

Sylvia Boisseau and Frank Westermeyer

*Y con ansias están esperando los barcos que traerán los nuevos hermanos a sus costas*

Ricardo Loebell

Emigration as a political and moral phenomenon has existed for centuries, but always, even in its rawest form, already as a social process as the result of a diseased politics.”<sup>1</sup>

Sylvia Boisseau and Frank Westermeyer’s video essay does not begin with scenes of a metropolis but rather of a necropolis, specifically the cemetery of Temuco. Amid silent ancestral gravestones, the viewer’s gaze is invited to travel through time to reconstruct traces of the remains of a key period in the history of Chile. This is a narrative in parallel, visually fractal micro-stories. Repeated on different scales, its structure is fragmented or irregular in order to be described in traditional terms.

In the nineteenth century, the “disappointed democrats” who emigrated from Germany saw the Los Lagos and Arauco regions of Chile as a “promised land.”

Their first (mis)encounter with the local population—descendants of the Spanish and mixed raced peoples, as well as the local indigenous communities—generated an enduring relationship of immiscibility.

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Alexander Simon, *Auswanderung und deutsch-nationale Kolonisation von Süd-Amerika mit besonderer Berücksichtigung des Freistaates Chile* (Bayreuth, 1850, facsimile), p. 5.

On this boundary between stratification and historiography a complex, pieced-together landscape—composed of images of southern Chile and the experiences of twenty-five people—unfolds in a narrative construction made from dialogues and concrete images. The alterations in space-time perspectives reveal the transculturation of the peoples of the south in an interstitial language removed from official history.

The ongoing consideration of certain areas on the map by some of the interviewees proves the utility of visual metaphorization as a means to interrogate a disputed territory. The video then shows how each of the protagonists defines the landscape in his or her own way. The artists place these statements opposite the paintings and drawings of the German immigrant Carl Alexander Simon and in this way attempt to find arguments to support that these works really do come from his hand as well as find evidence as to how the Chilean colonizer, businessman, and diplomat Vicente Pérez Rosales (1807–1886) could have appropriated Simon’s works when he took them into safekeeping following Simon’s death in 1852. On the basis of brushstrokes and aesthetic conception, it is demonstrated that the works were not produced by the plagiarist Rosales, as they in no way coincide with the historical mercantile philosophy reflected in his relationship with nature and indigenous peoples. Reviewing the biographies of these two men allows us to compare different reasons for colonization.<sup>2</sup>

The micro-stories erupt in diachronic history, in “readings” of nature and the different “crops” as perspectives: the original contemplativeness of the Mapuche before “mother earth”; the scrutiny of the scientist with his ornithologist’s observatory in the forest; the utilitarianism of the businessman for whom wood is a source of profit; the bucolic vision of the immigrant who attempts to reproduce scenes with nature, and the globalizing ecological perspective of Douglas

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<sup>2</sup> From 1850 to 1852, Carl Alexander Simon (1805–1852) documented his visual impressions of the landscapes, people, and customs of southern Chile.

Tompkins, who plants native trees in order to reforest the land, restoring its lost symbolic character. In his attempt to “relieve the stress” of the planet’s environment, he brings together all those perspectives, creating a national park for the future . . . and nature follows its course.

In the video, a female shaman of the Mapuche describes the lost past of nature, which one can compare visually with the flowers printed on her clothing. Her impassive face articulates utterances in a “language of the earth” from another time when “birds did not fly away”; now “they are frightened when they see us.”

In another scene, one that could not be more perfect, the video takes place amid orality and texture: a family is shown before the sacred *canelo* tree, which they see through the window; a girl tells the story, her words spinning a “text/textile” from the wool fleece that her mother slowly stretches from the spindle with her hands while her grandmother sips on a *mate* and speaks in a language unknown to us, which sounds like the timbral transformation of dried tea leaves. Here, linguistic signs go out from the body, just as with semiology in medicine takes the observation of symptoms as its starting point, in a consolidation of *sema* and *soma*, sign and body.

The indigenous can be indifferent to everything except the land that their hands and breath religiously plough and fertilize. The expropriation of the land with the arrival of the Spanish and then with the “war of pacification” was, for the indigenous people, the primary historical wound, and the reason for constant and legitimate protest.

The Chilean state took over all the Mapuche territories, turning them into government holdings to be auctioned off, conceded, or granted to companies and private citizens, thus carrying out colonization at the hands of Chilean and foreign powers and establishing agricultural property in Araucanía. At the same time, a small piece of property was allocated for an indigenous reservation, giving *títulos de merced*, or mercy deeds, to Mapuche families.

The other side of dislocation is related to nineteenth-century European emigration, one of the

largest displacements of persons in human history. Driven by political, economic, and cultural factors, it also served to consolidate European hegemony in the world. It is estimated that from 1841 to 1913, forty-seven million people (five million of them German) left Europe. Since 1913, the number of German emigrants has risen to ten million.<sup>3</sup>

Agricultural society evolved into industrial society, and from there into the culture of a knowledge society. At the same time, there are still historical and etymological connections between culture and crop, writing and ploughing, reading and harvesting in a number of languages.

Going beyond ideological polarizations in the face of the endless horizon of the social fabric, dislocation can be compared to a model for the visual representation of fractals.<sup>4</sup> Landscape as language and place of crossings where “one’s own and the other’s” materialize. Such landscape is present in biological matter. In its evolution, processes involving qualitative leaps in the forms that facilitate extraordinary facts surface, giving rise to new and more complex realities . . . turning the *promised land* into the legend of a *promising land*.

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<sup>3</sup> “Wanderung,” chapter 4 in *Europäische Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 3: Die Industrielle Revolution (Stuttgart and New York, 1984), p. 40-41; Friedrich Burgdörfer, “Die Wanderungen über die deutschen Reichsgrenzen im letzten Jahrhundert,” in Deutsche Statistische Gesellschaft, ed., *Allgemeines Statistisches Archiv*, vol. 20 ([Hamburg], 1930), p. 166; see also Joachim Schöps, ed., *Auswandern - Ein deutscher Traum* (Reinbek, 1982), p. 21ff.

<sup>4</sup> See Benoît Mandelbrot (1924–2010), in Eliezer Braun, *Caos, fractales y cosas raras* (Mexico, 1996).