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Ilka Kressner

University at Albany, State University of New York, ikressner@albany.edu

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Scapegoating in the Films by Alejandro Fernández Almendras

Iika Kressner, University at Albany, SUNY (ikressner@albany.edu)

Chilean filmmaker Alejandro Fernández Almendras has examined the processes of victimization of the “poor man” in all four of his feature films, most prominently *Matar a un hombre* [*To Kill a Man*] (2014, Winner of the World Cinema Grand Jury Prize at Sundance Festival, and of the festivals in Rotterdam, Miami and Lisbon, and competitor for the Academy Award of Best Foreign Language Film) and *Aquí no ha pasado nada* [*Much Ado About Nothing*] (2016, Grand Jury price at several Latin American festivals, most notably those of Cartagena de las Indias and Santiago de Chile). Both works exemplify and reflect on practices of victimization and mechanisms of scapegoating. As a surrogate victim, the scapegoat underscores the state of a community that cannot face the truth of its own violence, and projects it onto one single figure, in order to purify itself. Yet, as René Girard remarks in *Violence and the Sacred*, the technique of collectively assigning a culprit does not liberate a community of their violence: “Nothing has been truly abolished, nothing added, but everything has been *misplaced*” (81, emphasis in original).¹ Fernández Almendras’s portrayals of the process of scapegoating are more nuanced compared to Girard’s examination of the archetype. The communities that surround the victims and single them out are much less visible and closely knit. Both films emphasize the victim’s loneliness, hence vulnerability, in a partially abstract social environment that is merely represented through a few selected characters interacting with them. In both films, the killing of

¹ Girard takes as his examples archetypal and Biblical figures and characters of Greek mythology, most notably Oedipus. Latin American literature possesses a compelling, more contemporary figure of the scapegoat, that of Gabriel García Márquez’s Santiago Nasar in *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*. The collective selecting and killing of Santiago Nasar by the villagers is presented as a ritual. As Girard emphasizes, the process of scapegoating, however, does not lead to a liberation, but instead a collective trauma that weighs on the townspeople, as nobody can forget their guilt. For an analysis of the process of scapegoating in the novella, see Gustavo Pellón’s “Myth, Tragedy and the Scapegoat Ritual in *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*.”

the figure of the scapegoat, be it literal as in *Matar a un hombre* or in a symbolic fashion as in *Aquí no ha pasado nada*, is an act of arbitrary law that rises during times of a weak legal system, states of injustice and impunity.

Both films are inspired by true facts: In the case of *Matar a un hombre*, the director recounts that he had seen an interview with a prison inmate who had killed the man who for months had stalked and harassed him and his family, robbed him repeatedly, injured his son, and attempted to rape his daughter (Biéznobas, no pag.). The film fathoms the question and consequences of what it means to kill a man—even an evil man—and take the law into one’s hand. *Aquí no ha pasado nada*, which was financed entirely through crowdfunding, is based on a legal scandal that shook Chile in 2013, in which Martín Larraín, the son of former senator and president of the center-right party Renovación Nacional (RN), Carlos Larraín Peña, had committed a DUI hit-and-run accident in which a pedestrian was killed (Fernández Almendras [Invitation to crowdfunding]). The investigation was from its beginnings fraught with incongruities, such as the omission of a field sobriety test of the driver. Consequently, Larraín was ransomed on the basis of insufficient proofs. After strong public protest, the case was reopened, yet it ended again with the acquittal of Larraín. However, now two of the people who had been in the car with him, Sofía Gaete and Sebastián Edwards, were found guilty for having obstructed the police in the course of their duty (“Usuarios de facebook...”, no pag.).

The portrayals of victimization in both films are situated in different social strata. While *Aquí no ha pasado nada* exemplifies the process of scapegoating within the small political and economic elite, and zooms in on a victim that hardly objects to his being victimized, *Matar a un hombre* depicts members of the low middle class, who struggle to make ends meet, and who indeed do protest repeatedly and with determination to the authorities, yet to no avail. The

storylines of both films are born out of the reality of living under a law enforcement and juridical system that do not protect its citizens equally and thus violate the constitutional fundament.

To Kill a Man centers on Jorge (Daniel Candia), a hard-working, patient and silent man and his struggle to protect his family from the neighborhood delinquent Kalule (Daniel Antivilo). In the beginning of the film, he is robbed by Kalule, who in addition to stealing his money, also takes his diabetic supplies. Jorge's son attempts to buy back the glucose meter from Kalule, but is shot in the process. The criminal is sentenced to two years in prison. Once released, he seeks revenge. While still on a restraining order, he begins to menace Jorge with phone calls and messages, locks his son up for hours in a truck, and attempts to rape his daughter. The family (Jorge and his wife are now divorced) requests law enforcement to step in and protect them. Yet they are put off under humiliating pretenses, among those, the missing of a form or by pointing out that the girl only suffered minor injuries and was not raped. In one scene, we see Jorge ring the bell of the DA's private house in order to beg her to enforce the restraining order, yet is sent away by the maid with the explanation that her boss would attend to the matter after the week end. At that moment Jorge takes matters into his own hands. The next 10 minutes portray his minute preparations of the killing, in silence, that culminate in a long, final verbal exchange with Kalule, who shouts at him from inside the truck where has been caught, and menaces Jorge to kill him and his family.

The future assassin is now the victim of the verbal humiliation of the future victim. While Fernández Almendras does not show the act of killing—Kalule is gassed inside the truck—; the final 25 minutes of the film zoom in on Jorge's repeated attempts at getting rid of the cadaver, hiding it and later throwing it off a cliff into the sea. The camera shows him in detail from varying angles carrying the dead man up the hill and toward the cliff. Yet this new Sisyphus will

fail, as did his mythical predecessor. A few days later, Jorge finds the body stranded at the seashore. In an almost tender gesture, he puts on one of the cadaver's shoes that he finds lying next to him, carries the dead body back to his truck, drives to the city, and enters the gated area of a police station. In the final frame, we see him leaning against his truck in the parking lot, smoking a cigarette, which is presumably his last one before turning himself in.

With its quiet intensity, the film is a careful reflection on what it means to kill a human being. Jorge, this most patient, reactive, antiheroic and at times simply dull character, becomes an agent of radical violence, after he and his family have been singled out by the neighborhood bandit and his gang. The almost prototypically submissive victim figure takes fatal revenge. "All violence" states James Gilligan in *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic*, "is an attempt to achieve justice, or what the violent person perceives as justice, for himself or for whomever it is on whose behalf he is being violent, so as to receive whatever retribution or compensation the violent person feels is "due" to him... Thus the attempt to achieve and maintain justice, or to undo or prevent injustice, is the one and only universal cause of violence" (11-12). This is true even in the case of the killing of a sadist. The surviving victim turned arbiter of a life is faced with the burden of this responsibility. In an almost Dostoyevskyan fashion, the protagonist reinserts himself into the justice system in place in search for personal atonement. Jorge becomes a tragic figure, killing knowingly, feeling the horror of his own violence. His fight is not markedly religious, but it echoes the one described by Stanley Windass: "The horror that the Christian feels is not that of being killed, but that of killing; not that of being a martyr, but of being a murderer; not the fear of suffering with Christ, but that of crucifying him afresh in the person of our fellow men. This is the backbone of our tradition..." (129), at least a Biblical

tradition “without the Gospels” (149). Fernández Almendras’s underdog turned killer becomes again the underdog, the lonely, little man, the social loser.

The socio-cultural context in which he is enmeshed, that of the Chile of the early 21st century, is in clear contrast to other periods of growth of vigilantism, such as the 1980s in the U.S., with high urban crime rates that saw the citizens’ faith in the established institutions of law and order waning (Scully and Moorman 638). It was equally different from the deep distrust of the police that characterized the years under Pinochet’s dictatorship (1973-1990). The socio-political situation Jorge faces is that of an economically developed society marked by neoliberalism (Vázquez Olivera 13). Neoliberalism as a systematic political and economic project of restoration of ruling class power intensifies inequalities between social groups and promotes the accumulation of capital and exploitation on a new scale (Cabalin 486). Both Aníbal Quijano (“El laberinto de América Latina” 75) and David Harvey (*A Brief History of Neoliberalism*) describe Chile as the first large-scale national neoliberal experiment in the world. It had its beginnings during the dictatorship of the 1980s. Significantly, after the restoration of democracy, the economic and political policy of the military regime remained in place. Social gaps and economic inequality were not reduced, but instead, continued and intensified during the first decade of the 21st century. We may conclude that Jorge had been singled out as a victim by the state he lived in long before he felt the harassment of Kalule, another victim, though of a different character, who imposes his law of impunity onto the poor neighborhood. Jorge’s revenge, albeit geared to his victimizer, indirectly emphasizes the situation of a man who had never been given a chance, or, literally, “cared” for by his country.

Similar to *Matar a un hombre*, the plot of *Aquí no ha pasado nada* is simple and told in chronological sequence. Manuel Larrea (Samuel Landea), the twentysomething son of a

senator, is driving under the influence of alcohol, and kills a pedestrian. Thanks to his family's machination and lawyer's ploy that include the bribing of witnesses, falsifying of testimonies and faking the circumstances of the offence, he skirts juridical consequences by shifting the blame on an innocent third person. The scapegoat, Vicente (Agustín Silva), a party acquaintance of Manuel's, is presented as a character of a slightly lower social status. While still being part of the high upper class,—he studies in Los Angeles; the film shows him is visiting his family's summer home at a beach in Chile—, Vicente assumes an inferior position with respect to Manuel. The initial meeting of the two young men at a party quickly and firmly establishes the hierarchy among the two:

- Vicente.
- Manuel Larrea.
- Uuuuui.

The social hierarchy is determined and conveyed in four simple words. Manuel's last name speaks for itself, it triggers a mere phonetic, admiring response in Vicente. This fast establishing and mutual recognition of power structures makes Vicente a fitting scapegoat. In addition, he is both a partial outsider but still sufficiently close to Manuel, in terms of social hierarchy, to perform that function, as he is a "member" (Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* 88) of the same community, which in Fernández Almendras's coining, are the fortunate 5% of the Chilean society for whom the law is not necessarily a binding instance. The trailer of the film includes the following page-filling note: "Hay un 5% de los chilenos que haga lo que haga, nunca va a pisar la cárcel" [There are 5% of Chileans, who, whatever they do, will never set foot in a prison].

Vicente is carefree and ignorant about the intrigue that is being put forward. At the moment of the accident, he was sitting in the back seat of Manuel's car, kissing two girls, drunk,

drugged, and utterly unaware of what was going on around him. Once he learns that he has been accused of the hit and run accident, which his acquaintance had committed, Vicente only shows a weak initial resistance and quickly conforms to the scheme plotted by everyone around him. The lawyers hash out the deal, Vicente's family pays the bail, and in the last scenes he is back to his sweet and privileged life dancing, drinking, and flirting. "The surrogate victim," writes Girard accordingly, "inevitably appears as a being who submits to violence without provoking a reprisal" (*Violence and the Sacred* 91). The overall lack of resistance in Vicente disinterest can be interpreted as a distancing device that thwart any viewers' attempt at identifying with him. This feature that has been highlighted by critics, often in a reproachful tone. In his Sundance Review of the *Hollywood Reporter*, Boyd van Hoeij describes that: "indeed, the twentysomething lead and his peers don't seem willing, ready or even interested in committing to anything, which makes it hard for audiences to care about what happens to any of them.... It's here that the first meaning of the title [*Much Ado about Nothing*] comes back to haunt the proceedings; why should audiences care about apparently careless people who are falsely accused of anything?" (no pag.). This statement can of course be questioned, by simply asking the inverse question: Why should we not care, or even be deeply worried about these characters' apparent carelessness? Can their inadvertence be read as a sign of despair, ethic renouncement, or profound cynicism related to, among others, the functioning of the democratic state? Should we then not care for those who pretend not to care anymore?

Such an envisioned "care" precludes any hasty identification with the fictional character and points at a much broader conflict: Morality needs imagination to develop and grow. The concern for the other, whose existence and suffering is independent of one's own needs, needs to be learned and practiced. Vicente's and Jorge's environments are equally bleak "careless" spaces

that do not foster imagination and critical reflection, or only allow them, as in the case of Jorge's killing, to develop after contemplating one's own violence. Reflection and imagination, both terms that don't enjoy a particularly high appreciation in a neoliberal mindset, are all the more important in art. In fact, Fernández Almendras defines the role of art in times of social and economic insecurity in an interview in the following, straightforward way: "Me parece que allí donde falla la justicia, el arte debe generar reflexión" ("Aquí no ha pasado nada..." *The Clinic Online*, no pag.) [I thin that where justice fails, art has to generate reflection]. His purposed reflection on processes of victimization and scapegoating is unpleasant, and a radical questioning of the simplistic and dangerous assumption that, "if somewhere in the world, evil exists, somebody else must be responsible (Girard, *Oedipus Unbound* 13).

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