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Television audience and memory: the case study of the Chilean drama series *Los archivos del cardenal*

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Abstract

Introduction. Set during the Chilean military dictatorship, *Los archivos del cardenal* (“The Cardinal’s Files”) is a two-season-long fictional television series that was produced by Chile’s public channel TVN and broadcast in 2011 and 2014, respectively. **Objectives.** This article examines the impact of the series’ realistic depiction of the Chilean military dictatorship on audience’s historical memory and perception of the recent past. **Methods.** The study is based on a focus group composed of twenty-eight viewers of the television series and the analysis of participants’ discourses, performed from a cognitive and psychological perspective, within the framework of perceptive memory between real history and fiction. **Conclusions.** Viewers had the opportunity to talk about the contents of the fictional series and to evaluate the episodes as educational material to learn about the recent history of the country.

Keywords

Television series, representation, identity, historical memory, audiovisual narrative.

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Translation by **CA Martínez-Arcos**
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1. Introduction

Fictional series, which deal with real-life themes and contents, are true non-historical, yet referential documents, useful to understand certain passages of the past that history exposes according to certain

sources and based on references about events that need to be understood with authenticity, discarding the subjectivities of the audience. And fictional television series, as audiovisual materials, have made important advances in the representation of certain socio-cultural milestones and have the capacity to shock the audiences who recognise in them a lived reality.

The current television landscape requires contents that are capable of attracting a good share of the audience and can have an impact on audiences' comments. Thus, fiction television must offer representations that are understood as the identification of values, emotions and memories, dependent on indelible traces connected to the narrative, with the audience's personal experiences.

With Chile's bicentenary, television began to undertake projects to commemorate the country's celebrations. Thus, the two main networks, TVN and Canal 13, produced historical series (Fuenzalida et al., 2007), like *Los archivos del cardenal* ("The Cardinal's Files"). This series depicts historical moments that reflect Chile's daily life, characterised by rigidity and human rights violations, which still remain in the country's collective imaginary (Gutiérrez, 2013; Antezana and Mateos-Pérez, 2015).

This article examines the impacts of the representations of this series broadcast by Chile's public television channel, TVN, on the historical memory of its viewers, based on empirical method: a focus group of viewers. Participants were subjected to different levels of analysis in relation to the narrative in question, to study the audiovisual text's inherent representations and meanings, as reflected in viewers' opinions and memory reconstruction. Thus, viewers' discourses about the situational context of their lived reality are subjected to a cognitive analysis.

The article starts by outlining its theoretical basis on memory in the media and, subsequently, offers a review of the literature on fictional series to provide a framework to interpret the results of the empirical method used to analyse the convergence of fictional series and memory recalling. In this way, the article reviews how memory is treated in the media, specifically in audiovisual films, documentaries and fictional television series as an explanatory basis, to interpret the ideas posed by viewers of the television series and the relationship with the real history of the country.

2. Memory in the media

In a society, memory does not only refer to the past but also to what continues to live among us. And one of the ways for these experiences to remain active in the memory of a society is through the work of the media, both conventional and digital.

The media's representation of the past brings an important social dimension to the present through the references brought about by the historical context of the events represented. Now, to understand memory when it refers to the past, we need a platform. At present, the scope of the historical memory achieves its comprehension thanks to the traces or records that allow for the development of the social functioning of the object represented by the media.

When individuals perceive that memory comes from communication, either through different records and formats, it implies facing the past, which generates a communicative memory [1] that comes from outside, where subjects experience varied senses, and establish internal and external links.

An example of this is the narratives that describe experiences of episodes that impacted the world, such as stories about the Holocaust, an event that allows readers to draw their own conclusions about the subjective reality lived by victims, who narrate certain events from their own perspective. The most

recognised case is *The Diary of Anne Frank*, a story that narrates how the Jews lived in hiding during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands.

In modern and postmodern societies, the sources of history are often mediated to be distributed by institutions. Photography, for example, is a mediation that includes a series of discourses to rebuild memory, as well as the *Diary of Anne Frank* which rebuilds what happened, in addition to being a social contribution to knowledge.

González Callejas (2013) says that today's society uses memory as a fetish of consumption to recover the past, i.e., mass culture takes advantage of memory through tourism, books and media products, such as cinema. González Callejas terms this consumption of the past as the "age of the collecting of memories", a cult of marketing and exploitation of past behaviours.

However, the author admits the commercialised and massive existence that involves the theme of nostalgia, where the current narrative has been able to take advantage of the rehabilitation of the histories of urban centres and records of everyday life through video, digital photography, documentaries, docudramas and websites. In his view, this is part of postmodernity, whose traces and images are stored to recall the past and generate an amplified function of memory.

We cannot deny, then, that the review of the past is a matter of interest to the media that invoke it through documentaries, movies, television reports, radio shows, the internet and, currently, chats on social networks, as signs of reference to describe present situations.

The media industry is characterised by its uniqueness when it comes to conditioning its functioning to convert content into something essential to audiences. This aspect is what leads the media, as managers of memories, to fulfil three fundamental functions: informative seduction, view of nostalgia and representation of the extreme.

In this sense, in the words of Sánchez-Biosca, the visual medium "establishes and crystallises certain aspects of the collective memory, operating by selection between images, converting some of them into emblems of values, ideas, and by abstraction, stimulating different answers and diverse expectations" (2006: 14).

Today, audiovisual communication, in all of its facets, has become the main matrix of memory. Themes on memory have been used to tell stories that represent a truth that occurred in the past. In this sense, Cinema, following the line of photography, was the main medium to record to inform, becoming at the same time, an evocation of it, independent of its laws and codes, completely different from the hermeneutic of history.

Cinema's images present sequences, stories, characters and the history of the multiplicity of events delivered by the past. For the study of cinema and its relationship with history, Garrido (2013) prefers to call it documents in video format. The historian argues that cinema in the field of memory opens up the senses of personal positionings due to the memory of individual experiences, as well as of discourses of public use.

Another striking idea for the author is the recognition of the importance of television in terms of memory: "Television has become the main vehicle for the transmission of political and cultural ideas. Images penetrate the domestic sphere and exert an enormous influence on ideas, opinions, customs, and individual and collective memories" (Garrido, 2013: 30).

And with regards to cinema works dealing with themes of the past, Garrido emphasises that their importance lies in the fact that they are primary documents that allow us to make a historical reflection as a form of knowledge, social practice of identities and representations of conflicts, not failing to understand its context.

The audiovisual media, in general, have played a fundamental role in their connection with the past, as they maintain a fixation with the collective memory, which allows us to harmonise the reconstruction of events. It is increasingly more common for people to form an idea of the past through film and television, fiction films, docudramas, series and documentaries. At present, the main source of historical knowledge for the majority of the population is the audiovisual medium.

In this reflection, Rosa María Ganga (2008) admits that memories and historical events are materials available for the audiovisual media so that historical events are re-built as hegemonic vehicles of the information they receive, which for this case is based on the participation of people prepared to give clarity to what is narrated.

One of the important components in this integration of memory into the audiovisual media is associated with memory and personal experiences, because they arouse symbols of a memory linked to a certain generation that manages to resonate when images evoke something that viewers have lived in reality, i.e., there is a resurgence of the iconic subjectivity that acquires an indelible relevance.

The treatment of memory in the media, in some situations is closer to the feeling of nostalgia. This melancholy is the reflection of some arguments in fictional series, which without forgetting that they do not lose their regulations of commercial production, like entertainment material, but some scenes arouse the memory stored in people's minds due to realism of the events treated.

A “geo-cultural” identity is developed at this point (Duch and Chillón, 2012). This condition generates a process that can be seen from a nexus that relates to the historical-cultural field, which is known to those who possess those characteristics [2] and is passed down from generation to generation.

In this sense, fictional historical series provide a standard to the memory whose virtue is to offer a retrospective view of relevant events and, at the same time, provoke nostalgia through the memory in terms of anecdotes, fashion, censorship, economic crisis, fears, etc., which are elements that integrate the narrative of the everyday and social life of the community.

3. Representation of the past in fictional television series

Currently, watching television is not only an act of leisure or information consumption, because this behaviour also involves activities of a social and cultural nature due to the meaning of its discourses. A singular case of those significant criteria are the fictional series dealing with historical themes, which are recurrent type of production in television since the beginning of the 21st century to represent imaginaries through their narratives as a public service, with market policies and positive effects in the entertainment and programming formulas (Rueda and Coronado, 2009).

Television has an important and decisive power in society. Precisely, this power has come to fictional series, where the narrative, which is made up of formats with stories in a social, cultural and political context, speaks more and more of the past as an earthly paradise, forming the morphology of the collective memory generated in the programming of the small screen thanks to the view of producers

who use discursive tactics that converge on essential elements that connect with society, such as identity, identification and common sense, which become the marks of memory.

The public dimension opened by fictional TV series is a milestone in the link of memory, since the narrative allows for the generation of references through its discourses that present plausible coherent accounts (Rueda *et al.*, 2009). The best example that is appreciated from the past is the visual element, because it articulates the best traces of the values, fads, languages and beliefs of a society and its content enriches the present time.

These elements are intermingled with historical reality, even using archive images that are connected to certain events of the past, with real characters who have played important roles in recent history.

From the mid-20th century, society has come into contact with historical notions or past events through television. However, the antecedents of memory in the fictional narratives in television are observed in the “realm of memory” linked with popular culture, a concept coined by Oren Meyer (2007), in the production of historical films about the 1960s, which have a cultural resonance in the United States in the context of the television industry and its social impacts.

Meyer explains, in this regard, that the narratives linked to memory, whether fiction or miniseries, are linked to the social process of group creation, where the realm of memory materialises the notion of imagined groups.

Considering the formulated approaches, speaking of historical fictional series is, without a doubt, referring to a context of the past that possesses three fundamental components: the visual, the logic of production and the discourse.

From the second half of the 1970s, the United States presented a unique line of historical recreations that addressed some thematic traditions without losing the commercial line of cinema and television regarding consumption. The productions were literary or novel adaptations set in the popular imaginary, whose narrative was adapted to the standards of the cinematographic language of consumption and spectacle (Rueda and Coronado, 2009). This type of productions involved dramatic sequences led by famous faces from cinema to give some weight to the series. An example is the work of John Jakes, *North and South*, which was adapted to the small screen to represent the drama between two friends fighting in different armies during the civil war between the north and the south of the United States.

While there is mistrust about the ability of television to guide knowledge about events occurring in the past, due to the fact that the discourse does not have the authority status of written historiography, it is essential for television, with its audiovisual productions, to provide material of historical significance as a source of socialisation from the past.

In the words of Peris (2015: 118), “Television currently exerts an extraordinary impact on the public perception of the past and on the formation of individual and collective memory”, especially the historical fictional series that contribute to the shaping and articulation of the public discourse of the past, incorporating symbolic references on a common collective that allows viewers to recognise episodes of reality and knowledge.

However, fictional series have melodramatic and sentimental resources in some passages of the story, like soap operas, but the difference lies in the specificity of the format, which is ideal for reinterpreting

the acts of characters and events within proximity variables so that the spectator can appeal to nostalgia, personal experiences, family situations and everyday-life events, according to popular culture.

Thus, the narratives of fictional series that allude to memory have the singularity of being close, dominated by popular and domestic plots. In this way, historical fictional series contribute to the discourse of imagination that revitalises history as a narrative model in order to represent a certain period, marked by the postmodern disbelief which is unrecognisable in other media. In addition, it involves the localisation of a place that encompasses the universe of everyday life (narratives involving events of recent history) in which individuals' historical processes and privileged areas are combined with the world.

Regarding the incidence of viewers, “they recall their personal history, reminiscing how they lived the historic events of the 1960s and 1970s. For younger people, who were not yet born, the plots set in the political and social context of those years help them to better understand that historical period” (Pacheco, 2009: 226-227).

In order for the text of this type of productions to be understood by viewers, its argumentation has to be expressive and referential. As Puyal (2006) points out, it works with the present, because it uses understandable winks to share certain social contexts of the moment.

To the extent that the series with historical contents occupies an attractive narrative to be able to represent realism, it generates in the spectator a variety of emotions, identification and memories, which are elements that help approaching a social reality with the identity of a past. The obtaining of information provided by real-life events that are part of the narrative discourse can be considered, then, as an exercise of memory, understood as a desire to revisit the past from the logic of the present, through the evocation of a common imaginary.

4. Methods and techniques

In order to recruit an ideal focus group to obtain positive results, we invited volunteers to come up to the universities of Valparaíso and Austral. The only criterion to select participants was that they had to be regular viewers of the series. Once the total number of participants was gathered, the characteristics of the session were informed to participants to generate confidence in the purpose of the study. The focus group technique was selected because the historical memory is part of a process of knowledge and, as such, participants' perception is fundamental from a qualitative point of view, thanks to the experiences of a group of individuals, in this case the knowledge that TV viewers have of the fictional series. Participants were encouraged to reflect and talk about the contents of the series and its coherence with reality.

To be precise, participants gathered in the cities of Valparaíso and Valdivia, specifically in the Extension and Communications Centre of the Universidad de Valparaíso and the School of Philosophy and Humanities of the University of Austral. As mentioned, what participants had in common was that all of them were viewers of *Los archivos del cardenal*, so that, through in-depth dialogue, they could select and analyse representative elements of the discourse of the series, after watching 15 minutes of different scenes of the second season. The reasoning, as a report provided by the social actors, is used in the linguistic context for the social use of the results (Ibáñez, 1992).

The centre of attention of this technique was focused on “a public opinion”, which represents a plausible discourse on the historical memory whose narrative symbolises elements that are close to the daily life of Chile’s average family, which suffers from economic and social problems, as a result of the policies adopted by the dictatorship.

The focus group, in this way, has focused on the reasoning about the realism of the ideology of the discourse and, as such, its interpretation is based on the discourse expressed by individuals after having watched a series of images that allowed them to reflect on their effects. The discourses were captured in the spoken dimension of participants, i.e., in the open conversation and dialogue, which were encouraged to hear their experiences and perceptions.

The first group was composed of fifteen people and the second of thirteen. Once each session was carried out, we listened to the audio recordings to look for the various indications related to the memory to interpret the discursive states of participants.

The study, which is qualitative, took into account men and women between the ages of 20 and 54, with university studies and professional or technical jobs. For the intervention in the research, participants had to have the following requirements: possess knowledge of the reality of the country during the 1980s, participate voluntarily, respond the questions of the researcher and being a regular viewer of *Los archivos del cardenal*.

After verifying the information and the reading resulting from the text issued by participants, we proceeded to search for keywords and meaningful phrases that indicated formulas of thought or feelings, and then proceed to collect the information and perform the discourse analysis, based on the following variables: historical memory, archive images and memories.

The following table contains the perception categories applied to the Valparaíso and Valdivia groups with their respective questions applied during the technique:

Attributes	Question
Historical Memory	What do you think about the reconstruction of the historical memory in the fictional series you just watched?
Archive Images	How do you assess the archive images that appear in the series?
Memories	What types of memories do the sequences of the series trigger in your mind?
Contents of the Series	From the production point of view, how do you rate the contents of the series you just watched?

5. Results and conclusions

A discourse analysis close to cognitive theories was performed to identify participants’ perceptions, knowledge, opinions, feelings and thoughts, based on the group’s conversation in favour of transparency and freedom of expression from an ideological point of view and the situational context

of the group as members of a society, with the social, political and cultural reference frameworks of Chile (Ibáñez, 1992; Callejo, 2001; González and Barrios, 2012).

The cognitive properties have been chosen in relation to the narrative of the series, depending on the symbolic and cultural signs recognised by members of the group. All participants have many accumulated opinions and experiences as witnesses of the time under analysis and also know stories that have been transmitted to them by relatives in the case of the younger participants who were born after the 1980s but contributed to the country's sensitivities, resulting from the portrait transmitted by fiction television.

Viewers who were subjected to the test have a favourable opinion on the fictional series analysed as material to understand and revive the "historical memory" validated by the dramatisation of the story in the context of real-life events. Another evaluative reflection participants assign is the political memory and the recognition of experiences transmitted from parents or family members.

Both the "archive images" and the "memories" are a recognition or reinforcement that comes to mind thanks to the resources used by the series (production props). However, an interesting finding is the concept of "imposition" which, for participants, reflects a system characteristic of that epoch, and so rather than living the stories told at a dramatic level, these images are part of Chile's oppressive system in the 1980s.

However, both groups from Valparaiso and Valdivia highlight the contents of the series as a tendency to rescue the themes linked to the audiovisual product in terms of dramatic quality, as well as their contribution to revalorise the history of the country. For participants, the material provided by the series is a contribution to the "knowledge of the new generations who were not born yet during the period addressed" (highly valued topic).

An important element identified throughout the intervention is fear and emotion, which are transversal to the attributes of "historical memory", "archival images" and "memories". In other words, they are characteristic conditions of the dramatic dimension of the series in the social and political representations which are combined with the sentiment of those members of the group who remembered or felt what they experienced when they were younger.

Participants recognised that the series provokes an emotional affection and that the fear is present in the memories after recognising the political and aggressive character of the time. The identification with pain and fear is triggered by specific images of the series, such as scenes of shootings, torture and persecution. For participants over the age of 40, who witnessed the events that occurred in the 1980s, more than one image made them remember the experiences lived by themselves and acquaintances, which in turn provoked certain emotions or states of affliction.

Adults, who witnessed the events that took place during that time, confessed to remember fear. In this sense, we can point out that this is a behavioural conditioning, a basic emotion that is coherent with the time they lived, i.e., the series' strong images of torture and persecutions triggered the recognition of the fear experienced during the dictatorship, which is a sensitive and delicate issue for the Chilean society. This is confirmed by some of the focus group participants:

Víctor Peñaloza: "There was a very important fear that is plotted here, with the shootings, people running, that perceptible fear in all the people, that is the memory that comes to me the most".

Brenda Martínez: “It got me down because it is very close to me, i.e., I feel the stories of the CNI [3], I remains inside of me; this type of series makes me feel sad because they reflect what I experienced in the flesh”.

Fernando Valdés: “I feel depressed, I feel down, I’m very shocked because I, for example, was also 12 years old and I was detained for playing with a wave in the street when the curfew was at 3, when suddenly one went to the corner, when I was a teen, and you caught by the police [...] I was 13 years and at that age you could already be considered an extremist by the cops of that time. Then, I remember that was in the house and in the curfew in Valparaiso nobody was in the streets, there was an absolute silence. Then if they knocked at your door at 3 or 4 in the afternoon, it meant there was a problem; they did not knock the door but rather banged it. It was either the police or security guards [...] This makes me feel afraid, lots of fear at that stage, fear of the street, fear of seeing the disturbance. That’s it more than anything. It was a childhood in which going outside the house had to be controlled, because the time to go out was limited, they limited your space, they limited your time. It was not the same life: you could have family freedom but not public freedom”.

This study reflects on the connection between the fictional historical series and the contents of Chile’s recent past and its immediate effects on viewers with the national and personal historical context, through symbolic images that are not forgotten, such as the figure of Augusto Pinochet, public figures of that time, social events and the archive.

The narrative of the television series has a political character which combines the police thriller, depicting a prominent context of Chile’s recent history and highlighting historical moments whose narrative shows the military dictatorship, the political repression, the defence of human rights and the pursuit of democracy. The plot is a pretext to remember episodes from the past that are linked, directly or indirectly, with the memory of the country on social and personal levels in memory. The form and style of the audiovisual narrative of television series are the engine that generates the memories that acquire more relevance when the actors interpret the real-life events.

The intervention of participants was fundamental to collect information on the perception of the contents that were analysed. Their contribution confirms that this type of fiction allows viewers to recover the memory of recent history. The determining factor is the existing knowledge of the facts of the dictatorship. The episodes of the series reinforce experiences, feelings and emotions associated with the past, according to a situational reality linked to the daily and social life of the individuals involved.

The group of participants believes that the fictional series is a didactic contribution to be shared with younger generations who did not experience Chile’s military dictatorship. In addition, it is a space that allows viewers to appreciate in the narrative the recognition of representation and identity in terms of memories of a past period, which opens up the reflection on the past and present of the country.

Television viewers want to talk about the past because they believe it is necessary to remember to strengthen their knowledge of it. Based on the previous, *Los archivos del cardenal* is not just another entertainment television production. In the opinion of participants, the work in its totality is a historical educational document that is helpful to understand the reality of Chilean society of that time. And, on

the other hand, the application of the focus group reveals the presence of significant levels of perception, reflection and description of the ways of feeling the historical memory and all that it implies, as a consequence of the reading of the television series.

The research technique was appropriate to evaluate the occurrences derived from the perception of the series' representations, as it recognises the relevant connections between the contents and the historical memory.

To reaffirm and validate the results, we can point out some situations that were registered to contribute to the description of the types of feelings manifested by participants in relation to memories, fulfilling a fundamental role as part of the historical memory.

It can be argued that television and, especially, fictional series that deal with memory-related issues play a fundamental role because they directly represent events and social actors that turn reality and stories into fictional narratives, which are the result of real identities rooted in viewers' memories. What is interesting about narrative theory is how screenwriters and creators go from the multiplicity of personal documents and experiences to the unity of the story to represent a collective memory.

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6. Notes

1. See Duch and Chillón (2012), *Un ser de mediaciones. Antropología de la Comunicación* (“A being of mediations. Anthropology of Communication”), on the references of Jan Assmann, p. 414, who gives a pedagogical vision on the cultural memory derived from external dimensions, understanding culture as a broad process of comprehension.

2. Common in this type of transmissions are the stories told by grandparents about popular celebrations and religious festivities, which churches turn into true traditions, such as the Holy Week and the Assumption of the Virgin, among other festivities.

3. CNI stands for *Central Nacional de Informaciones*, which is the National Information Centre that operated in Chile during the military dictatorship.

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