

El Conde: The Chilean dictator Pinochet and counterrevolution through the years

Joanne Laurier
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September 11 marked 50 years since the US-backed military coup in Chile that brought brutal dictator Augusto Pinochet (1915-2006) to power. The coup led to mass repression, torture and death, and the country being transformed into a Milton Friedman-style, “free market” economic experiment, disastrous for the working class. The fascist terror in Chile lasted for two long decades. Thousands of political opponents were killed or “disappeared” by the Pinochet regime, and around 30,000 tortured, according to official figures. The coup in Chile also had profound consequences for the whole of Latin America.

Chilean director Pablo Larraín (*Tony Manero*, 2009; *Post Mortem*, 2012; and the Oscar-nominated *No*, 2013—a trilogy of films dealing with the post-Pinochet era) has made a horror-satire, the award-winning *El Conde* (*The Count*), which imagines Pinochet as a 250-year-old vampire. It is a complicated, dark, disturbing film about fascism, bourgeois corruption and counterrevolution. The film is currently streaming on Netflix.

Scripted by Larraín and long-time writing partner Guillermo Calderón, the film opens during the French Revolution. Claude Pinoche (Clemente Rodríguez) is a vampire and a French officer in the army of Louis XVI. He witnesses the revolution and the beheading of Marie Antoinette, whose blood he licks from the blade of the guillotine. Pinoche announces his determination to fight from then on “against all revolutions on behalf of his king,” such as in “Haiti, Russia and Algeria.” He absconds with Marie Antoinette’s head and goes to South America. There, he finds the taste of workers’ blood unpleasantly “acrid” with a “plebeian bouquet.”

Pinoche ends up in Chile in 1935, joining the Chilean army under the name Augusto Pinochet, and later leading the overthrow of the popular front government of Salvador Allende, rescuing the country, he claims, from a “Bolshevik infestation.” The narrator intones, “A brilliant general, he made himself into an invincible millionaire killing hundreds of revolutionaries with his own hands.” Pinochet himself explains, “I killed hundreds of Reds, smashed ... trade unions

and the Marxist/Leninist Allende.”

The vampire-dictator (as an old man-vampire now, Jaime Vadell) boasts that he “became a star all over the world because I defeated communism”

His depraved servant Fyodor (Alfredo Castro) is a White Russian, a “Cossack forged out of vodka and steel.” Pinochet, the narrator explains, “thanked Fyodor for killing many Bolsheviks by giving him eternal life.” “For the Chilean Army,” says Pinochet, “torture is of the utmost importance.” (At the time of his death, Pinochet was facing some 300 criminal complaints related to the murder, torture and kidnappings carried out by his regime. “The Caravan of Death,” “Operation Colombo” and “Operation Condor” were some of the murderous campaigns of repression for which he was charged.)

“All generals have the right to keep the spoils,” boasts Pinochet. His wretched, grasping adult children come to the desolate farm in Patagonia in the south of the country, hiring a nun (Paula Luchsinger)—an exorcist disguised as an accountant—to find their father’s ill-gotten gains. Pinochet’s wife Lucía (Gloria Münchmeyer) participates enthusiastically in her husband’s thievery (as she did in real life), embezzling huge sums, money laundering and illegally seizing public and private property to sell for her own advantage. In fact, Pinochet and his family were the objects of criminal investigations related to the embezzlement of tens of millions of dollars in state funds that were funneled out of the country and into secret accounts at the Riggs Bank in Washington D.C., as well as other overseas financial institutions.

Larraín told an interviewer that to avoid legal complications, “all the information” in *El Conde* about the Pinochet family’s looting is real: “About properties, amounts, dates, how they move the money. Basically, that they operated like a money-laundering cartel. Taking out money from the reserve accounts of the Army over the years is real, and it’s part of the report that condemned them from the highest Supreme Court in Chile. It’s an official truth.”

The snooty, upper-crust narrator of the film turns out to be

none other than former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher (Stella Gonet). According to the film's surreal storyline, Thatcher became pregnant with Pinochet after being raped and bitten in the mid-18th century by a slave-trafficking vampire. She left the child in a basket outside a Parisian orphanage and crossed the channel to Britain to become, many years later, the Iron Lady prime minister. Pinochet and Thatcher rejuvenate themselves by vampirish means. (While he was under house arrest in Britain in 1999, Pinochet received a single malt whisky from Thatcher, no longer prime minister. "Scotch is one British institution that will never let you down," read the accompanying note. She and George H. W. Bush campaigned successfully for Pinochet's release.)

El Conde is a pointed, angry film. Cinematographer Edward Lachman creates eerie black-and-white imagery that bring to mind Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer's classic film, *Vampyr* (1932) and *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), among others, and the artistically sinister look is aided by Juan Pablo Ávalo and Marisol García's jarring score, as well as by Oscar Rios Quiroz's stark set design. The performances are chilling, with cast members eager to draw a parallel between supernatural ghoulishness and fascist brutality.

In an interview with *Hollywood Reporter*, director Larraín elaborates on the vampire theme: "[T]he chain of thought involved the fact that Pinochet died in complete freedom—and with the most vile and absurd impunity. And that impunity made him eternal in a way—we still feel broken by his figure, because he's not really dead in our culture."

He goes on: "Fascism ... is a form of politics that can be located in a lot of countries in the world nowadays. It's something that's breathing and it's a real danger. I'm not into lecturing, but it's a shout on the screen and hopefully, it leaves a little trace."

In another interview, Larraín explains that doing a "realistic version [of Pinochet] could trigger empathy, and that is very dangerous," so he opted to do the film as a satire-farce, in the tradition of Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*.

"I think that every movie is political," the filmmaker tells *Vulture*. "Some movies are more openly and directly political, but once you are describing a reality, any form of society that is exposed there would likely be a perception of politics. This one, it's probably about how the structures of power are connected. There's some strong link between the end of World War II, the Cold War, and then the rebirth of socialism in different countries. A part of that is Vietnam."

He continues: "And then Nixon and Kissinger organizing the coup d'état with the Chilean far right. It's been 50 years since the coup d'état. Pinochet gets in power and becomes a symbol, protected by U.S. intelligence." Larraín wonders out

loud "if in the United States people really understand how the U.S. had such an influence in bringing Pinochet to power. Do you understand how the CIA through Kissinger, under Nixon, ordered to destabilize our country? There's more documents coming out every week. They met with rich businessmen and media owners. They co-financed it, and they helped put him there."

Pinochet died freed and a millionaire, asserts Larraín, "and that broke our society forever. ... Pinochet brought this wild capitalism, with no rules. Today Chile is one of those that has the greatest distance between rich and poor. Seventy percent of people in my country make less than \$800 a month. And the top one percent holds half the wealth."

During the first 13 years of the Pinochet dictatorship, the bottom 10 percent of Chilean society saw its overall consumption slashed by 30 percent. By 1988, the real wages of an average worker were 25 percent lower than they were in 1970.

Pinochet's ability to escape prosecution until his death at the ripe old age of 91—more than 16 years after surrendering power—is testimony to the fact that the horrors his regime unleashed against the workers of Chile were carried out to defend the interests of the ruling elite both in that country and internationally, which continued to protect him.

It is to Larraín's credit that he associates Pinochet's activities with "White" counterrevolution in France, Russia and elsewhere. Of course, none of the interviewers ask him about this and none of the critics comment on it, the references to Bolsheviks, "killing reds" and so on. This is too explosive an issue.



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