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‘Collecting what the sea gives back’: Postcolonial Ecologies of the Ocean in Contemporary Chilean Film

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Abstract

This article proposes a new mode of understanding the entanglement of ecological and postcolonial questions in contemporary Chilean documentary filmmaking, through the lens of directorial subjectivity. Both *Tierra sola/Solitary Land* (Tiziana Panizza, 2017), and *El botón de nácar/The Pearl Button* (Patricio Guzmán, 2015) contest hegemonic structures of belonging by constructing an alternative ‘oceanic archive’ (DeLoughrey, 2017). Yet where Guzmán’s metaphorical meditations on indigenous connections to the ocean risk collapsing into romanticism and replicating colonial visuality, Panizza’s reflexive conception of filmmaking as a situated and embodied practice facilitates a subtler understanding of cinema’s political engagement in this sphere.

Keywords

cinema, Chile, film, Patricio Guzmán, postcolonial ecology, Pacific Ocean, Tiziana Panizza

The Pacific Ocean is a quietly insistent presence in Chilean film, just as it is along the country's long coastline. In Ricardo Larrain's *La frontera* (*The Frontier*, 1991), tsunamis act as metaphorical figures for the upheavals of dictatorship and the transition to democracy, while the plot of *La fiebre del loco* (*Loco Fever*, Andrés Wood, 2001) revolves around the harvesting of a mollusc, Chilean abalone (or *loco*), in a small island community in the southern region of Aysén. In *La fiebre del loco*, the town priest, who oversees the harvesting operation, falls for the Argentine Canuto's fraudulent scheme to pay for the *loco* harvest with forged money. It is the seawater itself, at the film's close, which reveals the fraud by washing away the ink of the forged bank notes. More recently, in Pablo Larrain's *El club* (*The Club*, 2015), the ocean appears as an inescapable witness to the crimes of the priests who have been confined to a house on the edge of a coastal town. As the priests recount their actions to the inquisitorial figure of Father García, the Pacific looms in the background, visible through a window.

In each of these fiction films, the space of the Pacific coast and the water of the ocean symbolically reveal or witness uncomfortable features of society. Yet it is also possible to discern another, more explicitly material and ecological form of engagement with the ocean in Chilean filmmaking, particularly when one looks beyond fiction to the realms of documentary and essay film. This article will suggest that recent examples of these cinematic modes offer a means of rethinking the intersection of postcolonial and ecological concerns in Latin American culture. It aims, in other words, to pursue the socio-political implications of what might be termed 'hydrosocial territories' in Chilean cinema. Rutgerd Boelens et al. define 'hydrosocial territories' as

socially, naturally and politically constituted spaces that are (re)created through the interactions amongst human practices, water flows, hydraulic technologies, biophysical elements, socio-economic structures and cultural-political institutions. (2016: 1)

This article conceives of cinema as one such cultural-political institution, and argues that in contemporary Chilean documentary and essay film, an emergent set of ecological and affective approaches to the Pacific Ocean can reveal neglected histories of colonial and postcolonial oppression, while simultaneously demonstrating the complexity of addressing these issues in a manner that avoids replicating the power inequalities of coloniality.

The article has three sections: an overview of cartographic, colonial and militaristic understandings of marine space in Chilean culture and history precedes an examination of how these understandings are challenged and inverted in Tiziana Panizza's 2017 film *Tierra sola (Solitary Land)*. This essay film about the recent history and contemporary life of Rapa Nui (Easter Island), the Chilean territory some 3,500 kilometres from the South American continent, constructs what Elizabeth DeLoughrey has termed an 'oceanic archive', a multipolar narration of history that engages with the ocean's 'more-than-human temporalities' (2017: 33), and indeed accords the Pacific a prominent role in the organisation of its filmic material. In concluding via a comparison with another recent Chilean film – Patricio Guzmán's *El botón de nácar (The Pearl Button, 2015)* – the article will however sound a cautionary note regarding contemporary Chilean cinema's desire to tell neglected histories through an engagement with indigenous cosmologies and their prizing of the aquatic and aqueous. There is a risk that a renewed understanding of how power relations are ecologically articulated might be gained at the expense of converting indigenous experience into cinematic spectacle.

Y ese mar que tranquilo te baña...

The Chilean national anthem has many verses, but the one that is sung at official events extols the beauty of the country's nature: the 'cielo azulado' (blue sky), its 'campo de flores bordado' (countryside embroidered with flowers), and then 'ese mar que tranquilo te baña' (that sea that calmly bathes you) and which 'te promete futuro esplendor' (promises you future splendour). As scholars like P. Alex Latta have noted, latent here is a developmentalist and perhaps even extractive relationship to the environment: the sea will allow for 'futuro esplendor' (2007: 141-43, 160). One does not have to look too far forward from the date of composition of this anthem, to the War of the Pacific waged by Chile against Peru and Bolivia from 1879 to 1883, to find an example of this attitude: the conflict was driven by a claim to valuable nitrate deposits in the Atacama Desert (Collier and Sater, 2004: 125-146).

This territorial, conquest-oriented vision of the Pacific can be traced back still further in Chilean culture, to the opening lines of the great epic of the conquest of Chile, Alonso de Ercilla's *La Araucana*, and indeed to Spanish maps of the colonial period (Padrón, 2009). It can be traced forward, too, as this remarkable extract from a speech given in 1983 by the then director of Chile's public library and museum system, Enrique Campos Menéndez, demonstrates:

[...]the sea, our sea, became more Chilean, being baptised in the blood of heroes[...]

[...]That sea which the prows of our Navy opened on their sovereign voyages, in order to bequeath it, intact, to our grandchildren...That tranquil sea, hardened by ice, which presents a new continent to us...That Chilean sea, fertilised by the heroism of our great acts of war [...]
Our sea, to which we offer, today, the heightened emotion in voices. (1983, my translation)

Campos Menéndez notes (and proudly assumes) the colonial connotations of the sea elsewhere in his speech, recalling Ercilla's description of the oceans surrounding Chile in the *La Araucana*, and stating that 'Chile es un país que fue descubierto desde el mar' (Chile is a country that was discovered from the sea). Advancing this discourse of colonial visibility into

the late 20th century, Campos Menéndez boldly states that ‘Si se toma en cuenta el continente antártico, es precisamente en Punta Arenas donde está el centro de Chile’ (if we take the Antarctic continent into account, the centre of Chile is in fact in Punta Arenas [in other words at the very bottom of the South American landmass]) (1983). After the return to democracy in 1990, meanwhile, Chile turned to the ocean, and more specifically to an iceberg, to present an image of itself washed clean of the sins of dictatorship and open to the world at the World Expo in Seville, Spain, in 1992. A resonant cultural analysis of this moment has been offered by Tomás Moulian (2002), and the episode forms the basis for Ignacio Agüero’s 1993 film *Sueños de hielo* (*Dreams of Ice*), which repurposes documentary footage of the transportation of the iceberg together with a voiceover narration to create a tale of a sea voyage in which the crew suffer from a mysterious ‘polar fever’ and hallucinations. Agüero thus merges documentary and fictional registers, and goes as far as to have his narrator assign a kind of life force and consciousness to the sea ice (De los Ríos and Donoso, 2015: 59-60). Insofar as it resists easy classification, and challenges an extractive approach to the ocean through the evocation of nonhuman temporality and agency, *Sueños de hielo* thus figures as an important precursor to the films to be discussed here.

Agüero’s footage of icebergs from *Sueños de hielo* reappears in a later documentary of his: *El otro día* (*The Other Day*, 2012) a reflexive exploration of Agüero’s Santiago home and its function as a node in a network of urban social relations. In this work, the footage of the icebergs supplements material reminders within the house of Agüero’s family’s maritime past, and indeed of the Chilean state’s tendency to evoke the ocean as a site of past naval glories. At one point, the camera tracks past a photograph of Agüero’s son dressed up as Arturo Prat, hero of the War of the Pacific (1879-1883), for instance. The child in the photograph is a small boy, but Agüero’s son later reappears in the present of the documentary, reading a collection of stories by Francisco Coloane. Given that Coloane,

alongside figures such as Pablo de Rokha and Gonzalo Rojas, was one of the 20th-century Chilean writers to engage most frequently with the ocean (see, for instance, the corresponding chapters in Montecinos, 1958), this apparently casual moment again signals Agüero's concern with the history of Chilean cultural engagements with the ocean.

No study of this history can avoid the work of the country's two Nobel laureates, Gabriela Mistral and Pablo Neruda. In the work of both Neruda and Mistral, the ocean is an insistent and unsettling presence. For Mistral, it is often a queer space, while for Neruda it conveys international solidarity among workers, holds the stories of vanished indigenous peoples, and erodes the very soil in which a linear, singular human lifespan might be traced:

The wave that you set loose,
arc of identity, star-filled plume,
when it crashed was merely foam,
and returned, before consumption, to be born. (2003: 550, my translation)

Neruda's poetry about the Pacific, especially in the *Canto general*, is remarkable for its mobilisation of elaborate Baroque metaphors in a knowingly futile attempt to grasp the depths of the ocean. Neruda's ocean is also, as George B. Handley writes, 'the repository of New World dead and thus contains the stories New World colonialism has buried' (2007: 96). Indeed, for DeLoughrey and Handley, the *Canto general* articulates a postcolonial ecology in that it presents the reader with 'a nature nurtured by the violated bodies of colonial history' (2011: 6). Yet Handley also recognises, in relation to Neruda's poetry of the ocean, 'speaking for nature is as problematic as speaking for the subaltern or for the repressed past'

(2007: 95). Any act of poetic ventriloquism installs a hierarchy, a power relation, and it is therefore crucial to consider the subject position from which the intersection of ecological and postcolonial concerns is articulated. This, accordingly, is the question that this article asks of *Tierra sola* and *El botón de nácar*: how, by whom, and to what end are the Pacific's alternative histories told?

The following analysis will argue that because Panizza's and Guzmán's films sit at the meeting point of ecocinema and the traditions of political documentary and essay film in Chile, they provide the critical spectator with a subtle picture of contemporary Chile's cultural engagements with the ocean. More specifically, these works demand a nuancing of the emphasis placed on intersubjectivity and affective relation in scholarship on ecocinema and the environmental humanities. Indeed, the first film to be discussed here, Panizza's *Tierra sola*, makes clear how the ocean is caught up in historical and contemporary ecological articulations of power, and functions as a tool of confinement and oppression as well as a potential source of life and liberation. In terms of *Tierra sola*'s cinematic construction, it is in fact the denial of affective engagement and of a clear delineation of film's ecological entanglement with the Oceanic world that constitutes one of the film's most striking features.

Tierra sola

Panizza is a great experimenter with film form, having previously made a series of 'film-letters' exploring her own diasporic and postnational family identities in England, Italy and Chile (*Dear Nonna: a film letter*, 2005; *Remitente, una carta visual*, 2008; *Al final: la última carta*, 2012). For María Paz Peirano, these films established Panizza as a pioneer of the 'subjective turn' in Latin American documentary (Peirano, 2018: 288; see also Ruffinelli

2010, Piedras 2014). Adopting Catherine Russell's terminology, Peirano identifies 'auto-ethnographic' qualities in the trilogy of film-letters, which are 'made of recycled images united by a non-linear assembly, creating audiovisual collages that underline their analogue materiality and evoke home movies' (2018: 229). A similar emphasis on materiality is identified in the later film *Tierra en movimiento / Unstable Land* (2014) by Valeria de los Ríos, for whom Panizza's focus on the aesthetic qualities of specific material traces of an earthquake challenges classical divisions between nature and culture (2017: 54). Panizza's work can therefore be said to be ecological insofar as it contests those divisions. Her refusal to construct a clearly defined directorial subject as 'author' of her film, relying instead on a collage of texts, voices, and sounds, is also an ecological gesture in that it positions individual human agency within a network of other subjects. This fragmented and displaced subjectivity also, it should be noted, echoes the 'nomadic subjects' that are constructed in the earlier films of Marilú Mallet, Valeria Sarmiento and Angelina Vázquez (Ramírez Soto and Donoso Pinto, 2016). Many of these strategies remain visible in *Tierra sola*, which nonetheless marks a significant development in Panizza's cinema in that the reflexive ethnographic gaze on the filmmaking self is here also turned outwards towards the landscape and people of Rapa Nui.

Tierra sola begins as an overview of documentaries made about Rapa Nui – it is stitched together from them – and then becomes a poetic reflection on the island, its inhabitants, their relation to Chile and their relation to the ocean. Panizza inserts her own footage, some filmed on a Super 8 camera, some of it high-definition digital video, among the thirty-two documentaries that she has reviewed. She notes the frequency of certain linguistic structures, certain ideas in the documentaries she watches: exploration, isolation (rendered visible through frequent recourse to empty maps of the Pacific Ocean), mystery, and the fact that the *Moai*, the island's famous statues, appear more frequently than the inhabitants of Rapa Nui. Given the history of oppression suffered by the indigenous Rapanui people (see

Delsing, 2015), this last observation is sadly unsurprising. As Panizza's film recounts, after the island's annexation by Chile in 1888, it was leased to the British *Compañía Explotadora de la Isla de Pascua* for 60 years, and the few surviving Rapanui were confined to the main town Hanga Roa, and not permitted to leave the island. From 1953 to 1966, Rapa Nui was governed by the Chilean Navy, until an uprising led to civil administration and Chilean citizenship for the island's inhabitants.

In this opening collage of documentaries, Neruda appears, in a clip from a film made in 1972, and declares to the camera that he has resolved the mystery of Easter Island. In place of Neruda's orientalisising approach to Rapa Nui (an approach that, for critic Marisol Galilea [2015], is replicated in his collection *La rosa separada*, which emerged from the experience of filming a documentary there) and his authoritative self-positioning as interpreter of the Oceanic past, Panizza's subjectivity emerges in *Tierra sola* only in the form of textual fragments superimposed over the images. Some of these snippets of texts offer various definitions of ethnographic cinema, from the quasi-scientific ('the filmic documentation of human behaviour') to the critical. Panizza notes that 25 of the 32 films she has looked over document archaeological or ethnographic expeditions, and in one sequence, as the spectator watches a white man climb up to the top of a *moai* statue and pose triumphantly, the textual narration categorises ethnographic cinema as 'a film like a flag staked at the mountaintop, or graffiti in a public space which states a name and a date'. In contrast to this vision of cinema as the proud assertion of individual subjectivity, Panizza defines her activity as filmmaker as 'collecting what the sea gives back', according the ocean a clearer agency in the organisation of the material than she does herself (Fig. 1). Indeed, the anecdotal story of her chance encounter with some of the material in a Santiago flea market, coupled with the fact that her Super 8 footage seems designed to be difficult to distinguish from the historical films, reinforces this sense of a dilution of directorial subjectivity. *Tierra sola* resonates, therefore,

with the posthuman or new materialist strand of contemporary oceanic thinking (see Neimanis, 2017; Alaimo, 2012,) when it encourages recognition of the ocean as a body possessed of its own agency, as in the description of Rapa Nui as ‘a coincidence of the Pacific Ocean’.

Figure 1

There are echoes, too, of DeLoughrey’s suggestion that the sea’s histories are organised in an ‘oceanic archive’ that refuses conventional (for which read imperial and colonial) temporalities, as well as human-nonhuman binaries. Indeed, the structure of Panizza’s essay film is non-linear, responding to the Rapanui storytelling knot of the *kai kai* (depicted in archive footage in Fig. 2) in its multiple, intertwined narrative strands, which cover the history of the island, the contemporary life of its prison and the officers who run it, and a personal reflection on the experience of bringing together existing filmic material. Irene Depetris Chauvin has provided an astute reading of the affective implications of this dynamic:

Figure 2. The kai kai.

the documentary constructs and deconstructs the filmic archive through a system of montage that, on the one hand, reveals the colonial gesture of the ethnographic gaze, and on the other, submits the audiovisual fragments to a new production of sense, and recovers the affective

dimension of the archive, and the expressive qualities of its documents. (2018: 109, my translation)

Depetris Chauvin's appeal to affect here is worth dwelling on. Much work in the environmental humanities has drawn productively on ideas of prepersonal affect for thinking about how cinema and other media draw us into relation with the world. In some senses, however, Panizza's film refuses to provide the viewer with the affective engagement which is central to some theories of ecocinema (e.g. Ingram 2013). It does this by adopting a fragmentary and nonlinear narrative structure, which in turn draws attention to colonial and neo-colonial hierarchies of vision. The nonlinear organisation of Panizza's material and the prominence of interstices – cuts to black in between shots and sections – encourage a consideration of *Tierra sola* in light of Laura Rascaroli's work on the essay film. For Rascaroli, who follows a Deleuzian mode of thinking, the prominence of the interstice allows for the intervention of 'thought from the outside':

Rather than copying its object and offering a closed argument about it, then, the essay operates on its object's scattered parts. In this way, the essay shuns suture and works in a regime of radical disjunction. [...] it is through a disjunctive practice, I argue, that the essay film articulates its thinking and, in particular, its nonverbal thinking. (2017: 7)

Rascaroli goes on to elaborate on the 'interstice' as the key condensing figure of this practice of disjunction: 'The interstice as potentiality brings about the possibility of "thought from the outside", of a thought that does not have its origin in the subject, but is provoked by forces from the outside' (10). Rascaroli's accompanying assertion that the 'movement through the gaps creates a unity that is a reassemblage' (13) remits the critical spectator of Panizza's film to the field of nonhuman agency.

Rascaroli's argument demands some further nuance in this context, especially regarding its claim that the primacy of the interstice leads to a 'liquidity' of the essay film. Rascaroli's liquidity is much like Zygmunt Bauman's – it denotes the crisis of Enlightenment, Eurocentric institutions, societies and subjectivity (Rascaroli, 2017: 17-18). Here, by contrast, any identification of the liquidity metaphor is rather more complex. Panizza is at pains to stress that the sea has been just as much a wall and a barrier for the inhabitants for Rapa Nui, particularly when under neo-colonial rule by a British company and subsequently the Chilean Navy, as it has been a means of connection. Crucially, the director's textual reflection on isolation and obstruction is followed by close-up shots of strands of rope and then a vertiginous inversion of the camera's gaze over the ocean (Fig. 3). The paradox of connection and containment is thus written into the editing of the film.

Figure 3. The ocean as wall.

Panizza demonstrates, moreover, that the connections made across the Pacific have often led to the exploitation or commercialisation of Rapanui culture, through her incorporation of footage from 'ethnographic' expeditions that led to the ransacking of the island's material culture and the conversion of its inhabitants into objects of scientific study (we see, for example, the toppling and removal of a *moai* statue, and measurements being taken of Rapanui children's height and facial features). The director is also at pains to show how cinema itself is not an innocent observer of such activities, but caught up in them, as she recounts the story of an aviator who set up the first air link between the island and the continent, and brought with him film projection equipment. Nowhere is this complicity more apparent than in footage recovered from one of the 'lost' Chilean films made about Rapa Nui,

Isla de Pascua (*Easter Island*, 1965). The opening credits inform us that the film is supported by the *Compañía de Acero de Pacífico* (Pacific Steel Company), which remains Chile's largest iron and steel producer, and is thus emblematic of the extractivist approach to nature that has underwritten Chile's modern development. *Isla de Pascua* was directed by Nieves Yankovic and Jorge di Lauro, and the director of photography was the renowned documentary filmmaker Sergio Bravo. Bravo is an appropriate cinematic interlocutor for Panizza's reflections on ethnographic film, since, as Javier Campo argues, Bravo (along with Jorge Ruiz, Jorge Prelorán, Humberto Mauro and others) formed part of a group of Latin American filmmakers in the 1950s and 1960s who challenged rigid scientific determinations of ethnographic film, seeking instead to find poetic means of preserving cultural memory and allowing indigenous visibility (Campo, 2019). Indeed, Campo notes that in his earlier film *Mimbre* (*Wicker*, 1957), Bravo 'presents the weaving of baskets implying a metaphoric link with spider webs while working with oblique and oscillating shots' (Campo, 2019: 181). In Campo's account, this technique formed part of a larger tendency among the group of filmmakers to present stylised stagings of artisanal labour practices as a marker of identity (181-182) (and, we might add, of harmonious relations to the natural world).

It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that in the footage from *Isla de Pascua* which Panizza includes in her film, we find two depictions of the *kai kai*. The first of these appears on badly damaged film stock, discoloured and fragmentary. Panizza's textual narration, white on a black screen, has told us moments before that these fragments appeared by chance in a market in Valparaíso. Here, the spectator's attention is drawn to the material qualities of film, and to the partiality of a particular gaze. Panizza thus employs an archival variant of a strategy identified by Joanna Page in some recent Argentine documentaries: *Solitary Land* reflects on the 'positivist dogmatism' and the politically compromised nature of ethnographic or quasi-ethnographic filmic engagements with Rapa Nui, without 'undermining [its] own

truth-claims or discounting the representation of the other as a mere projection of the self' (Page, 2016: 137).

As Panizza's equivocal essay form presents a web of contradictory associations to the viewer, then, it does so in a manner that denies the spectator full access to what DeLoughrey terms the Pacific's 'generative fluidity [...] essential to the grammar of indigenous ontology' (2007: 125), to its conjugations of mobility and belonging. When Panizza introduces us to the old Rapanui men who once fled the oppressive life on the island on makeshift rafts, only to have returned to its coasts, the men face away from us, or are in profile, engaged in a relation that is not offered up to the viewer whole (Fig. 4). It is as if Panizza, as filmmaker, is reluctant to construct a fully apprehensible web of ecological relation between subject, ocean and spectator, for fear that it might become just another relation of power. The grainy Super 8 footage and the handheld camera in this sequence remind the viewer of the situated, embodied nature of Panizza's gaze, and of the other gazes she weaves together in *Tierra sola*. The images thus respond to the textual narration's earlier stated aim of including 'my gaze here, at the same time all the others', and of finding 'the pulse of the person holding the camera' in the fragments of footage she assembles for her film.

It is instructive to compare the shots of the men looking out to sea with the French artist Sophie Calle's 2011 work *Voir la mer*, a series of short videos in which Calle films residents of Istanbul who are seeing the sea for the first time. In the videos, the subjects stand facing out to sea, and then turn to face the camera, which captures their expressions of wonder.

Figure 4.

For Erika Balsom, ‘*Voir la mer* entices us to gaze with wonder at the small movements of water and faces. There is nothing in the image but the encounter between them’ (2018: 24). And yet there must be something more: there is the face-to-face encounter between the filmed subject and the video’s spectator. By denying the spectator of *Tierra sola* such a face-to-face encounter, Panizza is asking them to participate in a (partly imaginative) mode of relation in which the filmed subject’s emotions are not offered up for easy visual consumption. In her recent book *An Oceanic Feeling: Cinema and the Sea*, Balsom emphasises cinema’s ‘indissoluble connection’ to physical reality (2018: 15), writing in consonance with much recent scholarship on ecocinema and ecomedia (e.g. Ivakhiv, 2013). *Tierra sola*, though, is at pains to demonstrate the partial and interrupted nature of cinema’s encounter with an indigenous relation to the ocean.

Panizza’s film, in its cautious and situated formal liquidity and its refusal to construct its narrative straightforwardly ‘fluid’ aesthetic forms, therefore begins the work of ‘decolonizing ecomedia’ called for by Sean Cubitt (2014). There is certainly little sense of a ‘posthumous cult of indigenous knowledge’ or a nostalgic invocation of ‘environmental belonging’ (Cubitt, 2014: 282). Panizza’s incorporation of multiple perspectives and voices instead reveals an unexpected point of contact between cultural work that is ecological, at least following Timothy Morton’s expansive definition of ecology as including ‘all the ways we imagine how we live together’ (2010: 4), and some projects of memory politics in post-dictatorial Latin American documentaries, where it is only through difficult, partial or imagined encounters that the traumatic past can be approached (see, for instance, the extensive critical discussions around films such as Albertina Carri’s *Los rubios* [2003]). Indeed, *Tierra sola* can be seen as a continuation of Panizza’s own contribution to the complex debates around history, memory, and identity in Chilean documentary film (Ramírez 2010), insofar as it is concerned with the marginalised human histories the ocean contains.

The ocean, as material presence, offers a means for reordering and revaluing those histories. Yet Panizza's textual narration also states: 'I am not looking for memory, but patterns'. The director thus hints that by filming as if 'collecting what the sea gives back', she is more likely to establish an ecology of partial, embodied gazes than a full apprehension of the past.

El botón de nácar

The capacity of an oceanic perspective to reorder historical narratives underpins one of the virtues of Patricio Guzmán's *El botón de nácar*, his documentary about Chile, memory and the Pacific Ocean from 2015. This virtue is the uncovering of the ocean's more uncomfortable associations, not least the fact that the regime of Augusto Pinochet disposed of the bodies of some of its victims in the Pacific. Guzmán's long and prestigious career has seen him move from producing works like *La batalla de Chile (The Battle of Chile, 1975-1978)* that were fundamental to the development of the activist political documentary tradition in Latin America, to more reflective, personal and poetic films such as *Chile, la memoria obstinada (Chile, obstinate memory, 1997)*, *Salvador Allende (2004)* and *Nostalgia de la luz (Nostalgia for the Light, 2010)* in recent years (Rodríguez 2010). In *Nostalgia de la luz*, for instance, it is Guzmán's voiceover and highly suggestive use of montage that finds unexpected connections between the search for the remains of Pinochet's victims in the Atacama Desert and the investigations carried out by astronomers in the same location.

Similarly, the button of *El botón de nácar*'s title allows Guzmán's voiceover to find resonances between this story and that of Jemmy Button, the young Yámana boy, native to Tierra del Fuego, who, in exchange for a pearl button, was taken back to Britain by Captain FitzRoy on the HMS *Beagle* in the 19th century (this is a story also told by Agüero in *El otro día*). Guzmán's film is 'ecological' in a largely formal sense, insofar as it employs montage

that exceeds the strictly narrative, and privileges match cuts, split screens and fades in its establishing of hidden connections and uncovering of the histories of near-extirpated indigenous peoples. The film screen becomes something of a liquid space, then, particularly in meditative passages on water's role in connecting our embodied experience to the cosmos, where the camera provides haptic close-ups of the water's surface.

Guzmán's voiceover is explicit in its attribution of qualities typically associated with human bodies to bodies of water: 'El agua tiene memoria' (water has memory), the director states. Emblematic of this exploration of the ocean's memory is Guzmán's privileging of a button found attached to a metal rail used to weigh down the bodies of the Pinochet regime's victims that were thrown from helicopters into the Pacific. This button acts as what DeLoughrey terms an 'oceanic archive [...] the remnants of imperial debris and ancestral identities' (2017: 35). Just as DeLoughrey associates this form of organisation of the past with a particular 'visual poetics', and with the visibility of hidden histories, so it might be argued that Guzmán's fluid visual poetics construct something of an oceanic archive. There is, in fact, a striking similarity between Guzmán's insistence on water's memory, with haptic close-ups of the now barnacle-encrusted, ocean-altered rail (Fig. 5), and DeLoughrey's principal case study, a series of underwater concrete sculptures by Jason deCaires Taylor over which algae, sponges and other marine lifeforms have grown (DeLoughrey, 2017: 36-40). For DeLoughrey, as for Guzmán, it is submersion in the ocean *as a visual medium* that allows the production of 'alternative knowledges and ontologies' (2017: 37), and the visibility of 'a submarine human history that resides outside and below the official archive' (35). In both cases, the ocean *acts* in an unpredictable manner upon human artefacts, altering their materiality and their significance, and refuses to let the past lie undisturbed. This shared emphasis on mutability and change highlights how the Pacific Ocean is, for Guzmán, a very different sort of natural archive to the Atacama Desert in the earlier *Nostalgia de la luz*. In

that film, as noted by Jens Andermann, the desert appears as a surface of inscription, a medium that preserves, rather than alters, the evidence of human presence (2012).

Figure 5. The high-definition close-up of the rail invites a haptic relation.

In her book *Beyond the Pink Tide: Art and Political Undercurrents in the Americas*, Macarena Gómez-Barris makes a forceful argument for the decolonial potential of *El botón de nácar* in terms similar to those of DeLoughrey. Gómez-Barris notes that in a sequence in which the camera pans slowly down a paper map of Chile, the viewer becomes

aware of continental breakage all along the southernmost edge of South America, islands that scatter into a body of water [...] More ocean than landmass, that nation's limits blur into the sea, geographically troubling the neat containment of a nation-state's political geography. (2018: 88-89)

In Gómez-Barris's reading of *El botón de nácar*, Guzmán's film encourages the spectator to consider 'the primacy of the oceanic as a colonial space of mobility and restriction', through its meditations on water as a connecting medium between human bodies and planetary bodies (90-91), and through its interviews with surviving members of the seafaring indigenous communities of Patagonia. In one such interview, an indigenous craftsman, Martín G. Calderón, notes how the regulations enforced by the Chilean Navy forbid him from going to sea in his artisanal canoe, thereby perpetuating colonial logics of dominance and restriction over oceanic space (94-95). In this context, the recognition of indigenous coastal spaces provided by the 2008 'Lafkenche Law' appears very limited in its effects (Zelada Muñoz and Park Key, 2013). It is hard not to think here of the similar

restrictions placed on the Rapanui people by the island's neo-colonial authorities in the early twentieth century, which are highlighted by several of Panizza's interviewees.

For Gómez-Barris, the importance accorded to such testimonies, coupled with the explicit presentation of water as a living force within indigenous cosmologies, 'offer[s] a decolonial viewpoint' (2018: 98). In this view,

[...] the attention to water becomes the centerpiece of the film's diegesis, moving us away from a land-based visuality to one that imagines the Pacific Ocean as the source of life, as livelihood, as the center of Indigenous culture, as memory, but also as a source of colonial death. (98)

Elements of this nascent 'oceanic visuality' are undeniably present, as seen in the case of the encrusted rail above. Indeed, Guzmán suggests throughout the documentary that the indigenous peoples of southern Chile, who were systematically hunted down and exterminated at the start of the twentieth century, maintained a more sustainable relationship with the ocean, one from which we might learn. Yet he expresses this idea in remarkably orientalisising and othering language, stating that they 'walked on water', and denies them any possibility of future coexistence with hegemonic Chilean civilisation, instead imagining them living on a separate planet, elsewhere in the cosmos. It is, moreover, hard to avoid the impression that it is in fact Guzmán himself who remains 'the centerpiece of the film's diegesis'. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in a fade cut that follows the recounting of a canoe journey through the Patagonian archipelago by one of the film's indigenous interviewees, Gabriela Paterito. A framed photograph of Gabriela as a younger woman, taken by Paz Errázuriz, fades into a window looking out over an urban coastline (Fig. 6). Guzmán's languorous voiceover then proceeds to inform the viewer that when Gabriela was undertaking her journey, the director/narrator lived in a town on the coast, and knew nothing about the peoples of the south. 'Entre Gabriela y yo', Guzmán reflects, 'había

varios siglos de distancia' (between Gabriela and myself, there was a distance of several centuries). It is difficult to imagine a more perfect illustration of what Johannes Fabian terms the 'denial of coevalness' in modern anthropological discourse (1983). Guzmán's own biography remains a central point of reference in the film's narrative architecture. The use of the window as a framing device moreover echoes the way in which personal reminiscences (and bourgeois domestic architecture) frame the narration of political history in both *Nostalgia de la luz* and the later *La cordillera de los sueños* (*The Cordillera of Dreams*, 2019).

Figure 6. Gabriela's experience is quite literally framed by Guzmán's.

This observation need not erase the value of the work done by Errázuriz and Guzmán in rendering visible groups of Chilean society, and moments of Chilean history, that are otherwise largely absent from mainstream narratives. As many scholars have noted, Guzmán's first-person mode of documentary filmmaking has been crucial to the work of post-dictatorship political memory in Chile (see for instance, Klubock, 2003, on *Chile, la memoria obstinada*). The fact that *El botón de nácar* is narrated by Guzmán himself in offscreen voiceover certainly favours a clear articulation of an alternative narrative of Chilean history, in opposition to what the historian Gabriel Salazar categorises in the documentary as a national tendency to ignore the ocean (and, by implicit extension, the legacies of violence that reside there). Yet Guzmán's continuous disembodied presence might also contribute to a sense that, in contrast to Panizza's positioning of herself as one embodied gaze among many others, Guzmán is offering his voice as a singular, authoritative interpretation of Chile's past.

The sense that *El botón de nácar*'s network of ecological associations is anchored in the ground of hegemonic cultural discourse is strengthened during a sequence in which Guzmán tentatively associates the body-painting practices of the Selk'nam people of Tierra del Fuego with constellations, through a series of match cuts between photographs of Selk'nam people taken in the early 20th century by the Austrian priest and anthropologist Martin Gusinde, and images of outer space. After admitting that the meaning of the body-paintings remains unclear, Guzmán's voiceover suggests: 'perhaps a Chilean poet, Raúl Zurita, can help us'. No further explanation is offered regarding Zurita's legitimacy as an interpreter of Selk'nam practices.

In this context, it becomes possible to argue that Gómez-Barris's call to think about 'the archipelago, Southern epistemes, and embodied memory as ways to decolonise the universalizing language and practices of the Anthropocene' (2018: 98) receives a fuller response from Panizza's *Tierra sola* than from *El botón de nácar*. Consider, as a final comparative example, the contrasting interview practices of the two filmmakers. As noted above, Panizza privileges the voice of the Rapanui over her own, reflecting on the complexities her own role as a non-indigenous, quasi-ethnographic filmmaker in the organisation of their testimonies, and acknowledging that their relation to the ocean will only partially be grasped by the viewer. *Tierra sola* makes a virtue, in other words, of its fragmentary account of the islanders' ecological entanglements, and its privileging of the interstice might be seen to install a properly 'archipelagic' filmic subjectivity (to adopt a term sometimes invoked as a sign of an island-based epistemology [Roberts and Stephens, 2017]), a mode of filmmaking that is able to conceive of the ocean simultaneously as connection and as isolating wall. Guzmán's interviewees, conversely, are neatly and frontally framed, and their testimonies are frequently shaped by Guzmán's interjections, as when he asks Gabriela Paterito to translate a number of words, chosen by him, from Spanish into her native

Kawésqar. Near the end of the film, in fact, a series of long, static takes frames his interview subjects in a manner not entirely dissimilar to that of the aforementioned photographs of the Selk'nam taken by Martin Gusinde, in the context of an ethnographic project adjacent to the displacement and near-eradication of an indigenous group (Alonso Marchante, 2019).

Guzmán's project has entirely contrasting aims, of course, but on this basis, it is difficult to see how the filmmaker's viewpoint can be described as thoroughly 'decolonial', if we follow Walter D. Mignolo's definition of decolonial thinking as a practice of 'epistemic disobedience' (2009). To a significant extent, Guzmán adheres to epistemic conventions of documentary under which a disembodied, white, male narrator acts as the organiser and interpreter of the material (Bruzzi, 2006: 57-58). While Guzmán's voiceover states that 'la actividad de pensar se parece al océano' (the act of thinking is like the ocean), it is arguably Panizza's film whose narrative structure better exemplifies the decentred, ecological approach suggested by this simile.

The echo of the practices of colonial visibility in Guzmán's work seems particularly strong when the circulation of the film is taken into account. Guzmán's stature, and the success of *El botón de nácar* on the festival circuit (it won the Silver Bear for Best Script at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2015) granted the film a significant European and North American audience, while its circulation within Chile (as is the case for many Chilean films) remained limited: a government-funded report records just 12,288 spectators in the country in 2015 (Consultora 8A, 2016: 58). Does Guzmán's film therefore convert its indigenous subjects into a spectacle for international consumption, or indeed neo-ethnographic interpretation? *El botón de nácar*'s reliance on white, male 'talking heads', such as the anthropologist Claudio Mercado, who performs an indigenous water song, begs the question. There is certainly little of *Tierra sola*'s reflexive scepticism towards the colonial connotations of ethnographic visual practices in evidence here. There is no doubt that

imagining cinema as one dimension of a contested, endlessly mutable ‘hydrosocial space’ can do much to reveal the ways in which the relations between (indigenous) humans and oceans have been subject to oppression, and ineluctably drawn into ecological articulations of power. Yet a comparative analysis of *Tierra sola* and *El botón de nácar* makes clear the risk that the visual poetics employed in that act of revelation might themselves become instruments for the construction of hierarchical relations between filmmaker, spectator and filmed subjects.

Conclusion

On this evidence, it is surely not sufficient to engage in straightforward theorisations of cinematic liquidity or ecological connection, or to pay lip service to the (admittedly beguiling) notion that ‘For us humans, the flow and flush of waters sustain our own bodies, but also connect them to other bodies, to other worlds beyond our human selves’ (Neimanis, 2017: 2). Indeed, Neimanis, among the most prominent advocates of this view, is strikingly cautious about the politics of employing indigenous cosmologies within her framework, leaving the ‘troubling question of whether First Nations and other indigenous people are closer to Nature or better custodians of the Earth to others more willing to engage with those terms of debate’ (2017: 174). One claim she is content to make, nonetheless, is that a conception of water as in some sense *alive*, as possessed of its own agency, is a powerful antidote to ‘Anthropocene water’, to that all-too-transparent and immaterial imagining of water that underlies contemporary acts of ecological destruction (174-75). To acknowledge water as life, as Panizza obliquely does when she describes her filmmaking method as ‘coleccionar lo que el mar devuelve’ (collecting what the sea gives back), need not imply an attempt to assert visual mastery over the form of that life. Instead, the embodied, interstitial

form of Panizza's archival experiment opens up pathways for ecologically-minded ethnographic or essay film to engage with other subjectivities, whether human or nonhuman. Conversely, an auteurist approach to the oceanic archive, as Guzmán finds in *El botón de nácar*, can lead to the reassertion of hierarchical relations. In short, DeLoughrey's optimism about the possibilities of the oceanic archive to provide 'alternative knowledges and ontologies', echoed by Gómez-Barris's positive account of Guzmán's 'archive of starlight' (2018: 88), should be tempered through careful attention to the form of transmission of such knowledges.

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