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FREEDOM AFTER NEOLIBERALISM

Forms of Freedom in Pablo Larraín's *No* and *Neruda*

Eugenio Di Stefano

University of Nebraska at Omaha, US

edistefano@unomaha

For nearly forty years, freedom in Latin American literature has been tied to liberal democracy and state-sponsored terror. Literature, according to this post-dictatorial project, eliminates the division between art and life on behalf of democratic freedom and against human rights violations. What this project ignores is that the dictatorships' objective was to eliminate all resistance to the market. Or as Eduardo Galeano notes, "People were in prison so that prices could be free." This essay suggests that Pablo Larraín's *No* (2012) and *Neruda* (2016) begin to challenge the conception of freedom in relation to democracy and dictatorship by insisting that democracy and dictatorship be understood instead in relation to the market. That is, the true force of these two films is found in their insistence on aesthetic form, or what Larraín calls an "illusion," an illusion that not only rejects the indistinction between art and commodities, but also gestures toward a space of freedom beyond neoliberalism.

Introduction

Numerous films have depicted the dictatorships that took place in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay during the 1970s and 1980s.¹ Most of these films deal with the legacy of human rights violations and disappearances. Pablo Larraín's film *No* (2012) instead focuses on the eponymous advertising campaign surrounding a 1988 Chilean referendum that would help bring down the dictator, Augusto Pinochet, and end 17 years of military rule. The film centers on the adman René Saavedra (Gael García Bernal), orchestrator of the media campaign to oust Pinochet with the 'No' vote. In order to win the referendum, Saavedra endorses the same 'forces of market capitalism' that the left had traditionally critiqued (Benson-Allot, 2013: 61). In this way, *No* is less about a break than a continuation of neoliberal policies that make Chile one of the most unequal countries on earth. Larraín puts it this way: '[*No*] is not just about what happened before the referendum, it's about what happened after. Since 1988, we've been living in a shopping center. *No* is not just about defeating Pinochet, it's about where Chile is going—and what's going on *now* is terrible' (Romney, 2013: 32 [emphasis added]). For the filmmaker, then, the transition from a dictatorship to a democracy entails 'living in a shopping center' where everything, including democracy, can be reduced to a brand that can be either bought or sold. Or to put this another way, *No* points to a new postdictatorial Chilean reality where, according to the literary critic Idelber Avelar, 'every corner of social life has been commodified' (1999: 1).

Thus, it would seem that Larraín's film adds to a growing list of thinkers, like Avelar, who stress a certain equivalence between social life and commodities in years following democracy. Nevertheless, as this article argues, Larraín's *No* and his 2016 film, *Neruda*, differ from these accounts insofar as these two films insist on imagining an alternative to a society in which everything is a commodity. One of the most commented on aspects of *No* is Larraín's usage of U-matic video technology,

¹ In Chile, the most interesting narrative films that deal with this period include Ricardo Larraín's *La Frontera* (1991), Gonzalo Justiniano's *Amnesia* (1994), Andrés Wood's *Machuca* (2004) and Niles Atallah's *Lucía* (2010).

which, I will suggest, functions to assert an autonomous aesthetic space from which to question this reality where all 'social life has been commodified'. This assertion will appear again in a scene where Saavedra explains that the anti-Pinochet campaign needs a jingle to accompany the political advertisements, a jingle that can brand democracy to the Chilean audience; to do this, he demands that it must be '[A] jingle. No art. No folk, no pop, no rock. Jingle' (Larraín, 2012). The jingle that is created, 'Chile, la alegría ya viene' ('Chile, happiness is coming'), becomes wildly popular and the 'No' opposition ultimately wins. Saavedra's decision proves correct; and yet, his insistence on this distinction between a jingle and art signals a possible interpretation of art that is not simply seen as a commodity like any other. Saavedra's assertion, in other words, raises the question of whether art may function as a means to think through and beyond neoliberal freedom in Chile.

Larraín's interest in the status of art as a conceptual space from which to critique society can already be found in his first three films: *Fuga* (2006), *Tony Manero* (2008), and *Post-Mortem* (2010).² But where these films primarily center on art's relationship to the dictatorship, *No* and *Neruda* are very much committed to thinking of art in relation to a new democratic period where 'consumerism equals more freedom and more democracy' (Draper, 2012: 18). Where *No*, however, traces the emergence of a consumer economy in Chilean society in the 1980s, and the freedoms that are offered by the market, Larraín's *Neruda* takes place in the 1940s, during a period in which art's commodification was not the status quo. And yet, as I will argue, it is this historical distance in *Neruda* that represents the first gesture toward a thinking *after* neoliberal freedom. But more than the historical distance, it is Larraín's interest in genre in *Neruda*, and the detective story in particular, that offers the most radical critique

² Even though *No* is considered the last film of the so-called dictatorship trilogy, the argument could be made, as Robert Wells does, that the 'dictatorship haunts' (2017: 503) Larraín's first film, *Fuga*, and is especially visible in the figure of Claudio who has been interned because he is gay and a communist, 'which ties *Fuga* to Pinochet's politics of detainment' (2017: 506). What I will be arguing here is that *No* needs to be read less as an end than as a beginning to a way of thinking of art in relation to neoliberal freedom, a relation that also links it to *Neruda*. This, of course, does not mean that economic considerations are nonexistent in Larraín's previous films. See Thakkar, for example, for an excellent reading of *Tony Manero*, in particular, how Larraín allegorically critiques imported 'economic and cultural models from the United States' (2017: 530).

of neoliberal freedom. Following the work of Nicholas Brown, I suggest that the assertion of genre, which is governed by its own rules internal to the work, represents a turn away from a neoliberal world governed by consumer choice. By focusing on the aesthetic realm proper in *Neruda*, Larraín's aesthetic ambitions paradoxically take on a more concrete political significance as the film begins to imagine a form of freedom that is divorced from, rather than determined by, the market.

No and Market Freedom

The Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano famously noted that during the dictatorships 'people were in prison so that prices could be free' (qtd. in Weschler, 1991: 147). What Galeano suggests here is that the reason for authoritarian rule and repression was purely economic. This economic process dramatically and tragically intensified on September 11, 1973 when Augusto Pinochet led a coup in order to force out the world's first democratically elected socialist president, Salvador Allende, who had sought to nationalize industries and redistribute wealth.³ In the immediate years that followed, Pinochet's Chicago Boys would introduce and implement a neoliberal economic agenda that removed political and social obstructions to the market. Backed by US corporations, the CIA, and other organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank, Chile became the world's 'first experiment with neoliberal state formation' (Harvey, 2005: 7). By incarcerating, disappearing, and murdering citizens, the dictatorship was able to privatize large sectors of the public sphere. For the next several years, Chile's economy boomed. The success, nonetheless, was short-lived with the onset of the 1982 Latin American debt crisis (Harvey, 2005: 8). As democracy returned in Argentina (1976–1983) and Uruguay (1973–1985), there was mounting pressure from big businesses and the international community, including human rights organizations, to end the dictatorship in Chile. In 1988, a scheduled referendum would take place in order to decide whether Pinochet would govern for another eight years.

³ For a reading of the period that precedes the coup, especially the right-wing president Jorge Alessandri's attempt to reintroduce anti-statist, liberal economic efforts (1958–1964) in order to refute the import-substitution industrialization model that had been in place since the Great Depression, see Fornazzari.

No opens with an intertitle that provides some of this political and economic background. What is equally noteworthy about the intertitle, I want to suggest, is how blurry and gritty the image is. This blurriness, at first sight, might seem like a projectionist's oversight. Nevertheless, as the film progresses, one begins to understand that this blurriness is not only how the film is intended to look, but is also just as crucial to the politics of the film. As it turns out, *No* is shot on a 3/4 Sony U-matic magnetic tape, which was the standard format of Chilean television in the 1980s. The usage allows Larraín to mesh seamlessly the old television footage of the campaign with the director's new material. When blown up on a cinema screen it creates a hazy image and a dizzying effect. Much has been said about the politics of the U-matic, both positive and negative. Caetlin Benson-Allot, for example, applauds the technology, suggesting that the blurriness is meant show the moral and ethical blurriness of the transition, where the left capitulates to the capitalist system that, at one time, it sought to critique (2013: 61). The critic Nelly Richard, on the other hand, criticizes Larraín's usage of the U-matic, as it allegorically freezes Chilean history, effectively erasing any resistance that would occur in the years following the referendum (2014: n. pag.).

Both of these readings, however, ignore the importance of what Larraín himself has said about the U-matic: 'it breaks my illusion when I'm looking at a film that is shot in high resolution and they cut to archival footage that is made in video or old resolution film stock. [In *No*] [w]e were able to create the illusion in a way that fiction became documentary and documentary became fiction' (Wilkinson, 2013: 3). Indeed, Larraín's process takes old archival footage, including *No* campaign advertisements, and blends them with new material in order to produce a film that looks like a documentary. Nonetheless, the point here is not to suggest that the film does not blur genres, but rather that this blurring is a product of choices made with an eye to asserting the film's status as an 'illusion'. Larraín, in other words, chooses this technology as a means to insist on the film's status as fiction.

Which is just to say that Larraín's use of the U-matic in *No* serves to offer an 'impossible' point of view that can only exist within, and not outside of, the film (Bongers, 2014: 191). Or said differently still, insofar as *No* insists on this space of fiction, it does so to create what the art critic Michael Fried has called the illusion of a

'closed system which in effect seals off the space' from the beholder (1980: 64). In his 1980 book *Absorption and Theatricality*, Fried explores the idea of absorption in the work of Denis Diderot, an aesthetic technique in painting where aesthetic figures, who are entirely engrossed in their own world, treat 'the beholder as if he were not there' (1980: 5). What is important about absorption is not that the artist does not paint, in part, with the beholder in mind, but rather that absorption provides the most compelling account of art as a 'supreme fiction' (1980: 103), stressing an 'absolutely perspicuous mode of pictorial unity' (1980: 103). Undoubtedly, paintings and films are different mediums but what is vital to note here is that the U-matic for Larraín is employed to underscore *No*'s status as fiction, regardless of whatever feelings the beholder might have about this effect.⁴

Unlike absorptive works, theatrical art not only acknowledges but demands the beholder's presence; so much so, that it risks eliminating the division between art and life. This is why Fried has suggested elsewhere that theatricality can be understood as a 'negation of art' (1998: 153). In *No*, Larraín offers an example of this 'negation of art', when, as noted above, the adman Saavedra demands that the political campaign create a jingle and not art. From this position, it is worth considering the original Chilean advertisements that Larraín chooses to appear in his film, which offer a striking contrast between the U-matic's absorptive qualities and the theatricality of the ads. We get an example of this contrast in the first scene that follows the intertitle. A close-up shot introduces René Saavedra, an exile and son of a militant who has recently returned from Mexico to work in an ad agency. Saavedra, along with his boss Lucho Guzmán (Alfredo Castro), are pitching an ad campaign for a new soda, 'Free Cola', to the company's executives. Saavedra presses play on a video recorder as the camera tracks to a TV screening the commercial. The ad presents a rapid montage of images that show young people at a concert, drinking the beverage, and dancing to the Free Cola jingle, performed by the rock group, Engrupo. No doubt, the quick

⁴ *No* has been called 'ugly' and even off-putting (Dargis, 2013: n. pag.). For a discussion on how to read Fried in film, see essays from Siraganian and Morgon. In the Latin American context, see Buttes' chapter 'Los obreros son así: Fuguet, Film and Form' in his forthcoming book *Icons of Poverty*.

succession of images is meant to elicit the interest of the viewers.⁵ Nevertheless, it is the jingle itself that makes this link to the viewer most evident.⁶

The new soft drink has arrived! It's yours, it's unbound. It's Free. Because your time has come ... The time for Free is now. It's the taste you were waiting for because it was created for you. And now, Free. Refresh yourself now, yes. And feel Free! Unbound like you. Now you, now Free! (Larraín, 2012)

The Free Cola jingle is purely theatrical as it not only acknowledges but demands the viewer's immediate attention. For example, 'you' or 'yours' is mentioned in almost every line, sometimes twice, while 'now' is mentioned four times. If Larraín's use of the U-matic is the attempt to insist on 'fiction' in order to treat the beholder as if she is not there, part of the point of the Free commercial in *No* is to show that the product's very existence can't be imagined without the beholder ('because it was created for you').⁷

What becomes equally clear about the jingle is that theatricality for Larraín has its own politics. The jingle offers a powerful fantasy that freedom can be achieved by purchasing a product, a fantasy that will be crucial to our understanding of neoliberal freedom after the return to democracy. Indeed, in the neoliberal period, freedom increasingly will be connected to consumer choice and entrepreneurial initiatives, while government action and regulation will be considered a hindrance to practicing such freedom. The jingle itself seeks to brand freedom as it notes the word 'free' six times, while 'you' or 'yours' emphasizes the kind of individualism that defines neoliberal social relations. There is no mention of the social or historical context that informs

⁵ The jingle at the center of the Free Cola commercial must be considered in relation to this emerging consumption economy in Chile. Indeed, the commercial clearly reflects a new era in advertising and consumer culture, what Thomas Frank called 'The Conquest of Cool', where the influence of MTV and music in particular intersects with market demographics in order to target consumers based on taste, lifestyles, and income.

⁶ This is the original Free Cola advertisement that first appeared in the mid-1980s on Chilean TV. The *No* campaign advertisements in the film are also originals. For more details on these advertisements, see Cilento.

⁷ Although aimed at an entirely different type of art, a similar logic is found in what Fried called 'literalism', as examined in *Art and Objecthood*.

the individual. Instead, liberated from the constraints of both society and history, freedom is identified with the present ('new', 'has arrived', 'time has come', 'now you, now free'). This freedom has no past or future, as it incessantly points to the present. Now 'unbound', freedom binds itself forever to neoliberalism. From this position, the force of the Free Cola advertisement becomes less about persuading viewers to buy a product than about making them complicit with this neoliberal ideology.

That a cola called 'Free' is being sold during a period of political repression is certainly ironic; but part of the success of the No campaign is its promise to achieve the neoliberal democracy that the authoritarian regime has denied. Soon after making the pitch for the Free Cola commercial, Saavedra is offered a job to run the No television advertising campaign. The aesthetics of the 'Chile, la alegría ya viene' ad that Saavedra creates will directly borrow in content and style from the Free Cola commercial.⁸ To emphasize the link between the cola ad and political ad, Saavedra even uses the same Free Cola marketing slogan when pitching the No campaign advertisement: 'What you are going to see now is in line with the current social context. After all, today, Chile thinks about its future'. The most important aspect of this political commercial for Saavedra is not that it denounces Pinochet but rather that it, like the Free Cola commercial, 'sells' a lifestyle.⁹ This point becomes clear in another scene

⁸ These theatrical elements can even be read in how Larraín's film frames the commercials. Wells is exactly right when he notes that 'Many of *No*'s scenes start with the characters—and the audience—acting as spectators looking into television sets; the frame of the TV then disappears, and everyone becomes subsumed within the image. Pinochet's regime thus transitions to the regime of the image. A politics of antagonism passes from sight' (2017: 513).

⁹ In one scene, Saavedra views a possible political advertisement created by some of the No campaign members. The advertisement focuses on past human rights abuses as it shows images of La Moneda palace being bombed and people on the streets being beaten. The images are both powerful and disturbing. But they are not for Saavedra, as he dismissively responds: 'Eso no vende' ('This does not sell') (Larraín, 2012). The problem with these violent images, for him, is that they are 'too dark' and too fearful, and thus they don't produce the right response, a response that will motivate viewers to cast their vote. After rejecting this advertisement, Saavedra, with several No members, are left to brainstorm possible ideas that presumably will 'sell' this brand of 'democracy'. Saavedra tells the members that he wants 'something a little lighter, a little nicer [...] more humor' (Larraín, 2012). What is needed is a type of affective response that everybody likes: happiness. Of course, the turn away from these violent images for Saavedra does not mean a rejection of neoliberalism; nor does it mean that human rights offer a form of resistance to neoliberalism. Both the aesthetics of human rights and the aesthetics of the commercials are theatrical, and equally committed to producing affective responses; it is just that

where campaign members discuss whether the TV spot should include a family picnic where a baguette is placed in a picnic basket. One person contests that 'no one eats baguettes [in Chile]' to which Saavedra declares that it doesn't matter because it looks pretty. In this way, the political campaign not only uses the same strategies as the Free Cola commercial, but also offers a more powerful fantasy than the soft drink; that by purchasing a product one can achieve a prettier and happier life.¹⁰

The campaign works and leads to a return to democracy in Chile. Nevertheless, as Larraín makes clear in one of the film's closing scenes, neoliberal freedom—much like the Free Cola commercial—is not very good. After hearing the results of the referendum, the camera shows a politician from the No side speaking in front of reporters, noting that No's victory is a triumph for a 'fairer' Chile 'with more solidarity, with no privileges' (Larraín, 2012). While people cheer and celebrate, Saavedra looks completely absorbed and distant. The camera follows him as he solemnly walks through the crowd with his child; first, holding his child's hand, and then picking him up, to protect him from the crowd. Unlike everyone else, Saavedra looks concerned, as if he knows that the happiness that has been sold to Chileans is not really coming. Indeed, since the end of the dictatorship, the forms of economic inequality and injustice brought into existence by the dictatorship have only exacerbated.¹¹

the violent images don't sell as well. In the introduction of my forthcoming book *The Vanishing Frame*, I examine the aesthetics of human rights in *No*. In this article, however, I am concerned with mapping out the relationship between art and the commodity form in *No* and *Neruda*.

¹⁰ The commercial extends the idea that Walter Thompson had announced in 1937 that 'under private capitalism, the consumer, the citizen, is boss. The consumer is the voter, the juror, the judge and the executioner [...]. The consumer 'votes' each time he buys one article and rejects another—every day in every ward and precinct in the land [...]. In all history, there has been nothing remotely like modern American business as a sensitive index to popular likes and dislikes. It is democracy plus' (qtd. in Taylor, 2012: 67).

¹¹ This should not be surprising since the Concertación government, a coalition of leftist parties that came to power with the return to democracy, continued the same economic policies that were first implemented by Pinochet. Karin Fischer puts it this way: 'Despite the new [Concertación] coalition government and the postdictatorship opportunities, [...] the neoliberal model of economic policy by and large remained in place (2009: 333). Furthermore, these leftist governments have continued to favor neoliberal models that have also directly contributed to the rise of inequality in Chile.'

Thus far, I have attempted to argue that *No* is primarily about how Chile has transformed into what Larraín calls a 'shopping center'. What is more, Larraín's decision to place these advertisements in his film reveals that for him this transformation to a 'shopping center' also includes a theatrical aesthetics that negates the idea of art ('[A] jingle. No art') by demanding the beholder's presence ('because it was created for you'). Seen in this way, Larraín's film identifies a problem that has been central to Latin American criticism since the 1970s, but it shows it as reversed: Where Saavedra seeks to eliminate aesthetic form as a way to better sell a product, Latin American scholars have understood this theatrical commitment as essential to contesting capitalism. Perhaps the most visible example is found in the rise of the testimonio, which has been considered by some as the Latin American genre per excellence. The testimonio emerges in the 1960s to document a new revolutionary moment in Latin America in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution. In his much-discussed essay, 'The Margin at the Center' (also written in the 1980s) John Beverley declared that the power of the testimonio, in part, is located in its break with 'literature' and 'authorial intention' that have been 'bound up' in bourgeois literature (2004: 35). In order to produce a type of reaction that would motivate a reader to act, the testimonio is imagined as breaking with authorial intention and representation.

In other words, for Beverley, the politics of the testimonio is found less in its representation than in overcoming it in order to prompt an 'ethical and political response' (2004: 31).¹² To be sure, not all scholarship saw the testimonio this way. Indeed, some, most notably Nelly Richard, considered the testimonio as the epitome of conventional representation, and, thus, sought to find a more heteronymous form that would afford the beholder the possibility to define what the object was.¹³ The most recent iteration of this antirepresentational stance is located in Jon Beasley-Murray's

¹² In his reading of *Post-Mortem*, James Harvey is right to suggest that Larraín is rewriting political cinema as he turns away from the Third Cinema of the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, he is wrong to believe that these politics—following the work of Jacques Rancière—can be located in Larraín's metaphors which 'demand the spectator's participation in the reconstruction of history' (2017: 449). Indeed, if anything this 'demand' of the spectator becomes another mechanism to insist on the theatricality that Larraín connects to neoliberal freedom.

¹³ See, for example, Richard's *Cultural Residues: Chile in Transition* (2004).

Posthegemony when he notes that, '[w]hat matters is how things present themselves to us, not what they may represent' (2011: 205). According to Beasley-Murray's logic, once the question of representation is redescribed as a question about 'how things present themselves to us', a more productive critique of neoliberalism emerges.¹⁴

And yet, this world where authorship and meaning are rendered irrelevant, according to Nicholas Brown, is deeply connected to the rise of neoliberalism. In a contemporary period of what Brown describes as art's 'real subsumption under capital', the work's status as art is fully integrated into the market (2012: n. pag.). The shift from artwork to commodities also entails a complete disregard for authorial intention and the work of art. This does not mean, of course, that decisions are not made when producing objects for the market but rather that these decisions 'no longer matter as intentions' 'because they are entirely subordinated to more or less informed guesses about other people's desires' (2012: n. pag.). Whether somebody drinks that product, destroys it, or dances with it, does not matter; the value of the commodity is realized in its exchange, which depends on the consumer's interest. Following Brown's reading, one can say that the Latin Americanist emphasis on the reader, or what Beasley-Murray calls 'us', far from a critique of capitalism, becomes something like a theoretical justification of why the consumer is always right.

As it turns out, the jingle offers one of the clearest examples of this connection between anti-intentionality and the primacy of consumer choice. In his book *The Sounds of Capitalism*, Timothy Dean Taylor interviews the adman Buddy Scott who states:

[T]he process of developing a musical image, or jingle, for an advertiser or broadcaster usually follows a similar course. A detailed consultation with the client takes place initially to establish the primary goals and objectives. This process also includes developing a profile of the client's potential customer from the information given, which in turn helps to dictate the musical style, delivery and lyrics best suited to strike the responsive chord. (Taylor, 2012: 181)

¹⁴ For more extensive engagement with Beasley-Murray, see Di Stefano and Sauri.

The point here is not that the adman does not intend to produce a product but rather that the entire process is geared toward selling the product, as all choices are governed by the 'potential customer'. On this account, and returning to Larraín's *No*, the intention to make art, for Saavedra, is understood as a problem insofar as it is indifferent to the consumer's desire.

Brown suggests that a critique of these neoliberal politics can emerge today by insisting on artwork that rejects this identification with the consumer, an identification that is at the center of Saavedra's desire to produce a jingle. From this position, the U-matic—as an aesthetic space created by the filmmaker—takes on a more political valence in the post-dictatorial period as it turns away from the theatrical position that insists on an immediate relationship between the product and the consumer. Indeed, for Larraín, this assertion of fiction is a refusal of the 'shopping center' reality in which Chile finds itself in the years after the referendum. This point becomes clear when Larraín states that '[Chileans] have a problem with fiction and I think it's one of the most hidden legacies of the dictatorship: not being able to understand fiction, to believe that everything works in the realm of reality, where abstraction is not possible' (Howe, 2015: 424).

As such, one begins to understand that the true force of the U-matic is neither to freeze the past (Richard, 2014: n. pag.) nor to show 'the mixed moral victory' (Benson-Allot, 2013: 61) of the referendum, but rather to assert an autonomous aesthetic space from which abstraction becomes possible. This insistence on fiction vis-à-vis the U-matic, for Larraín, registers a rejection of consumer culture that seeks to appease the consumer.¹⁵ To be sure, this reading of art as a refusal of consumer logic remains less explicit in *No*. *Neruda*, as we will see below, is about making this aesthetic gesture more visible not only by entering in the world of art and artists, but also by providing a more concrete account of the creation of the work of art. Indeed, if *No* shows the process of creating goods in Chile's neoliberal era, *Neruda* offers a

¹⁵ This assertion of form can also be understood as offering what Walter Benn Michaels calls a class aesthetics, a vision of society that is organized not by the proliferation of subject positions, but rather by 'the conflict between labor and capital' that frames exploitation as the problem and economic equality as the solution (2014: n. pag.).

more radical aesthetic account by insisting on the process of creating art as a gesture to think beyond neoliberal freedom.

***Neruda* and Freedom after Neoliberalism**

The first point that one must consider about *Neruda* is that it is not a biopic. Instead, at the heart of Larraín's film one finds a metafictional detective story that undermines the very logic of the biopic. The biopic, of course, is a genre favored by Hollywood, and its success can be seen both in box office numbers and nominations during award season. Often depicting the lives of successful individuals, biopics also sell the fantasy of becoming someone else. In his study on biographical sketches in popular magazines, George Frederick Custen suggests that these famous lives 'were manufactured like [...] commodities [...]; story, form and content, like items on any assembly line, were standardized for consumption (1992: 32). Biopics, in many ways, intensify the sense that these lives are 'items on any assembly line'. According to Tom Brown and Belén Vidal, the biopic offers the fantasy of access not simply to the life of a celebrity, but to life more generally (Brown & Vidal, 2013: 1).¹⁶ The biopic, in short, produces a sort of immediacy between the filmic subject and viewer. This is done, according to Caspar Salmon, by imagining that there are no 'artistic choices' (2017) involved in creating a biopic. The biopic allows 'modern audiences' to think of film less as an art that involves aesthetic decisions than as a living event that involves none at all (2017). This is not to say that the biopic is solely a commodity, but rather that the 'assembly line' process of creating biopics imagines that 'artistic choices' are nonexistent (Custen, 1992: 32). From this account, we can begin to understand for Larraín the biopic as something like Hollywood's version of the Free Cola commercial as it seeks, much like a jingle, to appeal to the desires of a 'potential customer' (Taylor, 2012: 181).

¹⁶ Brown and Vidal note, for example, that from 2000 to 2009, 12 of the 20 Academy Awards for Actor in a Leading Role and Actress in a Leading Role have been awarded to biopics. Even Larraín's biopic *Jackie* (2016), released the same year as *Neruda*, was nominated for Best Picture, and Natalie Portman was nominated for Actress in a Leading Role. Although this article does not examine *Jackie*, the film provides an intriguing contrast to *Neruda*. Indeed, it is as if Larraín created *Neruda* in order to critique *Jackie*.

Where the biopic eliminates 'aesthetic choices' to insist on the 'potential customer', Larraín's commitment to 'aesthetic choices' and aesthetic autonomy—through a metafictional detective story in *Neruda*—serve to think beyond neoliberal freedom. But insofar as it is a detective story about autonomy rather than a film version of a jingle, *Neruda* asks viewers to read the detective story against the genre of the biopic; that is, it asks them to read art against the commodity. The film takes place in 1948, when the poet was a Senator for the Chilean Communist Party and writing *Canto General* (1950). The detective story begins at a party in Neruda's home, where he is reciting a love poem from *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* [*Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*] (1924). The festivities are interrupted by a knock on the door from members of his communist party who tell him that President Gabriel González Videla has now made the communist party illegal (This is a reference to The Law of Permanent Defense of Democracy also known as *La ley maldita, the Damned Law*). As the most famous communist in Chile, he is advised to flee since the government has begun to arrest these so-called subversives. After some resistance, Neruda decides to escape, but declares that 'I'm not going to hide under a bed. This has to be a wild goose chase' (Larraín, 2016).

That it 'has to be a wild goose chase' foreshadows the cat-and-mouse story that the film develops; it also offers the first hint that Neruda himself is imposing a certain vision of these events, that he is crafting this story. Detective Óscar Peluchonneau (played again by Gael García Bernal) is assigned to track Neruda down. The detective proves to be rather incompetent at his job, arriving always a bit too late, even though Neruda spends most of his time hidden in plain sight (Larraín, 2016). Peluchonneau never captures the poet as Neruda escapes through the snow-covered mountains of southern Chile, first to Argentina, and then to Europe. Peluchonneau, instead, will meet his fate in these same mountains, where he is killed by two gauchos who had promised to help him. The detective's failure to capture the poet, however, is not the point of the film. *Neruda* is less about finding a fugitive during the 1940s than about developing an aesthetic space from which to think beyond the 'shopping center' reality that Larraín describes in *No*. In short, the detective story seeks to create and 'to understand fiction' against the biopic, a genre in which 'everything works in the realm of reality, where abstraction is not possible' (Howe, 2015: 424).

To be sure, there is a strong Latin American tradition that uses crime fiction to abstract from reality, as seen in Jorge Luis Borges' essays on crime fiction. As such, it's not surprising that Larraín inserts intertextual references to Borges in *Neruda*. This is most visible in the detective novels that Neruda leaves to Peluchonneau before escaping to his next hiding spot. These novels, which the detective reads (through a voice-over) in the film, are from Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares' *Séptimo Círculo*'s crime series, which published crime novels from 1945 to 1983. A brief discussion on Borges, and his fascination with crime fiction, will provide clues to understanding not only the film, but also its politics.

Borges believed that crime fiction was the most 'artificial' of genres, which made it also a fascinating object of study (1996: 49).¹⁷ What Borges means is that crime fiction—in opposition to, for example, the biopic—is the genre that is most unlike real life: 'Crimes, in reality, are discovered in another way: not through smart reasoning, but rather through denunciations, errors, luck' (1996: 49). Detective fiction, instead, provides 'order' and 'structure' that contrasts the messy, disordered world that lives outside of it. For this reason, Peter Bondanella declares that for Borges the 'detective story resembles a sonnet or a sestina' since 'it has a relatively fixed narrative with certain rules that must be followed. The bravura of a writer is underlined not by breaking all the rules but by creating something original while following them ...' (1997: 106). The detective story 'represents order and the obligation to invent' that require following rules, patterns, and plot (qtd. in Bondanella, 1997: 106).¹⁸ In other words, the detective story not only abstracts from our world, but also and more importantly for the argument of this article, produces an 'obligation' to create an aesthetic world in relation to and perhaps against our world. Or to return to Larraín's films, the detective story in *Neruda* begins to signal a critique of neoliberal ideology (found in Saavedra's *No* advertisement or the conventional biopic), which insists that there are no alternatives beyond neoliberal freedom.¹⁹

¹⁷ All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

¹⁸ Specific rules are discussed in Borges' essay 'Chesterton and the Labyrinths of the Detective Story'.

¹⁹ Saavedra's commercials are also creating a (fictional) world; but where the commercials are meant to reject authoritarianism, they do so on behalf of the neoliberal desires of consumer-citizens. From this position, Larraín's intention to create a detective film is not only a repudiation of what the consumer

To be sure, these ideas about detective fiction have been read in relation to Borges' (conservative) politics. Borges later in life suggested, for example, that 'In this our so chaotic epoch, there is something that, very humbly, has maintained the classic virtues: the police story. Since a police story without a beginning, a middle, and an ending is incomprehensible [...]. I would say, in defense of the police novel, that it needs no defense; read now with a certain disdain, it is saving order in an epoch of disorder' (qtd. in Bennett, 1983: 266). Even though Borges does stress a conservative worldview, it is important to note that there is not, and there need not be, an innate political project that arises from this assertion of genre, and literature, more generally. Instead, what is central here is precisely how this genre offers an aesthetic space that is unlike reality. Beatriz Sarlo articulates a similar idea that:

When history seems to offer no sanctuary of values (when history is assailed by wars and inhuman or immoral public actions), literature can provide a model, often as horrendous as that of history, but one which by virtue of its fictional nature is bound to keep an ironic, parodic, aesthetic or philosophical distance from what is at risk in immediate experience or direct reflection. (1993: 80)

Sarlo suggests that fiction provides a 'distance' from 'experience or direct reflection'. By doing so, she also rejects the theatrical demand of the beholder's presence located both in Latin American scholars such as Beverley and Beasley-Murray as well as in the Free Cola commercial and the *No* advertising campaign.

Neruda, in other words, is an investigation of genre in order to find an autonomous aesthetic space in a neoliberal period that maintains that 'every corner of social life has been commodified' (Avelar, 1999: 1). Nicholas Brown has also suggested that the commitment to genre, as an assertion of form, can serve to refute the neoliberal vision that is defined by the consumer. As we noted above, genres—and detective fiction in particular—are, as Brown puts it, 'governed by rules', rules, or what Adorno called 'formulas' that 'modernist autonomy' invalidates (2012: n. pag.). Nevertheless, according to Brown, in a contemporary period in which art has been fully subsumed

demands from a biopic about Neruda, but also begins to form an alternative insofar as it rejects this neoliberal worldview.

by capital, these rules open 'up a zone of autonomy within the heteronomous space of cultural commodities' (2012: n. pag.). More to the point, since genre requires these rules, for Brown, it also begins to imagine a space of 'autonomy from the culture market' (2012: n. pag.). The point, of course, is not that a genre like detective fiction is not a commodity, but rather the genre insists on a 'problem' of interpretation where the commodity demands none: 'The requirements are rigid enough to pose a problem, which can now be thought of as a formal problem like the problem of the flatness of the canvas or the pull of harmonic resolution' (2012: n. pag.). Or to say this differently, where Brown identifies the genre as posing a problem, Larraín sees it as a means to abstraction in order to think about the constraints of neoliberal freedom. In this way, the detective story at the heart of *Neruda* becomes the first clue that the director is using genre as a way of contesting the 'shopping center' reality signaled above in *No*.

This negation of the consumer becomes evident in the detective story's turn toward metafiction, which, by its very definition, insists on the existence of fiction. That is, there can be no metafiction without fiction itself. In the film, the metafictional device is first announced when Neruda declares that his escape must be a 'wild goose chase'.²⁰ The detective's first appearance onscreen (his voice-over will appear earlier) offers another instance of metafiction as he states that he comes 'from the blank page'. Both Neruda's and the detective's comments reveal a process in which it is Neruda who writes the detective's character (Larraín, 2016). Later in the film, these metafictional references become even more explicit after the detective goes to Neruda's house to interrogate, Delia, Neruda's wife. The detective wants to know where Neruda is; Delia, instead, explains that the detective himself is a fictional character that Neruda is writing.

Delia: You don't understand, do you? You don't understand anything.

Detective Peluchonneau: What?

Delia: In this fiction, we all revolve around the protagonist.

²⁰ My idea, of course, is not that all metafictional texts function to assert their status as art. Quite the opposite. In many ways, Larraín's usage of metafiction represents a departure from a postmodern desire to insist on the beholder. Chapter six of my book maps out this postmodern metafictional project that demands the beholder's presence, as seen in my reading of Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976) and Albertina Carri's *Los rubios* (2004).

Detective Peluchonneau: What?

Delia: The books, for instance. This one [pointing to one of the crime novels left]. You've been reading it. It has a hunter and a fugitive. A hero and a supporting character.

Detective Peluchonneau: No. I'm not a supporting character.

[...]

Delia: He wrote all of this long ago. Have you ever seen a prisoner who's bored? In his head, he's writing a fascinating novel. He wrote you as the tragic cop. He wrote me as the absurd woman, and he wrote himself as the depraved fugitive.

[...]

He created you, thinking of himself, of you at home, reading his poems, of you looking in the mirror. He created you observing our parties, drowned out by music, caught inside a car, with an empty stare. A dog in the night, a bird in the daytime. He created you spying, waiting. He created you trapped, a furious spy, hearing things you will never understand, despising ideas and words, a hundred meters away from life. Powerless. Fragile. (Larraín, 2016)

This meeting between Delia and the detective marks the beginning of the second part of the film as the detective follows Neruda from Santiago to the south, where the poet escapes, and the detective is ultimately killed. This meeting also signals a transition from any resemblance to a biopic to the complete commitment to fiction, from a theatrical world that 'was created for you', to an absorptive world where the author creates you.²¹ Indeed, after this meeting, Peluchonneau's resistance gives way to the slow acceptance that he is, in fact, fiction. Which is just to say that for Larraín, the commitment to metafiction is a turn from the biopic that demands the presence of the beholder toward an autonomous aesthetic space that negates that presence.

²¹ The journey from the city to the south also recalls Borges' short story *El Sur* where, in particular, Juan Dahlmann's journey to the south is a journey toward fiction. This move toward fiction may be what Larraín has in mind when he notes 'Borges had an idea of overlapping fictions. *Neruda* is a Nerudean [sic] story overlapping with a Borgesian process' (Teodoro, 2016: 46).

Perhaps paradoxically, the most important aesthetic device to create this 'closed system' in *Neruda* is Peluchonneau's voice-over (Fried, 1980: 64).²² It is paradoxical because voice-overs tend to be used in order to address the viewer. Yet, *Neruda* complicates this conventional account of voice-over. The voice-over emerges in the second scene as the film moves to Neruda's house where the poet is hosting a party. The voice seems to appear from nowhere with no formal introduction, leaving viewers to wonder who the person is or what he is talking about. It will take several scenes to realize that this voice belongs to Peluchonneau, who still hasn't appeared onscreen. The content of the voice-over also surprises the viewer because it goes against what one might expect from a biopic about Neruda. Rather than praise, the voice-over speaks from a position of contempt for the poet; he frames him as a hypocrite who says he is a communist, but lives like a capitalist. He also makes fun of the poet's love poetry. Certainly, in these first scenes it does seem that the detective is speaking directly to the viewer. Indeed, it appears that the voice is not only addressing us, but is 'created for' us. That is, he exists in our world; not in an aesthetic one.

Nevertheless, as the film progresses, the viewer begins to understand that what seemed to be a gesture toward the beholder and his world is part of the aesthetic illusion. After the detective accepts that he is fiction, it becomes evident that the narrator is not having a conversation with the viewer but rather is interested in describing the process of being created: '[...] the poet invented me as furious, he wrote a beautiful death ... with poetry' (Larraín, 2016).²³ The detective is the created,

²² The voice-over, undoubtedly, has been a significant device in film noir, especially visible in landmark movies such as *Rebecca* (1940) and *Double Indemnity* (1944). *Neruda* exploits several other filmic devices to create this 'impossible' fictional Nerudian world (Bongers, 2014:191). There are scenes that are pitched in backlighting that make it difficult to see who is speaking. Larraín uses anamorphic lenses to great effect, as well as Soviet LOMO lenses from the late 1960s, in order to stretch the image, to muddle colors, and blur faces. What is more, there are several scenes in *Neruda* that seem excessively artificial. For example, car scenes are overtly contrived to the point of pastiche, as they are filmed with back projection, resembling Hollywood film noir from the 1940s and 50s. These techniques in *Neruda* have less to do with capturing the past than with creating an aesthetic world that is unlike the world that lives outside of the movie. Indeed, it's the desire to create this illusion that marks an important difference from the indexical fantasy of the biopic.

²³ It is interesting to note that Peluchonneau's last words are the first verse of 'Tonight I Can Write'. This ending can be read as completing a cycle from resistance to the acceptance of the detective's status as fiction, thus embodying the fictionality that his earlier commitment to reality sought to negate.

not the creator, and the conversation is not between the narrator and the viewer, but the poet and his character. Toward the end of the film, through a series of cross-cuts between Peluchonneau lying dead in a casket in Chile and Neruda speaking to a journalist in Paris, this conversation between the creator and created becomes even more visible as the detective's voice-over demands that his creator 'say my name', which Neruda finally does. In this way, the voice-over aims to develop an aesthetic world in which these characters are completely engrossed. As the voice-over negates the beholder he also insists on the idea of art as a 'supreme fiction' (Fried, 1980: 103).

At the same time, this last scene represents the most explicit declaration in the film about the creation of the work of art. As noted above, when the detective first appears onscreen, the voice-over states that he comes 'from the blank page', hinting that he is, in fact, a literary creation. After Neruda announces Peluchonneau's name, the film cuts again to the dead detective who suddenly opens his eyes in his casket, and triumphantly declares that 'Neruda made me eternal. His art gave me life. I was made of paper, and now I'm made of blood' (Larraín, 2016). What this metaphorical resurrection signals is not only the transformation of the detective into art, but also and perhaps more importantly, a conception of art that explicitly establishes a link between the creator and the created ('he made me eternal'). More to the point, this resurrection underscores a distinction between art and life that Chile's 'shopping center' reality has sought to eliminate. Larraín's *Neruda*, thus, offers an account of aesthetic form that insists on the author and the work of art, while rejecting both Peluchonneau's pleas that he is real (or even that he is the creator) and the logic that the consumer ultimately defines the object.

Using the voice-over to assert an aesthetic space does not mean, however, a retreat from politics. Quite the opposite. In fact, it makes the link between aesthetic form and neoliberalism more evident. The events in *Neruda* take place over a two-year period of time, and yet the voice-over introduces a distant future of political repression and economic injustices, one that no one who is living in the 1940s could know for certain. The voice-over serves to show how the Nerudian world dialogues with the dictatorship and contemporary neoliberal times. For example, when describing the persecution of communists as a consequence of the *Ley Maldita* enacted in 1948,

the camera cuts to images of the Pisagua concentration camp. During the presidency of Gabriel González Videla, the camp imprisoned communists and anarchists. The army captain Augusto Pinochet, in that period, was appointed to run the camp. The film shows him working at the camp, but the voice-over explains who he is, and the destiny of those who try to flee. 'Those who try to escape turn to pillars of salt. But no one ever escapes, because the prison captain is a blue-eyed fox. His name is Augusto Pinochet' (Larraín, 2016). Of course, this inescapability foreshadows the future of both the camp and the captain in the 1970s. The camp would become infamous as a mass burial ground for so-called subversives; and Pinochet, now as a president, would order the death of many citizens both inside and outside the camp, including Neruda.²⁴ The neoliberal present is addressed in the second half of the film when Neruda goes south and is searching for someone to help him cross the Andes. Pedro Domínguez, a smuggler, offers to take him safely into Argentina. The voice-over declares 'Domínguez. A feudal lord who invented capitalism on his land'. He continues, 'he doesn't want to pay taxes [...]. He believes the state is the enemy of freedom ... upon his shoulders and his soul, the future Republic shall be built. The millionaire is always smarter than the law of the nation' (Larraín, 2016). The voice-over suggests that both the detective and Domínguez be read as antecedents to the neoliberal present, where the '[h]alf moron; half idiot' detective who pursues Neruda turns into Pinochet who kills him. At the same time, the feudal lord, who doesn't want to pay his taxes, becomes the antistatist politician who creates a government that celebrates (rather than penalizes) these neoliberal practices.

Final Thoughts: Neruda's Poetry in *Neruda*

Neruda is not simply about neoliberal freedom but thinking beyond that freedom. And it is with that future freedom in mind that this article ends with a brief discussion of Neruda's own poetry as represented in the film. Perhaps the most surprising consideration is that Neruda's political poetry even appears in the film. Greg Dawes

²⁴ Although not proven, it is widely believed that Pinochet did, in fact, order the death of Neruda. A *Guardian* piece from 2015, for example, notes that the Chilean government acknowledged that he may have been murdered. The interior minister released a statement declaring that 'it's clearly possible and highly probable that a third party' had killed the poet (Associated Press: n. pag.).

(2006) has suggested that since the 1980s, liberal scholars have primarily read and celebrated Neruda as a lyrical poet of love, while his political poetry, especially his social realist poems in *Canto General* (1950), have been pushed aside, criticized as too political and reductionist. For Dawes, the celebration of Neruda's love poetry (and dismissal of his political poetry) are indicative of a neoliberal turn in the 1980s that seeks to eliminate all antagonism toward the market.

As such, it is important to recognize that Larraín's *Neruda* disrupts this neoliberal narrative by critiquing Neruda's sentimental poetry and celebrating his political poetry. Indeed, in the film Neruda's sentimental poems are openly dismissed and even mocked. In one scene, the poet, who is dressed as Lawrence of Arabia, recites perhaps his most (commercially) famous poem, 'Tonight I Can Write', from *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*, to a crowded room as people listen admiringly. The detective's voice-over intervenes as he states that Neruda has been reciting these same poems for years. Later in the film, Neruda will again deliver the same poem in a brothel/theater after a performer begs him to recite it. In both examples, Larraín emphasizes the theatrical quality not only of the settings where the poem is performed but also of the emotional appeal that poem elicits from the beholder. To be sure, it is interesting that Larraín treats these poems so mockingly, since like detective fiction they are also governed by aesthetic rules. Nevertheless, for Larraín, because of their theatricality and popularity, these poems become extensions of the critique of the advertisements in *No* and the biopic in *Neruda* insofar as they reinforce rather than reject the neoliberal realm of the potential consumer.

This treatment of his sentimental poetry is strikingly different from the film's representation of the social realist poems taken from his 1950's *Canto General*. Poems such as 'The Enemies' and 'Let the Woodcutter Awaken' are fundamental to the film as they are read and recited by workers and inmates not in theatrical settings but rather in factories and prisons. In the DVD commentary to *Neruda*, Larraín himself has reaffirmed the centrality of these poems by noting that if there is something that he wanted from the film it's that people begin to read Neruda's political poetry. He also suggests that he wanted to protect Neruda's political messages and therefore included recitations that would 'represent the voice' of people 'who need [...] to be united by

political reason' (Larraín, 2016). In the film, this same commitment to workers and the poor is echoed by the detective when he declares (again through voice-over): 'The poet gave them words to talk about their lives, and these words gave meaning to their nightmares. That's why he did it, to give them voice. They will quote him each time history tramples them. They don't remember the love poems. They remember the poems of rage. Unrecognizable poems. Poems of an imaginary future' (Larraín, 2016).

While Neruda's poems are important for the film, my point is not that the critique of neoliberalism is found in the return or the desire to protect the more political poetry of the 1940s and 1950s. Instead, as I have attempted to show, the most radical gesture in *Neruda* is found less in *Canto General* than in Larraín's assertion of aesthetic form, or what the voice-over declares as giving 'meaning to their nightmares' in relation to Chile's 'shopping center' reality. The idea of meaning here should be understood not only in relation to workers, but also in relation to a commodified world that wants to negate or forget the work of art, a work that cannot simply be reduced to a commodity. One can see that Larraín's unenthusiastic depiction of Neruda's love poems is a response both to their lack of political content as well as their theatrical appeal to the sentiments of the beholder. As such, the theatrical representation of the love poetry in *Neruda* is considered a continuation of the critique of the commercials already established in *No*, which places too much emphasis on the beholder at the expense of the work of art.²⁵ At the same time, the film's praise of *Canto General* in *Neruda* offers a more concrete example of Larraín's commitment to the creation of an autonomous aesthetic space as it rejects the logic that aesthetic intentions be subordinated to consumer interests. In this way, *Neruda* must be measured as a response to the consumption economy depicted in *No*, as

²⁵ To be clear, my point in this article is not that Neruda's love poems are any less a work of art than his political poetry. Nor do I believe that the Free Cola commercial or political advertisements are, in fact, art. My reading, instead, is grounded in Larraín's filmic treatment of the poems and commercials, as they both offer Larraín an opportunity to question the relationship between art and politics in the contemporary moment. At the same time, it should be stressed that while Larraín's *No* and *Neruda* are certainly more commercial (big-name stars, sympathetic characters, a polished aesthetic) than his grittier earlier films, they are still just as demanding, both critically and politically, as these previous films. Indeed, in part, it is in their commitment to insisting on a space of art in relation to their commodification that makes *No* and *Neruda* such demanding films.

the politics of the metafictional detective story become the desire to save not only art from the commodity form, but also freedom from the market. In other words, *No* is a film about the origins of a situation in which the artistic ambition of a film like *Neruda* takes on a political significance.

I want to end this article by stressing that thinking after neoliberal freedom from within Latin American criticism must begin with the assertion of aesthetic form that Latin Americanists such as Beverley, Richard, and Beasley-Murray have sought to eliminate. In this article, I have argued that the attempt to make aesthetic meaning legible is the first step from within criticism that seeks to find a form of freedom from the market, and it does so by insisting on a certain irreducibility of meaning to the commodity form. In this way, the detective world in *Neruda*, much more than the political world depicted in *No*, offers a clearer contrast to consumer culture since it is governed by aesthetic rules that can't be simply reduced to consumer desires. At the same time, the voice-over presents the most visible argument against the commodification of the work of art because it turns away from the beholder and his or her interest ('it was created for you') by insisting on the author's intention to create fiction ('the poet invented me'). *Neruda*, as such, brings us one step closer to thinking beyond neoliberal freedom as the film not only departs from a world where 'everything works in the realm of reality', but also insists that that departure is an obligation to invent an 'imaginary future' (Larraín, 2016).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

Eugenio Di Stefano is an associate professor of Latin American Literature and Culture at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He has published articles on human rights, the work of Roberto Bolaño, and the politics of aesthetic form in *MLN*, *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, and *Nonsite* (co-authored with Emilio Sauri), respectively. He is also the author of *The Vanishing Frame: Latin American Culture and Theory in the Postdictatorial Era* (University of Texas Press).

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