

Arpillera Analysis

The arpillera that I have chosen to analyze depicts the military disposing of people killed by the regime by dumping them into a river in a remote part of a town. In the background, the Andes mountains and a setting sun can be seen, possibly depicting the darkness and sadness of the situation, as the sun is typically thought to represent hope in arpilleras. The Andes may serve both as a marker of home and to indicate that these horrible atrocities are being committed within Chile by the Chilean military. The Andes mountains are blocking out the sun, perhaps indicating that at this time in this place, light cannot break through to the horrific acts being committed. Many of the bodies being disposed of have been dismembered, and the soldiers dumping the bodies look like they are smiling. This could serve to convey the lack of remorse the regime holds for those who it kills in such a brutal fashion. The dismemberment of corpses is important because it makes identifying victims more difficult, and because it would no doubt have a much more profound impact on those who come across it. Ultimately, the artwork itself illustrates the callousness and brutality of the regime and the lack of care from within the government and military for the citizens which they hold power over.

Pinochet's dictatorship, along with many similar military bureaucratic dictatorships in South America, were notorious for their tendency to silently kidnap and dispose of people who could potentially harbour resentment against the regime regardless of whether or not they really did. Among the largest targets for "disappearing" were university students, leftist political opponents, and virtually anyone else publicly critical of the Chilean government. The unprecedented violence committed by the regime made direct resistance extremely difficult, particularly in the earlier parts of Pinochet's regime when violence was far more widespread. Most widespread protests which did occur within Chile, such as the "Jornadas de Protesta Nacional" in May 1983, were often met with violent suppression with hundreds killed and injured. During the Dirty War in Argentina, a movement known as the "Madres de la Plaza de Mayo", came to prominence by protesting in extremely high traffic areas so that the government could not quietly disappear the members of the group, allowing them to bring to light the crimes of the regime without being properly dispersed.

In Chile however, mothers of the disappeared often looked to foreign human rights organizations to bring light to the crimes of Pinochet's dictatorship as opposed to directly opposing them within Chile. Among the most well known ways this was done was through the creation of Arpilleras, which would be sold abroad to human rights organizations so that they may bring awareness of the crimes to the wider geopolitical landscape. Arpilleras were often made out of burlap, scraps of clothing, and common items, and often depicted either direct military actions or the consequences of said actions. Arpilleras were often impoverished, living in slums in the outskirts of cities such as Santiago. Often, they would covertly express the sadness and repression which families of the disappeared would face due to having people taken from them. They served as a new form of language with which to tell the story of the hurt that had been inflicted upon them as a consequence of the regime's brutality. Many scraps of clothing used in Arpilleras came from the wardrobes of the arpillera's disappeared children.

Arpilleras would often be produced en masse in workshops sponsored by the Chilean catholic church, and then sold abroad so that those who created them could both make a living and call out for help.

Over the years, many would become exhibits in foreign museums, and transnational human rights organizations would take notice of the crimes being committed. Groups such as Amnesty International, AFDD, and the Catholic church itself would bring scrutiny to Pinochet's regime on a global scale, pressuring the regime both externally and internally to change its approach. Over the course of the 70's and 80's, more countries would become opposed to the violent South American regimes, and many of them either became less violent or ended altogether as a result. On top of bringing widespread criticism of the human rights violations committed by military dictatorships in the Southern Cone, these Arpilleras also allowed people in other regions of the world to confront feelings spawning from similar moments in their histories.