Back to the Future: Salvador Allende's Steampunk Chile

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> Chile como un cementerio.
> O como un país construido
> sobre un cementerio,
> intentando el olvido como
> método de supervivencia.
> —Baradit, *Synco* 293

The 1973 coup that deposed Salvador Allende is, in a way, everywhere in plain sight in today's Chile. The president whose popular support among not only the middle but the working class had dwindled abymsally by August 1973, whose government was regularly excoriated by both the right (for his economic nationalization program) and the far left (for his willingness to let constitutional fealty trump the need for radical structural change) is now spoken of in reverent tones by observers from across the political spectrum. Visitors to El Palacio de La Moneda today are greeted by a monument to Allende outside the northeast entrance; a museum in the tony neighborhood of Barrio República celebrates his legacy, treating his personal effects as something akin to holy relics; and

another impressive new museum devoted to the coup and human rights in general has recently opened, having received the support and encouragement of subsequent presidential administrations and other public organisms.[1]

And yet it is difficult to avoid the impression that the ubiquity of these tokens of remembrance do not so much acknowledge the coup as allow us to hold it at arm's length. It is as if their true function were not so much to keep Allende's memory alive as to externalize grief, externalize memory, and thus relieve us of its oppressive weight. In a sense, the objects and monuments remember *for* us: they remember on our behalf, as it were, absolving us from rigorous thinking about what the coup might have meant at the time and what it might continue to mean today.[2] Thus, while a profoundly troubling moment of Chile's history is commemorated in pious monuments and speeches, a direct confrontation of the underlying economic and political tensions that led up to the coup is studiously avoided.

The irony, of course, is that the burden of memory can never be fully borne by retrospection alone: to remember is also to project forward, to think in the future tense. It is, in fact, a complex interplay of recollection and imaginative projection that lends political memory its efficacy. This is one reason why, among the thicket of narratives that deal with the coup and the years of the Pinochet regime,[3] few are so effective and provocative, in my view, as the 2008 steampunk/alternative history novel *Synco*, by emerging young writer and graphic designer Jorge Baradit.[4] To be sure, the book is anything but testimonial in a traditional sense. Rather than aim at some kind of descriptive documentary ideal, the book asks us instead to

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[1] For a brief history of the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos, see the "Historia del Museo" link at the Museum's website; the URL is listed in the Works Cited.

[2] I am thinking here of arguments that have been advanced by Slavoj Žižek, who has examined the psychoanalytic structure of disavowal in many of his works. For a particularly clear and succinct example, see his discussion of Buddhist prayer wheels and a host of cognate issues in his short introduction to Lacan (22-39).

[3] For a brief but nonetheless helpful orientation, see Pagni.

[4] Baradit (Valparaíso, 1969) has rapidly established himself as perhaps the most important figure in contemporary Chilean cyberpunk and its various permutations. Prior to the publication of *Synco*, he was best known for his influential and critically praised *Ygdrasil* (2005).

imagine a fantastic possibility: that Pinochet's 1973 coup had actually been repelled by the general, who thereby ensured the survival of Allende's government and paved the way not only for intertwined political and technological revolutions in Chile but the surprising disclosure of malevolent, hitherto unimagined forces behind the more readily observable political events.[5] By circumscribing the now familiar stories of Allende and Pinochet into a narrative arc broad enough to encompass not only political history per se but rather the fringes of esoteric and conspiratorial thought, Baradit obliges us to rethink the nature and function of collective memory itself.

The novel is set in 1979 and opens as Martina Aguablanca, the daughter of a right-wing general exiled in Venezuela, returns to her native country, now as a diplomatic attaché, in order to observe the celebration of Allende's re-election. She is further charged with exploring the Allende government's implementation of Proyecto Cybersyn (also known as Proyecto Synco), a key feature of which was a kind of proto-internet designed to facilitate communication, via telex machines, between distinct nodes of the supply and distribution chain throughout the country. A central command center—looking very much like a set out of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*[6]—was designed to be installed beneath La Moneda, providing politicians, technocrats, and workers with economic data in real time from throughout the country, enabling them to respond immediately to inefficiencies in the various sectors of the market, from heavy manufacturing to shipping.

Incredible as it sounds, the Allende government's implementation of such a system was not mere fantasy on Baradit's part. Although historians have long neglected the topic in favor of exploring the political and economic aspects of Chile's experiment with constitutional marxism, important work is now being done on the Synco project inspired by British

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[5] Baradit's skills as a graphic designer are readily apparent in the design of *Synco*, as the book includes a number of photoshopped and otherwise modified images designed to enhance the documentary character of the novel. See Appendix 1 for an example. Baradit also designed an impressive website with quasi-documentary materials related to the work; the URL may be found in the Works Cited.

[6] See Appendix 2 for the most iconic image of the real-life ops-room of Synco.

cyberneticist Stafford Beer, who played a key role in the system's design and installation.7 For Beer, the Allende administration's radical restructuring of the national economy provided the perfect opportunity to explore how principles of cybernetic thought could facilitate the creation of a more socially just and economically egalitarian society. By making use of the same organizational principles embodied in a wide array of complex systems—from biological and social systems to mechanical ones—Beer believed it would be possible to design a social and economic communication grid that would be both economically efficient and socially empowering.

Beer's most significant contribution to cybernetics may well be his articulation of the "Viable System Model," or "VSM," a schema constituted by a number of discrete levels or systems and roughly patterned after the human nervous system. System One of the VSM is analogous to the limbs and bodily organs of an organism that are in open contact with their surroundings and spontaneously adjust to environmental input. System Two corresponds to the spinal cord, which facilitates communication between the diverse organs and sensory input that comes into the system. System Three—associated in Beer's view with the pons, medulla, and cerebellum—is charged with maintaining a general homeostasis among the organs constituting Systems One and Two. System Four, encarnated in the diencephalon, basal ganglia, and the third ventricle of the human brain, is responsible for long-term planning strategies. Finally, System Five—the "multinode," in Beer's parlance—is an interconnected system of managers who served to counter functional misfires and informational glitches in the system.[8]

A key point for Beer was that the system should not be thought of in hierarchical terms: the VSM sought to incorporate feedback from all levels into the decision-making process. A crucial principle of his work was that one could never hope to control any complex system in a top-down fashion.

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[7] The most comprehensive work to date on Proyecto Cybersyn has been Eden Medina's *Cybernetic Revolutionaries* (2011), from which I draw liberally in the discussion that follows.
    [8] For a more detailed description of the various levels of Beer's VSM, see Medina 34-39. Beer himself was a prolific writer; for one relatively accessible summary of his own thought, see his "Viable System Model."

Rather, effective management consisted in acknowledging the system's discrete organizational levels and making creative use of systemic feedback to increase the organism's sensitivity to environmental pressures, thus heightening its capacity to respond quickly and efficiently to them.

Beer's work in cybernetics found an enthusiastic reception on the part of some of the young government officials that had come to power in the early days of the Allende regime and it was not long before he had been approached by Fernando Flores, an ambitious young technocrat serving in the Allende administration, and invited to come to Chile as a consultant to the new government. Beer readily accepted and spent a significant portion of the next two years implementing the VSM by linking up a number of unused telex machines scattered throughout the country. The machines, in turn, would be used to transmit a wealth of production and distribution data to a specially designed ops room in Santiago.

It should be noted that Beer's system was designed not only to increase economic efficiency as Allende's administration embarked on an ambitious program of nationalizing vast sectors of the private economy, but also to enfranchise workers and facilitate democratic participation in the country's economic and political life. Beer's vision was personally endorsed by Allende, who saw in Synco ideas consonant with his own vision of worker empowerment. Although Pinochet's coup ensured that system was never fully implemented as Beer and his Chilean cohorts had originally envisioned it, it has become increasingly clear that the system played a not insignificant role in attenuating the effects of a devastating transportation strike in October 1972. Indeed, despite its only limited functionality, it has been argued that Proyecto Cybersyn helped to forestall the collapse of the Allende government, even if it could not save it in the end (cf. Medina 148-51).

It is against this backdrop that Baradit's novel—which shares a number of affinities with Latin American steampunk fiction, while not reducible to it[9]—asks us to imagine not only that the September coup failed

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[9] Given that steampunk is only just beginning to attract scholarly attention in the English-speaking world, it is unsurprising that serious critical work on the modest, but rapidly burgeoning, cultural field of steampunk in Chile is almost nonexistent. In addition to Baradit, other authors and texts often mentioned with

and that Allende was in fact successful in consolidating political power, but that Synco was to become a ubiquitous information processing system throughout the country. From the moment Martina's plane begins to make its approach to the airport in Santiago—when the pilot relinquishes control of the aircraft to the control tower as the plane prepares to land (19)—she discovers the imprint of Synco everywhere in Chilean society. Upon arrival at her hotel, Martina notes that her room is equipped with its own terminal, known as a t-Syn:

> Toma las manillas de bronce y loza y abre las puertas del armario. Una parafernalia horrible de cables, pantallas desnudas y teclados desgastados parece venírsele encima. Un enorme switch junto a una ampolleta de cuarenta watts pintada de rojo indica que el t-Syn de esta habitación está apagado. Martina mira con algo de rechazo la combinación de texturas y colores que se adhieren a la pared sin orden ni concierto y cierra las puertas con gesto agrio. Es lo más parecido al interior de una máquina del tiempo de utilería, piensa. (25)

These preliminary descriptions of the Synco system not only provide glimpses into Baradit's steampunk world but already hint that the technological utopia that Allende's government had attempted to realize would not so much obviate human labor as displace it or make it invisible. Consider, for instance, the following example. Shortly after her arrival, Martina is informed that in order to call a cab, she must make use of her t-Syn: "uno hacía las consultas a través de la radio y un funcionario operaba una t-Syn física y traspasaba la información de regreso a través del mismo medio. Luego, una impresora portátil pequeña, que ocupaba todo el maletero del automóvil, imprimía pequeños rollos de papel con los resultados en matriz de punto" (30-31).

As whimsically impractical as this steampunk version of a taxi paging system might be, it hints at a social and economic hybridity that will turn out to have a much darker side. Making use of her diplomatic credentials, Martina manages to finagle a guided tour of the inner workings of Synco from none other than Ricardo Lagos, one of Allende's most trusted advisors (86). Descending into the nerve center of the machine beneath La

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regard to steampunk include Sergio Meier (*La segunda enciclopedia de Tlön* [2007]), Francisco Ortega (*1899: cuando los tiempos chocan* [2011]) and Alberto Rojas (*La sombra de fuego* [2011]).

Moneda, Martina discovers that the technological prowess boasted of by the Allende government in reality serves only to conceal a hidden world of shockingly primitive labor:

> Lagos estaba aferrado al pasamanos, despeinado por el viento en espiral que subía desde las profundidades, y aparentemente ajeno al ruido de los que parecían ladridos de multitudes muy lejanas. Martina aguzó la mirada y se dio cuenta de que en muchos niveles del cigüeñal parecían estar trabajando niños. En un segmento, que parecía fabricado con los restos de una retroexcavadora y algún tanque militar, cinco críos se movían velozmente entre los recovecos de fierro y hojalata para operar pequeños sistemas con llaves de tuerca y martillos. Se gritaban números y contraseñas que anotaban en libretas de papel; algunos vomitaban, todos parecían asustados. A Martina se le encogió el corazón al distinguir a una pequeña meciéndose desvanecida en el vaivén sincopado de una pieza que quizá giraba demasiado rápido. (109)

It turns out that the computing power of Synco is predicated in no uncertain terms upon raw manual labor, which, though ostensibly regulated and organized by the government, is carried out in deplorable working conditions. The point is not simply that the Synco system aspires to complete tasks better suited to digital information transfer at a time in the 1970s in Chile when only antiquated, labor-intensive, analog tools were available: it is rather that that the ubiquity of computation always implies a material substratum of exploitative labor.[10] Of course, recent controversies over the working conditions in manufacturing plants in China, as well as investigative reporting on the seamy underside of the mining and processing of rare earth metals, have underscored the point that such exploitation is not necessarily as far removed from our own models of consumption as we might wish to believe.[11]

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[10] Consider the following description of the Chilean telephone system, which, Martina learns, had also been absorbed by the Synco project: "[...] le habían contado del famoso método de rastreo de los sistemas administrativos chilenos: un equipo recebía el número y lo derivaba a grupos que consecutivamente discriminaban el guarismo en cascada hasta dar con la identidad del individuo, todo en un lapso de ocho segundos. Los operadores trabajaban en turnos de tres horas por trabajo por tres horas de sueño, durante quince meses seguidos. Luego eran derivados a otras plantas con obligaciones más reposadas, y el Estado les proporcionaba gratuitamente los tratamientos y fármacos para la ansiedad" (92-93).

[11] See, for instance, the recent controversy regarding the working conditions of the Chinese employees of Foxconn, the electronic components supplier heavily relied upon by Apple and other multinationals

In the case of Baradit's novel, the invisible labor force that powers the computing system is composed primarily of orphans and otherwise undesirable or useless children. "El gobierno ayuda a los niños huérfanos o hijos de criminales," Lagos explains to Martina,

> proporcionándoles un espacio donde puedan hacer un aporte a la comunidad. Hemos constatado que esta ayuda al desarrollo de la patria les devuelve la dignidad a las familias de los convictos, y les entrega un hogar a niños huérfanos que de otra manera verían sus días perdidos en las calles de la ciudad. Son hijos de los males de un sistema que está por desaparecer. (112)

It cannot but strike the reader that the underworld of Synco is virtually indistinguishable from the world of child labor and exploitation that Baldomero Lillo had memorably described more than a century earlier in *Subterra* (1904). And it is worth noting that even now defenses of child labor are mounted on similar grounds.[12] Thus it is that a signature work of contemporary Chilean steampunk turns out to have an unexpectedly direct connection to one of the pioneering authors of Chilean naturalism, to say nothing of its obvious echoes of Dickens, particularly the latter's preoccupation with the fate of the invisible children of industrialization.[13]

(https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/30/business/apple-supplier-in-china-pledges-changes-in-working-conditions.html?pagewanted=all). Of course it was later discovered that some of the initial reports of exploitative working conditions could not be substantiated and important media venues (most notably the radio program *This American Life*) were obliged to produce retractions. It is worth noting, however, that the discovery of factual inaccuracies, exaggerations, and outright lies in the initial report has subsequently been used to dismiss out of hand other, well substantiated abuses and, of course, to efface broader structural questions about manufacturing labor in the developing world, as if the invisibility of these labor conditions needed to be maintained at any cost.

[12] Child labor has long been justified not just as a matter of financial necessity but also as a mechanism for "building character." Such arguments are perennially attractive to a not insignificant segment of the population. Witness, for instance, recent U.S. presidential primary candidate Newt Gingrich's claims that child labor protections are excessive and counterproductive to the inculcation of a proper   work   ethic (https://www.npr.org/blogs/itsallpolitics/2011/12/07/143258836/gingrichs-proposals-on-child-labor-stir-attacks-but-raise-real-issues).

[13] The following description of one child's working conditions cannot but strike us as something akin to a digital Dickens on steroids: "Armando trabajaba en el batallón de acopio de datos. Tipeaban directamente en ceros y unos, en un estado de contemplación inducido por psicotrópicos, los datos acumulados en papeles amarillentos, algunos manuscritos, otro apenas legibles. Trabajaban hacinados en largos mesones de madera en tres niveles hacia el techo, en agotadoras jornadas de doce horas, con sondas para recoger la orina y suero

Fittingly for a novel belonging to a genre named for the paradigmatic power source of the 19th century, *Synco* evokes a world of surprisingly sophisticated technologies even while it explores its morally problematic, and ineluctably material, substratum.

In this respect, at least, Baradit's novel is not dissimilar to other steampunk works that take Victorian society as their point of reference. And, as with its English-language counterparts, *Synco* posits as its enabling premise the tension between a set of technological artifacts and a historical setting with which they appear to be incommensurate. This, of course, is of the essence of steampunk, which, as one critic has noted, "is a fiction that places a premium on minutely accurate historical detail, within flamboyantly wrong imagined pasts, in order to explore the ways in which the conventional historical sensibility sometimes gets it wrong" (Rose 319). In fact, by fusing empirically verifiable historical reference points with "flamboyantly wrong imagined pasts," Baradit's novel encourages us to take up the burden of memory in a way that would be impossible for testimonial narratives to do, since the temporal (dis)order of the novel requires us to literally re-member the story, to reassemble memory fragments that can never fit perfectly together.

This process of re-membering, or assembling from diverse, perhaps even incompatible elements, is both demanded—and ultimately frustrated—by the complex hybrid character of the novel itself. We have already seen that the story's steampunk trappings suggest that a certain temporal hybridity is at issue. But, as Martina discovers, the political situation in Allende's Chile hints at an ideological hybridity as well: she comes to see that curious political deals have been struck to keep Salvador Allende in power. Her untangling of political alliances—which have brought together Unidad Popular, Democracia Cristiana, and Partido Nacional— leads her to discover that the uncanny support enjoyed by Allende's government in its exploitative and ever widening grasp requires an explanation that will go far beyond the tactical machinations required by political compromise and rather toward esoteric and conspiratorial thought

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inyectado directamente en una cánula incrustada en el cuello de cada operario" (121).

on an epic scale.

And this is where Baradit's novel gets weird.

As we have noted, each of the primary historical characters in *Synco* plays a role recognizably similar to the political or historical role that they actually played in the world of Chilean politics during the 1970s. But Baradit's novel goes beyond the trappings of conventional steampunk in suggesting that these roles are subtended—in the same way that the technology of Synco is undergirded by pervasive economic exploitation—by a metaphysical drama of cosmic proportions, as bizarre as anything ever dreamed of by Jodorowsky. During Martina's brief visit to the underbelly of Synco, a young worker makes unauthorized contact with her, pleading, "cuéntele al mundo la mentira del Allende" and giving her a mysterious encoded message on a slip of paper (114). Martina's attempt to decode the young man's message will enmesh her in not only a political intrigue that stretches to the breaking point familiar notions of the Chilean Left and the Chilean Right, but demonstrates that the array of political forces at play are in reality actors in "una guerra mágica" involving vast conspiracies and a potpourri of half baked esoteric ideas.

One of Allende's chief advisors in *Synco* is Miguel Serrano, an eccentric figure in Chilean history who for years had occupied a unique position on the margins of the country's intellectual life. Although he had held a number of diplomatic positions in the Alessandri and Frei administrations, Serrano is perhaps best remembered today for his highly idiosyncratic metaphysical views.[14] These found expression in a plethora of books, including, most notoriously, the six hundred-page tome, *Adolf Hitler, el último avatara*, which was designed to buttress Serrano's claim that Hitler was actually a god who represented one of the most evolved specimen of a cosmic race called the Hyperboreans, who were locked in an eternal battle with the Jews and the evil demiurge, Jehovah (cf. Goodrick-Clarke 188).

The freewheeling mythological framework of Serrano's views is complemented by his elaboration of similarly convoluted conspiracy

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[14] A brief but excellent summary of Serrano's life and thought is provided by Goodrick-Clarke (173-92).

theories. It is difficult to do justice to the complexity and strangeness of his thought, but the following thumbnail sketch of the real nature of the conflict, which he offers to Martina, is as good an indication as any of the deeper forces he sees subtending Chilean politics:

> --Usted conoce los poderes que hay detrás de los poderes, supongo. Detrás del gobierno de Chile estaba el gobierno norteamericano, detrás del gobierno norteamericano la Skull & Bones, la masonería y la gran sinagoga. Y detrás de ellos está el gobierno secreto mundial, dirigido desde el inframundo por los iniciados de Agartha. Ahora mismo hay sacerdotes mayas infiltrados en el Senado de Estados Unidos, y están en contacto con la Vía Láctea, que no es más que una gran inteligencia artificial utilizada por el reptil conocido como Jehová para programar un experimento del que somos solo un componente secundario. La galaxia completa es maligna. Todo lo que puedo decir es que cada acontecimiento que ocurrió estuvo planificado por alguno de esos poderes secretos. (201)

Synco, we come to learn, is not simply an electronic communication system. Nor, for that matter, is it simply the byproduct of the curious political alliance cobbled together to prop up Allende (who, in Baradit's novel, had long ago abandoned any socialist principles he may have once held). Rather, Synco represents in a certain sense the logical culmination of cybernetic thought by pushing the fundamental premise of cybernetics—namely, that complex organic, social, and mechanical systems are structurally isomorphic and thus governed by the same principles—to its inevitable extreme. Fernando Flores, Allende's Minister of New Technologies, describes Synco's function like this:

> El ops-room es una semilla tecnológica [...]. Fue enterrada en el kilómetro cero del país [...]. Desde allí extiende sus raíces, subterráneamente primero, a la luz del sol después. Sus tendidos conectaron partes inertes de nuestro cuerpo productivo, formando una masa que convirtió al centro de Chile en un cerebro del tamaño de una ciudad. [...] Chile, compañera, es el primer país orgánico. El primer territorio con un sistema neurovegetativo. (83-84)
> Unbeknownst to the vast majority of ordinary Chileans, the country

is immersed in a vast, nearly invisible "guerra mágica" (237) and the anodyne social ameliorations of Allende's widely celebrated but tepid "socialist" experiment—to say nothing of the more purely exploitative government policies and practices we have already noted—are but froth upon the roiling waters below.

Indeed, it could be said that if, as Flores would have it, Chile is

indeed the first *país orgánico*—its biological, social, and mechanical laws harmoniously articulated through the principles of cybernetics—it must be said that the nature of its growth is rhizomatic in nature and implacable in its spreading: Synco is "un dios hecho de cable y mente común, una colmena" that will establish "la primera dinastía tecnológica de la historia" (230). The ultimate objective—which can only be achieved with the acquisition of a black rock that fell from outer space in the Tunguska event of 1908[15]—will be to employ Synco to turn Chile into an enormous time machine. Then Synco will be put to use by fascist conspirators in order to

> trasladar a todo el país, con gente, montañas, ríos y desiertos, hasta 1930! Ahí apoyarían al Eje con tecnología actual para ganar la guerra, luego pondrían la piedra en el centro de la Antártica para que su energía derrita los hielos y salga a la superficie la Atlántida. Sus tesoros tecnológicos les asegurarían la supremacía para siempre. (234)

The project has not proceeded without resistance and, in true manichean fashion, is opposed by, on the one hand, an anonymous, and perhaps mythical, figure called Comandante Proxy, and, on the other, forces organized and commanded by Carlos Altamirano, the one-time Secretary General of the Partido Socialista in the 1970s. Baradit's Altamirano is something of a cyborg, his physical body in a state of literal and biological suspension, held in its place in a box on wheels by a system of leather harnesses and pulleys, while underneath the contraption a number of live, sedated hogs filter Altamirano's blood as it circulates (59). Altamirano has been clandestinely training an army of eight hundred "niños rompecódigos," charging them with hacking into Synco itself and disabling it. This they finally succeed in doing, with the assistance of two hundred psychics who are buried in capsules all around Santiago, forming an "arco de acupuntura" over the city, "confundiendo a las autoridades, generando ataques de pánico, depresión y alucinaciones" (270).

Baradit chooses to forego any detailed description of the conflict between the two sides, preferring instead to direct the reader's attention to the real climax of the novel, the scene when Altamirano and Pinochet

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[15] The Tunguska event was an unexplained explosion that took place in Siberia, many orders of magnitude greater than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. The event has given rise to a cottage industry of explanations of the explosion, many of a highly speculative and esoteric nature.

finally meet, after Altamirano's triumph has been assured. General Pinochet, once hailed by a naïve public as the savior of Chilean socialism, is forced to concede that the Synco project has been defeated by Altamirano's forces. The novel concludes as Augusto Pinochet is not only forced to accept defeat but is assigned, as atonement for his betrayal of the nation, a new role to play in a drama in which all of Chile will have an (unwitting) part. In a plot development taken straight from the pages of Borges's "Tema del traidor y del héroe," Altamirano informs his rival that Pinochet's atonement for his betrayal will take the form of yet another epic, conspiratorial drama, one in which Pinochet will be assigned a totally different starring role: "Mañana comenzaremos la verdadera Reconstrucción Nacional, Augusto. Y tú tendrás un papel relevante. Te van a odiar, pero harás su voluntad y no la tuya" (286). He goes on to explain what exactly will be required:

> Crearemos enormes autos sacramentales que recreen los hechos que debieron haber ocurrido en estos años. Borraremos ciudades del mapa, declararemos muertes y nacimientos. Una actriz elegida con cuidado hará disciplinadamente el papel de tu esposa de aquí en adelante, y lo hará tan bien que después de unos años te preguntarás si realmente Lucía murió o todo fue un mal sueño. Tenemos hangares en la Patagonia en donde hay personas reinventando la prensa de los últimos seis años, y todos los álbumes familiares, todos los hechos casuales. Para eso construimos costosos sets en las pampas, Augusto; tenemos el escenario correspondiente al Estadio Nacional, o el del interior de la casa de Pablo Neruda [...]. Llegará el momento en que volveremos a encajar con el calendario del resto del planeta. Entonces habremos triunfado. Otra historia estará escrita. (288-89)

Of course the reader cannot fail to appreciate the point that this precisely describes what "really" did happen in Chile: Pinochet successfully carried out his *coup d'etat* and Allende came to be lionized as a martyr for the cause of socialism. Martina, as a witness to this encounter between Pinochet and Altamirano, will consequently be obliged to assume a new role as well. "Tú no existes. Ya tenemos a alguien viviendo tu vida, con tu nombre," Altamirano tells her. "Tú, Martina, vives en Chile desde 1974, estás casada, tienes una hija de nombre Clara en honor a tu abuela, y tu padre es rector de la Universidad Católica. Pero no estarás realmente aquí para verlo [...]. Ya no volveré a dirigirte la palabra. Ahora eres una

desaparecida" (290-91).

It is important to be clear about the significance of Baradit's framing of the coup as a kind of rescripting of history. The point is not just that *Synco*, as steampunk *ucronía*, represents a (re)staging of history in the fullest sense of the term. Rather, it is the clear implication that we as readers lack any clear criterion for determining whether or not such a thing might have already in fact occurred. That is to say, we cannot eliminate prima facie the possibility that *Synco* should be read as a straightforward, documentary history (albeit one constituted of exceedingly strange characters and events), improbable as it may seem.[16] Here we come to appreciate the peculiar force of the conspiratorial logic on display in *Synco*: the same considerations that would enable us to examine critically Pinochet's 1973 coup also open the door to the kind of mythmaking that for better or worse are a part of our political landscape today. The struggle to appropriate Allende's legacy in terms of the state-approved, monumental gestures that I alluded to earlier are made possible by a certain kind of forgetfulness. It is not the forgetfulness of the economic distress that certain of Allende's policies may have precipitated nor is it the forgetfulness of the violence of Pinochet's coup but a forgetfulness of the very political coordinates themselves—the acknowledgement of class struggle, to put it bluntly—that defined the contours of Allende's experiment in constitutional marxism and the Pinochet regime's reactionary violence.

It is far from clear what the precise nature of Baradit's own political commitments might be, based on the evidence presented by *Synco* and, of course, they would hardly be to the point anyway. But there is, I think, something undeniably bold in his attempt to think through the

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[16] Philosopher Arthur Danto has argued that the properly philosophical structure of a conceptual problem such as this is revealed precisely through what he calls—with a hat tip to Leibniz and, for that matter, Borges's "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote" (33-53)—the problem of indiscernible counterparts. Even if two items or events share all observable properties (a favorite example of Danto's is the relationship between Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain" and an ordinary urinal which it exactly resembles), it does not follow that the two things are identical: in the case of Duchamp, one object belongs to an ontological category—namely "artwork"— that the other does not. However, the indiscernibility of the objects does require that the structure of their difference can only be articulated at the level of theory rather than at the level of mere inspection or observation. For his fullest development of this position, see *Transfiguration*.

mythologization of Allende—"cuéntele al mundo la mentira de Allende," as the enslaved child told Martina (114)—by supplementing it with an exercise in mythmaking that does not hesitate to draw from the most *outré* materials available, even if this means taking at face value the ramblings of an esoteric Hitlerist. It is precisely by imagining that a ridiculously speculative mythology might somehow undergird the official mythology promoted by the State that Baradit can hint at new coordinates for political thought. The virtue of Baradit's steampunk *ucronía*, then, is that it hints at new strategies for redefining the political field, undermining the peculiar kind of logic of disavowal that governs so much of political discourse today in Chile. The task of remembering—a task undertaken by institutions such as the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos—is indeed a noble one. But once we recognize that remembering, at least on the reading of *Synco* I have been developing, is inseparable from the project of mythmaking, it becomes clear that there can no more be a question of a wholly veridical memory than there can be of a wholly veridical myth.

We should not let the familiarity of this observation blind us to the significance of the distinctive way in which Baradit frames it. We are not concerned here with the banal claim that political history cannot be finally disentangled from myth. It is, rather, that we still have not understood what exactly this entails: to displace history into the realm of myth is to accept the possibility that perhaps there is no way out of the box at all, that ideology may turn out to be inseparable from metaphysics. It is Baradit's willingness to accept this possibility and think it through to its logical end in an almost Nietzschean spirit that makes his version of Chilean political history so distinctive.[17]

And what, finally, is to be said of Synco, as the logical culmination of cybernetic thought? As it turns out, Altamirano's army of child codebreakers and psychics is in fact unable to permanently disarm or

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[17] I am thinking here of Nietzsche's well-known (and often misunderstood) parable from *The Gay Science* regarding the death of God. Nietzsche's point per se is not that God is dead: that much is already taken for granted by the madman's audience (95-96). It is rather that his atheist listeners have utterly failed to understand exactly what their atheism entails. Similarly, Baradit could be read to argue not that politics and mythology are cut from the same cloth—a familiar enough point these days—but rather that we have not yet fully understood what this means.

disable it. And Altamirano himself acknowledges that the story is not necessarily over because even this latest twist in the script is not necessarily the last. Comandante Proxy—the symbol of rebellion against Synco—turns out actually to have been inscribed into the service of Synco itself. Proxy is, Altamirano claims, "el brazo armado de Synco en una guerra que no conocemos y que se libra fuera de nuestro conocimiento" (290). What, then, is Synco, if it is clear that it is no longer just some kind of mechanical (or even organic) system subject to the laws that cybernetics attempts to codify? Altamirano allows himself to speculate:

> Quizá Synco sea un escritor alucinado, o un niño asustado con poderes monstruosos. Lo que sé es que ya no quiere vernos. Pero coordinará nuestro retorno a la normalidad día a día. Será nuestra memoria inventada y la conciencia del país; el sistema nervioso de la sociedad chilena que, recostado sobre su territorio, durmiente, soñará con otro Chile con sus cables expuestos de cobre y goma negra incrustados en la tierra como agujas en la piel de una machi. [...] Claramente desaparecerá de vista, lentamente desmantelado. (290)

Even when Synco disappears from view, it will not really be gone, but will rather infuse everything with its presence even as it becomes less and less localizable. In the book's final scene, Martina is led with others to the airport where she will board a plane and begin a journey that will eventually wipe away even these final memories of Chile. In what amounts to a textbook case of free indirect discourse, we find the following lines, which I also cited in the epigraph to this study, as she passes for a final time through the streets of Santiago en route to her new destination: "Chile como un cementerio. O como un país construido sobre un cementerio, intentando el olvido como método de supervivencia" (293). It is no longer clear who or what the subject of this utterance might be: Martina, Synco, the nation itself. But in a sense it does not matter: the work of forgetfulness has already begun and, whether that forgetfulness is grounded in the individual subject, the State, or something still more abstract, it hardly seems to matter.

Baradit's work marks a promising new direction in contemporary political narrative precisely because it does not lend itself to ready appropriation by the familiar actors that define the landmarks of Chile's current political landscape. But this is not to say that his dramatization of

radical impulses from both political extremes somehow cancel each other out so as to leave that landscape unchanged. Rather, Baradit's work—precisely because of its hybridity, its absolutely undisciplined, promiscuous exploration of incompatible intellectual pathways—sends us back to the difficult task of historical thought: we are unable to console ourselves with familiar platitudes about the beneficence of a well intentioned administration that fell prey to a violent usurper or a champion of free markets that managed to save his country from civil war. Baradit's *Synco*, in its staging of the task of political memory in a fresh and unexpected register, demands of its readers a kind of engagement that cannot be satisfied by the mere evocation of external tokens of thought and memory or by facile calls to political action.

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