



Merchant, P. (2017). Rhetorics of Chilean Cinema (Pablo Corro, 2014). *Film Studies*, 16(1), 94-102. <https://doi.org/10.7227/FS.16.0008>

Peer reviewed version

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[10.7227/FS.16.0008](https://doi.org/10.7227/FS.16.0008)

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Rhetorics of Chilean Cinema (Pablo Corro, 2014)

Paul Merchant (University of Cambridge)

Introduction

The circulation of theoretical ideas about cinema across national and linguistic boundaries is uneven and unpredictable. It is intriguing to note, for example, that much literature in the field, especially work associated with the continental tradition of thought,¹ is translated into Spanish and published in Latin America before reaching the Anglophone market. Such is the case for some of the writings of Georges Didi-Huberman, Jean-Luc Nancy, and most importantly for the purposes of this extract, for those of Gianni Vattimo, whose concept of ‘weak thought’ is central to Pablo Corro’s analysis of the poetics of Chilean film. Vattimo first articulated this concept in a book published in 1983, but that volume only became available in English in 2012.² Corro’s adaptation of Vattimo’s ‘weak thought’ into ‘weak poetics’ has, therefore, a particular freshness for the Anglophone scholarly reader.

The book from which the present chapter is taken, *Retóricas del cine chileno* (*Rhetorics of Chilean Cinema*), is an ambitious and wide-ranging survey of styles and concerns in Chilean filmmaking, from the 1950s to the present day. Corro aims to discern (a) national tradition(s), but not in an exclusive sense: in his account, Chilean cinema avails itself of and reworks cinematic ideas and techniques from Europe and elsewhere. These ‘rhetorics’ (i.e., formal structures of persuasion and representation) cover issues from cinematic genres to subjectivity, baroque aesthetics, and the presence or absence of the working classes on screen.

According to Corro, Chilean cinema is both open to transnational influence (whether theoretical or technical) and is profoundly shaped by local factors, from the technological conditions of production to dictatorial or post-dictatorial political contexts. Each of these factors, he suggests elsewhere in the book, contribute to the increased adoption of aesthetics of enclosure and inaction by Chilean filmmakers. Something of these aesthetics of enclosure becomes visible towards the end of the present chapter, which largely adopts a broader historical approach. The crucial ‘twist’ which Corro gives to his narrative is provided courtesy of Vattimo’s concept of ‘weak thought’, which Corro adapts to visual culture to produce ‘weak poetics’. This notion provides the basis for Corro’s original, creative approach to Chile’s internationally renowned filmmakers (Raúl Ruiz) and to its lesser-known directors (Cristián Sánchez, Silvio Caiozzi, Ignacio Agüero).

Corro’s writing is dense and allusive: each idea is pushed in several directions, sometimes within the same sentence. The metaphors and images he generates are swiftly stretched, challenged, rendered nearly unthinkable by the next idea in the intellectual genealogy that he traces. The effect is disorientating, perhaps, particularly for Anglophone readers, used to rather more linear argumentation. I have however attempted to recreate the complexity of Corro’s rhetorical style as faithfully as possible, while maintaining marked concern for clarity and accessibility. I do so because Corro’s stylistic techniques mimic the films he discusses, creating a world where meaning is broken and dispersed into glimpsed appearances and acousmatic sounds, where cinematic space cannot function as a source of stable signification. Corro’s intellectual historicisation of this fracturing of meaning allows for a better understanding of its implications. Principal among these is the suggestion that the cinema of the mundane, the everyday or the individual (which, as he notes, proliferates in recent Chilean productions) is not a retreat from politics, but rather a complication or recasting of the grounds on which it might be practised.

Las Poéticas débiles

Weak Poetics

This chapter was originally published in: **Pablo Corro, *Retóricas del cine chileno*, Santiago de Chile: Cuarto Propio, 2014, pp. 217-225.**

It is possible to see, in the development of Chilean cinema over the last decade, a growing interest in stories of small things, of insignificant matters. A rejection of epic treatments of historical subjects, the dramatic predominance of feminine roles over masculine ones, and a weakening of the agentic presence of the latter. I use the term weakness for this preference for low-intensity actions, the interest in backgrounds, the reclaiming of sound as a dimension rich in suggestion and refractive of literalities, the taste for the *hors-champ* as a deliberate margin for the spectator's imaginary inventions. Articulated in a programme of work, and aligned as an aesthetic, a style, these mechanisms or creative modes merit the name of 'weak poetics'.

In Latin American fiction film, they can be traced through *Whisky* (Pablo Stoll, 2004), *El bonaerense* (Pablo Trapero, 2002), *La ciénaga* or *La niña santa* [*The Holy Girl*] (Lucrecia Martel, 2001, 2004), *Y las vacas vuelan* (Fernando Lavanderos, 2004), *Play* (Alicia Scherson, 2005), *Dos hermanos* (Martín Rodríguez, 2000), *B-happy* (Gonzalo Justiniano, 2003), *Machuca* (Andrés Wood, 2004), *La vida me mata* [*Life Kills Me*] (Sebastián Silva, 2007), *Tony Manero* (Pablo Larraín, 2008), *El cielo, la tierra y la lluvia* [*The Sky, The Earth and the Rain*] (José Luis Torres Leiva, 2008) and in all the films of the Mexican Carlos Reygadas:

Japón (2002), *Batalla en el cielo* [*Battle in Heaven*] (2005) and *Luz silenciosa* [*Silent Light*] (2007).

Chilean documentary also demonstrates a move towards 'weak poetics' in *Retrato de Kusak* (Pablo Leighton, 2004), whose specific form of weakness is a historicisation of an individual story and an existential twist to the grand narrative of History, and in *Ningún lugar en ninguna parte* (Torres Leiva, 2004), whose weakness is a narrative project consisting of the simple exhibition of the materials from which a documentary is constructed. In *El tiempo que se queda* (2007), by the same filmmaker, the marginality of the patients of a psychiatric clinic reveals itself to be geopolitically central. It does so without accusatory emphasis, and as if simultaneously discovering an unusual experience of temporality. Earlier travellers along this road were *Señales de ruta* (Tevó Díaz, 2000), *Un hombre aparte* [*A Man Aside*] (Bettina Perut and Iván Osnovikoff, 2001), *El corredor* (Cristián Leighton, 2004), *Tierra de agua* [*Waterland*] (Carlos Klein, 2004), and even Silvio Caiozzi in *Fernando ha vuelto* (1998), although this was more to do with the camera and direct sound operators than with the director himself.

In both audiovisual and narrative senses, weakness is constituted through a recording strategy that privileges the vague, the imprecise, the background; whose symbolic preferences associate expression with the ambiguous, the evocative, allusion, suggestion. Narrative progression is no longer defined by literality, the predominance of action as a mechanism of exhibition and articulation, linking sequences and dramatic tones with the intentionality of epic, the absolute monopoly of the visual, or uplifting metamorphoses. Instead, these features figure as an unfulfilled expectation left to resonate around things, like inertia proper to language.

Weakness is the weakening of action, of the morphologies of action-reaction, the undoing of agentic roles and of the epistemological status of recording, of the reality

accorded to content, of the distance of the camera from the object. Weakness is, in one regard, an undoing of the limits between the objective and the subjective, between nonfiction and fiction. This is why it is possible to construct an inventory of the presence of this intention in both systems (the fictional and the nonfictional).

In philosophical terms, a 'weak poetic' is related to weak aesthetics, to weak dramas, to weak ontologies. The thinker who has referred most directly to the notion of weak ontology is Gianni Vattimo; from him I borrow the terminology introduced in his book *Weak Thought* ([1983]2012).³

Vattimo refers to new environments where philosophy encounters being, or at least questions it: in language, in the modes of consistency of daily life as a site where authenticity or inauthenticity occur, as life lived with purposes, meanings and ends imposed by common sense. The itinerary of weak ontology, or of modes of weak thought, is essentially that of the philosophy of existence, from Nietzsche to Heidegger (in his exegesis), but it also incorporates and develops contemporary manifestations of phenomenological philosophies and aesthetics, for instance via the work of Merleau-Ponty. The crisis of metaphysics as the most relevant of metadiscourses is perhaps the event which transfers the active interest of cinematographic consciousness away from places, protagonists and actions representing paradigmatic truths, to the spaces and things that figure as forms, or to characters who suspend their actions in order to feel that existence passes through them, that time and space determine them and are indifferent to them. From this perspective, or modality of consciousness, Vattimo writes:

... that acts multiply, that we discover a number of previously unnoticed, or even invisible actions. There is an inversion between what appeared relevant and the

apparently banal: trivial gestures become realities from which we can extract indications, significant realities that allow us to understand the ensemble of our experience.⁴

Vattimo could be discussing several of the films named above: their dramatic structures, their indiscernible, indescribable, pallid plots. His description, which corresponds to an act of consciousness, even applies to Antonioni's film protagonists in the first half of the 1960s, or to the protagonists of Tsai Ming Liang's last film. In other words, this disruption in the fields of philosophy and cinema (but also in our minds), is already old, or has contaminated the West and its zones of influence and expansion for at least half a century.

This doctrine, this cosmovision, is a late effect of the discourse of the great crisis of Modernity in the middle of last century. It is a crisis of instrumental reason, of ceaseless progress, of European Modernity as the irradiating centre of the civilisation of the spirit. The crisis occurs via the multiplication of the centres of dissemination of meaning, via the media revolution (in Vattimo's own opinion), via the multiplication of images of the world both inside and outside the head, as Deleuze terms this zeal for representations of the world with dissolving effects.

This notion of 'weak poetics' as a dramatic manifestation of a 'weak thought' is preceded by the notion of the 'crisis of the action-image' proposed by Deleuze in *Cinema I*.⁵ Deleuze mentions the crisis of Hollywood cinema as the paradigm of the cinema of optimism, of work as edifying action, of the promotion of Western civilisation; a cinema which is articulated through an infallible mechanism of actions-reactions, of causal relations between situations which always move towards the reestablishment of the dominant order. For Deleuze, the Second World War is the great impulse behind the cowering of agility and

naivety, behind the dismantling of the festive violence which is always sheltered by the order of Hollywood action cinema, or of genre cinema. This is because the war is an event which discredits the founding ideals of the Western project and the narrative of the ethical supremacy of the West over the rest of the world, and which, in sum, disqualifies instrumental reason and its reflected forms of labour and technique as instances of human betterment. Georges Sadoul, in his *Histoire du cinéma mondial* (1999) calls this process the 'crisis of Western cinema', the crisis of bourgeois cinema; he also conceives of it as a nihilism brought about by the war and, just as Deleuze, sees it as a motivating factor behind Italian Neorealism, which is perhaps the most influential movement in global cinematography in the second half of the twentieth century.⁶

Commented [am1]: Surely this should be 'cinema'?

The action-image drama, with its strong linking sequences, is replaced by a narrative that is at once choral, fictive and documentary, one sensitive to decadence, with action cowed in favour of protagonists who are unemployed, retired, women and children. This is a drama of the peripheries, of shock and of vagrancy, which appears with Italian Neorealism, and is termed an optical drama by Deleuze in *The Movement-Image*; its empty wanderings receive from him the name of white events.

Commented [am2]: The use of the passive here is a little clumsy. Consider rephrasing.

Georges Sadoul, in his *Histoire du cinéma mondial*, calls Neorealism the cinema of the crisis of modernity and of the crisis of the bourgeoisie, due to its tendency towards tedium, which increases until the untimely dramatic evacuation of narrative through apathy (in the 1970s, with Antonioni's *The Passenger* [1975]) and through the dramatic stubbornness of opposition.

At the end of the 1940s, André Bazin, when considering Rosellini, Zavattini and Visconti's first works, maintained that the highest filmic intelligence was to be found in Italy. That intelligence, for Bazin, was capable of producing a story which was sufficiently open, dispersed and non-schematic so as to permit the spectator new margins for his or her freedom

of movement, and of producing narrative or compositional openness, linguistically formalised in the long take and in depth of field. In the middle of the 1960s, Pasolini establishes the existence of a 'Cinema of Poetry', whose best exponents are Pasolini himself, Bertolucci, Antonioni, Godard, Bergman, Resnais (although he does not say so), and Glauber Rocha.

According to the Italian filmmaker and poet, cinema, 'the written language of reality',⁷ becomes poetry when it is able to narratively weaken the real in order to expose it to the influences of dreaming, myth, tragedy, prehistory. In Pasolini, the weakening of bourgeois drama is completed, as is later the case in Rocha, and with it Pasolini himself is brought to an end, executed. This occurs through irrationality and violence, both defined by Rocha in *Estética da fome* [*Aesthetics of Hunger*] (1965) and *Estética do sonho* [*Aesthetics of Dream*] (1971) respectively, as the central meaning of the revolutionary and as hunger's noblest consequence.

These 'weak poetics' appear in nations under reconstruction, anxious to avoid narratives which mythologise guilt; they appear as a counter-discourse to the economic, to financial gain, to the economic miracle. They are the stories that follow on from the comedies of the shameless, or that run alongside them as a mockery of the epic of profit. One need only consider how the Latin American films mentioned above are preceded by a monomaniacal series of tricksters, of fortune hunters: *Amores perros* (González Iñárritu, 2000), *La fiebre del loco* [*Loco Fever*] (Andrés Wood, 2001), *Taxi para tres* [*A Cab for Three*] (Orlando Lübbert, 2001), *Negocio redondo* [*A Sure Deal*] (Ricardo Carrasco, 2001), *Pizza birra faso* [*Pizza, Beer, and Cigarettes*] (Adrián Caetano, 1998), *Nueve reinas* [*Nine Queens*] (Fabián Bielinsky, 2000); and in the European case, before Antonioni's and Resnais' hysterical or bewildered women, come the pickpockets, the fugitives of Bresson or of Jacques Becker in *Le Trou* (1950), the *vitelloni* or *bidone* of Fellini in the films thus named, in *Lo sceicco*

bianco [*The White Sheikh*] (1952) or in *I soliti ignoti* [*Big Deal on Madonna Street*] by Monicelli (1958).

Inspired by Neorealism, ‘weak poetics’ appear in Latin America in the 1960s, through the inaugural, foundational form of the *Nuevo Cine* (New Cinema).⁸

The mixtures of the documentary and the fictional which result from the spectacular display of sociohistorical reality, and from the difficulties in combining education with entertainment, political commitment with aesthetic autonomy, the enjoyment of the senses with critical consciousness, and, above all, from the need to deny the fatal determinism of the bourgeois narration of exemplarity, identification and catharsis, are: Julio García Espinosa’s *Cine imperfecto* [*Imperfect Cinema*] (1969), Rocha’s *Aesthetics of Hunger* and *Aesthetics of Dream*, and Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino’s *Tercer cine* [*Third Cinema*] (1968).

In those diverse programmes and manifestos, precarity is capitalised upon in aesthetic and creative terms. Mario Handler, a Uruguayan filmmaker of the *Nuevo Cine* period, defines the lack of resources as a possibility for expression. All the proposals that endure aesthetically or that achieve a certain rhetorical consistency are allied with numerous revelations, excepting those of action or edification: it is a question of making those on the periphery ever more visible, from *Las callampas* (Rafael Sánchez, 1957), *La marcha del carbón* (Sergio Bravo, 1960), *Herminia de la Victoria* (Douglas Hubner, 1969) or *Reportaje a Lota* (José Román and Diego Bonacina, 1970), where the people move from being extras to being subjects in close-up, though still without speech, until the exclusive reality and linguistic consistency of their demonstrations and beliefs become apparent in the work of Patricio Guzmán and, especially, ~~in~~ Raúl Ruiz²⁶.

The visibility of contradictions is, in most instances in *Memorias del subdesarrollo* [*Memories of Underdevelopment*] (1968), by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, or in *El chacal de Nahueltoro* [*The Jackal of Nahueltoro*] (1969) by Miguel Littin, more a contradictory

inventory of realities, discourses and significations, than the exemplary formalisation of a mode of action or particular path. The painstaking upheaval of all normalisations of meaning involves a jump from the signs themselves to the referents, to the outside, naming what is beyond, glimpsing it, stuttering its existence, or, in conformity with fear, substituting a discredited definition for a new and pretentious one, alluding to the existence of an inexhaustible beyond. In these open peripheries woman appears, and so does the desert of Rocha's *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol* [*Black God, White Devil*] (1964), the Atacama in Helvio Soto's *Caliche sangriento* [*Bloody Nitrate*] (1969), the mountain ranges and the Bolivian *altiplano* in *Yawar Mallku* [*Blood of the Condor*] (1969) by Jorge Sanjinés. Those locations are not World but Earth, in Heidegger's terms, opaque, absurd and indifferent surroundings; on Earth action is useless and cowed, and silence stands out as the sonority which witnesses space without end and materialises time.

When images must provide change and point out the subtleties and the programmed technical resistance of things, audio makes a dramatic appearance in Latin America. It does so most evidently in Cuba and in Brazil, for the ends discussed above, and in order clearly to distinguish the songs which take up an immemorial wisdom and elevate it beyond the contradictions of the image.

In Chile audio appears later, with the vigour or excess of speeches, and during the dictatorship, under a regime of closure, as in Arturo Ripstein's Mexico, following the necessity of a lowered voice, of the clarity of whispers, the whispers of Caiozzi's *Julio comienza en julio* [*Julio begins in July*] (1977). The emphasis on audio is justified because it is the expressive level proper to 'weak poetics', a late-arriving brother to cinematic expression. According to Robert Stam, in *Film Theory: An Introduction* (2000), and revisiting the work of Christian Metz, three of the five tracks of cinematographic expression have to do with the acoustic: words, music, noise.⁹ The world of the acoustic is, insofar as it

is relatively self-sufficient, the kingdom of suggestion, of expression that admits co-creation, of intervallic expression, whose generic referentiality requires the intervention of an instance of subjectivity.

Acoustic expression is the form which best corresponds to expression that plays with the 'de-severance of beings' (Heidegger) and with the evidence of the inexhaustible vastness of the surroundings and the sonorous, articulated from *off-space*. Or, following the expression of the *hors-champ*, it adds space to space, and then weakens and relativises visual hegemony and the project of semantic univocity, which are the narrative of the visible. As the philosopher of *Being and Time* would say regarding the materialisation of spaces in sculpture, sound in film can arrange places and put these places in relation with the free vastness of the surrounding region.

The works which are now my concern are the final effects of the decompression of cinema after the dictatorships in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay.¹⁰ What comes afterwards. The medium is the reconstruction of expectations of the real possibility of cultural existence in a situation where fascism structurally endures, as in Christian Democrat Italy after fascism. Disenchantment, and the evacuation of hopes for reparation and for reestablishment in all senses, can be seen as the crushing of thematic and rhetorical concerns, as a plastic arrangement of the environment.

These are cinematographic consciousnesses formed under the influence of television, of advertising, with renewed, lightweight technologies, video, digital, high definition, with sound laboratories and lighter systems for finalisation and the polishing of expression. They are, therefore, consciousnesses which distinguish an infinity of discourses of forms, of languages, of beliefs, of subjectivised monuments and of historicised belongings, both indoors and in the immediate outside.

This is perhaps an effect of a long life indoors, of intensive compensation for the lack of open space. Or perhaps it is because the prestige of established connections with the *distant* outside (that illusion of a world through the screen) favours the experience of the *near* outside with its inexhaustible, contradictory experiences. This choice demonstrates a stubborn resistance to the usual epic negotiation:¹¹ a resistance that is an effect of urgency, of misfortune, or of the taste for its own personal assimilation.

Note on contributor

Paul Merchant is a PhD candidate in Latin American Studies at the University of Cambridge. His thesis discusses issues of housing and domestic space in contemporary film from Argentina and Chile. He has published articles on the fiction of Roberto Bolaño and on modernist architecture in Argentine cinema, and he has a developing interest in modern Chilean poetry.

Notes

¹ I am thinking here of the work of French film scholars and philosophers, from Jean-Louis Comolli to Jacques Rancière, and of European writing in a broadly post-structuralist vein.

² Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti (eds), *Weak Thought*, trans. Peter Caravetta, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012.

³ Vattimo and Rovatti (eds), *El pensamiento débil*, Madrid: Cátedra, 1983.

⁴ Vattimo and Rovatti, *El pensamiento débil*, p. 51. The English translation from the Spanish edition is mine. These sentences do not appear in the English edition of *Weak Thought* (2012).

⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

⁶ Georges Sadoul, *Histoire du cinéma mondial*, Paris: Flammarion, 1999.

⁷ Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'The Written Language of Reality', in Louise K. Barnett (ed), *Heretical Empiricism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988, p.204.

⁸ The *Nuevo Cine* movement of the 1960s in Latin America sought to mobilise filmmaking as an instrument of direct political action, typically by the radical left. The manifestos Corro cites here provide a good overview of the stances of those involved.

⁹ Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.

¹⁰ Corro is referring here to the films he will analyse in the following chapter, which discusses 'monumental subjects and anomalous representation in contemporary Chilean cinema'.

¹¹ The word used by Corro here, 'concertación', makes indirect reference to the dominant governmental alliance (La Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia) in post-dictatorship Chilean politics in the 1990s.