Contemporary Chilean Cinema and Traumatic Memory: 
Andrés Wood’s Machuca and Raúl Ruiz’s Le domaine Perdu

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Introduction

This essay contributes to the scholarship on Chilean cinema’s consistent engagement with the traumatic memory of the dictatorship. It discusses two recent narrative films, both directed by Chilean auteurs, which depict the experience of the military coup that overthrew the government of Salvador Allende in 1973. The films are: Andrés Wood’s Machuca (2004) and Raúl Ruiz’s Le domaine perdu (2004). Where Machuca largely follows the conventions of mainstream narrative cinema, representing the historical past through a coherent, linear chronology, Le domaine perdu is full of the laberynthine and baroque temporal and narrative juxtapositions that have become Ruiz’s trademark.

This essay’s discussion is situated within ongoing debates in memory and trauma studies regarding the question of visual culture’s capacity, or lack of it, to represent trauma. In this respect I will discuss in relation to my analysis ideas by Dominick LaCapra, Joshua Hirsch, Miriam Hansen, and Susannah Radstone. One of the essay’s central concerns is the limits of the trauma framework in facilitating diverse understandings of cultures of political memory. Chile’s contemporary culture of political memory is far from homogenous and this diversity, as I argue here, is expressed in these two films: where Machuca seems driven by a desire to “remember” fixed memories that “act out” the traumas of the military coup, Le domaine perdu encourages responses that “work through” trauma by elaborating a plural, heterogenous and unfixed sense of historical truth and cultural memory.
**Trauma, Representation and Cinema**

Central to the debate about cultural trauma is the problem of whether trauma can or cannot be represented in speech, writing, performance, photography, film or visual arts. The idea of the failure of the representation of trauma partly derives from Adorno’s dictum that “after Auschwitz to write poetry is barbaric.” The significance of the specific historical reference underlying Adorno’s remark, namely the Holocaust, has been transferred to other, more recent experiences of genocide and atrocity, and is often believed to mean that to represent trauma is not only an impossibility but to attempt it would constitute a gross ethical transgression.

In a recent intervention Joshua Hirsch proposes the “discourse of trauma” as a way of facilitating not only a theory of trauma representation but also of bridging methodological gaps in analyses of individual and collective historical experiences. According to Hirsch, “the discourse of trauma—as one encounters it in conversation, in reading, in film—gives one a language with which to … represent the failure of representation” (18). In fact, despite Adorno’s warning, post-Holocaust histories and experiences of collective suffering have been represented through a broad range of cultural forms. Among these, it is film that most often and vividly has been mobilised to visualise traumatic experience. The sheer magnitude of cinema’s interest in historical trauma and traumatic memory points to the emergence of a genre in its own right, as Janet Walker’s phrase “trauma cinema” (2005) seems to suggest.

In this context, Dominick LaCapra (2001) has advanced a critique of the dominant representational paradigm used by trauma films, which, according to him would establish a model of cinematic “acting out” of traumatic memory by prompting real or
performed survivors to act out traumatic symptoms in front of the camera. The outcome of this strategy would be that the films merely work as relay points in unconscious cultural processes of trauma transmission. In psychoanalysis acting out refers to a moment or technique in the therapeutic process, which is used by the analyst to identify and uncover a repressed trauma. Acting out consists in inducing a state in the patient—through methods such as hypnosis and memory work—in which she or he may revisit mentally and verbally the (repressed) memory of the traumatic event, in order to re-experience it emotionally. According to the theory, once the repressed trauma has been acted out and emotionally re-lived, its recognition by the patient may lead to the second stage or technique: working through. In this latter stage of the therapy the patient is then able to articulate the overwhelmingly emotional and bodily memory of the traumatic experience through language and narrative forms, that is, he or she may be able to, so to speak, tame the trauma by naming and a narrativising it. Thus, LaCapra (2001) suggests a use of these coupled terms outside the context of therapy in the domain of culture. He argues that these categories can be productive in furthering understandings of texts that deal with historical trauma caused by catastrophic events. In a lengthy discussion of Claude Lanzman’s influential Holocaust testimonial documentary Shoah, LaCapra (1997) critiques what he describes as Lanzman’s obsession with having his Jewish interviewees—who are death camp survivors—act out their repressed trauma, apparently dormant beneath their scarcity of words and taciturn manners. According to LaCapra, Lanzman’s agenda throughout his film is to elicit this acting out of Holocaust trauma in front of the camera in order to facilitate its transmission to the film’s audience. LaCapra adds that much modernist and contemporary art, but also broad twentieth-century accounts of modern Western history, suffer from this obsession with acting out trauma.
LaCapra favours, in consequence, cultural forms and texts that place a greater emphasis on working through processes, that is, texts and figurations that may contribute to open up the cycles of trauma transmission and to the subsequent release of audiences from trauma’s straight-jacket.

In the remainder of this essay, I will consider LaCapra’s theory of trauma texts in relation to the two Chilean trauma films mentioned earlier. As already advanced in the introduction, whereas *Machuca* can clearly be categorised as an acting-out trauma film, as it seems driven by a desire to re-enact fixed memories of the traumas of the Chilean dictatorship, *Le domaine perdu* can be more accurately defined as a working-through trauma film, as it would engage with the dictatorship memory by elaborating a heterogenous and unfixed sense of historical experience.

However, in rehearsing LaCapra’s textual categorisation through my analysis of these Chilean films, I do not seek to consummate a blind celebration of *Le domaine perdu* on the grounds of an utter dismissal of *Machuca*, but to suggest that both approaches can be considered, in terms of their potential and limitations, in a broader process of national historical elaboration through cinematic spectatorship. Indeed, Joshua Hirsch (2004) has taken up LaCapra’s theorisation of acting-out and working-through texts in an encompassing critical discussion of Holocaust films, identifying a tendency to acting out in modern avant-garde cinema, according to which well established modernist cinematic styles would visualise, and thus repeat, the symptomatic characteristics of traumatic memory. However, Hirsch moderates LaCapra’s critique suggesting that in order to have the capacity to produce working-through texts a culture firstly needs to acknowledge and come to terms with its traumas by acting it
out through narrative and figuration, that is, acting out would be a necessary stage of any process of mourning or working through. Similarly, Miriam Hansen (2001) proposes that films that address traumas of collective and historical dimensions often function to rework trauma narratives in the name of public memory and national identity. In this sense, she adds, these films would contribute to the political and politicised construction of national history. In terms of their reception, Hansen goes on, these films often expose contesting views of traumatic histories, while also making visible the unequal discursive arenas that lay claim to what and how a nation or community ought to remember.

Thus, extending Hirsch’s and Hansen’s ideas I would argue that in the context of Chilean contemporary political culture all films engaging with traumatic memories of the military dictatorship period possess a relative degree of significance, despite their being categorised as either acting-out or working-through, in so far as they constitute contributions to the overall political process through which Chile’s political society comes to terms with its traumatic past.

**Machuca**

*Machuca* uses the narrative and stylistic conventions of the mainstream historical drama to produce a recreation of the final weeks of the socialist government and the first days of the dictatorship in Chile’s capital, Santiago, during the year 1973.iii However, despite the scenes that realistically depict mass street political rallies and its careful attention to detail in the composition of the historically specific *mise-en-scène*, the film’s period recreation favours a subjective approach by focussing on the experience of Gonzalo Infante (played by Matías Quer), a blondish, plump 13 year-
old boy, whose upper-middle class family is on the verge of a total collapse (thus, echoing the deep crisis the country as a whole is undergoing). Gonzalo attends an expensive all-boys private school run by an English priest, Father McEnroe, who is carrying out an experiment of social integration by bringing boys from lower socio-economical backgrounds to the school. Pedro Machuca (played by Ariel Mateluna), with thick, black hair and dark complexion, is one of the new boys. He is told to sit at the desk behind Gonzalo’s.

Gonzalo and Pedro become close friends. Pedro lives with his sole-parent mother and baby sister in a shanty-town located not far from Gonzalo’s affluent neighbourhood, on the opposite side of the river. They visit each other’s homes after school, gaining a glimpse of their radically different life styles. Yet, whereas for Pedro this means to be able to borrow Gonzalo’s bicycle, Adidas sneakers and Lone Ranger comic books, for Gonzalo the newly found friendship sets off a series of character-changing experiences. One day after school, Gonzalo joins Pedro along with the latter’s uncle and 15 year-old cousin, Silvana (played by Manuela Martelli), on a trip to the city centre, where the man with the help of the kids earns an income by selling cigarettes and flags with the symbols of the various political parties to street rally attendants. As a result, Gonzalo, willingly and joyfully assisting the others in their work, becomes an unlikely participant of some of the mass street demonstrations that were held in Santiago in support of Allende’s government in the weeks leading to the coup. Soon Gonzalo becomes a regular visitor of Pedro’s and Silvana’s slum. Sitting by the polluted waters of the river, in the midst of scattered debris, one day Silvana initiates Gonzalo into kissing. All these experiences are suddenly stopped by the military coup. Gonzalo’s father has recently left Chile to take a post in Europe, his mother has not
come back from her lover’s house and his older sister has left with her neo-fascist boyfriend. Gonzalo and the maid sit together and watch in silence the black and white images of the aftermath of the coup on television.

Many of Machuca’s reviews refer to it as a “coming of age” film. In addition to this perception, Machuca’s narrative is often described by critics as a reference to the director’s own personal remembrance of that period, when he was himself a child. Thus, although the film cannot be accurately described as an auto-biographical text, the extra-textual information conveyed in publicity and review material promotes a reading of the film in terms of which the director’s own recollections of the depicted historical events would constitute the substrate of the fictionalised dramatisation. This reception of the film is further encouraged by its visual style, which at strategic moments stresses a subjective point of view. For example, in the opening scene the film establishes its central point of view to be, if not Gonzalo’s own subjective gaze, at least a close, even intimate, cinematic look that follows him everywhere. In this scene, Gonzalo is dressing himself in his bedroom early in the morning moments before going to school. In conjunction with the ethereal flute music that we hear even before seeing any images—suggesting a feeling of innocence as well as an attitude of tender sympathy towards the depicted subject—the camera then follows the boy’s movements in extreme close-up, passing from his hands to his clothes and to the mirror where Gonzalo’s face is revealed looking at himself in silence. One of the effects of this close range camera is the production of a haptic image, that is, a visual image that triggers tactile or olfactory sensations and, as a result, augments the perception of the scene as subjective memory. Even though throughout the film a more objective or omniscient approach will be used to describe narrative and
historical events, from time to time, the subjective camera will return accompanied by the same ethereal music.

The reception of *Machuca* as a memory film is in accordance with some of the features of a contemporary film sub-genre by male directors that Susannah Radstone has recently called the “nostalgia for boyhood” film (2007: 181), which contain “narratives in which male protagonists remember or ‘revisit’ the scenes of their youth” (184). In order to understand this kind of film, Radstone invokes the classic linguistic theory of Benveniste, who defined two modes of enunciation, namely, historical and discursive. In terms of this framework, *Machuca* would then encourage a reading as memory, while being enounced historically. According to Benveniste’s theory, “[h]istoric enunciation denies its selectivity, partiality and limitations by means of strategies through which it presents its version of events as ‘always already there’” (Radstone 2007: 185). *Machuca* in fact collapses memory and history, that is, while inviting the audience to engage sympathetically with Gonzalo’s subjective experience in the foreground, the child’s “coming of age” travail occurs against a historical background that appears to be “always already there”. Indeed, *Machuca* rehearses and repeats an established trajectory of the events of 1973 Chile, sometimes even visually quoting from iconic documentary images, for example, from Patricio Guzmán’s *The Battle of Chile*, thus further reinforcing its claim to historical authenticity. At the same time, extending the metonymy suggested above between Gonzalo’s family and country, *Machuca* can be interpreted has an allegory in which the coming of age of its central character stands for the loss of innocence, if not of the whole Chilean society, at least of the middle-class political intelligenzia.
Machuca’s collapsing of memory and history is best illustrated in the film’s climatic scene, which is temporally positioned one or two days after the coup. This ambiguity between memory and history is visible in the paradoxical position that Gonzalo is made to occupy within this scene’s diegesis. A wide shot firstly shows Gonzalo hastily cycling through the barren field that takes to the shanty town, which he traversed with Pedro after school so many an afternoon over the previous months.

The next shot, taken from a low angle, shows the silhouettes of soldiers holding their guns and guarding the place while standing on a small hill located nearby. Despite this potent sign, Gonzalo gets off his bike and walks slowly into one of the passages that are formed between the rows of wooden shacks. He looks at the scene in shock as the place is being violently raided by the military, who are destroying the meagre huts and burning piles of political propaganda. Gonzalo is engulfed by the black smoke
from the burnings and the constant screaming of both soldiers and dwellers. Behind him we see children and women holding babies being pushed by soldiers into the back of a truck. At intervals the camera either turns on him revealing his somber expression as he walks and looks on or it turns around revealing the violent scenes he is bearing witness to. A hand-held camera intensifies the reading of these images as the boy’s own visual and emotional experience. Thus, Gonzalo becomes completely immersed in the chaos of the scene with soldiers thrusting people on both sides [clip 2].

Machuca Clip 2

CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDO FILE ( MP4 – 2.2 MB )
At this point, he comes face to face with a jeep full of soldiers moving in the opposite direction, which almost completely blocks the narrow passage, but in the next shot Gonzalo keeps walking forward holding on to his bicycle as if he had magically walked through the jeep [clip 3].

Machuca Clip 3

CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDO FILE ( MP4 – 3.5 MB )

In fact, the scene by now manages to create the uncanny impression of a disembodied or ghostly Gonzalo, who, not unlike the camera itself, both is and is not there, both is and is not seen and touched by the many clashing bodies that cram the reduced space. In this sense, Gonzalo is foregrounded as a witness of events occurring in a space that he cannot reach and which can not touch him. This is a paradoxical structure that, although is presented as spatial, can only be understood as a temporal dislocation.
But the above reading is by no means one that *Machuca* seeks self-consciously to incite. On the contrary, soon the film will overtly subvert its construction of Gonzalo’s subjective positioning, which reaches its climax with his witnessing of the killing of Silvana, who is shot by a soldier as she tries to protect her father who is being beaten by the troops. Significantly, it is at the point of the witnessing of atrocity that Gonzalo for the first time halts his moving forward and makes a first tentative attempt at turning back, as if the film, having reached the very source of the trauma that motivates it, were to begin a temporal return [clip 4].

Machuca Clip 4

CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDO FILE ( MP4 – 5.7 MB )
From here on the scene reassumes its more conventional, omniscient narration as Gonzalo’s backing calls for the first time the attention of one of the soldiers to the boy’s presence. When the soldier forcefully blocks his way, Gonzalo appeals to his middle class appearance—his clothes, bicycle, and fair complexion—to support his claim that he doesn’t belong in that place, thus denying his friendship to Pedro and most significantly his status as witness of the brutal murder of Silvana. Gonzalo’s pleading also attracts Pedro’s attention, who has also witnessed the killing of Silvana. This segment’s omniscient narration is further illustrated by the movement from objective shots to semi-subjective reverse shots that equally describe the content of the soldier’s, Pedro’s and Gonzalo’s gazes [clip 5].

Machuca Clip 5

CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDO FILE ( MP4 – 3.5 MB )
The omniscient narrative approach closes the scene with a wide, telephoto shot of Gonzalo escaping the place, appearing from behind a cloud of dark smoke and riding towards the camera visibly anguished. The climatic value of this image is intensified by the image’s slow motion and an extremely dramatic soundtrack. Then, both the image and the sound fade out [clip 6].

Machuca Clip 6

CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDEO FILE (MP4 – 3.2 MB)
The next shot fades in. The camera is following Gonzalo as he rides on a paved street. Firstly, we see only his front bicycle’s wheel. Then, the camera begins a tilt up until it reveals his sneakers and jeans, then his torso, hands on the bicycle’s handles and finally his face. The camera continues to move with him, observing him in almost complete silence (apart from some distant whistle sounds), until it pans slightly to the left and lets him ride away [clip 7].

Machuca Clip 7

CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDEO FILE (MP4 – 1.5 MB)
This silent shot closes the temporal cycle of the suggested subjective memory, which began with the film’s opening shot’s equivalent silent, haptic exploration of the boy’s body. The shot also powerfully evokes a deep sense of trauma in Gonzalo, which, in terms of the category of acting-out trauma films being rehearsed in this essay, may well have resonated among left-orientated Chileans.

**Le domaine perdu**

Ruiz’s *Le domaine perdu* is a film that I propose as an alternative to *Machuca* in its mode of engagement with the memory of the Chilean dictatorship. Like most of the films of Ruiz, who has lived in France since 1973 after leaving Chile due to the military coup, *Le domaine perdu* is spoken mainly in French. Its original title translates into English literally as “the lost domain” and perhaps figuratively as “paradise lost”. This loss of a mythical space-time can be interpreted as referring to the film’s central character’s fabled childhood in Chile as much as to the equally legendary Chilean socialist dream that was shattered by the military coup in 1973. Indeed, the idea of a lost paradise is suggested in the film at various textual levels, especially in its central literary reference. According to Jorge Morales:

> In Ruiz’s film, Alain Fournier’s *Le Grand Meaulnes* is the favourite book of Max Miranda, a Chilean pilot who lives in London during World War 2 as a R.A.F. flying instructor […] ‘The Lost Domain’ was one of the titles considered by Fournier earlier for his book. Fournier’s novel narrates the story of a newly adolescent boy, who one day becomes lost in the countryside and finds a big, old house. In the house […] he meets a beautiful young woman and falls in love immediately. After going back
home, Meaulnes desires to see the girl again but he finds it impossible to locate the house again. Thus, the mysterious site acquires mythic dimensions and begins to inhabit his imaginary as a lost paradise.

(Morales: 2005) iii

Fournier’s Meaulnes’s entertaining of a memory that becomes a foundational myth resonates in Ruiz’s Max (played by François Cluzet), whose childhood and early adulthood memories become enmeshed with the images of his dreams, fantasies and literary readings. Thus, present experience, far from constituting the positive accumulation of the past figured in our common-sense linear representation of time, explodes for Max in a circular temporality. This temporality resembles the “open memory” invoked by Radstone by virtue of which Max’s traumatic recollections of World War 2 and the military coup in Chile are creatively embraced in the task of interpreting the signs of the present.

Indeed, in the promotional material Ruiz’s film is presented as a memory text in two senses: firstly, as a film that in order to remember a “lost domain” reshapes a foreign landscape into the geography of memory, and, secondly, as a narrative in which the main character, Max, is himself constituted by an act of remembrance. iv The first sign that the film offers in this direction is its opening frame, which is a still image: the shipwreck of an old, rusty cargo, half sank in a completely still sea. On this image we hear Max’s voice-over beginning to narrate his recollections. Thus, memory, like the shipwreck that fills the screen, is an ambivalent notion, as it evokes loss, decay, stagnation, pain and ultimately death as much as the imminence of the creative recovery of a time past. Such a recovery through memory is suggested by a reading of the shipwreck as a Ruizian ghost
ship in which memory is indistinguishable from dream, fantasy and desire. This ambivalence of the temporality of the first image defines the whole film’s approach to time and memory, which unfolds through a constant and rapid passing between temporal layers as well as through complex juxtapositions of what is remembered sometimes as experience and sometimes as dream, literature, or myth.

In the second shot, a jeep full of soldiers passes by a house near the beach in the middle of the night. The text on the screen reads “Chile, 11/9/73”. Inside the house, Max reminisces about his past experience in World War 2. But, then, as quickly as we are taken from the trauma of 1973 to that of the 1940s the narration and the images now transport us to Max’s childhood. We see a biplane, one of those from World War 1, flying over a house near the ocean on a sunny day.

Source: [http://www.mabuse.cl/1448/article-70739.html](http://www.mabuse.cl/1448/article-70739.html)

We see the beach and the waves and then a boy inside the house looking at the airplane through the window. At this point we hear a distinctive flute theme, which will return throughout the film to denote both an aerial movement of the camera and a movement of
memory in the narrative. Immediately, the camera begins to float, lightly taking off and exploring surfaces at close proximity, then ascending swiftly, moving away from the ground but returning to it in the end to mark the completion of this memory scene. There is an extra-diegetic relationship between this aerial camera movement and the fluid movements of memory. The same aerial camera movement is seen again in a World War 2 scene in which the young Max gives his friend Antoine (played by Grégoire Colin) a flying lesson. Suddenly, we hear the flute theme and the camera becomes airborne as before, floating away from the two men and moving in circles around the stationed airplane, now approaching it, now retreating from it. The trauma of war is at this point suggested by Antoine’s silence and then by his annoyance as he finds it difficult to learn, saying that he desires neither to fight nor to fly anymore.

Source: http://www.mabuse.cl/1448/article-70739.html

The association of traumatic memories from both World War 2 and the Chilean dictatorship is further establish in a later scene in which Max is seen in his Chilean beach house one night, when a young couple—Agustin and Helene—knock on his door. The young man has a bad wound in one of his arms and his white shirt is completely blood stained. Although they don’t say it, and Max doesn’t ask, it is understood that they are being chased by the military regime’s political police. When Max gives Agustin first aid
the young man screams in pain. The volume of his scream increases exponentially and through it we move back to the R.A.F. base where Max and Antoine were posted. The base is being air raided: bombs are falling, fire and smoke fill the space, people run, and planes burn parked on the runway. Back at Max’s house, he is sitting at the table talking with the young couple. We learn that Augustin is looking for his father in Chile. He produces a photograph and Max recognises Antoine. The persistent sound of thunder outside activates more traumatic flashbacks in Max, as he continues to talk with the youngsters. A musical theme becomes progressively louder until it covers over all the voices.

The way in which Ruiz elaborates his cinematic temporal fluctuations diverges from the conventions of traditional narrative film, which in spite of its flashbacks and flashforwards is always guided by an underlying urge to maintain the coherence of a linear, absolute time. Ruiz instead respects no coherence, and the more he produces temporal narrative transitions through flashbacks and returns the less certainty one retains as to which is the past and which is the present. In the end, we gain a sense that what we are witnessing is not simply a convoluted representation of an ultimately linear historical narrative but the operations of subjective memory itself, with its confusions, blurrings, and creative reconstructions. In the midst of it, however, the tendency to repeat the same memories, sometimes even from different perspectives, connotes the presence of trauma as the force of a dialectics of articulation and disarticulation.

Mythical memory and traumatic memory are also enmeshed in Ruiz’s film with oneiric and literary reminiscences. This is best illustrated in a latter scene that quotes the central narrative image of Fournier’s Le Grand Meaulnes, as referred to above. In the scene, the
child Max and the adult Antoine, find a nineteenth-century two-storey house in the middle of the Chilean desert, freshly painted white and generously lit up. Max and Antoine find inside the house a well-attended party with the guests wearing aristocratic nineteenth-century clothes, and dancing, chatting, and drinking in every room. Antoine speaks with the young and beautiful daughter of the landlady, who tells him that the party is held once a year to celebrate the anniversary of her engagement to her fiancé, who went missing one day a long time ago and has never returned. She points at the dozens of framed portraits of the disappeared man that cover the walls in every room of the house. These signs of repetition refer us once again to trauma, which is at the level of the characters in the narrative expressed in the form of a melancholic attachment to the absence/presence of a lost loved one. Yet, at a contextual level, it also refers us to the traumas of the Chilean dictatorship. Especially to the many cases of men who disappeared in 1973 and whose remains were found with visible signs of torture only after 1990, following the end of the military regime, buried in unmarked collective graves in distant, isolated locations in Chile’s northern Calama desert. In contrast to the family of the missing man in *Le domaine perdu*, however, the families’ attachment to the memory of their missing husbands, fathers and sons in this case was not melancholic but deeply political. At this point the guests are invited by their host to move closer to the windows to see an “apparition”. This, and the fact that some of the guests wear skeleton masks, encourages a reading of this place as a house of the dead. In the ceaseless transitions between temporalities the memory of experience and the imagination have become indistinct and so the living and the dead are seen dancing together. Bright lights are distinguished outside through the windows, and then we hear the fireworks, which soon become mixed with the loud noise of explosions.
After endless temporal circulations throughout the film’s intricate narrative structure, in the film’s closing shot a floating camera returns us to the sea, this time not a still image but a wide aerial shot of the ocean. *Le domaine perdu* begins with the image of a shipwreck in a still sea and ends with the ocean’s incessant undulations, thus signaling the contrast between the staleness of traumatic memory against the intensity of a creative memory that continues to be reshaped in the living present.

The model of a positive embracing of memory as a productive and creative domain, whose mobility and openness is otherwise constantly being fixed by trauma and nostalgia, is considered in Radstone’s discussion of memory films that break “the mould of the nostalgia for boyhood films by working towards [an open] embrace of loss, death and natural history” (190).*xvii* *Le domaine perdu*, in a similar vein, actively discourages the repetitive, traumatic acting out of trauma while contributing to the textual working through textual advocated by LaCapra. Accordingly, there might be a third way in which this film’s title can be understood: the “lost domain,” a domain that is the object of an active search within the film’s baroque layering, may after all be memory itself.

**Conclusion**

This paper has shown that *Machuca* encourages a reading of the film as memory by means of both extra-textual information and visual style. Furthermore, it presents a coherent narrative of fictitious personal experiences against the backdrop of an established history of events that unfold chronologically on the screen and is therefore perceived as an “always already there” historical time. In contrast, *Le domaine perdu* has been described as a self-reflexive text constructed by the accumulation and circulation of narrative layers in which the narration of what the central character remembers,
constantly merges with historical references, dream descriptions, and mythical and literary quotations and depictions. Thus, following the model of conceptualising trauma texts offered by LaCapra, the paper has argued that whereas Machuca seems motivated by a desire to remember fixed memories through the acting out the traumas of the military period, Le domaine perdu actively works through these traumas by elaborating a heterogenous and unfixed sense of historical truth and cultural memory.

At the same time, however, despite these films’ differing approaches (acting out and working through) both films possess a specific degree of significance within the broader, extra-textual context of Chilean political history. Following Hansen’s reflection on the importance of all films that address traumatic histories within a specific national context, I’d like to argue that through the example of films discussed in this essay many Chilean filmmakers seem committed to a process of articulating a “trauma discourse” (Hirsch) with which to address the failure of representation that trauma motivates. The fact that a good part of Chilean cinema can be defined as “trauma cinema” (Walker) is symptomatic of the close relationship between this country’s film production and its traumatic history. This is a relationship that, in the case of films such as Andrés Wood’s Machuca and Raúl Ruiz’s Le domaine perdu, contributes to Chile’s engagement with its traumatic historical past through politicised approaches to cultural memory.

**Works Cited**


Films Cited

La batalla de Chile (dir. Patricio Guzmán, Chile/Cuba, 1976-1979)

Le domaine perdu (dir. Raúl Ruiz, France/Portugal, 2004)

Machuca (dir. Andrés Wood, Chile, 2004)

Shoah (dir. Claude Lanzman, France, 1985)

Notes

i The paper is part of a book project provisionally entitled ‘Chilean Cinema: Politics, Trauma, Memory’.

ii The classic theorisation of trauma in the humanities pivots around the idea of a representational collapse, as seen for example in the pioneering work of Elaine Scarry (1985), for whom the pain of the tortured is not only “inexpressible” but it has the capacity to “unmake the world” through a shattering of language; Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992), who talk about a “crisis of witnessing”; and Cathy Caruth (1996), who refers to traumatic experience as “unclaimed”. More recently, Joshua Hirsch has addressed this “failure of representation” through the notion of “discourse of trauma” (2004: 18).

iii This famous statement can be found in Adorno (1988); see also Adorno’s revision of his maxim in Adorno (1973: 362-3).

iv Dominick LaCapra (1997) discusses the quasi-theological sacred sense with which the Holocaust has been imbued, thus complicating any engagement with the topic with taboos and prohibitions. For example, LaCapra refers to the prohibition on the question ‘why?’, or Warumverbot, as well as the prohibition on images, or Bilderverbot, (1-6) in relation to the Holocaust. The views about the Holocaust of French film director Claude Lanzmann offer a potent illustration of what LaCapra is referring to. According to Lanzmann, the Holocaust is “unique in the sense that it erects around itself, in a circle of flames, a boundary which cannot be breached because a certain absolute degree of horror is intransmissible: to pretend it can be done is to make oneself guilty of the most serious sort of transgression” (quoted in Hansen 2001: 133). Arguably, this sense of “sacredness” of the traumatic event persists, although to a lesser degree, in most discussions about the representation of human suffering in post-Holocaust historical catastrophes.

v My emphasis.

vi Additionally, LaCapra (2001) extends this critique to highly influential deconstructionist theories of trauma, which have become key references in the field of trauma studies, in particular Felman and Laub (1992) and Caruth (1995).

vii The film won the Most Popular International Film award at the 2004 Vancouver International Film Festival, was selected Quinzaine des Réalisateurs at Cannes in 2004, and was nominated for an Ariel Award in 2005 in the category Best Ibero-American Film. Additionally, it received awards at international film festivals in Brussels, Bogotá, Lima, Quito, Viña del Mar, and Valdivia.

viii Karen Backstein (2005) stresses that “Wood himself came of age during that period, and Machuca is the first Chilean fiction film to examine the coup's effect on this young generation.”

ix On haptic sense perception, see Paterson (2007), and on haptics applied specifically to film, see Marks (2000).

x This reading is not unlikely; Latin American and, in general, third world national cinema scholarship has shown that films produced in these regions more often than not allegorise the nation, with individual characters standing for specific ideological entities within national historical processes and social formations, while plots represent national foundational myths, historical narratives or projects of nation.

xi Produced in 2004, the film only premiered in Chile in 2006 at the International Film Festival of Viña del Mar.

xii A good point of entry into the literature on Ruiz’s cinema is Bandis et al. (2004), which includes a select bibliography and list of web resources.
In the 2006 film festival’s catalogue the film was described in the following terms: “The film reconstructs the Chilean landscape in Rumania. During the events of September 1973, Max, a Chilean, remembers past events during WW2 in which he participated. This is a work about parallel times.”

“This is a film about airplanes but because we didn’t have many airplanes we had to make the camera fly” (Raúl Ruiz, cited in Quintín 2005)

In another scene that reflects the theme of the disappeared and the plight of their relatives, we see Max and Helene trying to locate Agustin’s whereabouts by going to public sport venues that have been abilitated by the military as centres of detention of political detainees. As the two leave these venues, they are hassled by anxious mothers and wives asking them for news about their own relatives.

Emphasis in the original. Radstone is here adapting a film analysis by Tania Modleski in which the latter applies Hélène Cixous’s theorisation of sexually differentiated approaches to the memory of a loss by means of which the French feminist writer proposes a distinction between the suffering of loss in the linear temporality of mourning and the embracing of loss in an “open memory”.

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xiii My translation from Spanish.
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