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THE NARRATIVE OF A TRANSFORMATIVE LEADER: NEOLIBERAL MEMORY POLITICS AND THE REFRAMING OF AUGUSTO PINOCHET IN CHILE

ABSTRACT

The paper explores how General Augusto Pinochet's death in 2006 catalysed a shift in the collective memory of Chile, reframing him as a transformative leader who modernised the nation with neoliberal reforms. Rather than pursuing systematic empirical analysis, the paper adopts a conceptual approach that draws on Basil Bernstein's theory of recontextualisation and Mark Fisher's concept of capitalist realism to examine the contribution made by media narratives to this reframing. Through thematic analysis of cross-platform cultural texts, including news coverage and the films The Death of Pinochet and El Conde, it is argued that these narratives strategically separate economic success from political repression, marginalising working-class memory and reinforcing neoliberal hegemony. The Chilean case is situated within broader global memory politics, with a comparative reference made to Margaret Thatcher's legacy in the United Kingdom. By highlighting the ideological work performed by historical narratives, the paper contributes to debates on memory, neoliberalism, and the erasure of resistance in post-authoritarian societies.

KEYWORDS: Augusto Pinochet, transformative leader, memory, cross platform discourse, capitalist realism

Neoliberalna politika spomina in preoblikovanje podobe Augusta Pinocheta v Čilu

IZVLEČEK

Članek raziskuje, kako je smrt generala Augusta Pinocheta leta 2006 oznanila spremembe v kolektivnem spominu Čila. Pinochet je v uradnem spominu postal lik transformativnega voditelja, ki je moderniziral državo z neoliberalnimi reformami. Namesto empirične analize članek uporablja konceptualni pristop, ki črpa iz Bernsteinove teorije rekontekstualizacije in Fisherjevega koncepta kapitalističnega realizma, zato da precizneje preuči, kako so medijski narativi prispevali k tovrstnemu preoblikovanju spomina. Skozi tematsko analizo medplatformnih kulturnih besedil – vključno z novicami in filmi Smrt Pinocheta in El Conde – avtorica ugotavlja, da ti narativi strateško ločijo gospodarski uspeh od političnega zatiranja, marginalizirajo spomin delavskega razreda in krepijo neoliberalno hegemonijo. Čilski primer je umeščen v širšo globalno politiko spomina, s primerjalno analizo na zapuščino Margaret Thatcher v Združenem kraljestvu. S poudarjanjem ideološkega dela zgodovinskih narativov članek prispeva k razpravam o spominu, neoliberalizmu in izbrisu upora v postavtoritarnih družbah.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: Augusto Pinochet, transformativni voditelj, spomin, medplatformski diskurz, kapitalistični realizem

1 Introduction

The military coup of 11 September 1973, led by General Augusto Pinochet, marked a significant turning point in Chilean history. Beyond the immediate political upheaval and human rights violations that characterised the subsequent dictatorship (1973–1990), the coup signified a radical economic shift towards the implementation of neoliberal policies under conditions of extreme coercion. The systematic dismantling of social solidarity structures, coupled with the violent suppression of workers' movements and leftist political organisations, laid the groundwork for what would later be celebrated by neoliberal advocates as Chile's "economic miracle". Nearly five decades later, narratives surrounding this period remain deeply contested, with much scholarship divided between the human rights abuses and transitional justice processes that followed Chile's return to democracy (Collins 2010; Lira and Cornejo 2023; Rojas and Shaftoe 2022) and its neoliberal transformation (Valdés 1995; Huneeus 2007; Taylor 2006). Less attention has been paid to how the economic transformation itself has been remembered, commemorated, and narrativised through media discourse.

General Pinochet's figure holds a central role in Chile's debates about memory, as his persona has been shaped both as a symbol of national salvation and as a source of deep trauma. Stern (2004; 2006) identifies three main narratives that influence public discourse about Pinochet: the salvation narrative, portraying him as the leader who rescued Chile from Marxist chaos; the wound narrative, highlighting state terror and human rights abuses; and the closure narrative, which aims to silence debate to maintain political stability. He suggests that these narratives persisted into the democratic period, creating what he calls a "memory impasse" during the 1990s, when elite pacts limited accountability (Stern 2010). This balance was broken by Pinochet's arrest in London and subsequent corruption scandals, which reignited calls for truth and justice and altered his image from an untouchable patriarch to a contested historical figure. Despite Pinochet's declining popularity among his supporters – due to his detention in the UK in 1998 and the corruption cases filed against him after his return to Chile (Weeks 2000; Roht-Arriaza 2005; Angell 2007; Stern 2010; Huneeus and Ibarra 2013) – the persistence of neoliberal economic structures and the 1980 Constitution, which enshrined authoritarian enclaves and market-friendly reforms, has ensured that the legacy of the military regime continues to influence Chile's political and economic landscape (González and Prem 2023). This continuity has coincided with a new wave of political polarisation, culminating in the emergence of the *Partido Republicano* (Republican Party) and other actors of the Chilean New Right (Urbina 2020), who openly defend elements of Pinochet's institutional framework as protectors of stability and national identity (Mardones Marshall 2023). These dynamics have fostered a revisionist discourse that seeks to reshape Pinochet's figure from that of a dictator to that of a moderniser, emphasising economic successes while minimising human rights abuses (Joignant 2013; Aguilera & Badilla 2025). As a result, Chilean memory politics has shifted from a near-consensus of condemnation to a contested terrain where selective rehabilitation of Pinochet's image becomes increasingly visible in public debate (Collins et al. 2013).

This paper examines how the death of General Pinochet in December 2006 acted as a key moment in shaping the collective memory of Chile's neoliberal transformation, with a focus on how working-class struggles have been marginalised or erased from mainstream narratives. Since Pinochet's death, conflicted memories of the recent past have reshaped his legacy and slowly reinterpreted him as a leader who modernised Chile's economy and institutions. This view has been echoed in national and international media, especially during the 40th and 50th anniversaries of the coup. It appears in various media texts, including news stories and the two films discussed here: The Death of Pinochet (Osnovikoff

and Perut 2011) and Pablo Larraín's *El Conde* (2023), which present complex, often contradictory portrayals of the dictator and his legacy, engaging with the disputed narrative of Pinochet's economic miracle.

From a conceptual perspective, the paper aligns with Mark Fisher's concept of capitalist realism, which posits that it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. General Pinochet's neoliberal reforms transformed Chile's political culture; what Moulián (2002: 103) described as credit card citizenship was defined by reorganising political identities around a neoliberal understanding of individual freedoms and their relationship with the State (Harvey 2010: 7). This narrative developed alongside the "glorious defeat" of the Unidad Popular government, which highlighted Salvador Allende as a fallen hero, following the tradition of socialist martyrdom (Traverso 2017: 103). Both narratives coexist, as neoliberal reforms and the related political and cultural shifts have fostered the belief that there is no alternative to neoliberalism, thereby limiting the imagination of systemic change and maintaining the status quo in Chile.

This paper focuses on how the two films symbolise two distinct moments in the narratives surrounding neoliberal Chile and Pinochet. It engages with Basil Bernstein's concept of recontextualisation (1996), which explores how meaning shifts when it is transferred from one discursive context to another. This framework provides analytical tools to understand how Pinochet's image has been reshaped across different discursive spaces, from journalistic accounts surrounding his death to his portrayal in films and documentaries. Factual, documentary, and fictional representations of Pinochet since his death have contributed to a gradual redefinition of his historical significance, emphasising economic and institutional transformation over human rights abuses. This recontextualisation advances the interests of neoliberal continuity by portraying economic "success" as justification for authoritarian rule, while also marginalising or erasing the experiences of working-class people who endured repression and resistance. Through this analysis, the paper aims to understand how the recontextualisation of Pinochet's legacy has increasingly emphasised economic "modernisation" while neglecting the experiences of those most impacted by these changes- the Chilean working class. Consequently, it has reinforced top-down narratives surrounding Pinochet's dictatorship, which are framed around Allende's fallen hero and transitional justice concerning human rights violations. These narratives sustain the discourse of economic success, aligning with the national narrative of modernity and Chilean exceptionalism. Previous work has examined these frames, analysing similar processes in the United Kingdom and Chile, drawing parallels between these two paradigmatic cases of neoliberal transformation –

one enacted through coercion (Chile) and the other through democratic consent (UK) – to illustrate how comparable narrative strategies have contributed to naturalising neoliberal policies as inevitable, necessary, and ultimately beneficial, despite their damaging impacts on working-class communities and collective solidarity (Mansell et al. 2022). As Chile witnesses a resurgence of right-wing political movements nostalgic for aspects of the Pinochet era, even during the presidency of left-wing Gabriel Boric, understanding these politics of memory becomes increasingly urgent. By revealing how media discourse has contributed to what Mark Fisher (2009) termed "capitalist realism", the belief that there is no alternative to neoliberal capitalism, this paper aids efforts to recover forgotten or suppressed memories of working-class resistance and solidarity.

While this paper engages with media texts and cultural representations, its primary aim is conceptual rather than empirical. It does not provide a systematic discourse analysis or formal film study but instead uses these texts thematically to illustrate broader patterns in Chilean memory politics. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Fisher, Bernstein, and Traverso, the paper examines how neoliberal narratives have recontextualised Pinochet's legacy in ways that marginalise working-class memory and resistance. The focus is therefore on the ideological and discursive implications of these representations, rather than on detailed content analysis or methodological rigour in source selection.

2 Theoretical framework: Capital realism and melancholia in the construction of memories

The 1973 coup in Chile represents one of the most traumatic defeats for the global left in the 20th century. Allende's democratic socialist project proposed a "third way" between Soviet communism and Western capitalism, as he described it as a Chilean revolution with "the taste of red wine and empanadas" (Allende 1972). This path was violently foreclosed by Pinochet's coup, which targeted not only a democratically elected socialist government but also initiated a coercive transformation of Chile into a neoliberal state. Traverso (2017) has explored this event by conceptualising left-wing melancholia as an example of the end of a cycle of glorious defeats and tragic moments in history, where socialist martyrdom adds a mythical dimension to political leadership. He describes it as what remains after the shipwreck; its spirit shapes the writings of many of its "survivors", drafted from their lifeboats after the storm, shaping leftist political culture (Traverso 2017:83), from a dialectical perspective as living memories of past struggles while recognising their defeats as "nightmares on the brains of the living", which hinder historical materialist thinking (Marx 1852).

From a critical perspective, the rise of memory and memorialisation can be seen as a "cultural fetish" that emphasises victimhood rather than political agency, stripping the working class of the potential to drive historical change (Steven 2017: 185). In the case of Chile, it is human rights abuses instead of working class struggles It venerates the victim while ignoring the defeated; it starkly contrasts left-wing commitment, serving as a pre-emptive strike against political change. As Benjamin stated, left-wing melancholia can become fixated on collective experiences of the past, which can trap progressive movements in a paradoxical state, caught between an inescapable past and an unimagined future (Kuhar 2019: 184). Discussing Kastern's social purposes, Steven (2017: 182) states that left-wing melancholia renders the political reality of the working classes and committed activities for bourgeois consumption in what he calls an early manifestation of "virtue signalling", the opportunistic performance of political subjectivity, turning left-wing melancholia into the debilitating ideology of capitalist realism. Traverso explains this willingness to accept capitalism as a sign of resistance, as a disenchanted acceptance of market capitalism and now, neoliberalism, where melancholy can be seen as a refusal to compromise, untangling the concept from nostalgia to offer insights into how the left can struggle to counter capitalist narratives aligning with the TINA discourses (2017: 153).

Enzo Traverso's concept of left-wing melancholia offers insight into how the left has struggled to counter these capitalist realist narratives that have paralysed and prohibited utopian imagination. Instead of viewing capitalism as the unchangeable horizon of human society, as Fisher points out (2009), they have failed to challenge this notion. Thus, capitalist realism is defined as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (Fisher 2009: 2). He describes capitalist realism as an "invisible barrier" that conditions our thoughts and actions, making it seem like there is no alternative to capitalism as it subsumes and consumes all previous history (2009: 4). This ideological condition permeates contemporary culture, creating what Fisher terms a "business ontology", where everything is evaluated according to business criteria, and education, healthcare, and other public services are increasingly subjected to market logic (2009: 17). It affects all cultural production, economic activity and general thought, reinforcing the status quo. Like Benjamin (1940), who posits that the victors write history, Fisher critiques the dominant narratives that shape cultural and material understandings. Capitalist realism, he argued, presents liberalism, like historicism, as a totalising system that leaves no room for alternatives because it tends to suppress alternative narratives (Fisher 2009: 16). This tendency to become all-encompassing is evident in how liberalism and

capitalism are often depicted as the ultimate endpoint of history, leaving no room for viable alternatives, as this perspective constrains the ability to envision different futures (Fukuyama 1992). Here, memories can be a moment of danger that needs to be controlled because, in Benjamin's words, articulating what the past is does not mean recognising how it really was (Benjamin 1940: VI). This is to use this totalising narrative to shape collective memories, limiting their challenges. When addressing the collective memories surrounding the 1973 coup in Chile and those who viewed Salvador Allende as a fallen hero and Augusto Pinochet as a transformative leader, Traverso and Fisher help us understand how these diverse narratives can be sustained and shape collective memories. The Chilean socialist experiment represents a "might-have-been" historical moment that sustains the memory of an interrupted political project, which still holds the potential for alternative political futures, even though the coup becomes a site of unresolved historical trauma. The remembrance of Allende and the Chilean experience prevents them from being completely erased from history, but confines them to institutionalised, top-down memories reinforced during the political transition that began in 1990, while Pinochet's figure has been linked to the economic transformation of Chile despite its political and human cost. Thus, the critical reflection of this political possibility is that memories and narratives have been framed within the realms of "what is possible", paraphrasing Patricio Aylwin's definition of democracy at the beginning of his term (Aylwin 1991). The dominant narrative of Allende's overthrow reinforces capitalist realism by presenting neoliberal capitalism as the inevitable and only viable system in Chile, which has helped frame Pinochet's persona as a transformative leader in economic modernisation. These narratives shape collective memory, making it challenging to envision alternative efforts to remember Allende's legacy and the socialist project he represented, which could challenge the prevailing notion of capitalist realism and the idea that there is no alternative to Pinochet's economic project. As a result, any memory and class struggle in contemporary Chile represents a subversion that warrants attention due to its potential to challenge neoliberal capitalism as Chile's inevitable and only viable system. Thus, Traverso's framework also helps explain how this historical trauma created a vacuum that allowed Pinochet to rehabilitate 50 years after the Chilean coup.

Pinochet's Chile represents a foundational moment in the global installation of this capitalist realist paradigm. As the first major experiment in neoliberal economics guided by the "Chicago Boys", Chilean economists trained at the University of Chicago under Milton Friedman, the Pinochet regime implemented radical free-market reforms, including the privatisation of state enterprises, market deregulation, reduction of trade barriers, and significant cuts to public

spending. These reforms were carried out through violence and repression, without democratic consent, yet are often retrospectively portrayed as necessary for Chile's economic modernisation (Klein 2008). Fisher's analysis clarifies how the violence of this transition has been systematically minimised in favour of narratives emphasising economic success. He states, "Capital's dominance is maintained not merely through direct repression, but also through its ability to subsume and consume all of previous history" (Fisher 2009: 4). Portraying Pinochet as a transformative leader exemplifies this process, as the dictator's economic achievements are increasingly separated from the repressive apparatus that made them possible. The stories of Salvador Allende as the fallen hero of utopian socialist memory versus Augusto Pinochet as the transformative leader of capitalist reality highlight a dialectical relationship between the past, seen as a struggle, and the neoliberal present in Chile, as well as its modern project led by Pinochet. The tension between these two figures demonstrates how the struggles of the working class and the transformation of Chilean political culture – framed by neoliberal ideas of freedom and markets – have been overlooked in the debate. Here, the media has played a vital role in recontextualising both narratives from the public discourse, from Pinochet's death to fifty years after the coup, emphasising Chile's conflicted memories of its past.

3 Historical memory and cross platform discourses

The media plays a vital role in shaping collective memory and mediating between private and public spheres (Mihelj 2017), especially through its agenda-setting function (Sorensen 2009: 6). Since the mid-19th century, Chilean media has largely adhered to a liberal model based on factual reporting and objectivity (Santa Cruz 1996: 14). From a political economy perspective, this model reflects the idea of a "free market of ideas", but it has been characterised by a high concentration of ownership among a few powerful national and international actors since the return to democracy (Mayorga Rogel et al., 2010; Del Valle et al. 2011; Monckeberg 2011; Sunkel and Geoffroy 2001; Godoy 2016). After the 1973 coup, the cultural revolution led by the military junta redefined socio-cultural rights around market freedoms and individual liberties (Moulián 2002; Solimano 2012), establishing a neoliberal state. This shift also increased the concentration of media ownership led by conservative and liberal capitals, marginalising alternative voices (Faure 2013), especially those representing working-class interests. As a result, the media landscape supported the dissemination of top-down narratives aligned with the transition process initiated in 1990. By the end of the decade, the uniformity of voices across broadcast, print, and digital

platforms reinforced an institutionalised approach to collective memory, within the limited scope of transitional justice and rooted in the discourse of Chilean exceptionalism. This narrative, based on the *Ruptura Pactada* (Agreed Rupture), aimed to position Chile as an international model of negotiated democratisation. Consequently, since the return to democracy, dominant media discourses on the 1973 coup, human rights violations, Salvador Allende, and General Pinochet have been reproduced across media outlets, courts, the National Congress, and other public spaces, including schools (Sorensen 2009: 6).

The construction of collective memory differs across various contexts shaped by distinctive political and economic histories, as well as diverse class structures and identities; therefore, context plays a vital role in this process. Collective memories are sustained by competing narratives that often coexist in tension (Lechner 2023). Understanding how these narratives are recontextualised is crucial for analysing how memory discourses are organised. Bernstein (1996) describes recontextualisation as the process through which discourses are selectively appropriated, relocated, refocused, and linked to other discourses to establish a new order. As discourses shift from their original sites of production to secondary contexts, they undergo transformation; consequently, "every time a discourse moves, there is space for ideology to play" (Bernstein 1996: 24). This framework highlights three interconnected processes: the selective appropriation of narratives, the articulation of ideological positions, and the transformation of discourse. Recontextualisation is therefore not a neutral process but one embedded in power relations, as narratives are strategically appropriated and reorganised to support particular social orders (Bernstein 1996: 47). This perspective demonstrates how top-down memory construction in post-authoritarian Chile has marginalised working-class experiences, reinforcing a form of capitalist realism that presents neoliberalism as the only sustainable economic system. This cross-platform discourse has dominated Chilean public life since the democratic transition of 1990.

This paper employs Bernstein's concept of recontextualisation to analyse the discourses surrounding Augusto Pinochet's persona as portrayed by various news media outlets on his death in 2006 and the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Chilean coup. It focuses particularly on the documentaries The Death of Pinochet (Osnovikoff and Perut 2011) and Pablo Larraín's *El Conde* (Larraín 2023). Documentaries serve as powerful cultural tools for transmitting knowledge and information, aligning with Bernstein's idea of pedagogic discourse, where knowledge is structured and communicated to shape understanding. The way a documentary is constructed and the perspective it adopts can significantly influence how viewers interpret and engage with narratives about these media

texts, some of which have already appeared in other institutional spaces, such as news media. Therefore, the paper examines how media narratives have recontextualised General Augusto Pinochet's legacy. Using Bernstein's framework, it explores how meanings shift as they move from journalistic coverage to cultural productions, highlighting processes of selective appropriation, ideological positioning, and discursive transformation. In doing so, the paper interrogates how neoliberal narratives have framed Pinochet as a transformative leader, despite his association with authoritarianism and human rights abuses. The analysis considers representations in The Death of Pinochet and *El Conde* alongside news articles and long-form opinion pieces published in English and Spanish during three key moments: Pinochet's death in 2006, the 40th anniversary of the 1973 coup, and the 50th anniversary in 2023. This approach enables a critical understanding of how cultural and media texts participate in the ongoing contest over memory and historical interpretation in post-authoritarian Chile.

Focusing on how General Augusto Pinochet has been portrayed, it becomes clear that the neoliberal transformation of civil society in Chile carefully excluded any working-class experience from the narratives surrounding the traumatic past of Chile between 1973 and 1990, thereby omitting it from the cultural representations that Chileans have encountered when addressing these historical events. While Allende has been described as a fallen hero, Pinochet's dictatorship has been depicted as a transformative moment in Chilean history that introduced a neoliberal project capable of modernising the country. Due to the persistence of the narrative of Chile as an exception within Latin America, especially in its political and economic context, this discourse has endured. The cost of this transformation was seen in changes within the class culture in Chile, resulting from policies that dismantled most of the gains the Chilean working class achieved during the 20th century (Stallings 1978; Martínez and Diaz 1996). Despite the ongoing resistance of the working class throughout the dictatorship – ranging from continued organisation of copper miners to the *poblaciones* (poor urban neighbourhoods) – which demonstrated remarkable resilience and agency (Schneider 2010; Paley 2001), stories and memories of working-class struggle and solidarity have been increasingly marginalised in dominant narratives about Chile's transformation, particularly after Pinochet's death, as they do not fit within the frames of Chile as a modern nation. Collective memories are not neutral records of past events but are fundamentally social and political, shaped by power relations and serving present interests (Halbwachs 1992). The accepted narratives about both Allende and Pinochet are therefore those that address the past in a way that aligns with the national story of modernity and Chilean exceptionalism, promoting Chile as a country that has been able to reconcile its

past with its present. The reframing of Pinochet as a transformative leader reflects the power of neoliberal discourse to appropriate and neutralise alternative narratives. Pinochet's representation has increasingly shifted from restricted codes (specific to the experiences of his victims and opponents) to elaborated codes (abstract discussions of economic transformation and modernisation), allowing for a more sanitised version of history to emerge. As discourses about Pinochet's economic policies move from their original context – economic policy debates, implementation, and immediate impacts – to media representations, cultural productions, and commemorative practices, they undergo significant transformations that reflect power relations and ideological positions. Primarily, this paper aims to examine how media narratives and cultural representations have influenced the portrayal of Pinochet's persona in these spaces, as reflected in the films discussed in this paper.

4 Pinochet, from a dictator to a transformative leader

Describing the role of the media in constructing collective memories in Chile, Sorensen (2005: 1) identifies three main periods linked to most media production when recounting the country's recent history: the democratically elected socialist government of 1970–1973, General Pinochet's dictatorship from 1973 to 1990, and the transition to democracy, which began in 1990. These periods have been significant for organising media output, as various voices have accessed different platforms, including traditional broadcasters and alternative media, with Chileans engaging with them differently – mainly influenced by institutional and socioeconomic factors. This is significant because the role of diverse media in shaping collective memories is interconnected with the identities promoted by media and the reproduction of media narratives (Richards 2004, quoted by Bucciferro 2012: 16). Among these narratives is the framing of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorial and economic legacy, which has been highlighted in both national and international accounts of the neoliberal transformations that have influenced Chile since 1975. While examining how Neoliberalism has shaped national memory as part of a broader global trend, Poblete (2015: 94–95) considers how collective memory is moulded under Neoliberalism – this involves deep, recurrent violence beyond mere military force or human rights violations, as violence becomes a means of articulating social memory. Here, neoliberal violence and the management of social memory are interconnected because Neoliberalism impacts how social memory is created and preserved. Poblete (2015: 100) concludes that authoritarian regimes, such as the Chilean military dictatorship, utilise a narrative of a "breakdown" of the political system

and a "clean slate" to forge a national memory that supports their authoritarian projects. This narrative aids in establishing a foundational basis for their rule, allowing them to transcend it, as exemplified by the case of Chile.

On the day Augusto Pinochet died, 10 December 2006, media coverage diverged from the dominant pattern by rhetorically separating his economic policies from the transitional justice and human rights violations experienced during his regime. This separation aimed to enable a more positive evaluation of the economic transformation while acknowledging political repression – effectively compartmentalising these aspects of the dictatorship that, in reality, were deeply intertwined. Coverage by national media outlets such as El Mercurio and international news sources like The Washington Post, The Economist, and The New York Times emphasised this narrative of technical achievement and modernisation, portraying neoliberal transformation as separate from, rather than dependent on, authoritarian coercion in a sanitised frame (The Washington Post 2006; The Economist 2006; Rohter 2006; El Mercurio 2006). Chile had been presented in the media as an example of political transition and economic stability prior to Pinochet's death[1], especially during the governments of the *Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia* (Coalition of Parties for Democracy), the centre-left coalition that ruled from 1990 to 2010. These governments did not radically depart from the economic policies of the regime but instead maintained the same socioeconomic framework as at the outset (Garretón 2012). The narrative of economic success attributed to the transformations initiated by Pinochet's dictatorship was reinforced by the prevailing political consensus. It stemmed from democratic administrations, erasing resistance and political struggles – particularly those of the working class – during the regime. This erasure facilitated the presentation of neoliberal policies as inevitable rather than political, aligning with the TINA discourse; in democratic Chile, there was seemingly no alternative to neoliberal policies.

Media coverage often invoked the "Chilean miracle" narrative, emphasising macroeconomic indicators while downplaying or omitting discussions of rising inequality, labour precarity, and the dismantling of social protections that disproportionately affected working-class Chileans (Winn 2004). Substantive discussions on how economic policies directly impacted working-class communities were largely absent from mainstream coverage. When workers appeared,

1. International media outlets portrayed the Chilean neoliberal project as a success story before General Pinochet died. Some early examples can be found in American liberal news outlets such as The New York Times, Washington Post, and the Wall Street Journal. See Kamm (1993); Rohter (2004); Kozak (2017).

they were usually portrayed as passive recipients of economic growth rather than as agents who both suffered from and resisted neoliberal policies. This was one of the frames explored in documentaries while documenting the days following that particular day. The documentary *The Death of Pinochet* (Osnovikoff and Perut 2011) offers a more nuanced depiction of how Chileans processed the dictator's death, capturing spontaneous reactions across class lines. The film documents public demonstrations of grief and celebration, giving rare mainstream visibility to working-class perspectives on Pinochet's economic legacy. It follows four main characters, three from a working-class background, who reflect on their experiences of that day from the viewpoint of supporters and detractors of Pinochet's persona. In a particularly striking sequence, the filmmakers contrast the celebrations in *Villa Francia,* a working-class neighbourhood known for its resistance to the dictatorship, with the mourning at the Military Hospital where Pinochet's body lay (MacWilliam 2012). The film begins with the spatial division, highlighting how memory is geographically fragmented in post-dictatorship Santiago, with *Plaza Italia* remaining a focal point for political protests. This division helps us understand why and where the upper-class mourners emphasise Pinochet's economic achievements, while residents of working-class neighbourhoods and other middle-class Chileans who gathered to celebrate his death discuss ongoing economic hardships, directly linking their current struggles to policies from the dictatorship era. Nonetheless, class background is not a clear-cut indicator of supporters and detractors. One of Pinochet's supporters, a working-class woman, thanked General Pinochet for helping her start her small business – a kiosk in central Santiago – that enabled her to educate her children, all three of whom hold engineering degrees, as she stated. This shift in working-class political allegiances is not uncommon in housing policies; infrastructure projects have moved some working-class communities into what has been called "thankful memory" (Infante Batiste 2024: 1459). These memories are highlighted when Pinochet loyalists expressed their support for the regime outside the Military Hospital in Santiago (Joignant 2013:175). Political repression and economic hardship affected working-class organisations and their political identities during the dictatorship (Winn 2004). Therefore, favourable opinions of the regime reflected how the Chilean working-class identity was reframed within the neoliberal understanding of individual entitlements and freedoms. The documentary challenges the typical recontextualisation process in mainstream media by refusing to separate economics from politics and by not prioritising elite perspectives, a narrative found among academics' op-eds in the national press (Joignant 2013: 181–185). Instead, it portrays collective memory as fundamentally contested and class-based, as explained by one of the main characters, a

working-class man who was a conscript in the army during the coup. For him, Pinochet was a tyrant who had the Chilean people, *el pueblo chileno*, "under his yoke for 17 years with the PEM and the POJH", policies implemented by the regime to tackle working-class unemployment.[2] These are described in the film as an example of Pinochet's hatred for them.

Previous work by the author examined the discourses surrounding the 40th anniversary of the Chilean coup, focusing on three main narratives: transitional justice, Allende as a fallen hero, and the economic and political success of the transition. These narratives aligned with how national and international media portrayed those events (Watkins and Urbina Montana 2022). The perspectives of Salvador Allende and his political project as a doomed utopia highlight the failure of collective capacity to produce, care for, and enjoy the fruits of commonwealth, relegating any potential alternative to the realm of fiction because they are deemed impossible to realise in practice. This ensures that all possibilities of political reaction are unable to articulate an alternative, as Traverso outlined in his conceptualisation of melancholia (2017: 15–17). Due to the dominant discourses of Chile's political and economic success following its transition and neoliberal revolution, this narrative also serves an ideological purpose, helping to avoid contradictions in the national story of modernity and Chilean exceptionalism. It promotes Chile as a country that has successfully reconciled its past with its present. The accepted narrative, therefore, addresses human rights abuses, justice, and reconciliation within the context of a tragic historical past. This narrative does not challenge the foundations of the economic exceptionalism that Chile has built around its political identity since the 1980s. Consequently, the collective memory of the 1973 coup has been shaped by the need to accept the terms of the Agreed Rupture, initially defined by the Democratic Alliance as a political strategy between 1983 and 1988 and later consolidated by the *Concertación* after the 1988 referendum. This agreement was committed to a political settlement to restore democracy, including the acceptance of the Chilean neoliberal State as a political reality. This perspective contrasts with the bottom-

2. The *Programa de Empleo Mínimo* (Minimum Employment Programme -PEM) was established in 1974 and implemented in March 1975. It aimed to provide employment to the unemployed through various municipal projects. The *Programa de Ocupación para Jefes de Hogar* (Employment Programme for Heads of Households -POJH) was created in October 1982 to address the severe unemployment crisis. It targeted heads of households, particularly in response to the economic downturn that saw unemployment rates soar to around 20%. Both programmes were criticised for their substandard working conditions and inadequate compensation, and as forms of institutionalised subemployment (Urmeneta and Ruiz-Tagle 1984).

-up "dissident memories" of the coup as a Year Zero rupture – an initial point of Chilean struggles with its traumatic past and resistance to some of the radical societal changes introduced by the regime. The memory of Allende within public discourse, which includes narratives of economic instability and polarisation during his administration as well as his persona as a fallen hero, has allowed the transformative memory of Pinochet, as depicted in the documentary, to persist. As one supporter stated in the film, "he was one of the first to defeat communism internationally", echoing the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. This narrative, employed by supporters of Pinochet to justify and glorify his regime, portrays Pinochet as a heroic figure who saved Chile from chaos and Marxist tyranny, emphasising his role in bringing stability and economic growth. Larrain (2001) suggests that heroic figures are familiar among Chileans due to a militaristic identity rooted in the army's role in shaping the Chilean State. The significance of the armed forces in the institutional development of Chile was codified in the 1980s constitution, citing their "cohesive element" of Chilean identity (Larrain 2001: 147). The authoritarian nature of Pinochet's regime reinforced this militaristic identity – one that stressed order, discipline, and national security – allowing a heroic version of history to be celebrated in public discourse, commemorations, and through selective recounting of past events, including the anniversaries of the 40th and 50th years of the coup.

The ongoing debate over Pinochet's legacy as a transformative leader has gained renewed importance with the recent rise of right-wing politics in Chile. Since 2017, José Antonio Kast's right-wing Republican Party has ridden a conservative wave, emphasising the economic changes Chile experienced during the dictatorship and his portrayal as a leader who reshaped the economy, stabilising the country amid perceived chaos. Kast has often highlighted the economic reforms carried out during Pinochet's regime, which he believes laid the foundation for Chile's modern economic success. Despite Gabriel Boric winning the 2021 presidential election, Kast advanced to the second round, demonstrating how narratives about economic reforms and success under Pinochet influence Chilean politics and, notably, public opinion. Two years later, right-wing media and political figures increasingly depicted Chile's current economic challenges as consequences of deviating from Pinochet's model, rather than as the result of its internal contradictions, a view echoed by the international news media.[3]

3. International media outlets highlighted in 2023 that Chile's economic slowdown reflects a dangerous abandonment of the principles that made the country a Latin American success story, explicitly linking current difficulties to insufficient fidelity to neoliberal orthodoxy. They also emphasised the shift among Chileans who do not hold unfavourable views of the Coup and justify it. See Izquierdo and Ugarte (2023) and Funk (2023).

As Chilean political scientist Patricio Navia (2023) noted, Pinochet is now seen as an abusive father and murderer who built the house that the whole family still inhabits, emphasising his role as the most transformative president Chile has had in the last 80 years. As previously suggested, despite the atrocities of the dictatorship, Pinochet could be regarded as the father of contemporary Chile (Navia 2008). Pablo Larraín's *El Conde* (2023) exemplifies this perspective by depicting Pinochet and the politics of memory surrounding his figure. As Borzutzky (2023) stated, by reimagining Pinochet as a 250-year-old vampire who has witnessed centuries of Chilean history, the film employs fantasy to challenge the idea that his economic policies were an inevitable step towards modernisation. The vampire metaphor vividly illustrates the exploitative nature of neoliberal economics. Pinochet survived by draining the life force of others, especially the working class – an image drawn from Fisher's *Exiting the Vampire Castle* (2013), which effectively highlights the need to return to a class-based politics to combat the exploitative aspects of neoliberal policies. Pinochet's portrayal in these films aims to illustrate how the absence of class struggle underpins economic inequalities. Ignoring these struggles helps sanitise the narrative about his economic policies, as it overlooks their political cost to the working class.

Additionally, by extending Pinochet's presence throughout Chilean history, the film incorporates the narrative of the "Chilean miracle", which depicts the dictatorship as a clean break from the past and the beginning of modern prosperity within the ambitions of Chile's elite since independence, as the culmination of Western-style modernisation. However, portraying Pinochet mainly as a symbol – exemplified by his depiction as a vampire figure – reinforces the idea that Neoliberalism is a consequence of his political leadership, aligning with the discourse of a transformative leader shaping his legacy. This is clear at the end of the film, when a young Pinochet, transformed into a schoolboy, is led to his new school by Margaret Thatcher, who assumes the role of a new maternal figure. As a metaphor for his political legacy, his return to life could be seen as the fluidity of his figure, which can be reinterpreted or "rediscovered" in a new context that overlooks his past or political regime. Nonetheless, the media's metanarratives about his persona were a top-down exercise in shaping collective memory of recent history, resonating with the idea of a new Chile born because his neoliberal reforms paved the way to modernity and economic success.

5 Conclusion

The contested memories surrounding Augusto Pinochet reveal the complex interaction between neoliberal transformation and collective memory in Chile's recent history. As this paper has demonstrated, media discourse has gradually reinterpreted Pinochet from a brutal dictator to a transformative leader who modernised Chile's economy through necessary, if painful, reforms. This narrative shift exemplifies what Mark Fisher called "capitalist realism" – the belief that neoliberalism is not a political choice but the only viable economic reality. In this framework, working-class experiences and resistance are systematically erased, and economic transformation is celebrated as a historical inevitability. This Chilean case finds a compelling parallel in the United Kingdom, where Margaret Thatcher's legacy has undergone a similar revaluation (Stepney 2014; Bale 2015). Both Pinochet and Thatcher are increasingly portrayed as architects of modernisation and national renewal, whose economic achievements are used to justify or obscure the social costs of their respective regimes, despite being driven by coercion in Chile and by consent in the UK. Nevertheless, both cases demonstrate how memory politics can strategically compartmentalise violence and repression, preserve the economic model while distancing it from its authoritarian origins.

The binary opposition between Salvador Allende as the "fallen hero" and Pinochet as the transformative leader further illustrates how ideological narratives shape collective memory. Allende's legacy is often confined to tragic idealism, while Pinochet's is reframed as pragmatic modernisation. This dichotomy not only simplifies Chile's complex political history but also reinforces neoliberal hegemony by marginalising alternative visions of democracy and social justice. As Chile confronts a renewed wave of right-wing politics, exemplified by figures like José Antonio Kast, the stakes of memory become increasingly urgent. The rehabilitation of Pinochet's image is not merely a historical revision; it is a political strategy that legitimises contemporary neoliberal agendas. Recovering bottom-up memories of working-class resistance and suffering is essential to challenging the narrative that "there is no alternative". These memories remind us that neoliberalism was not inevitable, and that its foundations, whether built by Thatcher or Pinochet, remain contested. Ultimately, the fight over memory is a fight over political possibility. By examining how media and cultural texts have contributed to the recontextualisation of Pinochet's legacy, this paper highlights the ideological work carried out by historical narratives. In both Chile and the UK, the past is not just remembered – it is actively shaped to influence the future.

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