating back to Greco-Roman times, especially with regards to technique. More recently, in modern times, mural painting has been explored in very different guises in diverse latitudes, not all of which are relevant to *MVN*. However, Chilean experts concur that the Mexican modern masters can be considered important influences on Chilean *muralismo* (Bragassi n.d.; Saúl 1972). Modern Mexican *muralismo* is a particular style, a visual practice with its own rules, codes, history, and traditions rooted in Latin American sociopolitical issues (Campbell 2003; Folgarait 1998). It includes both forms of high art and popular expressions (Gonzalez 1982). Whichever perspective we take on *muralismo*—that it is fine art or an expression of ordinary popular culture—it is undoubtedly public art, i.e., art about

public issues frequently located in public places. In Latin America, *muralismo* did have an ideological impetus—evident in the influx of Marxism and nationalism represented by the works of the Mexican masters Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Jorge González Camarena. A second strand of muralism that influences Toral's work is Chilean political and popular *muralismo*, expressed by the popular collective *Brigada Muralista Ramona Parra*, among others (Bragassi n.d.; Saúl 1972). [2] Besides these, other relevant influences on *MVN* are single artists and artistic movements in the visual arts. These will be considered in due time as part of the analysis. But first, we should discuss what Toral aimed to do in *MVN*.

In *MVN,* Mario Toral sought to create a visual representation of the history and identity of the Chilean nation from its early beginnings to the present (Toral 2002). Accompanying this central theme are subtopics, such as the forces of nature; real and fantasy Chilean landscapes; poetry; the ocean; the meeting of cultures; the popular; and an admiration for humanism shown by the use of the human figure. The mural also represents traumatic conflicts from Chilean history. Indeed, the mural is a daring project because it avoids clichés and does not give in to the temptation to present an unproblematic version of Chilean identity and national history.

This article focuses on the panel *Los Conflictos*, one significant section of the *MVN* mural that deals with collective traumas (Alexander 2012) of the republican period. Why did Toral include conflictive issues in a mural dealing with Chilean identity and national history? And, how did Toral, an artist inspired by politics, deal with national identity and its demand for unity when faced with a divisive and traumatic history? Is the representation of divisive events in *MVN* somehow an awkward selection for a visual representation of national history? In order to answer this questions, this analysis will mostly draw on concepts and methodologies from Laclau and Mouffe's Postmarxist Discourse Theory and further developed by the Essex School of Discourse Analysis (Carpentier and Spinoy (eds) 2008; Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000; Laclau 1990; 1994; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mouffe 2001; 2013; Stavrakakis 1999; 2007) and visual and cultural analyses from the field of Cultural Studies (Hall 1991; 1993; 1996; 1997; Fiske 1990). Throughout my interpretive analysis I first examine the interconnectedness of meaning-making and social and political context and, second, the tension between the realm of the political -or antagonism- and the realm of hegemonic politics -or order- as explored by Chantal Mouffe (2001; 2013) to gain a deeper understanding of the work of art and its representation of Chilean history and identity.

The analysis of works of art from Mouffe's agonistic perspective, based on the ontological distinction between the political and politics, seems to hold great promise. Whereas politics refers to the organization of human existence through practices and institutions, the

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2. There is also a history of Mexican muralism in Chile. For instance, David Alfaro Siqueiros was in exile in Chile between 1941 and 1942. In this period, he made the marvelous *Mural de la Escuela México* in the Chilean city of Chillán. Later, between 1964 and 1965, another Mexican master, Jorge González Camarena, produced the brilliant 300 m[2] mural *Presencia de América Latina* in the *Casa del Arte* at the *Universidad de Concepción*. These are examples of early influences of Mexican *muralismo* on generations of Chilean artists.

political signals the ontological dimension of antagonism inherent in the social. Because antagonism is inherent in the social and is also irreducible, the distinction between political and non-political practices —including artistic practices— loses its meaning (Mouffe 2001; 2013). Any artistic practice can be politicized because the dimension of antagonism has no specific place in the social and can be reactivated and potentially manifest itself in any relation (Mouffe 2001: 100; see also Mouffe 2013). Hence, every form of artistic practice either contributes to reproducing the given common sense—and in that sense is political— or contributes to its deconstruction or critiques it.

Cultural and artistic practices frequently result in the expression of collective traumas, fantasies and anxieties unexpressed in other fields. This is a good reason for analyzing visual expressions of discourse and social antagonism. Such an analysis is especially fruitful for exploring the affective dimension of discursive meaning-construction, which frequently rests upon a fantasy structure. As Lacanian psychoanalysis teaches, fantasy—although symbolically structured—stems from the realm of images, the Imaginary. Phantasmatic visual expressions— like those in the panel *Los Conflictos*—provide easier access to the passions and traumas involved in discourse and identity formation. Furthermore, because of its explicit fantasmatic contents, *MVN* may offer a privileged access to the comprehension of social antagonism in Chile. In our agonistic perspective, society and social agents lack any essence, and their regularities consist merely of the relative and precarious forms of meaning fixation –or articulation in Laclau and Mouffe's vocabulary– which accompany the establishment of a certain symbolic order and social hegemony. This analysis blazes a trail for elaborating a new concept of meaning-making based on articulation, with the overdetermined character of social relations as its starting point (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 98). Making this aspect our starting point allows us to build a social theory that views the construction of meaning as a political process, combining articulation and discursive hegemonization. With regards to the formation of identity, different post-Lacanian perspectives have also taken an anti-essentialist stance. For instance, Stuart Hall, in his classic "Who Needs Identity?" observes that the demand for identification originates in the subject of the lack. Similarly, Laclau (1994: 3) wrote that "one needs to identify with something because there is an original and insurmountable lack of identity".

If it is true that, on the one hand, meaning-making is an open-ended and uncertain process of discursive hegemonization (Laclau 1990; Laclau & Mouffe 1985) and, on the other hand, that the identity of social agents and national collectives is marked by a constitutive void or lack (Laclau 1994; Stavrakakis 1999; 2007), then researchers of national identity should take contingency seriously, connecting the ontological premises of anti-essentialism and anti-foundationalism with an ontic questioning of empirical problems (Laclau 1990; 2004; Glynos & Howarth 2007). With this in mind, I have focused my efforts on the question of identity formation and the lack in Chilean national identity, rather than on defining Chilean identity as pre-given cultural entity. For this purpose, elements of Lacanian theory have proved helpful. Therefore, rather than stressing commonalities, I have tried to pay particular attention to the constitutive role of the divisions, traumas and conflicts that seem to tear Chilean national identity apart, as represented by Toral.

In what follows, I analyze in some detail a particular section of Toral's mural, the panel *Los Conflictos* (The Conflicts). As suggested by its title, this panel deals with a series of political conflicts of Chilean republican history. By doing so, I pay particular attention to the discursive representation of the military coup of September 11, 1973, and the *trace* of a surprising selection made by Toral of a quote he attributes to Bertoldt Brecht. At first glance, this text would seem an awkward selection for a pictorial discourse on Chile's national identity and collective memory. However, as I will argue, it both conceals and visibilizes a *trace* of Chilean identity. As will be argued below, the representation of *La Moneda* under fire and Brecht's text (and its trace) reflect the irreducible dimension of antagonism at the heart of Chilean national identity.

2 The breakdown of democracy and the idea of national reconciliation in *Memoria Visual De Una Nación*

Toral's mural is neither a juxtaposition of clichés nor an attempt to sustain a myth of cultural coherence. Toral sees Chilean national identity as the result not only of shared values, experiences, and origins, but also of unsolved traumas relating to antagonism, conflicts and divisive experiences. From this perspective, national identity can be seen as a combination of shared elements and values on the one hand, and antagonism and divisive "points of concern" (Laitin 1988) on the other. The panel *Los Conflictos* presents a series of historic social cleavages, social problems and worries that constitute shared points of concern for the whole society (see Figure 1). Among these, the dictatorship-democracy cleavage, past human rights violations and their legacies, class conflict and the so-called "social question", are especially relevant for the following reason: the formation of Chilean identity is not only a contentious process, but also an impossibility insofar as these deep social antagonisms prevent its constitution as a fully reconciled community (on antagonism and identity see Laclau and Mouffe1985; Laclau 1990; 1994). It would seem productive, then, to understand identity as being constitutively split because it is based on a constitutive lack (Laclau 1994). Nevertheless, because void is unbearable the lack at the heart of identity must be filled through concrete processes of identification. This necessity – impossibility dialectic in the formation of identity is expressed visually in *MVN*.

Toral's remarks that *MVN* represents scenes that have divided the Chilean people throughout their history allow us to infer that he shares the above intuition regarding identity. In the past, Toral wrote the following about his deeply felt need to represent the most traumatic and divisive events of Chilean history: "It was impossible for me to avoid certain episodes and events that were sad for our country. Those episodes are real, they happened, and if left aside, what is represented would not be Chilean history at all, but rather a fairy tale." (Toral n.d.).

MVN does not avoid the representation of violent and bloody events, tragic divisions that Chileans have inherited and that tear them apart, despite the fact that "they are all citizens of a common land in which they should live in peace" (Toral 1999a). *MVN* expresses the tension inherent to identity between the fantasy of community plenitude on

the one hand and its traumatic elements on the other. In other words, this tension expresses the impossibility of fullness faced by Chilean identity.

The experience of nationality and identity in Chile is particularly traumatic, due to its past rich in conflicts that still divide the population (Coloma 2011; Huneuss 2003). The northwestern panel of Toral's mural, named *Los Conflictos* (*The Conflicts*) mainly deals with political conflicts from the history of the Chilean Republic (Figure 1).

Is this a proper representation of the dimension of antagonism? Images of pain and suffering in red and dark colors are predominant. Besides Toral's talent as a muralist, his affinity with the sensibility of expressionism means that he is eminently suited to represent such events through human experiences, emotional feelings and their deeper meanings.[3] His painting contains references to Goya's *Caprichos* and other Goya paintings, such as *El tres de Mayo de 1808: los fusilamientos en la Montana del Principe Pio* as evidenced by the composition of the section on the execution of Portales by firing squad. Similarly, Picasso's *Guernica* and Eisenstein's 1925 film *The Battleship Potemkin* are alluded to in the frieze *La Masacre de Santa María de Iquique* (*The Massacre of Santa Maria de Iquique*). There is also a possible link to neo-expressionist painters such as Helmut Middendorf and his images of bombed cities—particularly in the *La Moneda en Llamas* section. Another reference are the murals and early works of Ecuadorian painter Oswaldo Guayasamin, with their emphasis on deeply human feelings like suffering and anger—for example in his collections of giant and harrowing hands and faces. Last but not least, are the connections with Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis* in the section *Vida y muerte en las minas del Carbón* (*Life and Death in the Coal Mines*), where alienated and exploited workers are depicted in forms reminiscent of Lang's work. Besides these citations of the history of the visual arts, the section on the bombing of the *La Moneda* palace – the seat of the Chilean Government and President - is evocative of certain widely disseminated photographs of the September 11, 1973 military coup.

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3. Here, I consider expressionism as an artistic *sensibility* rather than as a proper avant-garde movement prototypical of the 20th century.

Figure 1. Panel *Los Conflictos*

2.1 The work of representing a divisive event through imagery

In my interpretation, *MNV* does not signify the 1973 coup itself, but rather a representation of the event. Instead of attempting the impossible depiction of the "objective" event, it seems to me that well-known photographs and videos were used as sources for the mural. Common sense assumes that photographs, due to their iconic character, have a straightforward meaning. As Fiske (1990) stated, the photographic image tends to elude the contingency of meaning. Its realism seems to guarantee its objectivity as a mirror of reality, reflecting it truthfully, honestly, and without intrusion. In reality, however, the photographic text is entwined in intertextuality, therefore its meaning is unfixed. The meaning of the photograph is contingent, open to interpretation, and therefore also to political intervention. In short, the photograph has no true and unique meaning. Truth claims regarding the interpretation of the photographic image are no more than strategic moves, attempts to hegemonize its meaning. As Stuart Hall (1991: 152-3) stated:

> *In any event, the search for their "essential Truth"—an original, founding moment of meaning—is an illusion. The photographs are essentially multiaccentual in meaning. No such previously natural moment of true meaning, untouched by the codes and social relations of production and reading, and transcending historical time, exists.*

Political interventions concerning images and photographs usually try to fix their meanings by anchoring them in wider discursive chains. This is precisely what has occurred with the pictures of the bombardment and subsequent burning of *La Moneda*. These have been interpreted in highly diverse ways. Consequently, the same image is given captions and headings by different people and groups that blatantly contradict each other. The website of a Chilean human rights organization based in Britain published the picture in question under the title: *11th of September: coup d'État*, and the same web site states: "In 1973, the military led by Augusto Pinochet overthrew the democratically elected government of President Salvador Allende, installing a military dictatorship that lasted until 1990." (Memoria Viva, n.d.).

A very different interpretation of the same image is provided by the Chilean Anti-Communist League: "La Moneda in flames: the only way to free the Nation from Marxism." (The Chilean Anti-Communist League, n.d.). This case illustrates the all-too-common experience of how different people and social groups interpret events, images and political events in dissimilar –sometimes even opposed- ways. This leads to the observation that what is usually taken to be objective reality is actually a social and discursive construct. In our example, the image of *La Moneda* acquires its meaning within a wider framework of signification. This is what some have named discourse (Hall 1991; 1997; Laclau 1990; 1993; Laclau and Mouffe1985). Any such discourse provide people with "a viewpoint" that makes the world intelligible and our experience of it meaningful (Laclau 1993: 433). Furthermore, it is through discourse that people can describe the "totality of social life" (435). One should not confuse the commonsensical notion of discourse as speech or language with this rather technical meaning, which refers to the meaningful field that pre-exists and enables any single perception, thought or action. This notion of discourse goes beyond the distinction between the linguistic and the extra-linguistic (Howarth 2000, Laclau 1993,

Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Through discourse, empirical objects, events and identities are constituted as discursive objects. Empirical discourses, such as those exemplified by the opposed interpretations of the 11 of September 1973, constitute historical frameworks of meaning constructed in contingent and conflictive political processes. Despite this, each discourse has a relatively "unified and coherent organization of meaning" (Sayyid & Zac 1998: 260). The September 11, 1973 event is discursively constructed either as the tragic end of Chilean democracy or as the nation's liberation from Marxism. Consequently, representations of this event in pictures or paintings depend on the structuring function of the discourse that signifies it.

Figure 2. Frieze *1973. Bombardeo de La Moneda*

How does the structuring function of discourse work in this case? The contradictory interpretations of the photograph of the bombing of *La Moneda* are made possible by the openness of signs to a variety of discursive articulations (Evans & Hall 1999; Hall 1991). What we call reality, including social relations and the experienced world, is culturally mediated and therefore overdetermined. From this perspective, external entities or events are never given as independent essences with inherent meanings. Meaning arises only in a process of symbolical and imaginary mediation. Consequently, the 1973 coup has no inherent and objective meaning awaiting discovery. The multiple and often contradictory meanings one finds connected with it have been bestowed on it by discursive practices. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) provide a good theoretical account of signification through what they call articulation. Articulation is a recurrent discursive practice that aims to produce meaning, to signify. It takes place in a heterogeneous, amorphous and potentially infinite domain of signification called the field of discursivity (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 111). Articulation links dispersed "elements" from that field and transforms them into "moments" belonging to a signifying chain that fixes their meanings. Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 105) defined articulation as "any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice." In other words, articulation frequently implies a form of redescription in which discursive elements are disarticulated from prior chains of signification, and appropriated from other discourses. Consequently, the results of articulation are fragile. The meanings it produces are unstable, partial and temporary, and remain open to new disarticulations/articulations. This feature of articulation is of paramount importance to understand the "nature" of the political, of politics and of hegemonic practice. In our case, the meaning of September 11, 1973 remains open to contestation, disarticulation and new hegemonic articulations.

In what regards to MVN, the image referring to the 1973 coup and the breakdown of democracy is significantly located in a central position in the *Los Conflictos* panel. In my view, the iconic nature of the image tends to determine or constrain its meaning. The bombing of the building seems to be used essentially as a metaphor for the breakdown of democracy. *La Moneda* is the heart of the executive branch and therefore symbolizes the core of the Chilean democratic institutions. The iconic representation of the burning palace is clearly inspired by the historic television images and photographs with which generations of Chileans have lived since 1973. This point is crucial because it makes the representation of the 1973 events strikingly different from that of other events depicted in the mural, most of which are situated in imaginary spaces. This representational strategy can be framed as an attempt to positivize and objectivize the discursive construction of the event so as to evade controversy.

In my view, however, the "objectivist" character of the representation does not make it neutral. It is not accidental that Toral's depiction of the event is not based on personal memories of the *La Moneda* bombing, but on widely disseminated and well-known images. In my view, this is coherent with the whole logic of his mural, which both derives from and strengthens the collective memory rather than the artist's personal and intimate recollections. There is certain iterability at work here (Derrida 1988; Culler 1982; Thomassen 2010). On the one hand, the pictorial representation of well-known photographic images

of *La Moneda* involves alteration through iteration (Figure 2). This iteration of the image ensures the impossibility of unpolluted repetition. On the other hand, this subtle distortion of popularized images is still recognizable through a "minimal remainder" (Derrida 1988: 53; Culler 1982; Thomassen 2010). Below I detail a few of these variations, beginning with the perspective. The panel presents a frontal view of a section of the façade. The scale, too, is modified. The image in the mural shows dramatic details of the bombing in a close-up rather than the usual panoramic view of explosions, smoke, and dust seen from a side angle. Another intervention has to do with the representation of the jet fighters. No photographic representation exists showing the planes and the building together, because the distance between the two was too great. However, everyone remembers the documentary images of fighter planes approaching the civic area of Santiago's city center. Here, the building is brutally attacked by obscured aircraft, resembling black hawks or lightning. A third variation is the dramatization of the image through the collapse of the flagpole. I contend that the falling flag symbolizes the pain of the Chilean nation and the collapse of its democracy. It can also symbolizes the end of an era of institutionalized popular progressivism in Chilean politics.

In addition to these interventions, we should also consider the symbolic role of the hands surrounding the representation of *La Moneda* in the panel. Most of them are folded in prayer or shaking other hands (see Figure 1). The folded hands appeal to a religious code to express hope for national reconciliation. The hand with the raised finger can be traced back to Leonardo da Vinci's famous and ambiguous St. John the Baptist and to other religious paintings in which the main character points to the mystery of Heaven. Another Christian symbol is that of the Hand of God. Furthermore, the hand gesture on the left is clearly inspired by the typical representations of the Lord of Divine Mercy. The mural refers to the conflicted Chilean reality and the fundamental division of its people and, at the same time, the universal task of building a civilization characterized by peace and happiness. The fantasy of national reconciliation seems therefore to be the main theme of the section. The reconciled nation is evoked through a permanent presence through absence. Moreover, the representations of these painful events from Chilean history can be read as a national narrative transcending the particularities of each event when we oppose the divisions they evoke with the imaginary scenario of a reconciled Chile. Here we find a quasi-religious concept of sociopolitical reconciliation. In contrast with the strictly religious meaning of reconciliation, which also drew on the idea of unity, reconciliation here mainly means peace as a sublime state in which antagonism is overcome. This is neither an accident nor a representation typical of Toral alone. Both religious (Silva 1986) and political leaders (Aylwin 1992; Foxley 2003) extensively used religious symbols and figures of unity and reconciliation when speaking of the re-democratization of Chile during the 1980s and 1990s. As opposed to Paul's reduction of all social differences, the image here is of a state of peace, achieved through moral improvement.[4] As in the Reign predicted by Isaiah, differences do not disappear. What changes is the logic of the

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4. *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus"* (Galatians, 3, 28).

interactions therein.[5] Toral's view privileges the hope for tolerance (utopia?), rather than the impossibility of social homogeneity. These symbols and signifiers of reconciliation and consensus function as nodal points (Laclau & Mouffe 1985) or empty signifiers (Laclau 1996) that structure and join otherwise isolated and contentious elements. In this particular case, these empty signifiers/nodal points are supported by a particular fantasy: the fantasy of the wholeness and plenitude of the Chilean (national) community. This fantasy of fullness of the national community offers individuals strong emotions and affects with which to identify, and it is this affective dimension of discourse that explains the effectivity of its ideological grip.

Even authoritarian regimes, such as Pinochet's government, offer some meanings for the community's identification. Generally, it can be said that Chilean authoritarianism aimed to put an end to uncertainty, insecurity, and disorder that preceded during the revolutionary government of President Allende. Consequently, the promotion of order and national values formed the basis of attempts by the Pinochet dictatorship to legitimate itself (Cuevas 2014). During the post-authoritarian period, fear both of the disorder of the recent revolutionary past and of repression from Pinochet's dictatorship were the backdrop for the elite's consensual politics and discourse of national reconciliation. As noted by a former minister of defense of the time, trauma was the underlying motivation behind the so-called "lessons from history" (Fernández 1998). The stability of the new democracy, social peace and governability required the elite to learn those lessons to make a new politics of national consensus possible, to allow a difficult merging of economic progress and social peace in a society divided by its past (Boeninger 1997). Does Toral offer the viewers of *MVN* a similar discourse on consensus? In my opinion, *MVN* presents an ambivalent narrative, typical of an open work of art that raises more questions than it answers.

For instance, the *Los Conflictos* panel assembles discursive elements and symbols from different and sometimes contradictory ideological narratives (Figure 1). It refers to the execution by firing squad of 19th century conservative ideologue and Minister Diego Portales—but also the mass slaughter of native people in southern Chile and of saltpeter miners and their families in the northern Atacama desert in Santa Maria de Iquique, to inhuman exploitation in the coal mines and political prosecution under the *Ley Maldita* (Damned Law), which banned the Communist Party and was used to prosecute leftist leaders. The way Portales is represented, the dimensions he is given, his hieratic posture, and the placing of a spiritual force at his side suggest his superior nature. Traditional historiography portrays Portales as the ideologue of the so-called Conservative Republic (Edwards 1936; Vial 1981-1987). Most other episodes in the panel are central to Marxist or anti-oligarchic historiography (Villalobos 1980; Vitale 1993-1998; Vitale et al. 1999). The reference to the 1891 civil war and the suicide of President Balmaceda is more ambiguous, because these events have been articulated by both elite and anti-oligarchic narratives. Placed in the context of this contradictory selection of events and an ambiguous interpretation of

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5. *"The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid ... They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain ..."* (Isaiah, 11, 6-9).

history, the frieze *1973. El Bombardeo de La Moneda* (1973. The Bombing of La Moneda) tends, in my view, to be framed by an anti-oligarchic narrative.

Despite the symbols of reconciliation (hands) surrounding the images of suffering, the *Los Conflictos* is evidently a controversial panel (Figure 1). It should be remembered that the unveiling of the Western half of *MVN* took place in the beginning of 1999, in a conjuncture of extreme political polarization over Pinochet's legacy during his detention in London. Thus, the unveiling of the mural was met with virulent criticism, especially from a number of right-wing leaders.

During my research of *MVN*, I was able to talk to two people involved in the production of the mural who mentioned the fact that the most controversial frieze, entitled *1986. El Martirio de Rodrigo Rojas y Carmen Gloria Quintana* (1986. The Martyrdom of Rodrigo Rojas and Carmen Gloria Quintana), was withdrawn just before opening. This frieze represented one of the most horrifying acts of repression during the dictatorship: the burning alive by the secret police of two university students who were taking part in a protest against Pinochet's government in 1986. Arguably, the divisive content of the frieze would have made the controversy around Pinochet's fortune in England even harsher. My two informants told me that only after indirect pressure by the democratic government led by President Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle did Mario Toral agree to voluntarily withdraw the frieze.

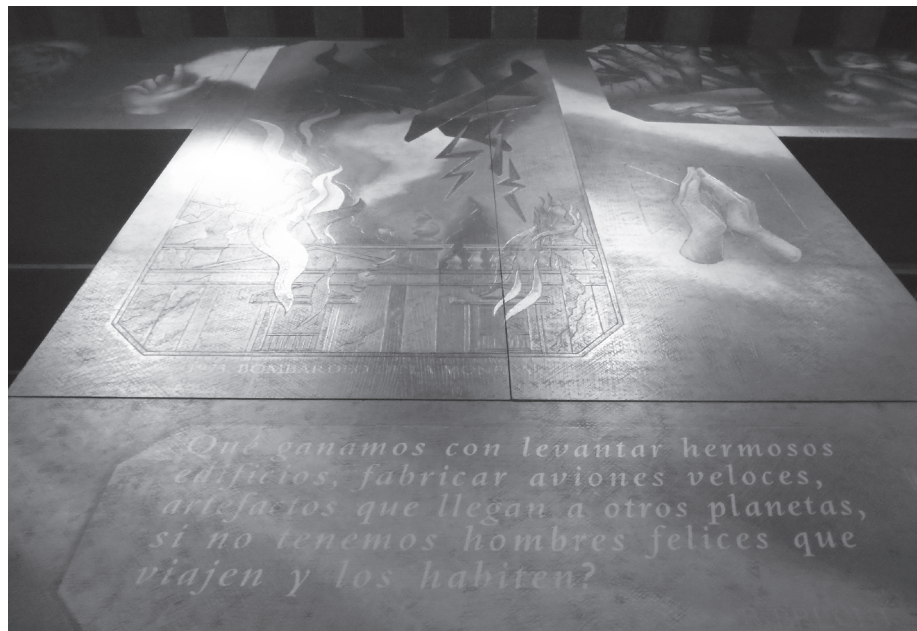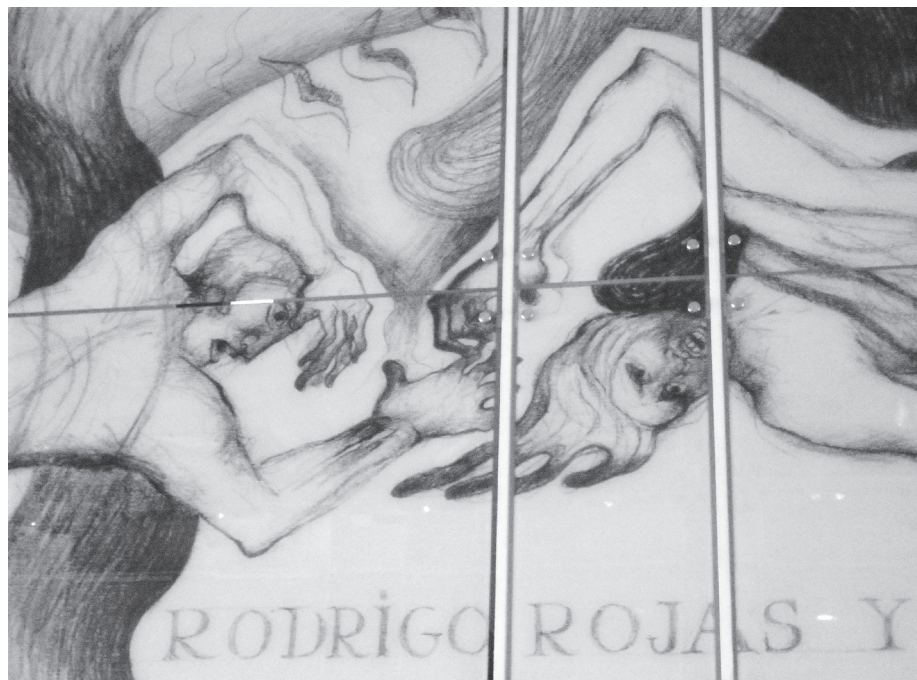Figure 3. Frieze *1973. Bombardeo de La Moneda* and text attributed to Bertolt Brecht

Figure 4. Detail of the blueprint of the withdrawn frieze *1986.*
El Martirio de Rodrigo Rojas y Carmen Gloria Quintana

Interestingly, the artist decided to replace the controversial frieze with a somewhat strange selection of a text that he attributes to Bertolt Brecht (Figure 3). The text, placed under the frieze *1973. Bombardeo de La Moneda*, deals with the unintended consequences of modernity and the absurdity of material progress incapable of making humans happier and freer. In my interpretation, the replacement of the frieze *1986. El Martirio de Rodrigo Rojas y Carmen Gloria Quintana* was aimed at avoiding an even greater controversy around the human rights violations perpetrated during the dictatorship at a time when the whole world was paying attention to the dictator's fortunes and the Chilean process of democratization. The nature of this operation was functional to consensual politics and the systematic reproduction of oblivion. Nevertheless, the abstract and somehow decon-textualised text selected by the artist retains the subtracted meaning of the controversial frieze in the form of a "trace" (Culler 1982; Derrida 1997).

The reasons for this controversy went far beyond the Pinochet affair. The mural stirred up memories of fearful times. Fear was a condition, a result and a justification of the military coup and the new regime's subsequent consolidation. As we saw above, some view military authoritarianism as a response to the threat of revolution and communist takeover. For others, this fear was the result of military repression and political persecution. Only a decade later was a blueprint of the withdrawn frieze given by Mario Toral to the Museum of Human Rights located in Santiago (Figure 4). Yet the controversial history of the frieze remains untold and unconfirmed by the artist.

3 Discussion and Conclusion

As explained in the preceding pages, Toral's concern in *MVN* is with the constitution of a Chilean Nation, understood as a collective of persons endowed with rights and sha-ring the same land as their homeland. Although a united and reconciled Chilean nation is an impossibility, it remains a strong aspiration with which Chileans tend to identify. Toral exposes these deep tensions in Chilean identity. Indeed, *MVN* represents this impossible aspiration towards fullness as the plenitude of the nation.

Thus, the major political achievement of Toral's northern panel is its critical exposé of the predominant political discourse, which emphasizes the idea of Chile as a homogenous society and a unified and monolithic nation. In contrast, Toral's representation of Chilean national identity stresses conflict and division. His work intervenes in the struggles over, among other things, the history of Chilean democracy, the role of oppression and social struggles, the role of key figures in the history of the republic and 1973 coup. In doing so, Toral acts as a negotiator between the dominant conservative historiography and counter--hegemonic leftist versions of the past. In Toral's representation, Chilean cultural identity is best understood as the provisional result of a conflictual process. The term reconciliation presupposes the existence, at a given time in the past, of a unity that was broken. Although this moment may be purely fictional, it can have real discursive effects. Thus, it can be said that Chilean contemporary identity is built not only on the basis of shared elements in fantasies surrounding Chilean national identity, but also on the basis of the conflicts, divisions, traumas and antagonisms that constitute key divisive points in Chilean national

culture— which is exactly what we might expect when considering the question of identity formation from the point of view of contemporary Lacanian theory (Laclau 1994; Laclau & Zac 1994; Stavrakakis 1999; Žižek 1990; 1994). The traumatized Chilean society requires the fantasy of a national reconciliation to keep itself together.

The *Memoria Visual de una Nación* mural fosters and encourages a complex reading of recent Chilean history. It strategically uses symbols and images of past divisions, as well as images and symbols of reconciliation and consensus. The latter function as nodal points/ empty signifiers in structuring meanings (Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Laclau 1996). The efficacy of such symbols depends on a structuring fantasy that acts as a framework for images and concepts of unity, harmony, nation, republican values and national identity. These signifiers are embedded in discourses that provide the meanings for the images they evoke. Moreover, a certain economy of enjoyment exists, drawing on fantasy to support these meanings. The quasi-religious images of reconciliation suggested by hand gestures are what reunites the Chilean nation. They represent national unity, as a state in which divisions have been overcome, built on a fantasy of harmonious unity of the nation as a whole. This leads to the construction of an imagined community that attempts either to eclipse the dimension of social antagonism or to reconcile it in an imaginary scenario. Still, the images of the mural visibilize social antagonism, and present it as constitutive of Chilean identity and history. The presence of an enemy of the Chilean community is still implied. In *Los Conflictos*, the threat to the phantasmatic scenario mentioned above is precisely internal conflict, the split in the identity of the Chilean nation, the divisive events of the past and the possible reappearance of such divisions in times to come. The solution to this threat is a phantasmatic reconciliation, the hope for which is suggested by the images of the hands, which suggest the potential for overcoming conflict through reconciliation. They point to the idealized scenario of the reconciled nation as an imagined community. Consistent with evidence collected in previous research, I have found here that contemporary discourses on democratization, nation and identity in Chile prove to be highly intertwined. Indeed, the signifiers reconciliation, forgiveness, social peace, unity and consensus, and narratives about wounds in the soul of the nation, about learning the lessons from the past, and about the need to overcome conflict, —all of which were key themes of the elite discourse of the 1990s—are also very evident in the panel *Los Conflictos*, albeit transcoded into a visual register.

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