
Film Review

Political Fiction in the Cinema.

A review article of *Il pleut sur Santiago*, a Franco-Bulgarian film; directed by Helvio Soto, produced by Jacques Charrier (Marquise Films), 1976.

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We all have somehow to relate the life and death of the Allende government to our political theories, adjusting the theories if need be—it is too important to ignore. When a film is made about the *golpe* in Chile in 1973 we need to identify what statement it makes and then analyse this. In doing so I shall raise some wider questions.

At one level this is a memorial to Salvador Allende. The unfolding of the tragedy is none the less gripping because we already know the outcome. The film's climax is the storming of the La Moneda, the Presidential palace, and the annihilation of the President and his staff, who ignored a promise of safe-conduct and fought on with mere rifles against an armoured brigade. Although these scenes are reconstructed, they must be substantially true (if we ignore the lingering but trivial uncertainty about the actual manner of the President's death). This is undoubtedly more or less what actually happened, that grey September morning. And it is so harrowing that I would advise anyone with emotional involvement in Chile not to watch.

President Allende was an authentic hero, the victim of a treasonable conspiracy by those who were sworn to protect La Moneda, a man who testified to his political integrity with life itself, as Che Guevara had done earlier. He has provided an example to contemporaries and a legend for future generations. In an era full of self-seeking and cowardly *politicos*, this needs saying and film is a powerful medium for doing so. He deserves a tribute so richly that one hesitates to raise any critical questions about an attempt to provide one. It seems like complaining that the memorial to Edith Cavell in Charing Cross Road is too tall.

But films say more than statues. The statement made here is fairly obvious. Allende was supported by the workers and the students. Senior officers in the armed forces are fascists, protecting the propertied classes, who are shown celebrating with champagne in the Hotel Carrera as they watch La Moneda being destroyed. An executive of ITT has earlier been seen telephoning Washing-

ton for United States intervention. In brief, workers and students good: officers, capitalists and Americans bad.

There is of course a fair amount of truth in this. But not quite enough. Anyone seeing the film might well remain slightly mystified why the Allende government fell. Its collapse seems under-determined. The heroic resistance of its supporters is depicted vividly. But why was it so brief and so hopeless?¹ The puzzle baffles us because there are important pieces missing, especially the mounting interaction of economic privation and political tension beforehand.

Certainly these difficulties were (as we now know) in part due to deliberate 'destabilising' by Henry Kissinger and the CIA, but not as much as the film implies by ignoring other major contributory factors. Much less planning had been done by the parties of the Left before the election than before that of 1964. The Unidad Popular manifesto, by promising both to raise wages substantially and to avoid any devaluation, may have doomed the government before it ever took office, since it actually tried for some time to carry out such a policy.² (The UP manifesto also naïvely assumed that it would be simple to mobilise all the unused industrial capacity).

After the election there was incessant sectarian struggle between the parties of the UP. The Cabinet could not prevent the ultra-left (including the ultras *inside* the government) helping themselves by *tomas* to factories and farms, creating an atmosphere of violence and uncertainty more 'destabilising' than any actions of the US government. Examples of economic mismanagement were the lack of coherent policies for nationalised industries or a credible strategy for stopping the accelerating inflation. On top of all this, the

1 The starting point of Radomiro Tomić's "Reflexiones sobre el golpe d'estado en Chile", *IDS Bulletin*, Vol 7 No. 3, 1976.

2 Some of the policy weaknesses were touched on in the ODEPLAN/IDS conference in Santiago in 1972, which we organised at the request of the Government of Allende, who opened the conference. (See *The Chilean Road to Socialism* edited by Ann Zammit, published by IDS).

Two absences from this conference became easier to understand in the light of subsequent developments. I tried to get a member of Kissinger's staff to come, because the Minister of Economics, Pedro Vuskovic, wanted to establish some sort of communication with them and to show them that the situation need not be considered politically intolerable by Washington. I did not get even answers to my letters.

Secondly, the failure of Carlos Rafael Rodríguez to nominate Cuban participants reflected, I felt after talking to him, a deep pessimism about the prospects of the Allende government.

Allende government never had a majority either in the country or in Congress.

It certainly carried out many important social reforms, but still it did not quite create the workers' paradise that the film depicts. To say this is not to 'justify' the actions of the CIA or the rebels, still less the subsequent conduct of the Pinochet regime, which could make a plausible claim, against considerable competition, to being the most brutal anywhere this century—as well as one of the least successful economically.

The point of drawing attention to the gathering clouds during the UP administration is because lessons have to be drawn, not only for the future of Chile itself after the dictatorship, but also for Left coalitions which come to power in any non-revolutionary situation, as is now indeed growing likely in a number of Mediterranean countries. Is it possible to achieve changes in the social structure constitutionally as Allende tried to? Could he have maintained power by taking some Christian Democrats into the Government (as Radomiro Tomić claims, and David Lehmann denies³)? If the lesson of his fall is that democratic socialism is *inherently* impossible, then political theorists will have to take due note and Left-wing governments will have to conduct themselves accordingly.

So we need a thorough analysis of the failure of the Allende government and in the first place we look to Chilean exiles to acknowledge their errors, however painful this may be, both politically and personally. Yet anybody seeing this film, directed by a well-known Chilean, could reasonably conclude that the major task of a Left government is not to work out its priorities, set its own house in order and learn how to administer a complex economy, but rather to expel all foreign companies, arrest leading officers and arm the workers and students—in other words, adopt an ultra-Left programme.

Do the Bulgarians, who helped produce this picture, know so little about Chile that they fail to realise its implications? Is the correct advice for, say, Berlinguer or Mitterand that they should promise major social changes, polarise the situation as much as possible and risk goading the Right into counter-revolution? Would those who give this implicit advice accept responsibility for the predictable consequences in countries where neither the economic nor the military power of the bourgeoisie has been broken, and it can call on strong external support? 'Predictable' in the light of what has happened not merely in Chile

but also—in various ways—in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Uruguay, etc.

This is the crux of the matter. When a Left-wing government is at last elected, after decades of political frustration, and the optimistic promises of an electoral campaign, but suddenly finds its power severely constrained, its position is extremely difficult, especially if it lacks a parliamentary majority. It has to convince its followers that they need to continue to accept the major and minor injustices of everyday life—living in slums and enduring insults from factory managers who have been *politically* defeated but continue to enjoy the comforts of a bourgeois life. Meanwhile, institutions, including the armed forces, have to be reformed, which may be a very slow process. If it fails to educate its followers in political realities, they will become demoralised and attracted to the ultra-Left, and the government may be brought down.

Sadly, *Il pleut sur Santiago* will make this more likely. Its showing in Italy, for example, could well help bring to power a military dictatorship, and generate new waves of political refugees. Those who encourage tactics of confrontation, even by implication, may be left with a heavy burden on their conscience.

The technique of reconstructing reality and presenting it in documentary form raises another set of issues. The film is laced with recordings of Allende's voice and sequences showing TV screens showing actual events, heightening the documentary effect. The viewer is unsure, especially the European viewer, which of the remaining material is based on some sort of record, which is pure invention—and there are of course many hybrids between fact and fiction. (Analogous questions were posed by Oscar Lewis's reconstruction of Mexican family life in *The children of Sanchez*). It is particularly difficult to know what to make of scenes involving living people, such as Eduardo Frei or Pedro Vuskovic, played by actors.

Presumably, many of the committed will not care. This is history as they *want* it to have been, preferring the film to select and digest the material for them, regurgitating the nutrients they need. But some people would like to try to understand what actually did happen, and this is difficult since we do not know how the script writer and director have selected their material and how much it has been altered to fit the main themes.

The film closes with a public demonstration at the funeral of Pablo Neruda, *after* the insurrection, in which large crowds demonstrate against the military *junta*, shouting slogans of defiance, despite the presence of the police. The final frozen frame

3 IDS *Bulletin*, Vol. 8 No. 1, 1976.

of clenched fists is doubtless deeply comforting to those who have to believe that the revolution still lives, openly challenging a regime it will shortly bring down, in some inevitable apocalypse. But it is hardly representative of the situation since the insurrection.

It is interesting to compare this film with another covering the same period, made in Cuba in 1975 by Chilean exiles out of newsreel and television material—*La Insurreccion de la Burguesia*. That is naturally edited, but the viewer is on much more secure ground. He (or she) is shown the growth of political tension and food problems in Chile as the winter months of 1973 passed. Watching pictures of the copper strike he will scarcely believe that all opponents of the UP were either fascists or fools. He may well, with the advantage of hindsight, agree that the striking miners (and the students who supported them) were 'objectively' guilty of helping bring down the government. But he is shown actual meetings of miners and students and is, to a considerable extent, free to put his own interpretation on them. This genuine documentary has a rich complexity very different from the quasi-fictional stereotypes of *Il pleut sur Santiago*⁴—the latter incidentally chooses to ignore this strike by part of the proletariat against egalitarian policies, although it is highly significant and precisely what we all somehow need to accommodate in our ideologies.

Perhaps, however, we are being unfair to the makers of *Il pleut sur Santiago*. Suppose we treat it simply as propaganda. Never mind what actually happened! Let us start from the assumption that this is how people *ought* to see the fall of Allende. Then quite different criteria apply. We ask simply whether enough minds will be manipulated and how efficiently.

It will no doubt be widely screened. It is adorned by many international stars including Annie Girardot and Jean-Louis Trintignant,⁵ and was running simultaneously at three major cinemas in Tokyo when I was there in June.⁶ And it certainly meets the main requirement: it is a simple story with clearly identified baddies and goodies. One does wonder, however, whether it is not too simple. Audiences will need considerable ignorance and credulity to swallow it completely.

Or should one look on it (though no Marxist could do so) purely as an artistic creation, a disembodied fiction, the producers of which are allowed special license to reorganise life into patterns which are tidy and satisfying, just as a sculptor may remove the flawed parts of his material? In that event, as when we treat the film as mere propaganda, 'truth' becomes less relevant than simplicity.

On these terms it is more successful—perhaps too much so. Direction, camerawork and acting are of high quality. Sub-plots of individual lives are skilfully and realistically woven into a central plot which is elegant and strong. Some incidents, like the desertion of a sergeant who does not support the *golpe*, linger in the mind.

But why pick on Chile? There is enough material God knows, in her neighbours, not to speak of the rest of the world, for constructing political melodramas that would be much less misleading.

It is true that the story of Allende's death is useful to the propagandist and the artist. But in the last analysis, *Il pleut sur Santiago* fails to bring out how heroic he was. He did not just know how to die. Propagandist objectives require it to be silent about his central problem namely how to keep in power a "Popular Unity" that was—given its objectives and its lack of room to manoeuvre—neither sufficiently popular nor sufficiently united. Allende required great ability and great nerve to hold office for so long, under such circumstances: a *day* can sometimes be a long time in Chilean politics. His real legacy to us is not an act of heroism, important though that is, but evidence on what can and cannot be done under certain non-unique political conditions.

We have every reason to doubt that such a sophisticated man would have wished, or even permitted, a monolithic monument that conceals this evidence. President Allende deserves serious cinematic treatment, so that what was finally a disaster should not be repeated in Chile or anywhere else. He would know that distorted perceptions of the past could distort the reality that is to come: it might rain again in Spain. Ultimately *Il pleut sur Santiago* exploits the silence of the dead it purports to glorify.

⁴ The Cuban Communist Party understands a good deal better than the Bulgarian what the lessons of Chile are.

⁵ Although the actors are listed together in the credits, without distinction, the publicity material is less egalitarian.

⁶ However, it has not been a financial success so far. The firm that produced it is now bankrupt. For this reason we were unable to obtain 'stills' from the film as illustrations for this review.