

Whitewashed Walls and (Un)broken Windows. Notes on Operation Cleanness, 1973

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ABSTRACT

Following the 1973 coup, the Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio* pushed forward an operation designed to materially and rhetorically erase the traces of a recent past through the whitewashing of urban walls. Taking the episode as a starting point, the following article seeks to render visible the conflation of aesthetic, hygienic, and political claims that the campaign circulated and their reincarnations in a binary narrative anchored on the language of order that arguably still haunts us today.

○1:18 Plaza Italia is absolutely empty by now.

The image is a stark contrast to what happened in the afternoon, when more than one million people were in the Baquedano area. However, at this time (...) there are only a dozen Military soldiers guarding the area and collaborating in the cleaning tasks.

— Emol, October 26, 2019

Santiago de Chile, September 11, 1973. A military coup led by Augusto Pinochet seized power of the country. No newspapers were printed the following day. On September 13, the local paper *El Mercurio*—one of the few printed media authorized to circulate—reported on these events. The cover announced the President's death, showed the faces of the new Military Junta ruling the country, and depicted the damage to La Moneda, the presidential palace that was bombed during the coup (Figure 1). Inside, images of the city center recalled the hollowness of a battlefield after warfare. But a different war targeting the urban fabric was only just beginning.⁽¹⁾

On September 15—just four days after the coup—*El Mercurio* reported that General Hermann Brady, in charge of the Zone under State of Siege, “urged citizens to clean the walls of the city from political propaganda by September 18,” in order to “return the city its sobriety, its character, and its cleanliness [limpieza]” (“Se borrará propaganda política,” 1973, p. 2).⁽²⁾ The news piece was just a very small item. But on the following page, the newspaper took Brady's campaign into its own hands. In a separate, much longer article, it called upon Santiago's population not only to support, but also to actively collaborate

on the program meant to “restore the image of cleanness [limpieza] and order” that once characterized the Chilean capital city (“Aseo de Santiago,” 1973, p. 3). The phrasing is slightly different from that articulated by General Brady. In his statement, the city was to return to being clean—i.e., free from political propaganda on its walls—as a result of the coerced action of its dwellers. A pragmatic approach. In the newspaper's article, by contrast, it wasn't the city but the ‘image of cleanness’ that needed to be restored. The introduction of the word ‘image’ in lieu of ‘city’ here hints at a further complex mission.⁽³⁾

The article listed a long series of tasks to be undertaken—from garbage collection and street cleaning, to the salvage of malls and public gardens—that, in turn, relied on the support of private citizens to be extended “to all the details omitted from the action of the district apparatus” (p. 3). The entire urban fabric was up for renovation. The entanglements of aesthetic, political, and public health concerns driving the call can be grasped from the following passage:

We believe that there is a formed conscience regarding the depressing ugliness that afflicts the metropolis due to the negligence or incapacity [of former democratic authorities] (...)

The official indifference and, in many cases, the stimulus to the propaganda

(1) This essay was written during the Fall of 2019 for the Architecture, Human Rights, Spatial Politics class led by professor Felicity D. Scott. I thank Professor Scott and the editorial team at *Materia Arquitectura* for their comments and suggestions.

(2) Here and in the following quote, I translated the word ‘limpieza’ first as ‘cleanliness’ and then as ‘cleanness,’ in order to emphasize the different uses of the word in each case. It is worth noting, however, that in Spanish the same word ‘limpieza’ is used for both its English meanings.

(3) I am indebted to Luis Errázuriz's work for pointing at this news article on the ‘cleaning operation.’ For an account on this and other Military strategies, see: Errázuriz, 2012.

brigades that covered the walls of private property and public works with coarse legends, posters, or prints, made discouragement abound regarding the benefits of painting facades or cleaning the sidewalks. Such an attitude must change now.

[The rehabilitation task] is needed (...) for basic health prevention. Worldwide experience certifies that when abandonment and uncleanness predominate, various types of diseases find suitable ground to flourish (*"Aseo de Santiago,"* 1973, p. 3).

Despite no proven connection between the alleged 'depressing ugliness,' the 'covered walls,' and the 'flourishing diseases,' the article advocated for a new aesthetic that relied on private actions being taken to address supposedly pressing concerns on urban hygiene. The scaffolding of the rhetorical, all-encompassing "image of cleanness and order" envisioned by *El Mercurio* circled back to the urgent need of whitewashing the city's tainted walls.

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Over the following days, *El Mercurio* published a stream of images commenting on the cleaning campaign. The photographs did not depict the variety of tasks first envisioned, but were largely focused instead on boosting General Brady's wall whitewashing. On September 16, the caption on the first image of a civilian painting a fence indicated that "In every neighborhood of the capital, there was significant activity yesterday to restore an appearance of cleanness to the city. Some neighbors clean the block's walls from political slogans" (*"En todos los barrios de la capital se registró ayer una gran actividad para volver a dar a la ciudad un aspecto de limpieza,"* 1973, p. 17) (Figure 2).

On September 17, obscuring the campaign's compulsory nature, captions on further whitewashing images underscored that the population's "spontaneous gesture of community cooperation" could now be seen nationwide. Women and children were also devoted to the task of cleaning their homes' facades, "in which the extremists imprinted their slogans." Further on, spontaneity was met with "great enthusiasm" for the job, "especially the walls [bearing] political propaganda and Marxist slogans." Attending to the moral implications of the enterprise, the captions also pointed out that a "group of workers sacrificed their Sunday morning to comply with the order of the Governing Junta" (*"Limpieza en la Ciudad,"* 1973, p. 16).

Whitewashing activities continued to be published, just as the discourse surrounding the images kept escalating. By September 18, "Operation Cleanness" –as the newspaper called it– was taking place in different neighborhoods across the city, with civilians "proceeding to remove the remaining political propaganda," but also "erasing the slogans on walls, especially the 'work' of the Ramona Parra Brigade [BRP]" (*"Intensa campaña de limpieza,"* 1973, p. 20). As one would expect by now, the murals by the Communist BRP collective were more than just collateral damage: the whitewashing of the heroic quarter-mile-long painting depicting unionized workers, the nationalized copper industry, and communist martyrs on the stone walls of the Mapocho river was one of the most straightforward symbolic actions undertaken right after the coup.

Political slogans disappeared not only in Santiago, but from walls across the country in the name of a "return to normality, cleanness, and morale"

(*"Limpieza en Punta Arenas,"* 1973, p. 9). In the meantime, *El Mercurio* kept fueling the operation by rendering it as if it was an everyday urban activity: the backdrop of a cartoon on September 22 featured a wall being whitewashed as part of the city landscape (Figure 3). Moreover, the "Gigantic Operation Cleanness" now counted among its ranks 'hundreds' of undergraduates (Figure 4). "The most enthusiastic" were those coming from the Catholic University of Chile, who –as posed by a 19-year-old Law student– were doing "something quite simple: contributing to erase every trace of Marxism" (*"Con gran entusiasmo cientos de jóvenes han proseguido la tarea de limpiar los muros de la ciudad de toda clase de leyendas políticas,"* 1973, p. 17; *"Gigantesca operación limpieza,"* 1973, p. 21). That such a task was so casually framed as 'simple' was largely based on –what had by then become– the shared belief on the rhetoric of 'erasing,' with the images getting real traction.

After two weeks of relentless whitewashing imagery, "cleanness and order" was finally achieved. By September 29, the newspaper could already praise Santiago's "new face" –the motto that had slowly introduced over the latter editions– anchored in the bright-white walls on the banks of the Mapocho that illustrated the news article (Figure 5). With "clean streets and an ordered city," the urban environment, "if not yet entirely flattering," had certainly "improved by a hundred percent" (*"Nuevo rostro con calles limpias y ciudad ordenada,"* 1973, p. 29).

Unsurprisingly, a cynical turn was lurking behind the self-congratulatory tone of the article. The last paragraph announced that, since the city neighbors had themselves decided to paint their

homes' facades, the Military would guarantee that "no individuals would come to put posters up or write [political] slogans" on their walls ("Nuevo rostro con calles limpias y ciudad ordenada," 1973, p. 29). As *El Mercurio* had foreseen, whitewashed walls were a backdrop – but for violence. The policing measure also signals back to the importance of the achieved "new face:" whitewashed walls had become a symbol not only for the city, but for the Junta itself.

Further violence was to be found on the pages of *El Mercurio*. On September 24, photographs illustrating detentions and book burning on the city's streets pointed to a different kind of erasing. As "Marxist propaganda and extremist leaders' posters" caught fire and melted into Santiago's disillusioned air, new images were called upon to replace them ("Gigantesca Operación Militar," 1973). By October 30, 1973, the Dictatorship published the *Libro Blanco* (*The White Book*), an account of the events that had 'rightfully' (in the book's argument) led the military to seize power in Chile. Although 'white' here points to freedom and not 'cleanness,' the fact that the volume's front cover depicts a rough texture – seemingly, a wall – could come to reinforce the ongoing rhetoric.

If images of whitewashed walls were being mobilized, they certainly did not remain unchallenged. On October 20, 1973, a collective action aimed at reproducing 100 feet of the longer BRP mural by then washed from the banks of the Mapocho took place on West Broadway, New York. North and South American artists and cultural workers replicated the fragment on 25 separate foam panels, which were used a week later for picketing outside the Chilean National Airlines offices in the city (San Martín, 2018). The flyer calling civilians

to join the action was illustrated with a newspaper clipping featuring a man washing a wall. The picture's original caption, in English, read "Under junta orders, worker erases slogan, 'Long Live Liberty,' from Santiago wall." As the new symbol of the Junta, the whitewashed wall opened a possibility to contestation. It was time for the image to be inscribed into a broader, yet more precise, political narrative.

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In his analysis of George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson's "Broken Windows" –the 1982 article that served as a principle for the homonymous law enforcement policy around the world– Reinhold Martin underscores how the formula linked crime with visual order. The argument in the article could be roughly summarized in a single quote: "Social scientists and police officers tend to agree that if a window in a building is broken and is left unrepaired, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken" (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). Albeit best known for punishing minor offences like fare evasion or graffitiing with excessive penalties, the theory also aestheticized crime by linking it to a disordered urban setting. Moreover, in "moving the source of criminality into the physical environment," and specifically by locating "crime in the city's physical and institutional infrastructures," the approach rendered these elements as "a series of boundary conditions that, like a window [or a wall], must be maintained" (Martin, 2016, p. 123). Boundary conditions, inasmuch as what they separated was no longer just an outside from an inside, but "two states of being, one orderly, the other disorderly," as "a threshold (...) that takes the form of what Kelling and Wilson call a 'signal'" (Martin, 2016, p. 123).

Santiago's urban environment after the coup was leaning towards this logic, with whitewashed walls turning into self-explanatory signals. By 1975, a Decree was passed for the city, according to which "the use of black color or other violent tones on the facades was prohibited" ("Aseo exterior de todos los edificios," 1975, p. 16). Oddly enough, this ban on colors was something that already existed in the 1936 Urban Law, that stated that it was "forbidden to give the color black or white to the facades of the buildings" (Ley y Ordenanza General Sobre Construcciones y Urbanización, 1936/1938, Art 478). However, the fact that by 1975 white was the desired color and black the forbidden and violent one points to the specific character of the Military aesthetic sanction on walls.

That same year, the publishing by the Military Junta of the photobook *Chile Ayer Hoy* [*Chile Yesterday Today*] engaged whitewashed walls following a different temporality. Building on black and white binaries, the book was meant to depict the country before and after the coup. The colored cover already suggests the argument inside: designed after the Chilean national colors (blue, red, and white) a red stencil-font type spells 'yesterday,' while 'Chile' and 'today' are both written in matching white.

Inside, the book is a multilayered device. Black and white photos –largely portraying Santiago's urban space– are structured in spreads: on the left page, the city as it was before the Military coup, on the right, its "new face" today. To stress the point, the photos on the left stand against a black background, while the pictures on the current status of the city are framed in white. But the images are not the only dimension that is mobilized in the book. Every image was accompanied by a caption in Spanish,

translated also into English and French. As many of the photos from 'yesterday' were a refunctioning of Allende's imagery, the captions in each picture also played a key role in the task of both resignifying the past and building a narrative on the present situation.

One key spread celebrating 'Operation Cleaning' shows and old photograph of BRP activities in the banks of the Mapocho river, mirrored by the current status of (apparently) the same wall, with the mural already washed out. The English caption on the image on the left spells "yesterday. The communist brigades painted even the riversides" (Chile Ayer Hoy, 1975). The image on the right is captioned in Spanish as "hoy. No hay ninguna consigna política en ningún muro de Chile. Se borraron hasta las pintadas ayer en el Mapocho" (today. There is no political slogan in any wall in Chile. Even yesterday's slogans on the Mapocho have been erased) (Chile Ayer Hoy, 1975). A closer look at the gaps in the translation may serve to further underscore the specificity of the instrumentalization. In the book's English version of this caption, the passive voice in "se borraron" [have been erased] is translated into a very specific, active agent: the English caption featured goes "today. The community has voluntarily cleared all reminiscences of the communist moral" (Chile Ayer Hoy, 1975).

While acknowledging the fact that translation has been historically accused of refunctioning meaning –traduttore, traditore, as the motto goes– the introduction of new elements between the Spanish and the English caption can hardly be unaccounted for. Further on in the book, another spread shows two photos of walls –on the left, bearing a Russian inscription; on the right, unspoiled. On the left, the caption in

Spanish reads: "ayer. Consigna en 'ruso' en muro colindante, junto a la carretera al aeropuerto Pudahuel" (yesterday. 'Russian' slogan on adjoining wall, by the road to the Pudahuel airport) (Chile Ayer Hoy, 1975). The book's English version of that caption goes: "yesterday. A Russian slogan. It had become a second language" (Chile Ayer Hoy, 1975). Across the page, for the image on the right, the caption in Spanish reads "hoy. Se borró la ofensa" (today. The offense was deleted). Its English version goes "today. Our honor has been reestablished" (Chile Ayer Hoy, 1975).

Through images and captions, Chile Ayer Hoy seeks to frame the whitewashed walls into a broader narrative, where "the image of cleanness and order" is underpinned by a notion of 'order' that resorts not only to aesthetic discourses, but also to political ones. The book epitomizes the attempt to provide a binary reading of recent Chilean history that features these walls as signs, following the "broken windows" logic. For Kelling and Wilson, the windows were not meant to be interpreted but simply decoded. Here as well, the content of the narrative is empty: it provides nothing but differences.

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The argument behind Operation Cleanness sounds oddly familiar – some may say even contemporary. Encompassed in the trope of 'cleanness and order' are aesthetic and hygienic claims that point literally or allegorically to a specific kind of erasure, with 'normal' and 'clean' whitewashed walls not as a neutral background, but rather as active surfaces. Such an appraisal of whitewashing resonates with Mark Wigley's call to take a step back and rethink the implications of –still today– considering white "the default setting"

(Wigley, 1995, p. 362). Whitewashed walls' normality is in fact normative.

Likewise, whitewashed walls can be thought of as transitioning from images into self-explanatory signals. By assimilating tainted walls not only with filth and ugliness, but also with disorder, the Dictatorship's discourse restores to an argument that is first and foremost political. Moreover, as signals, both the window (broken or unbroken) and the wall (tainted or not) are to be "looked at and decoded," rather than understood. In Martin's words, "a broken window means nothing; it simply constitutes a signifying environment" (Martin, 2016, p. 129).

Broken windows and tainted walls –why do these arguments reach out to architectural elements? Inasmuch as both discourses fail to clarify why broken windows or tainted walls occurred in the first place, architecture becomes a proxy for violence aimed at making visible order reign over disorder. Furthermore, the proliferation of the words 'return,' 'restoration,' or 'rehabilitation' on which the calling to order is based on begs the question of what past condition were the ones aimed at reinstating –one without garbage on the streets, without socialists in office. **m**

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