

# A *Twelve-Year Night* from Uruguay: No reckoning with the past

Gabriela Zabala  
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*A Twelve-Year Night* (*La Noche de 12 Años*) is written and directed by Uruguayan director Álvaro Brechner, currently based in Spain. Premiering in the Official Selection at the 75th Venice International Film Festival, the film was Uruguay's submission in 2018 to the 90th Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film. It was also winner of the Golden Pyramid Award at the Cairo International Film Festival and is now available on Netflix.

Making films for more than a decade, Brechner is considered a leading South American talent. His previous films *Bad Day To Go Fishing* (*Mal Día para pescar*, 2009) and *Mr. Kaplan* (2014) have garnered international critical acclaim.

Based on the events leading up to the military coup in 1973 in Uruguay, *A Twelve-Year Night* focuses on the imprisonment and torture of three guerrillas who were part of the Movement of National Liberation, better known as the Tupamaros. The three, José “Pepe” Mujica (Antonio de la Torre), Mauricio Rosencof (Chino Darin) and Eleuterio Fernandez Huidobro (Alfonso Tort) were kidnapped by the National Army in 1972, the year before the military coup in June 1973.

All went on to hold important positions in government with the Frente Amplio (Broad Front) when it held power from 2005 to 2020. Mujica, a former Tupamaro, served as President of Uruguay from 2010 to 2015. Rosencof, a founder of the Tupamaros, has been the Director of Culture of the Municipality of Montevideo since 2005. Fernandez Huidobro was Minister of Defense from 2011 until his death in 2016.

The Frente Amplio is an electoral coalition that includes politicians who had been exiled, tortured and imprisoned under the former military dictatorship, which lasted from the 1973 coup until 1985. Formed initially in 1971 by the Communist and Socialist parties, Frente Amplio was later joined in 1989 by ex-members of the Tupamaros, as well as the Christian Democratic Party and other bourgeois political forces.

Shifting between their imprisonment and flashbacks, the film shows the Tupamaros planning urban guerrilla warfare such as kidnappings and bombings. Visually, *A Twelve-Year Night* captures well the effects of indefinite solitary confinement. For instance, the three prisoners are not permitted to communicate with each other verbally, and so resort to communicating via tapping codes on walls, even playing chess this way.

The prison settings themselves range from unused grain silos with limited sunlight to coffin-like cells so tiny the captives can barely stand up or stretch out on the floor. Beds are rarely if ever provided. The exception, as the film depicts, occurs during an inspection by the Red Cross, when beds, desks and reading and writing materials are brought in and promptly removed once the inspectors leave. The political prisoners are always locked up, except on the rare occasions when they are taken outside to exercise.

The prisoners, held on penalty of death if Tupamaros organize further attacks, are blindfolded as they are transported to different locations throughout Uruguay, kept in solitary confinement, and never told where they are. An officer warns them that “if an attack happens, we’ll have to

kill you. And that’s easy. You’re no longer prisoners. You’re hostages.” Tortured and provided with the merest of bare necessities, they are held in this manner for twelve years.

The isolation inevitably causes hallucinations and delirium, which are jumbled up with the fragmented memories of loved ones. These are some of the more compelling scenes. An officer says, “We should have killed you when we could. Now we will drive you crazy.” The senior officials in particular are depicted as relentlessly brutal, spitting in their victims’ food and worse. The cells are infested with vermin and lack lavatory essentials. On one of the rare occasions when they are allowed medical treatment, a doctor, disturbed by the conditions in which the three are kept, tells an officer, “This is barbaric. A firing squad would be more humane.”

Their families have to navigate bureaucratic military channels to find out where they are being detained and are told, “I’ll let you see them, but don’t make things harder, because you’ll make it harder for them.” Sometimes, the families are just not informed of their whereabouts at all and are simply sent on a wild goose chase.

Inspired by the interview-memoir written by Rosencof and Huidobro about their experiences, the filmmaker also conducted interviews and investigations over four years to explore the “mental confusion” caused by prolonged solitary confinement/torture, which Brechner considered “the most important thing to transmit” in the film. The confusion is captured fairly well and *A Twelve-Year Night* is a testament to the resilience and courage of the three prisoners. Yet the film is not very engaging or compelling given the subject matter. This may be attributed to its guiding perspective.

In a 2018 interview with Emilio Mayorga for *Variety*, when asked, “What was your key aim when making this film?,” Brechner replied that his “intention was to show the mental universe of people who were robbed of everything that makes them human, and everything they do to maintain themselves as human beings.” In the same interview, he explained that the film is not a “prison movie,” but “a film about descent into the depths of inner hell.” One has to ask, why this particular focus?

There are no doubt many routes by which one can descend into the depths of “inner hell.” If, however, the “inner hell” happens to involve three political prisoners during one of the most volatile social and political periods in Latin America in the 20th century, then why does the film assiduously avoid the most serious historical and political questions that would sensitize the viewer to the plight of the three? One leaves *A Twelve-Year Night* more puzzled than enlightened about the brutal and reactionary events. It fails to illuminate in any way the concrete historical and political context in which these events took place.

A country once regarded as the “Switzerland of South America,” Uruguay came to have the most political prisoners per capita in the world, with about one out of every 30 Uruguayans detained, and even more who were tortured, yet the film evinces not even a modicum of anger at what took place. It is even less concerned with how or why the military dictatorship came to power or how a country ranked as one of the most

democratic in Latin America from 1945 to the mid-1960s became one of the most repressive regimes in the region.

Who was responsible? Where is the justice for the victims whose abusers in the military continue to enjoy amnesty? In a country of only three million, officially 180 people were killed by the military dictatorship, many more were “disappeared” and many were forced into exile. Brechner’s film does not make one feel a trace of any of this. Instead, it lionizes the three individuals and then portrays their subsequent rise to top positions in a capitalist government as the vindication of their suffering.

It is to Brechner’s credit that he chooses to make a film about this critical period, but why then is one left with something of a void at the film’s conclusion? A viewer with no knowledge of the political situation in Latin America at the time, including the politics of the radical or leftist movements that dominated in certain countries, and the involvement of the CIA throughout the region, would not be enlightened by one scintilla.

There is hardly even an oblique reference to the fact that during the 1970s and 1980s, dictatorships in Uruguay, Bolivia, Chile, Brazil, Paraguay, Peru and Argentina, with the assistance of US military-intelligence agencies, instigated Operation Condor. Under this program of coordinated repression, police-military resources were pooled for the purpose of tracking down political exiles and sending them back to their deaths, with secret death squads crossing borders with impunity.

The filmmaker elides an entire critical historical period in which the working class was defeated as the result of the betrayals of Stalinism, the bankruptcy of the pseudo-left politics of Pabloism and the blind alley of petty-bourgeois guerrillaism, all of which paved the way for the victory of Washington-backed counterrevolution and the military’s overthrow of democratically elected regimes throughout the region.

The Tupamaros played a conspicuous role in disorienting the working class. Their perspective of urban guerrillaism, influenced by the politics of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, relegated workers to the role of passive bystanders to spectacular armed actions, from kidnappings to bombings and sporadic attacks on security forces.

The perspective of guerrilla warfare served to isolate radicalized students and youth, as well as sections of workers, from the working class as a whole, which left the workers’ movement under the domination of reformist and Stalinist leaderships. The acts of “armed struggle” then provided a pretext for the military to impose dictatorship.

The bankruptcy of guerrillaism, lauded as “heroic” by the pseudo-left, was most sharply expressed in the Tupamaros’ orientation to the military itself. In 1970, they drafted a letter offering an alliance with the military, disclosing that they already included members of the two main political parties, the Blancos and Colorados, as well as members of the armed forces, in their ranks.

The purpose of the letter was to persuade the military that the government was the real threat to the nation’s sovereignty, “We are not enemies—how could we possibly be enemies?—because the plight of our Uruguay hurts us as it does you,” it stated. (National Liberation Movement, “Tupamaros: Letter to the Military,” as quoted in, *Tricontinental*, 54-5, (1970) cited in Woodruff 2008, “Political Culture and Revolution: An Analysis of the Tupamaros’ Failed Attempt to Ignite a Social Revolution in Uruguay,” pp.16-17). Having failed to persuade the military, they adapted to other bourgeois forces, such as the Frente Amplio political coalition.

And what is the legacy of the Frente Amplio? During its tenure, it presided over disintegrating social conditions in Montevideo, which produced historic levels of emigration between 1999 and 2003, with 30,000 mostly young and educated economic exiles leaving per year. Shantytowns proliferated in the northern and western sections of Montevideo and in the regional cities they grew by 10 percent annually. Child and infant mortality rates increased, including from starvation and

malnourishment. Previously eradicated infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis, re-emerged, while poverty increased by 108 percent.

Under such conditions, the Frente Amplio, which had controlled the Montevideo municipality since 1989, came to power nationally in 2005, in what was considered a historic break with the two capitalist parties that had ruled for 174 years, the Colorados and Blancos.

The Frente Amplio rejected any radical social or economic changes to address the growing human catastrophe in Uruguay, however. Instead, its leaders preached moderation and made overtures to the national bourgeoisie and international financial institutions. Their promise not to “rock the boat” upon gaining power included rejecting proposals to raise the minimum wage and continuing to pay Uruguay’s foreign debt, which amounted to 35 percent of the country’s export earnings. So accommodating were they that Frente Amplio ministers were well regarded by Wall Street, which was assured of the continuity of the country’s essential economic policies.

In 2011, an attempt by lawmakers to pass a bill that would have overturned the amnesty protecting officers who carried out executions, disappearances, torture and political imprisonment of tens of thousands of Uruguayans during military rule was rejected. The Frente Amplio, and in particular Mujica, routinely referred to as the “world’s humblest president” in the mass media, supported the amnesty. Mujica warned of the supposed dangers of transferring “the frustrations of our generation to the new generations.”

The filmmaker seems to have adopted Mujica’s conciliatory sentiments, which permeate the entire film, rendering it a rather amorphous foray into the mental anguish of extended solitary confinement. More importantly, it accepts uncritically the entire political framework of the Tupamaros and the Frente Amplio, and this constitutes the film’s greatest failing.

The uncritical attitude towards the Tupamaros and their subsequent evolution into bourgeois politicians is bound up with the fact that Brechner’s starting point is not to examine the historical and political conflicts that drove both the prisoners and their persecutors. Instead, it presents a study of human nature, the “heart of darkness” and of mental anguish, but in a manner so decontextualized that the protagonists exist in something of a historical and political—and even geographical—vacuum.

*A Twelve-Year Night* lacks such concreteness that one forgets that this is even taking place in Uruguay! The only real indication is the World Cup, listened to avidly by both the military and the prisoners alike. This is because the perspective is a quest for something more abstract and less confrontational than a reckoning with the past. The end result, unfortunately, is something far more banal, far less memorable and far less insightful.



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