Załącznik

Załącznik Kulturoznawczy 9/2022

DOI 10.21697/zk.2022.9.38

VARIA

THE SECOND COMING IN THE WICKED HOUSE: PABLO LARRAÍN'S *EL CLUB* (2015)

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INTRODUCTION

The text investigates the Chilean film drama *El Club* (2015), an impactful artistic exploration of the revolting abuses perpetrated by Catholic Church officials in Chile, and the efforts of their superiors' to cover them up. Although the film provides an in-depth treatment of these burning issues and thus cannot be located within the domain of ad hoc journalism, it has not yet received a comprehensive reception from academics, except for Sarah Wright who in her illuminating analyses and interpretations, rooted in the tenets of animal studies, focused on the aspect of animal harm, present in the movie[1].

Before I begin my *close reading* of the narrative of this intimate picture and attempt to penetrate into its deeper meanings, I would like to first identify the key constituents of the *culture of impunity* embedded in the grim legacy of the Pinochet dictatorship (1973–1990) that is still ravaging the country, regardless of the fact that the 2019 massive civil unrest spurred radical political and social transformation that Chile is undergoing today. Undoubtedly, the film created by Pablo Larraín (b. 1976) and his collaborators[2] adds to the critical interrogation of this culture and aims to expose its

[1] S. Wright, *The Muteness of Dogs: Pablo Larraín's* El club *(2015)*, "Bulletin of Spanish Visual Studies" 2017, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 95–116.

[2] It is hard to consider Larraín the sole auteur behind the film, given the picture's origins and the filmmaking process. The starting point for its development was the monodrama *Accesso* (*Access*), penned by Roberto Farías – who played Sandokán in *El Club* – in collaboration with director Pablo Larraín. The play, directed by Larraín at the

gruesome offshoots and repercussions. By no means do I wish to claim that the film narrative is dominated by the local color. On the contrary – drawing on Chilean realities, the film's fictional storyline is rather universal and could easily take place anywhere in the world, while the film itself touches upon a number of fundamental issues. Nevertheless, the Chilean context strongly grounds the horrific story it tells and lends it plausibility, thus augmenting its influence, which itself encourages a more profound reflection over the condition of contemporary Catholic praxis. In other words, the film invites to inquiry a certain *modus operandi* which produces specific consequences in both social and political spheres (rather than the doctrinal or mystical dimensions of the faith).

This particular interpretive thrust is further supported by including the picture's particular artistic dimension, manifested here in the poignant

La Memoria theater in Santiago, at the time headed by Larraín's frequent collaborator, Alfredo Castro, premiered on April 5, 2014, not long before Larraín began working on the feature film. Boasting strong political overtones, the performance revolved a monologue delivered by a man from the margins of society, sexually abused in childhood by priests, presently trying to make ends meet by hawking trinkets (including copies of the 1980 Chilean constitution) in little buses traveling across the city (for more on the performance, see M. Saavedra González, Acceso*: un cuerpo cargado de historia y cultura*, "Telóndefondo: Revista de Teoría y Crítica Teatral" 2015, No. 21, pp. 136–142). The film was shot pretty quickly, in three and a half weeks, during a break in principal photography for a bigger project about Pablo Neruda (2016) that Larraín was working on with a larger crew, a part of which the director borrowed to shoot the more intimate *El Club*. The multigenerational production team included Larraín's frequent collaborators, such as his brother, producer Jose de Dios Larraín, co-writers Guillermo Calderón and Daniel Villalobos, cinematographer Sergio Armstrong, artistic director Estephanía Larraín, and the cast of experienced actors. In an interview with Maria Delgado, the director recounted that the script and the dialogues were, to a large extent, written on set, so the cast had no idea of what the whole story was and had to immediately adapt to constantly shifting circumstances, demonstrating considerable improvisational abilities throughout (see M. Delgado, *The Capacity to Create Mystery, An Interview with Pablo Larraín*, [in:] *A Companion to Latin American Cinema*, ed. M. Delgado, S. Hart, R. Johnson, London 2017, pp. 459–472). It is likely that the creative process on set was aided by much of the performers' extensive theater background.

performance by the high-caliber cast[3], who managed to create psychologically profound, unconventional characters, the film's visual aesthetic and its strong symbolic undercurrent, and the correspondence between the picture and the carefully selected, vaguely sacred music-sounding soundtrack, comprising pieces from Johann Sebastian Bach, Benjamin Britten, and Arvo Pärt, which underscores the dramatic nature of many a scene in the film. I pay attention to these aspects in my inquiry of the work, in the course of which I focus on key threads of the plot, conceived here as the primary conduits of meaning. In the text's final part, I attempt to interrogate the film's overall message.

A CULTURE OF IMPUNITY

The seventeen years of the Pinochet regime began with the military coup of September 11, 1973, which led to the overthrow and death of the democratically elected socialist president Salvador Allende. The period immediately following the coup was marked by a campaign of murder, torture, "disappearances," and mass repressions against tens of thousands of Chileans, carried out by the state terror apparatus and its myriad enforcers, including the DINA secret police. Formally, the dictatorship ended in 1990 with the first free elections that brought Christian Democrat Patricio Aylwin to the presidency, but Pinochet stayed on as Commander-in-Chief of the Chilean Army until 1998, only to finally trade the post for a senator's chair. Under the provisions of the 1980 Constitution, drafted and enacted in violation of normal legislative procedure, he was supposed to serve in the position for life, but ultimately stepped down in 2002 due to ill health. Despite the ardent attempts of Judge Juan Guzmán, who sought to confine

[3] The cast featured actors that Larraín often asked to star in his films, like his wife Antonia Zegers, the emblematic Alfredo Castro, Jaime Vadell, and Alejandro Goic (the latter was a member of the youth wing of the Socialist Party of Chile and later of the party itself; he left Chile in the 1980s for Sweden after his arrest and torture at the hands of the DINA secret police). The director also invited Alejandro Sieveking (1934–2020) to work on *El Club*; a renowned playwright, theater director, and actor, Sieveking had spent nearly two decades working with legendary singer Víctor Jara, who was tortured and brutally murdered soon after the 1973 coup by soldiers at Santiago's Estadio Chile, back then turned into a makeshift concentration camp.

the dictator to house arrest, Pinochet managed to evade any responsibility or punishment for his actions until his death in 2006. Likewise, only some members of the military junta or their civilian allies have been brought to justice or forced to take criminal or political responsibility for the abuses and misdeeds they either perpetrated or sanctioned. Representatives of the totalitarian regime, who continue to wield considerable influence over public life in Chile, have worked to keep many painful events in the country's history from seeing the light of day, putting a hold not only on delivering justice and restitution to victims of the regime, but even on more fundamental matters, like declassifying the names of the murdered and their burial places. As a result, hundreds of Chileans are to this day considered *detenidos-desaparecidos*, the forcibly disappeared whose ultimate fates – or, in many cases, final resting places – remain unknown[4].

Although socialists have twice returned to power in Chile in recent decades, under the leadership of Michelle Bachelet who was the first woman to hold the Chilean presidency in 2006–2010 and then in 2014–2018, the influence still wielded by the conservatives has repeatedly proven too entrenched for anyone to seriously upset the status quo. The fierce socio-political polarization of Chile consistently returns conservative circles to power – their last leader, Sebastián Piñera, already headed the government in 2010–2014 and between 2018 and 2021[5]. It was only recently, in the wake of the mass protests that broke out across the country in late 2019, that

[4] For more on the subject, see J. Dinges, *The Condor Years: How Pinochet and His Allies Brought Terrorism to Three Continents*, New York 2004; P. Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability*, New York 2003; P. Read, W. Marivic, *Narrow But Endlessly Deep: The Struggle for Memorialisation in Chile since the Transition to Democracy*, Acton 2016.

[5] The portfolio of Minister of Justice and Human Rights in his government was held by Hernán Larraín, an influential politician hailing from the right-wing Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI) party, and privately father of director Pablo Larraín. The politics and worldview of the director and his brother, Juan de Dios, differ considerably from those of their parents (their mother, Magdalena Mitte, is also an active UDI politician, who served as the Minister of Housing and Urban Development in Piñera's first government). Unlike their parents, the brothers share an unambiguously negative view of the dictatorship period.

Chileans were given the opportunity to express their vision for the future in a national plebiscite. In the October 25, 2020, referendum, 78% of the voters backed plans to rewrite the Constitution (its current form was written back in the darkest days of Pinochetism), paving the way for the undoing of the regime's legacy, in the legislative realm, at least. A similar percentage of the population also voted for the new constitution to be drafted by a specially appointed Constitutional Convention, to be selected through a general election on April 11, 2021, postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic to May 15 and 16, 2021. The results of the referendum demonstrate that most of the population sees the parliamentary elites as untrustworthy and that the Chileans are still stuck in a dangerous transitional period. Although democracy was restored to the country over three decades ago, the lack of a full, unbridled reckoning with the past continues to cripple its foundations, thus creating favorable conditions for the culture of impunity to thrive in[6].

This culture is actively supported by the hierarchy of the Chilean Roman Catholic Church, which is strongly tied to the conservative establishment and the army. Although a significant part of the clergy went above and beyond back during the Pinochet era, persistently pleading with the government on behalf of the illegally detained and tortured, organizing legal aid for them, and making emigration arrangements for those at risk of persecution and death at the hands of the terror apparatus[7], some of the Church hierarchy and rank-and-file clergy openly sympathized with the regime, as they well

[6] This can change, however, since the May 2021 elections will undoubtedly contribute to the rearrangement of the Chilean political scene. In the elections, the governing alliance of conservative parties, Vamos por Chile, received the lowest results in Chilean modern history for right-wing politics, not even reaching the third of members needed to veto in the Convention. Moreover, the November 2021 general elections handed in the presidency to a left-wing candidate, young Gabriel Boric (b. 1986), who beat far-right José Antonio Kast, a son of Michel Kast Shindele, a lieutenant in the Third Reich army and a Nazi Party member who fled to Chile in 1950 to avoid denazification.

[7] La Vicaría de la Solidaridad (Vicariate of Solidarity) was a perfect example of these aid efforts. The institution was founded by human rights champion Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez in 1976 at the Santiago Cathedral. A master Chilean filmmaker, Patricio Guzmán, investigates the topic of church's aid to oppressed citizens in his documentary *En nombre de Dios* (In the God's Name, 1987).

remembered the reforms that the socialist Allende government unrelentingly passed in the early 1970s (the land reform above all, as it struck at the heart of the Church's vital interests). Over the past decade, the position of the Catholic Church in Chile has deteriorated considerably, mostly on account of the many child abuse scandals it found itself embroiled in, despite the hierarchy's fervent attempts to cover them up. Most of the cases never went to trial, while the perpetrators were instead cross-examined by an ecclesiastical court. The most notorious case involved Fernando Karadima, a priest held in particularly high esteem by conservative circles, who, as it emerged, had abused and molested minors for decades. A group of his erstwhile parishioners had lodged a complaint against him with his superior already in 1984, but the prurient episode was quickly swept under the rug. In 2010, four men who were victims of Karadima filed a joint complaint with the local prosecutor's office, drawing considerable publicity in the process[8]. A year later, the Church sentenced Karadima to a lifetime of penance, barred him from any contact with his parishioners, and banned him from performing priestly duties. Eventually, Pope Francis defrocked Karadima on September 28, 2018. The statute of limitations, however, precluded him from standing trial in a lay court.

The Karadima case triggered a flood of similar complaints, shaking the Chilean Church to its very core. The extent of the shock was made manifest by Pope Francis' unprecedented decision, preceded by his 2018 admission that his appraisal of the situation in Chile had been inaccurate, to recall all the diocese heads in Chile back to the Vatican, along with five out of six auxiliary bishops and three retired prelates (thirty-four priests in total), in order to work out a way out of the impasse. In light of sustained behind-the-scenes pressures, the entire Chilean Episcopate resigned toward the end of their visit to the Holy See in mid-May 2018[9]. Ultimately, Pope Francis accepted the resignations of seven bishops, including Bishop Juan Barros,

[8] A. Barrionuevo, P. Bonnefoy, *Chilean Priest Found Guilty of Abusing Minors*, "The New York Times", February 18, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/02/19/world/americas/19chile.html?_r=1 [accessed 22.02.2021].

[9] D. Gallagher, *All the Catholic Bishops in Chile Have Resigned Over a Sex Abuse Scandal*, CNN, May 18, 2018, edition.cnn.com/2018/05/18/americas/chile-bishops-resign-abuse-scandal-intl/index.html [accessed 22.02.2021].

former Military Ordinary of Chile and protégé of the notorious Fernando Karadima. And Pope Francis had a lot to apologize for, as before he decided to take decisive action on the Chilean clergy's sexual abuse scandals and subsequent cover-up attempts, he himself appointed Barros Bishop of Osorno, a decision that drew fierce opposition from much of the local clergy, the faithful, and even people unaffiliated with the Church, and led to weeks-long protest vigils and even a petition to the papal nuncio, asking him to reverse the decision. Francis stuck by the appointment, however, leading to a demonstration held on the day of Barros' installation, during which hundreds of black-clad protesters stormed the cathedral and accused the bishop of complicity in the clerical sexual abuse of minors, shouting "Get out of the city!"[10]

The shocking Barros case surfaced, electrifying public opinion, in early 2015, coinciding with the release of Pablo Larraín's film (the film's international premiere was held on February 9, 2015, at the Berlin International Film Festival, where it received the Silver Bear Grand Jury Prize). In many of his post-premiere interviews, the director emphasized how deeply offended he felt by the impunity of the clergy. In one of these conversations, he brought up two particular incidents that spurred him to begin the work on the film dealing with the subject.

The first involved Francisco José Cox, former Bishop of Chillán and Archbishop of La Serena, who was forced to resign his positions in 1997 following accusations of sexual abuse of minors. Larraín recounted how appalled he was after accidentally coming across a photograph of the former archbishop, pictured somewhere on a beautiful estate in Germany, owned by the Schoenstatt Apostolic Movement, which the priest was a member of. "I could not believe my eyes – although disciplined by the Church, seeing that he never found himself in front of a lay judge, the priest was leading a rather comfortable life", the director said[11].

[10] P. Bonnefoy, *Angry Protest Over New Bishop in Chile*, "The New York Times", March 21, 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/world/americas/angry-protest-over-bishop-juan-barros-in-chile.html [accessed 22.02.2021].

[11] P. Felis, *Kościół bardziej boi się dziś mediów niż piekła*, interview with Pablo Larraín, "Gazeta Wyborcza", October 17, 2015. wyborcza.pl/1,75410,19039371,rezyser-el-club-hitu-berlinale-kosciol-bardziej-boi-sie.html [accessed 22.02.2021].

The other case, first made public in August 2014, involved Father Gerardo Joannon, senior minister to the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in Santiago, well-connected in conservative circles, who was accused of running a forced adoption network in the 1970s and 1980s. The criminal group that Joannon was believed to be the brains of seized infants born to teenage mothers from upper-class families, issued the women with certificates declaring that their children had died immediately after birth, and put the newborns up for adoption. The racket, which brought the ring of doctors and priests substantial profits, thrived by offering well-off families a way out of an embarrassing predicament that would be a scarlet letter were it ever discovered. Although Joannon was actively involved in the network's operations (e.g. by saying mass for the allegedly departed children), his official "censure," meted out by his superiors in the Church hierarchy, would be limited to relocation to Madrid to, as the official press communiqué said, "initiate a process of psychological and spiritual accompaniment"[12]. While a court order ultimately prevented him from leaving the country, Joannon ultimately did not stand trial, as the Santiago appellate court declared on April 9, 2015, that the statute of limitations on the charges against the priest had ran out[13].

Both scandals have found their way into *El Club*, though have been reworked into allusions – the authors patterned one character after Father

[12] *Chilean Priest Probed After 'Stolen Babies' Scandal*, BBC, August 14, 2014, www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-28795897 [accessed 22.02.2021].

[13] The priest's further fate – after the release of *El Club* – only validates the accuracy of the film's interrogation of the Church's cover-up strategies employed in the event of a scandal involving the clergy coming to light. In the course of the investigation into the illegal adoption network, another accusation surfaced – namely that Joannon had an affair with one of the pregnant women. The charge had to be solid because on July 6, 2020, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in the conclusion of its own internal investigation, asserted that there was "moral certainty" as to the relationship between the priest and the woman, stripped Joannon of the right to say mass for five years, and sent him to a house of confinement in the countryside. See M. Salinas, *Adopciones irregulares, relaciones paralelas y abuso a menores: la 'doble vida' que terminó con la influencia de Gerardo Joannon*. "El Dinamo", July 7, 2020, www.eldinamo.cl/nacional/2020/07/07/adopciones-irregulares-abuso-menores-acusaciones-gerardo-joannon/ [accessed 22.02.2021].

Joannon and had another come from Chillán, which in this context was an unambiguous reference to Archbishop Cox. This treatment fundamentally separates Larraín's picture from two other feature films that famously took up the subject of clerical sexual abuse and were released around the same time, namely the Chilean *El bosque de Karadima*, directed by Matías Lira (premiered in April 2015), and the widely discussed, award-winning US drama *Spotlight*, directed by Tom McCarthy (released in September 2015), both of which are based on actual events[14]. In *El Club*, meanwhile, the disturbing crimes of the clergy, as well as the Church hierarchy's pattern of removing its more troublesome elements far from the public eye, have been reworked, as I already mentioned, into a shocking albeit fictional story. Its individual elements are portrayed as a sort of puzzle, coming gradually together into a coherent, plausible picture only in the mind of the viewer. This, in turn, leaves many of the film's threads ultimately unexamined and at the mercy of the audience's curiosity and imagination.

THE WICKED HOUSE

We are introduced to the picture's setting by a passage from the Bible: "And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness"[15]. The blurred lines of the world we find ourselves in, however, stand in stark contrast to the clear delineations offered by the Book of Genesis, and bring to mind the visions of Andrei Tarkovsky, particularly his penultimate film *Nostalgia* (1983). In both *Nostalgia* and *El Club*, light seems unable the filter through the clouds, leaving the world shrouded in a depressing gloom, blurred, its colors fractured, an impression produced by the use old Soviet lenses[16]. The device deliberately precludes the audience from determining the exact season or even the time of day. Reality seems oppressive and suffocating, as if subtly suggesting that something horrible had either happened or is bound to happen.

[14] The Belgian-French film *Grâce à Dieu* (*By the Grace of God*), directed by François Ozon and released in February 2019, is similar to the two films, as it also tells a fictional story based on actual events.

[15] Book of Genesis 1:4, www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+1%3A4&version=NKJV [accessed 22.02.2021].

[16] See M. Diestro-Dópido, *Sins of the Fathers*, "Sight and Sound", April 2016, p. 30.

From a narrative standpoint, the opening scene, showing a man training a dog by having it chase down a beach after a piece of bait hanging from a long stick he is holding, portends events still to come, but is also underpinned by a strong symbolic thrust. Thus, we find ourselves in a place that seems, like a circle bound by a holding spell, to offer no way out. A circle of questionable morality on the one hand, it is also a specific place – a remote, oceanside township of La Boca, Chile, an occasional destination for big city surfers. The action, unfolding across interiors and exteriors, is confined to the single village, augmenting the sense of captivity, bondage even, and the stifling atmosphere, intensified even further by the rising, doleful swell of Arvo Pärt's *Fratres* in the background.

It is this small town, seemingly a purgatory at world's end, that serves as home to three priests, seniors with ruined reputations, troubled pasts, and few prospects for the future. The first is Father Vidal (Alfredo Castro), a gay man who had seduced a boy[17]; the other is Father Ortega (Alejandro Goic), once involved with forced adoptions; the third is Father Silva (Jaime Vadell), a former chaplain with the armed forces who – presumably – abused his position as a confessor to profit off the secrets he had been entrusted with. In their new hometown, they live with a fourth clergyman, the dementia-ridden Father Ramírez (Alejandro Sieveking), relocated to the small town back in the 1960s, for reasons no one seems to remember anymore. The priests live in a yellow house on the edge of town, bound by strict although loosely enforced rules and daily rituals, like saying mass and singing. The house is run by a caretaker, Sister Mónica (Antonia Zegers), a former nun who adopted a little girl while on a mission trip to Africa, only to be charged with abusing the child. All of the five residents are, in their own ways, a thorn in the Church's side, best to be swept under the rug.

As the story unfolds, however, it turns out that the characters are far from one-dimensional and have their driving motives, although it might be hard to say whether they are in any way right and whether the five of them can

[17] This provocative element of Vidal's characterization, associating homosexuality with pedocrime, was criticized by Peter Bradshaw in his review of the film. See P. Bradshaw, *Dark Drama Skewers Sinning Priests*, "The Guardian", March 24, 2016, www.theguardian.com/film/2016/mar/24/the-club-review-pablo-larrain-catholic-church-chile [accessed 22.02.2021].

actually be believed. Father Vidal believes himself a master at controlling his urges and keeps saying that he saw "the light of the Lord" in his transgressive sex acts. Father Ortega, meanwhile, argues that by snatching children and giving them up for adoption he was actually saving their lives, because had he done nothing, they would have been discarded like trash. Father Silva believes that by taking confession he helped the military purge themselves of sin, so when their hour comes, God would have reason to forgive them. Finally, Sister Mónica claims that her alleged abuse of the girl was fabricated by her (racist) mother, who could not abide the fact that she would have a black-skinned grandchild. The characters seem to harbor a sense of having been mistreated and clearly do not believe they have anything to atone for.

Perhaps this is why they have no qualms pursuing glib amusement, like training a greyhound to race it at the track and presumably win considerable sums of money – the latter believed particularly important by Father Ortega, whose propensity for drowning his sorrows in alcohol leaves him with what he unceremoniously calls "expenses". At the weekly Sunday races – which they seem to hold more holy than the Lord's Day – they field their adopted greyhound Rayo (played by the canine actor Donka and another unnamed racing dog), lovingly cared for by Father Vidal, who projects onto the animal all the love he had been forced to suppress due to his vows of celibacy. Because the house rules ban them from coming near the townspeople and allow them to visit the village only early in the morning or at night, and always one at a time, the clergymen are represented at the trace track by Sister Mónica, whose strong personality helps her deal with the local machos who see the races as a validation of their masculinity. Furthermore, although ostensibly strict and unyielding, the caretaker does not shy away from bending the rules to preserve the balance of her quasi-family – the only one she has. The significance she attaches to this minute community is made clear in a later, brief scene, which shows her tending to Father Ramírez, tenderly changing his diaper as she would a child she never had (or, more precisely, had and promptly lost).

Clearly, the setup is depressing, albeit not without some darkly amusing elements. Nevertheless, it veers much closer to absurdist theater, "with its typical atmosphere of vague danger and grotesque distortion of reality", as

Bartosz Żurawiecki wrote in his review of the film[18], than to the lowbrow humor of the incredibly popular Irish sitcom *Father Ted* (1995–1998), which explored the misadventures of three Catholic priests and their housekeeper living on the fictional Craggy Island, sitting off the west coast of Ireland – a situation eerily similar to the one chosen for *El Club*. In this sense, Larraín's film stands as an extension of his previous works, particularly the trilogy made up by *Tony Manero* (2008), *Post Mortem* (2010), and *No* (2012), which offers a psychologically subtle yet rather grim interrogation of popular attitudes in three stages of the Pinochet dictatorship: immediately after the coup (in *Post Mortem*), during the peak reign of terror in the late 1970s (in *Tony Manero*), and nearing the regime's demise (in *No*) in 1988, when Chileans voted in a plebiscite on whether to let Pinochet stay in power or to hold elections[19]. In the films, mentally fractured characters with a propensity for hurting others, so typical for this sort of post-traumatic cinema (particular the first two installments in the trilogy, which espoused a similar emotional tone and similar aesthetics as *El Club*), were presented as tangible proof of the criminality of a regime so proficient in breaking people's moral backbones.

The club's dreary existence is upended, however, when the yellow house is visited by a Church envoy, Father Alfonso (Francisco Reyes), escorting another "blackballed" priest, Father Lazcano (José Soza). The new arrivals are trailed by a mysterious, bearded individual (Roberto Farías), who soon launches into a loud, melodious jeremiad right outside the windows of the "house of penance", listing, in detail, all the sexual transgressions of the clergy inside. It quickly emerges that Lazcano took him from an orphanage when he was still a child, made him an altar boy (which is probably where the proclivity for melodeclamation comes from), and then repeatedly abused him sexually. The trespasser bears a very meaningful name, Sandokán, and like his literary prototype, the Malaysian pirate from the novels of Emilio Salgari, he is bent on taking revenge, here against the church official who wronged him. On the other hand, as we later learn, Sandokán – a man with

[18] B. Żurawiecki, *El Club*, "Kino", October 2015, p. 76.

[19] An in-depth examination of the trilogy (and the director's 2006 debut *Fuga*) was penned by Robert Wells. See R. Wells, *Trauma, Male Fantasies, and Cultural Capital in the Films of Pablo Larraín*, "Journal of Latin American Studies" 2017, Vol. 26, No. 4, pp. 503–522.

a broken life, a modern outcast that Chileans derogatorily refer to as *flaite*, a term denoting a person without schooling, hailing from the margins of society, often homeless, filthy, drunk, and foul-mouthed – is a profoundly wounded and ambivalent character. Harmed deeply as a child, he despises his violator and wants to take revenge on the oppressive Church milieus, yet simultaneously seems too long for his "caretaker" – perhaps because the man offered him emotional availability, a sense of being chosen or closer to God, or all of these things at once. This ambivalence is further manifested by a cross earring that Sandokán is wearing, a clear reference to his being a "pirate" and a silent implication of his extant links to the religion he was brought up in and his longing for the clergymen whom he sacralizes. The pressure brought on by his seemingly incessant monologue prompts Lozcano to take the gun offered him by Silva (a former military chaplain, so his possession of a firearm should come as no surprise), however, rather than use it to scare the trespasser away, the priest instead shoots himself in the head, which can be read as a gesture of self-punishment and a way out of extreme stress. And so the Church is left with what it worked so hard to avoid – another scandal.

Wishing to do away with the new problem and get to the truth of what happened that fatal day in La Boca, the Church hierarchy sends a crisis specialist to the oceanside village – a middle-aged, well-educated, and insightful Jesuit, Father García (Marcelo Alonso) – with authority to close down the miserable house should he deem it an appropriate course. Like the others, García is far from a one-dimensional character. On the one hand, he is a Church bureaucrat, focused on solving the mystery he has been presented with and assessing the five residents who, he rightly believes, are lying to his face after coming up with a story to feed the police investigators. On the other hand, we see how emotionally invested he is in his mission, we even see him pray on the beach – presumably for the priests to finally understand their transgressions, show genuine contrition, and begin treating their penance as the sacrament seeking to restore balance to the world that it is. These two sides are reflected in his conversations with the residents of the yellow house, which alternate between interrogation and confession.

Like a practiced inquisitor, Father García quickly figures out the lay of the land, so to speak, and tries to restore the house to order and stricture. The wine, heretofore generously served with dinner, is poured down the

drain. The Jesuit also demands the men give up the greyhound, which he believes only fueled their avarice. Despite his strictures, and even the threat of taking away Rayo, García still fails to determine the truth about Lazcano's death. Although Ramírez ultimately "spills" the real story, repeating parts of Sandokán's monologue and later admitting that Lazcano killed himself because he was followed, García remains oblivious to the true meaning of words, smothered by the torrent of examples of sexual perversions of the clergy flowing forth from Ramírez.

Rather than disappear from the town following the suicide, the bearded intruder returns, building a makeshift shelter at the foot of the hill that the yellow house sits on. Then, one night, he once again launches into his poorly rhymed jeremiad, thus revealing himself to García as the true reason behind Lazcano's suicide. The notion is confirmed the next day by Sister Mónica, who gives the investigator a full account of the incident and threatens that should the suicide ever come to public light, making her an accomplice in the process (a plausible scenario, given that the clergymen in the house are under her care), and should García close the house down, then she – after losing the only surrogate family she has – will release the story to the media, framing it to bring down as many Church officials as possible. And so the mystery is solved, only to be replaced by another problem: the unwanted intruder in the town, who may end up pulling yet another stunt.

Intent on preventing further incidents, García invites Sandokán to the local bar and engages him in conversation over a bottle of wine, offering him a spot in a Santiago shelter. When the man vehemently opposes the idea, García suggests placing him with a family, "a normal one, without priests", that will take him in and give him a roof over his head. The prospect of (finally) having his own bed is tempting to Sandokán. In the following shot, we see that the two men have moved the conversation onto the banks of the Rapel River. They talk about Father Lazcano, who, although prevented from going to heaven, will nevertheless have the prayers of those who knew him as a good, holy man, "an angel sent by God". Then, suddenly, Sandokán asks the priest to take his confession, putting his hand upon García's heart and falling into a sort of exaltation, or even arousal, as the confession itself has strong sexual undertones. When García, feeling defeated, tries to leave, Sandokán – sensing that the priest either does not fancy him or is simply playing hard to get – offers to bring him younger boys. The scene ends with

a medium close-up on García, looking crushed, staring at Sandokán. We can only surmise as to what is going on in his head. Perhaps he is just realizing the true burden of the sexual crimes perpetrated by his brethren or pondering what to do with this particular "case", seemingly impossible to resolve with administrative tricks. Perhaps this is him taking in the full consequences of sacralizing the institution of the Church and its functionaries? Perhaps it is all those things at once.

In the meantime, the residents of the yellow house take matters into their own hands. A dark night begins, bringing events that will send the characters into a downward spiral. Acting alone, Father Vidal decides to pay a trio of surfers he met earlier to chase Sandokán out of town. Fathers Silva and Ortega, meanwhile, under the direction of Sister Mónica, carry out a more sophisticated plan to brutally murder the local racing greyhounds and channel the resulting fury of the townsfolk onto Sandokán. To foster a presumption of their own innocence in the murder, their own dog Rayo is also killed, suffocated earlier by Sister Mónica using a plastic bag. Both plans unfold alongside each another. The first, however, fizzles out as the surfers, offended by Father Vidal's immoral offer, beat and ridicule him after finding out that he is a priest rather than the racing dog breeder he tried to pass as. The second plan, however, comes off without a hitch. As the surfers lay into Father Vidal, a mob of locals – whipped into a frenzy by Sister Mónica – locates Sandokán and beats him within an inch of his life. The tension of the scene is further amplified by Arvo Pärt's *Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten for Strings and Bell*, with its distinctive pealing bell, portending terror and despair.

As the hellish night soon gives way to a new day, we find ourselves in the living room of the house of confinement where Father García – after personally carrying Sandokán from the scene of the lynching on his back what provides a visual echo of Christ's *Via Dolorosa* – tenderly washing and drying the feet of the "resurrected" man, intent on setting an example for the rest of the residents. He is thus reenacting a ritual that the Catholic Church calls *Mandatum* (Maundy), first performed by Christ in the Cenacle, and a key part of the Holy Thursday Mass. During the Maundy liturgy, the celebrant declares "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one

another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another,"[20] he symbolically washes the feet of the poor and destitute, people like the "simpleton" Sandokán. When the Jesuit kisses his feet, a bell rings out, bringing up connotations with the bells marking the commencement of the liturgy – it is Sister Mónica calling the residents into the living room. As García washes the wounds on Sandokán's face, his visage a clear visual reference to the figure of Pensive Christ, the Jesuit orders the clergymen to take the homeless man in and offer him shelter in the house. In exchange, he promises to forget everything that has happened there. In the meantime, Sister Mónica continues cleaning the bloodied face of the visitor, sitting at the table amidst the clergymen, like Christ surrounded by his disciples at the Last Supper. This visual reference stands in stark contrast to the dialogue, which sees the clergymen bargain over Sandokán's future.

The next shot mirrors the sequence showing the arrival of Father Lazcano. We see the four characters, seated in a similar manner, and Sister Mónica welcoming Sandokán with almost the same words she used to greet the pedocriminal wearing the Roman collar. Integrating the new arrival into the community has a quasi-ritual character, marked by Father Vidal rechristening him "Thomas". Father Silva wants to conclude this peculiar rite of passage by washing the newcomer down with disinfectant. Sandokán, for his part, decides to go for broke and, claiming mental instability, demands access to a long list of psychotropic medication. The bitter irony and dark humor of the scene, as well as the worried looks that the clergymen give each other when they realize what sort of housemate they wound up with, only amplify the tragic note on which the finale ends. As García softly intones "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world", staring at his clerical brethren, they awkwardly join in. Finally, like a celebrant finishing mass, he says "Peace be with you", leaves, and climbs into his brand new car. As the film draws to a close, the shrill tones of the pathetic four-priest choir are replaced by two interweaving female voices, singing the same prayer in clear, moving voices.

[20] Gospel of John 13:34, biblehub.com/kjv/john/13–34.htm [accessed 22.02.2021].

THE SECOND COMING

The paragraphs above offer quite a detailed rundown of the plot, nevertheless, in *El Club*, the devil is in the details and it is fairly easily to overlook something ostensibly insignificant, only to realize its importance when seeing the big picture. The plot brings together a variety of disparate elements and no thread is ever purely ornamental, but pushes the story forward and contributes to the structure of meanings. Such is the case with Father Vidal running into the three surfers on the beach in the early part of the movie and the later consequences of that encounter. The two scenes featuring visitors from the capital embody the organizing principles of the film, namely duplication and repetition. It is especially prominent in the two scenes that bookend the film, when new arrivals are welcomed at the yellow house. Sandokán twice performs his lamentations outside the house, and both his appearances prove to be turning points in the plot. The first of his litanies is also delivered twice: first by Sandokán himself and later by Ramírez, who mechanically repeats much of it from memory during García's interrogation.

These organizing principles also apply to Sandokán himself, whose character in *El Club* also serves as a stand-in for Christ. In one scene, we see him hauling an old armchair on his back toward his makeshift domicile. The long take of the man struggling under his burden brings to mind images of the Way of the Cross. In the mob justice scene, his bloodied face is a visual replica of Christ's battered visage, while the scene itself seems to carry echoes of the Passion. The finale, on the other hand, a blend of Christian ritual and iconography, evokes the morning of the Resurrection, bringing the prospect of spiritual and moral renewal.

That prospect, however, is ultimately squandered by García. Initially, the Jesuit seems pure in his intentions and eager to persuade the members of the eponymous "club" to show contrition and repent. The idea to use the pummeled Sandokán for that purpose most likely came to him during the attempted lynching, as he stared for a longer while into the man's bloodied face. By placing him in the yellow house, however, the Jesuit aims to kill two birds with one stone – resolve a crisis and accomplish what he sees as a pastoral feat. It is apparent that García treats Sandokán and his suffering in a wholly instrumental manner, an attitude evinced by the fact that the Jesuit leaves the twice-harmed man in an unsafe environment. In the long run, his actions are driven by the interest of the institution he represents

and his plans ultimately cement the status quo, because the guilty are not brought before any tribunal, no punishment is administered, and no atonement made. Given this leniency and preference given to the fate of the "holy" men, the quasi-mass from the finale, during which García so piously washes Sandokán's feet, rings hollow, and seems to be devoid of any redemptive power, regardless of the fact that the success of ecclesiastical rituals is not contingent upon the justness of the celebrant. In this particular context, we ought to note that García's double-edged plan is tainted here by the priest's inaction during the attempted lynching, as he neither stopped nor tried to pull the mob away from the innocent man. He limited himself to addressing Sister Mónica with the words: "Thank you, Sister, that's enough for today", which ought to be read as a sign of him recognizing the nun as the brains behind the operation rather than his admission of involvement with the plot (if he were actually involved, the message of the film would be blacker than hell itself).

Besides, the Jesuit seems wholly uninterested in what the residents of the yellow house did with the town's complement of racing dogs and the fact that the dearest price in the whole affair was paid by canines rather than men. García's detached attitude reflects the view of animals espoused by conservative Catholic doctrine, which holds that humans and animals are separated by a chasm that is impossible to bridge[21]. This anthropocentric dogma shines through in an earlier conversation between Fathers García and Vidal, during which the Jesuit warns the priest against humanizing Rayo as the greyhound was not, and could never be, a person[22]. Moreover,

[21] The situation was particularly dire for dogs. On account of them being carrion eaters, in Biblical times they were considered unclean, repulsive, and a symbol of evil, a view enshrined in a passage in Proverbs: "As a dog returns to his own vomit, so a fool repeats his folly" (Book of Proverbs 26:11, www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Proverbs+26%3A11&version=NKJV [accessed 22.02.2021]). For more on the subject, see S. Menache, *Dogs: God's Worst Enemies?*, "Society and Animals" 1997, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 23–44.

[22] While the body of literature on that particular subject is quite extensive, one particular essay, featuring a deeper philosophical slant, deserves special attention, see Ch. Taylor, *The Precarious Lives of Animals: Butler, Coetzee, and Animal Ethics*, "Philosophy Today" 2008, Vol. 52, No. 1, pp. 60–72.

animals seem to have value to García insofar as they are of use to humans, a position evinced by a brief conversation he has with Rayo's caretaker, during which the Jesuit recounts his mission trip to Africa and the gift of milk-giving goats that he brought to needy families to help them make ends meet. With admiration for the poor and their ability to find a use even for old, worn-out animals, and a touch of patronizing superiority, the former missionary concludes that when the goats inevitably grew too old, the natives sacrificed them to "our Lord Jesus Christ". The remaining residents of the yellow house – except Vidal – hold similar views of animals. It should also be noted that the film shows two dog races (another instance of repetition): Rayo wins one but loses the other, failing the hopes that the priests had for his rise. We may doubt that Sister Mónica and her accomplices would have come up with a plan that involved Rayo's sacrifice if it had any chance for winning a championship[23].

Both of the aforementioned conversations between García and Vidal strongly correspond with the moving finale. The Jesuit seems to take no notice of the fact (or he simply does not care) that nipping the scandal in the bud and the (potential) moral renewal that he cares so deeply for can only come about at the cost of canine lives. Could he have forgotten that one of Christianity's key tenets, from its very inception, was the abandonment of animal sacrifice and its transposition into the symbolic sphere[24]? In the clerical club, the ends justify the means, and its members are either unaware of or care very little for the fact that their actions violate a fundamental pillar of their faith.

I have already mentioned that Sandokán seems a stand-in for Christ in the film (or even his twin, a notion substantiated by Father Vidal rechristening

[23] They end up perpetrating the same sort of savagery that breeders across Argentina and Spain are accused of, namely killing thousands of greyhounds after they outlive their usefulness. The horrifying practice, which Larraín was well aware of when he began working on the film (see S. Wright, op. cit., p. 96), was brought to light and lambasted in the interventionist documentary *Broken Spirit – The Galgo's Last Run* (2016).

[24] For more on the subject, see D. Ullucci, *The Christian Rejection of Animal Sacrifice*, Oxford 2011.

him "Thomas"[25]), a device that seems to frame *El Club* as a manifestation of Pope Francis' appeal to see Jesus in the faces of the victims of the clergy's sexual transgressions. In this particular context, it ought to be noted that Sandokán and Rayo also share a number of strong similarities: one is homeless, the other a stray, and both are taken in by the priests, only to eventually suffer abuse and torment at their hands. When Father Vidal mourns Rayo toward the end of the movie, the way he leans over the dead dog brings to mind the Virgin Mary, holding the body of Christ after his Deposition; consequently, the Passion of Sandokán seems to eerily mirror the canine interpretation of the Pietà. Thus, the film provokes into asking whether both the theologians and the faithful are actually capable of conceiving that Parousia, the Second Coming of Christ, might not come about in the king's glory, but by the suffering of the humiliated and insulted – and not just humans, but animals, too. While Christianity may hold that the latter lack a soul, it is nevertheless rooted in proclamations such as the following: "For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all *is* vanity"[26].

CONCLUSION

As previously brought up, in the last scene, the garishly out-of-tune performance is replaced by a melodious duet. Should we take that to mean that the world has been brought back to normal? Well, the answer depends on what contemporary Catholics believe "normal" – is it defined by clerical crimes, covered up by the Church hierarchy, or by the faith's fundamental values, such as compassion, atonement, and redemption. Although *El Club* is deeply accusatory in tone, it nevertheless refuses to render final judgment and leaves it open for the viewers to pass the final verdict.

Ultimately, the film harmonizes with the choir of voices which demand reexamination of the modern Catholic praxis, including the misuse of

[25] In the gnostic tradition, the Apostle Thomas was believed to have been a twin brother of Christ (the Hebrew *t'om* and the Aramaic *t'oma* means "twin"), to whom the Savior allegedly revealed the greatest mystical truths.

[26] Ecclesiastes 3:19, www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ecclesiastes%203:18–20&version=NKJV [accessed 22.02.2021].

sacraments such as confession and absolution and, more generally, the virtue of mercy. When misapprehended and misapplied, mercy and absolution replace criminalization and punishment of transgressors, leading to cultivation of the aforementioned culture of impunity in which – and this is particularly troubling – next rounds of wrongdoings and criminal acts may appear.

February, June 2021, January 2022

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Abstract

The article explores the 2015 Chilean drama film *El Club*, director Pablo Larraín's investigation of the efforts undertaken by the Roman Catholic Church to conceal the abuses and crimes perpetrated by its officials. It also interrogates the socio-political context of the production, defined by the culture of impunity cultivated by Chile's conservative establishment. The text presents an in-depth examination of the film's plot, conceived as the primary conduit for meaning, and emphasizes the picture's artistic dimension. It also offers an interpretation of the film that sees it as a manifestation of Pope Francis' appeal to see Christ in the faces of the victims of the clergy's sexual transgressions. Ultimately, the film harmonizes with the choir of voices which demand reexamination of the modern Catholic praxis, including the misuse of sacraments such as confession and absolution and, more generally, the virtue of mercy.

Keywords: Pablo Larraín; *El Club*; fiction film; Catholic Church; pedocrime; Chile

Data przesłania tekstu: 10.06.2021
Data zakończenia procesu recenzyjnego: 20.09.2021
Data przyjęcia tekstu do publikacji: 22.09.2021