

**SUSPENDED UTOPIA:  
THE 1988 CHILEAN PLEBISCITE  
IN ANTONIO SKÁRMETA'S  
*LOS DÍAS DEL ARCOÍRIS***

Utopía pendiente: el plebiscito chileno de 1988  
en *Los días del arcoíris* de Antonio Skármeta

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Abstract

Antonio Skármeta (1940, Antofagasta, Chile) returns to the conflict of democracy and dictatorship in his 2011 novel, *Los días del arcoíris* (*The Days of the Rainbow*), which follows the creation of the No campaign against General Augusto Pinochet in the 1988 Chilean plebiscite. The novel emphasizes democracy as a utopian motivator in contrast to the violence of the authoritarian regime. The action of the novel places the characters in mortal danger referencing documented tactics of Pinochet's dictatorial state, creating an atmosphere of fear and suspense leading up to the plebiscite. Drawing on utopian theory and narrative theories of suspense, these elements display a convergence of utopian motive against dystopian circumstances that capture the hope and horror of the final months of the Chilean dictatorship. The novel also offers a timely admonishment: while Pinochet lost the plebiscite, the return of full and fair democracy to Chile is still considered a suspended project.

*Keywords:* Antonio Skármeta, democracy, utopia, suspense, dictatorship, *Los días del arcoíris*

Resumen

Antonio Skármeta (1940, Antofagasta, Chile), vuelve a tratar el conflicto entre la democracia y la dictadura en su novela *Los días del arcoíris*,

publicada en 2011, la cual sigue la creación de la campaña del No contra el General Augusto Pinochet en el plebiscito chileno del año 1988. La novela enfatiza la democracia como un motivador utópico en contraste con la violencia del régimen autoritario. La acción de la novela pone a los personajes en peligro mortal al referirse a las tácticas de la dictadura, lo cual recrea la atmósfera de miedo y de suspenso que antecedió el plebiscito. Al recurrir a la teoría de la utopía y la teoría narrativa del suspenso, estos elementos muestran una convergencia del motivo utópico contra las circunstancias distópicas que capturan la esperanza y el horror de los últimos meses de la dictadura chilena. La novela también ofrece una advertencia: aunque Pinochet perdió el plebiscito, el regreso de la democracia completa y justa todavía se considera un proyecto pendiente.

*Palabras claves:* Antonio Skármeta, democracia, utopía, suspenso, dictadura, *Los días del arcoíris*

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## Introduction

Antonio Skármeta (Chile, 1940) returns to the conflict of democracy and dictatorship in his 2011 novel, *Los días del arcoíris* (*The Days of the Rainbow*), which follows the creation of the campaign against General Augusto Pinochet in the 1988 plebiscite. The novel won the Premio Iberoamericano Planeta-Casa de América in 2011, recognized as the best Spanish-language novel of the year. Skármeta also won the Chilean National Prize in Literature in 2014 and sealed his status as one of Chile's most important living novelists. In this novel, the themes of youth suspended by national crisis, the branding and marketing of democracy, and dictatorial violence create narrative suspense between the utopia of democracy and the dystopian reality of military rule in Chile in a specific historical moment. In this novel, Skármeta presents the notion of democracy as a utopian image and as an act of protest against dictatorship. Drawing on narrative theories of suspense and utopia, the concept of suspense takes on a double function. On one hand, suspense drives the narrative tension towards the climax of the plebiscite in the novel. On the other hand, the full realization of the utopia of democracy in Chile is presented as suspended and out-of-reach, even though the results of

the plebiscite point to the end of the dictatorship and the ushering in of a new era of democracy.

The historical context of the novel and the background of the writer both factor into the conceptual framework of utopia. The novel focuses on the protagonist, Nico Santos, a marginalized youth who confronts an epic national crisis. The novel also presents the branding of the No campaign as a means to market democracy to the Chilean public. The novel gives various explicit examples of dictatorship as they directly affect Nico: his father Rodrigo, who is kidnapped by the regime; and Adrián Bettini, who risks his own life to lead the campaign against Pinochet, creating an atmosphere of suspense and fear. These elements display a convergence of utopian motive against dystopian circumstances that attempts to capture the hope and the horror of the final months of the Chilean dictatorship.

Narrative suspense in fiction is used to keep the reader engaged and sympathetic to the protagonist's plight (Mazzoni and Hanafi 145)<sup>1</sup>. In historical fiction, suspense is built in the fictional world that refers to historical events. In *Los días del arcoíris*, the novel's narrative present spans the months leading up to the 1988 plebiscite under Pinochet's regime. In 1970, Salvador Allende won the presidency with the left and center-left coalition called the Unidad Popular. From 1970-1973, his presidency was plagued by domestic and external conflict, which led up to the coup d'état on September 11, 1973. With Gen. Augusto Pinochet as military leader and head of the government, his regime employed violent tactics characteristic of dictatorship to maintain authoritarian rule over the country. These included: abolishing all political parties, assassination of political dissidents, political detainment, interrogation, torture, censoring of all art forms and media, and curfews<sup>2</sup>. In 1988, Pinochet faced increasing inter-

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<sup>1</sup> Mazzoni and Hanafi highlight the turn that occurred in the mid-to-late 18<sup>th</sup> century from allegorical to suspense reading. Up to that time, allegorical reading was the primary mode of interpreting fiction among the reading public, with the primary focus on meaning, concepts, and judgements (145). This transformation is evident in "the opposition between the 'poetic' narrative of the *romance* and the 'historical' narrative of the *novel*" (Mazzoni and Hanafi 142).

<sup>2</sup> The *Informe Valech*, commissioned by President Ricardo Lagos and led by Bishop Sergio Valech, documents the systematic abuses of human rights during the Chilean dictatorship including the imprisonment and torture of almost 40,000 people. It was first published in 2004, revised in 2005, and reopened in 2010 with the addition of more cases (Comisión Valech). Ernesto Carmona investigates the dictatorial strategies, including de-

national pressure to legitimize his regime and allowed a national referendum on whether or not he would remain as president the next eight years. If the populace were to vote down his referendum, he would step down and allow for democratic elections to take place. He lost the plebiscite and left office, but remained part of the government as head of the armed forces and later as senator with a life-term. The years following the dictatorship are commonly referred to as the Transition to Democracy, as this was a gradual turnover of power with some dictatorial institutions and practices (military presence, institutional silence, and non-prosecution of some regime leaders) remaining up to this date<sup>3</sup>. Articles 43 and 47 of the 1980 Constitution written under military rule provide for military supervision of elected officials as well as military representatives in the Senate to ensure right-wing control of future governments (*Constitución* 29, 30). As of 2021, Chileans have begun the utopian democratic work of assembling a constitutional convention to write a new document to replace the 1980 Constitution<sup>4</sup>.

In economic terms, the Chilean dictatorship marks the country's transition to a neoliberal economic model. Chicago School-trained economists (called the Chicago Boys) were appointed to the highest economic posts and implemented the following policies: a laissez faire approach to economic issues, increased international trade, and a liberalization of the market and price system (Fornazzari 5, Rodríguez 3). Idelber Avelar and Alejandro Fornazzari have referred to this period as a collapse of economic and cultural

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tainments, assassinations, and disappearances of journalists and the broader population in Chile under military rule, in the 1998 testimonial volume *Morir es la noticia*.

<sup>3</sup> Grínor Rojo details some of the democratic strategies that were generated well before the plebiscite was called. Members of various ideologies (including conservative republicans, socialists, and Christian democrats) began the work of what was to be the Concertación as early as 1983 with a Manifiesto Democrático and other frameworks for re-establishing or transitioning to democracy in the country (234). Alessandro Fornazzari, in his analysis of an eclectic selection of texts, details the neoliberal transition in Chile, in aesthetic and economic terms (2). Neoliberalism became the dominant economic model in Chile beginning in 1973 in the wake of the military coup and continuing to-date, as a backlash to the socialist policies of the Unidad Popular (Popular Unity) government led by President Salvador Allende (Fornazzari 4).

<sup>4</sup> Juan Pro details the utopian impulse in the process of Latin American nation-building and the authoring of constitutions (3). Carlos Ferrera explores utopianism in the early years of Chilean independence from a Trans-Atlantic perspective (in Pro 92-98). The underlying utopian notion of a society in-progress is also present in Skármeta's pro-democracy text analyzed here.

thinking into one worldview (Fornazzari 7-8, Avelar 46). According to Fornazzari, drawing on Michel Foucault, the neoliberal market offered a way of rationalizing everything, including society and culture (7-8). Avelar explains that under Pinochet: “the policy entailed control for people, freedom for things, especially for capital and commodities” (46). Under neoliberalism, the dictatorship was able to “restructure every corner of social life according to market logic” (Avelar 46). Skármeta’s novel demonstrates how the campaign against Pinochet used the dictatorship’s own tools of market logic against itself to convey a positive utopian alternative to dictatorship. Part of Skármeta’s message in the novel is that the No campaign created a space for a return to the collective social dreaming that occurred during the emergence of the Popular Unity movement which led to the democratic election of Salvador Allende. The novel also concedes that the victory of the No campaign, while significant, does not repair the deeply ingrained social, political, and economic transformations that occurred from 1973-1988. Skármeta’s novel forms a social critique against the fragmentation and destruction (suspension) of civil society during the Pinochet era. This type of anti-authoritarian discourse, according to Juan Pablo Rodríguez, “has the power to situate individual problems within broader contexts, triggering solidarity bonds among individuals in scenarios marked by social fragmentation” (8)<sup>5</sup>. Skármeta’s novel focuses on the power of utopian imagination in Chile’s recent history to renew social and political engagement and galvanize popular mobilization in the form of democratic practices.

### **Skármeta’s writing against dictatorship**

While this novel focuses on the co-protagonists and their family members who are endangered by Pinochet’s regime, the dictatorship affected Skármeta’s life and work in several ways. A former ambassador to West Germany and a leading public intellectual in Chile, Skármeta has dedicated his career primarily to literature and theatre. He is the author of over fifteen novels, and his work has been translated into thirty languages. His career is marked by exile in Argentina and West Germany during the years of the Pinochet dictatorship. In regards to his role as a public intellectual,

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<sup>5</sup> Juan Pablo Rodríguez analyzes the extent to which social critique of capitalism and political mobilization can resist the neoliberal model in Chile in the Post-Pinochet era, examining principally the 2011 mobilizations in Chile (9).

Skármeta believes in a democratization of public debate and has used his novels and media as way to make conversations about society and culture more accessible to a broad populace<sup>6</sup>.

This novel is not Skármeta's first project dealing with the 1988 plebiscite. His play *El plebiscito* was adapted into a screenplay by Pedro Peirano and produced as the feature film, *No* (2012), directed by Pablo Larraín and starring the Mexican actor, Gael García Bernal. The film garnered several awards including the Art Cinema Award at Cannes (2012) and an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Language Film (2012). The film follows a similar trajectory to the novel, including the creation and execution of the No campaign and the election that ousted Pinochet. Throughout his career, Skármeta has continued to write against authoritarian forces, incorporating unlikely characters as protagonists and maintaining a "burning patience" for liberation<sup>7</sup>. With Skármeta's approach to literature in mind, both the narrative concept of suspense and utopian theory together offer a framework for understanding the idea of democracy as more compelling than the threat of violence as presented in this novel.

In *Los días del arcoíris*, suspense is used effectively by creating empathy for the principal characters and by suspending the revelations of

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<sup>6</sup> During the years of the dictatorship, the Chilean generation of the *novísimos*, coinciding with the literary Post-Boom, emerged in the 1970s and gained popular and critical attention into the 80s and beyond, riding on the wave of popularity and consumer interest in Latin American fiction of the 1960s Boom. Within Chile, a handful of names stand out in the Post-Boom generation: Antonio Skármeta, Isabel Allende, Poli Délano, and Ariel Dorfman. One common thread that can be traced from the Boom to the Post-Boom and beyond is a focus on stories of exile and memory to some extent, as many of them were marked by authoritarian rule, according to Raymond L. Williams (61). In the Post-Boom and in later generations, narrative tends more towards minimal histories and marginalized figures as protagonists. The Post-Boom writers of the Southern Cone, including Skármeta and Allende, continued the modernizing project of the Boom writers, but with a return to accessibility and realism that was lacking in some of the works of the 1960s Boom (Williams 61). For example, Skármeta regularly employs colloquial language, references to popular culture, and young protagonists from the middle or working social classes in his narrative. Additionally, the writers of the Post-Boom generation tended towards more optimistic narratives than the writers of the Boom. This approach is evident in Skármeta's fiction, and particularly in this novel, wherein the protagonists confront dystopian, dictatorial circumstances with the hope of a return to democracy.

<sup>7</sup> "Burning patience" refers to the title of Skármeta's first novel, *Ardiente paciencia*, also published as *El cartero de Neruda* (1985). The title is a reference to Pablo Neruda's Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1971, which incorporated the line by Arthur Rimbaud.

their fates within the story. Regarding suspense in literature, Noel Carroll states the following: “suspense is not a response to the outcome; it pertains to the moments leading up to the outcome, when the outcome is uncertain” (in Vorderer et al. 74). According to Elana Gomel, utopia relates to suspense in literature, because utopia is the fiction of an ending (352). In fiction, the suspense within the plot leads the reader toward the climax, the revelation of the unknown, or the unraveling of the enigma in detective fiction. The utopia of narrative finality offers the reader a satisfying sense of order being restored in the narrative world, representative of empirical reality (Gomel 352). Suspense in fiction, in this case, “implies that the world ultimately makes sense; that underneath the irrationality of human suffering lies a perfectly rational pattern” (Gomel 352). As this analysis will demonstrate, the variables related to dictatorship affect the characters, creating uncertainty and tension in the text. Utopia in the novel, in one sense, is the striving toward meaning and reason and away from suffering and violence. Additionally, Carroll affirms: “suspense is the art of making the reader care about what happens next” (in Vorderer et al. 75). The novel evokes empathy for Nico and Adrián Bettini as the co-protagonists, both of whom confront the effects and tools of authoritarian rule in the novel. The suspense builds in the novel towards a resolution of the principal conflict alongside the allegorical utopian striving towards a society free from dictatorship.

### **Democracy as a utopian motivator**

The conceptual framework that I employ in analyzing the novel draws on recent contributions to the field of utopian studies. Theorists including Lyman Tower Sargent, Lucy Sargisson, and Tom Moylan refer to both utopian literature and creative work as well as actual political projects in their studies. Fernando Ainsa is the critic who has most thoroughly explored the utopian imagination in the Latin American context. In terms of utopia, it is usually described as a social project that is bent toward collective well-being. In Sir Thomas More’s work *Utopia* (1516), the term derives its meaning from the Greek *u-topos*, non-place, as well as *eu-topos*, good place. More’s narrative world represented an imaginary paradise at the same time it offered a satire of some of the social and political issues of early 16<sup>th</sup> century England. Common themes in more recent utopian projects include the notion

of social dreaming, or positive social imagination around a particular value set. Ainsa's conceptualization of Latin American utopias corresponds to this differentiation: «Gracias al adjetivo utópico, la utopía pasó a ser 'un estado de espíritu', sinónimo de actitud mental rebelde, de oposición o de resistencia al orden existente por la proposición de un orden radicalmente diferente» (*La reconstrucción* 21)<sup>8</sup>. In contemporary utopias, the desire for the eu-topos is prioritized over the actual implementation of a definitive social framework. Modern utopias are inclusive of diverse people and viewpoints, and they are forward-thinking, or a projection of what life could be like in the future (Sargisson, *Contemporary* 5). Oftentimes the notion of utopia is dismissed as pointless or out-of-touch (as synonymous with Quixotic) or as a gateway or permission slip for authoritarian control. However, utopia is framed here as a tool for critiquing the actual and proposing new or creative ways to imagine the future in an ethical, forward-facing sense. Michael J. Griffin and Tom Moylan claim that “these dark times of closure, exploitation, privilege, and violence call out more than ever for Utopia's transformative energy as a necessary stimulus to sociopolitical transformation” (11). Juan Pro draws a direct line from Thomas More to the Latin American political movements of the twentieth century:

The Latin American experience helps us understand that the impulse that lay behind Thomas More's new literary genre in 1516 was the same one that prompted nineteenth-century European socialists and anarchists to emigrate to the Americas to put their ideal communities into practice, and also inspired the mobilization of the revolutionary guerrillas and populist masses in the twentieth century. (2)

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<sup>8</sup> “Thanks to the adjective utopian, utopia became a ‘state of spirit,’ synonymous with a rebellious mental attitude, in opposition or resistant to the existing order, by means of the proposition of a radically different order” (my translation). All original quotes from the novel by Skármeta will be accompanied by the equivalent English quote in Mery Botbol's translation of the novel *The Days of the Rainbow* (2013), except for instances where the translation is inaccurate, in which cases I have provided the translation.



The collective imagination behind those movements to build a new and different society is an essential element behind many philosophers and essayists in the Latin American context, including Alfonso Reyes, José Joaquín Mora, and Andrés Bello (Pro 2, Ferrera in Pro 94). As Pro discusses, utopian revolutionary projects since the beginning of the nineteenth century and through the twentieth century “marked the processes of emancipation in the new Latin American nations, but also the subsequent creation and consolidation of the independent states, as well as the history of the entire region” (3). Additionally, utopian ideals are imbedded in the constitutions of Latin American nations, which were the product of revolutionary processes and included the social aspirations of their writers (Pro 3). The concept of the democratic republic is considered here as a utopian social experiment and also an ideal in the Latin American context (Pro 3). Specifically, *Los días del arcoíris* emphasizes the pursuit of democratic practices as a utopian motivator. Following the trajectory of utopian thought in Latin America, and specifically in Chile, this novel offers a fictionalized snapshot of a historical transformation that was carried out with the desire for a more humane and equitable society.

According to Lyman Tower Sargent, dystopia (also known as a negative utopia) is “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived” (9). Modern dystopias, which have recently increased in visibility and popularity across multiple creative and media forms, are presented as a social protest. Dystopia focuses on the physical negation of basic human needs and rights for a group. It is issued as either a cautionary tale or a warning to elicit action or change in the present. Additionally, the u-topos (non-place) dimension of utopia relates specifically to the use of suspense in the novel. Following its narrative arc, suspense is maintained past the climax of the election and into the denouement as the new Chilean president is inaugurated<sup>9</sup>. It is then that the utopia of democracy prevails, yet it fails to be implemented comprehensively, leaving the utopia of democracy unfinished and in suspense. Various conflicts and convergences of utopia and dystopia as they relate to suspense are evident in Skármeta’s text and will be laid forth in this analysis.

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<sup>9</sup> In the novel, the historical Patricio Aylwin is depicted as the fictional President Olwin.

## Youth in suspense

The title of the novel, *Los días del arcoíris*, refers to the months leading up to the 1988 plebiscite, and the rainbow is the image used to represent the eighteen political parties that formed a coalition in favor of the return of democracy, known as the Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia. The No emblem is the iconic brand of the campaign against Pinochet that was employed as a discursive strategy and as an anti-authoritarian political protest. In the novel, the high school senior Nico is dealt a personal blow by the regime as his father, Rodrigo Santos (a teacher at his school), is arrested during class as a political dissident. His whereabouts and status are unknown by Nico and their acquaintances<sup>10</sup>. In narrative terms, Nico's trajectory and personal development is suspended by the disappearance of his father. Grínor Rojo recognizes this as a competitive David v. Goliath *leitmotif* in Skármeta's work (236), and this novel overtly makes that allusion to the match-up between a dictator in power and the idea of democracy (Skármeta, *Los días* 39). The juxtaposition of the underdog (the No campaign) v. the returning champion (the Sí campaign, that won the fraudulent referendum of 1980) is clear in *Los días del arcoíris*, specifically. Rojo also cites the trope of competition, in an athletic and/or rivalry sense, as a recurring theme in several of Skármeta's works: the short story «El ciclista de San Cristóbal», the short stories of *Tiro libre*, and the novel *No pasó nada* (236). Such a narrative device has various thematic and rhetorical uses, one of which is to provide compelling ethical evidence in favor of the David or underdog figure. Another use is the building of suspense in regards to the hero (Nico) being outmatched by a larger and more powerful foe (the military regime). In this case, the novel uses two protagonists, Nico, and the advertising executive Adrián Bettini, alongside the No campaign as the ethical choice against the Sí campaign and the Pinochet dictatorship, represented by the Minister of the Interior, Doctor Fernández. This moral competition between utopia and dystopia

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<sup>10</sup> This represents Skármeta's technique of using a young protagonist from the lower to lower-middle class as a point of departure for exploring a national issue. In Skármeta's early short story, «El ciclista de San Cristóbal» ("The Cyclist of San Cristóbal"), youthful idealism is confronted with personal and collective tragedy, specifically, as poverty and illness unequally affect the lower social strata. In Skármeta's other major works of fiction, marginalized figures find themselves at the center of national conflicts in *Ardiente paciencia/El cartero de Neruda* (1985), *No pasó nada* (*Nothing happened*, 1980), *La chica del trombón* (*The trombone girl*, 2001), and *El baile de la victoria* (*Victory dance*, 2003).

allows the reader to identify with the underdogs and build suspense and conflict in the competition against Goliath, in a historic victory for democracy. Additionally, Skármeta's narrative technique humanizes the recent Chilean political conflict for a post-dictatorship generation.

Besides the novel's use of suspense, one of the ways Skármeta's novel appeals to a broad readership is through his use of young protagonists that follow common tropes related to the teenage years: romance and freedom, which become code words for democracy in the novel. The following quote references this youthful attitude and the desire for liberation. The protagonist, Nico, describes his girlfriend, Patricia Bettini: «Ella ve el fin del colegio como una liberación. Se imagina todas las cosas buenas de la vida juntas: la universidad, el sexo y por supuesto, el fin de Pinochet» (61)<sup>11</sup>. There is a parallel in the novel between the collective desire to be free from Pinochet and the future of the young protagonist. Freedom in this context also equates to rebellion and to the utopian ideals proposed by Ainsa in resistance to the status quo (21). The ideals of freedom in three aspects of life: educationally, personally/sexually, and politically, represent utopian ideals for a more open, less restrictive way of life, specific to the point of view of a teenager. It also shows a characterization of a youth that is politically aware, to whom overthrowing a dictator is as important as high school graduation.

The novel continues to build suspense and tension, as well as empathy for the protagonist, by exposing Nico to the most sinister aspects of the dictatorial violence. While Nico fears for his missing father, one of his other teachers is assassinated by the secret police, the CNI. During the teacher's funeral, «El profesor de filosofía Valdivieso hace una semblanza del profesor Paredes. Evoca sus logros pedagógicos y teatrales. [...] Dice que don Rafael Paredes ha muerto en trágicas circunstancias. No dice que lo han degollado los agentes del CNI. Justo hoy teníamos la prueba de Shakespeare» (159-160)<sup>12</sup>. In this instance, the young protagonist must

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<sup>11</sup> "She sees the end of high school as a liberation. She thinks that all good things in life will come together: going to college, having sex, and, of course, the end of Pinochet" (53).

<sup>12</sup> "Valdivieso, the philosophy professor talks about Professor Paredes' life. He mentions his pedagogical and theatrical accomplishments. [...] He says that Mr. Rafael Paredes died in tragic circumstances. He does not say that CNI agents cut his throat. Today we were supposed to have a test on Shakespeare" (my translation).

face his teacher's tragic murder and realize that this might indeed happen or might have already happened to his missing father. This scene evokes the banality of evil as Hannah Arendt would call it, as the atrocities of the dictatorship become simply "tragic circumstances", according to official discourse, that interrupt daily life, a high school Shakespeare test, in this case.

Nico personally confronts the dystopian elements of dictatorial society as a high school student. In a conversation with the teacher that is brought in to replace his father, Nico learns the motive behind his father's disappearance: his political position against Pinochet was identified in student notes sent to the office of the Rector. The following segment connects this dystopian revelation with a strict society of citizen vigilance, evoking an Orwellian dystopia:

—«Así se puede decir que los chilenos en la dictadura de Pinochet somos como los prisioneros de la caverna de Platón. Mirando sólo sombras de la realidad, engañados por una televisión envilecida, mientras que los hombres luminosos son encerrados en calabozos oscuros.»

—¿De dónde sacó eso, maestro?

—Son los apuntes de clase de uno de sus compañeros de curso, Santos. El joven se lo entregó al rector (52)<sup>13</sup>.

A surveillance state in which children report their teachers for political dissidence echoes many literary as well as historical and present dystopian scenarios: from the rise of Big Data in late capitalism, to well-known literary representations such as George Orwell's *Ministry of Truth* in *1984* and Luisa Valenzuela's satirical short story «Los censores», in which the censorship sector of the (assumed Argentine) government represents dehumanizing state control. Diamela Eltit's novel, *Los vigilantes* (1994), explicitly invokes the surveillance state in dictatorial and post-dictatorial Chile. These examples also warn of the dangers of the abuses of state

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<sup>13</sup> "We can then say that Chileans under Pinochet's dictatorship are like the prisoners in Plato's cave. We're looking at shadows of reality, led by a TV that's corrupt, while brilliant men are confined to dark prison cells.' —Where did you get this, Professor? — These are the notes of one of your classmates, Santos. The student handed them over to the principal". (45)

power in the private lives of citizens, reminiscent of Michel Foucault's panopticon, in which the person is reduced to an "object of information, never a subject of communication" (Foucault 200). Culture and creative expression were devastated under the Pinochet regime in Chile. As Idelber Avelar explains, the "ideological office" of the dictatorship "functioned primarily through mass media", and thousands of Chileans were forced or chose exile abroad (46). Moreover, the regime used the "contempt for authority" provisions of the Military Code of Justice and State Security Law to suppress criticism of the government or military, leading to the arrest and prosecution of journalists during and after 1990 (Human Rights Watch).

The realities of life under dictatorship are indeed internalized for Nico as he deals with the aftermath of his father's disappearance and the suspense for an outcome continues to increase. Nico follows the established protocol for the Plan Bárbaro that Nico and his father's acquaintances had agreed upon in the event of his kidnapping without witnesses (in contrast to the alternative Plan Barroco in case he was taken prisoner with witnesses). In contrast to conventional high school concerns, such as sports, social life, and end-of-school parties, Nico has the disturbing task of reaching out to his father's friends in search of information as to his whereabouts in accordance with Plan Bárbaro. This traumatic experience for Nico contrasts with the seemingly disassociated market logic that governs the plebiscite campaigns: the breezy, upbeat appeals for the youth vote by the No campaign and the Sí campaign's absurd grasping for relevancy.

The campaign in favor of Pinochet, the Sí campaign, for many reasons, was unable to connect with the youth vote. The campaign in favor of Pinochet was characterized as reactionary, old-fashioned, and out of touch with the reality of most Chileans. For example, one campaign poster by the Chilean Movimiento Juvenil (Youth Movement) in support of the No vote stated «Yo no te pesco, cachai. Vota no como yo». ("No, I don't get you, understand? Vote no like me") (Movimiento Juvenil n.p.). In addition to the political violence of the era, Skármeta captures the youthful energy, colloquialisms, and inside jokes. He equates democracy and youth as utopian, and dictatorship and those representing the older establishment as dystopian. This youthful irreverence to the *status quo* also corresponds to Ainsa's «actitud mental rebelde» characteristic of contemporary utopia in this context (21). As Nico is a victim of the regime, the stakes for Nico in

the campaign are high. Moreover, Skármeta's utopia/dystopia dichotomy regarding the campaign extends to other characters in the novel.

### **The campaign for democracy**

Nico's story intersects with the political conflict of the plebiscite as his girlfriend's father is Adrián, the marketing director that is brought on by the Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia to lead the No campaign. By the mid-1980s, both Brazil and Argentina's military dictatorships had ended, making way for the return of democratic elections and with both governments led by civilian politicians. However, in Chile during the same time, the country was still under severe authoritarian rule, and even state-sanctioned opposition was subject to censorship and intimidation. As discussed previously, the military controlled all media and cultural outlets: radio, print, creative arts, and especially television. Televisión Nacional was under military occupation, and television was used as the central medium in the dictatorship's "cultural intervention" (Avelar 46). The No campaign, as depicted in the novel, was forced to adopt a guerrilla strategy to evade sabotage: «El padre de Patricia cambia de oficina cada tres días. Trata de evitar que allanen los locales donde está la cinta grabada de la campaña contra Pinochet. Quiere mantener en secreto las imágenes para que los publicistas del 'Sí' no alcancen a reaccionar» (133)<sup>14</sup>.

The tape containing the television ad is hidden and transferred as if it were live ammunition in a war against a dictator. The novel presents Adrián as a reluctant hero who selflessly risks his life to a protest against Pinochet in the form of a tv commercial campaign. Adrián, a former political detainee, is characterized in the context of the campaign as a white-collar revolutionary who puts his career and life in jeopardy to defeat the dystopia of dictatorship from inside, within the parameters set by the dictatorship: its censorship, intimidation, violence, and attempts at sabotage. The threat of violence against Adrián, a former victim of the regime, compounds the sense of suspense and anticipation in the novel. With the odds stacked against him, it is the utopian idea of democracy that Adrián and others communicate to the Chilean voters that ultimately wins the plebiscite.

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<sup>14</sup> "Patricia's father changes offices every three days. He's trying to prevent the cops from breaking into the premises where he keeps the videotape with the campaign against Pinochet. He wants the images to be a secret, so the ad agents for the *Yes* don't have a chance to react" (124).

Although the No campaign had life-or-death implications for those who invested in it, it was still a political marketing campaign designed by politicians, activists, strategists, technicians, writers, and artists in a highly precarious political context. The group against Pinochet, the Concertación, represents the conflictive, contradictory, and open-ended notion of utopia according to Lucy Sargisson (*Contemporary* 5). The secondary character, Patricia Bettini, encapsulates some of the challenges the coalition faced: «...los políticos que están detrás del ‘No’ son una bolsa de gatos sin un concepto claro de cómo conducir el país en caso de que ganaran. Porque estoy convencida de que este país no tiene salida. No creo que poniendo papelitos en una urna se derroque a un dictador que tomó el poder disparando balas» (58)<sup>15</sup>. Many citizens believed that the referendum was a sham to give the appearance to the world that Pinochet’s power was legitimate, as occurred in 1980. The 1980 constitutional plebiscite permitted no real opposition, allowing Pinochet’s early grasp on power to take hold and extend his presidency until 1989. By that time, many Chileans doubted the ability of the opposition to organize against the dictatorship. The figure of Adrián Bettini represents the concessions that the Concertación made in the campaign. The leaders had to agree to the constraints set forth by the regime and simultaneously carry out a successful campaign using market strategies resulting from the neoliberal economic framework: the No campaign fully embraced the selling (branding/commodification) of democracy in order to begin the long process of ending the military regime. In this way, although Pinochet was indeed voted out, the economic model implemented by Pinochet remained and was even embraced by the opposition in the campaign, highlighting the suspended and conflictive nature of the utopian imagination.

The various ideologies among members of the Concertación, referenced in the rainbow icon of the No campaign, again echo Sargisson’s position of utopia as open-ended and contradictory, rather than a prescriptive blueprint for society (*Contemporary* i). According to Carlos Ferrera, in the Chilean context, utopia has been given an unfinished connotation well before its independence: “utopia was not so much a

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<sup>15</sup> “...the politicians behind the ‘No’ are like a sack of cats that have no idea how to lead the country if they win. Because I’m convinced that this country has no way out. I don’t believe that putting little papers in a ballot box can overthrow a dictator who came into power by firing bullets” (my translation).

finished reality as had been the norm laid down by More, but was something potentially within their grasp” (in Pro 93). Adrián’s exasperation in working with the Coalition makes the notion of bringing about democracy in Chile seem impossible, given that the only thing they had in common was being against Pinochet: «Tengo que conseguir un acorde que armonice a los liberales, a los demócratas cristianos, a los socialistas, a los socialdemócratas, a los radicales, a los cristianos de izquierda, a los verdes, a los humanistas, a los socialistas renovados, a los comunistas, a los centristas... ¡Qué cacofonía!» (92)<sup>16</sup>. The various political parties represented in the Concertación had been suspended under the dictatorship, and, in being allowed to express opposition against Pinochet and support for the return of democracy, they had serious questions about the legitimacy of the referendum process. After fifteen years of censorship and loss of rights, they were participating blindly and guided by utopian optimism. Many citizens believed that instead of considering the referendum an actual opportunity to oust Pinochet, that they should maximize the opportunity to expose the violence and abuses committed by the regime, focusing on the past (telling the truth of the horrors of the dictatorship), rather than painting a rosy picture of an imaginary alternative Chile without Pinochet.

The ads created by Bettini in the novel, similar to the actual ads produced in 1988, incorporate a conflictive and contradictory utopian approach. They include both harmonious carefree images as well as the testimonial style of revealing truths about the violence under Pinochet. Additionally, Adrián favors aspirational and easy-going images for the campaign, presented as a radical utopian alternative (as Ainsa would say) to the fear-mongering and threats used by the dictatorship. In a conversation between Adrián and his daughter Patricia, he describes the moral dilemma of the No the campaign:

–Sé que el «No» no es un producto. Pero para convencer a la gente, Pinochet ha hecho publicidad en la televisión durante quince años. A mí sólo me dan quince minutos para seducir a los «indecisos» a que voten contra él. Tengo que

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<sup>16</sup> “I have to come up with a harmonious chord between Liberals, Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, Radicals, leftist Christians, Greens, Humanists, Renewed Socialists, Communists, Centrists... What a cacophony!” (my translation).



excitar a los chilenos a que compren algo que hoy no hay  
en el mercado.

—¿Qué?

—¡Alegría! (72)<sup>17</sup>

The novel uses exposition as well as situational narrative to give examples of what it means to live under a military rule: fraudulent elections, censorship, disappeared detainees, political assassinations, and a traumatized and apathetic citizenship. The utopia of democracy is presented as something intangible and imprecise. It is depicted as the happiness that is currently not for sale and therefore unattainable. Adrián struggles with apparent incoherence of a neoliberal framework, he uses his own profession (a symptom of late capitalism) as a means to achieve a democracy with social utopian goals.

### **Suspense and dictatorship**

Additionally, Adrián personally confronts the dictatorial regime in his meeting with the Ministry of the Interior ahead of the campaign. The novel exemplifies the dictatorship's manipulation of discourse to legitimize its authoritarian rule. Adrián is called to Doctor Fernández at the palace of the Chilean government, La Moneda. The mention of this edifice evokes strong memories in the Chilean collective consciousness: the images of the bombardment during the coup d'état, Salvador Allende's last radio broadcast during the attack from the presidential offices, as well as the seat of dictatorial power usurped by Pinochet. Fernández attempts to recruit Adrián, a former political prisoner of the regime, to direct the Sí campaign, and minimizes the seriousness of the violence of the dictatorship. For example, Fernández dismisses the crisis of disappeared detainees as minor: «[Fernández:] —Mucha gente se preocupa sin motivo. A veces mis hombres hacen un par de preguntas de rutina y los detenidos vuelven a casa tan campantes. [Adrián:] —Ministro, hay más de tres mil desaparecidos. [Fernández:] —Esa es una exageración de las estadísticas. El país ya

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<sup>17</sup> “—I know that ‘No’ is not a product. But in order to convince people, Pinochet has been advertising on television for fifteen years. I only get fifteen minutes to seduce the ‘undecided’ to vote against him. I have to encourage the Chilean people to buy something that’s not yet on the market. —What is it? —Joy!” (62-63).

superó la emergencia» (25)<sup>18</sup>. Here Skármeta's novel highlights the misinformation and manipulation of discourse used by the regime to defend its actions, claiming the necessity vis à vis a national emergency at the same time it characterizes severe interrogation, torture, and disappearances as routine questions. Adrián boldly cites the well-documented statistic of over 3,000 disappearances, and the Minister dismisses it as exaggerated in a blatant example of dystopian gaslighting. This dialogue emphasizes the cruelty of dystopia in denying basic human rights and dismissing their significance, underscoring the dehumanization of dictatorial rule.

The novel also describes the process of creating the iconic ads for the No campaign, with their catchy songs and inspiring visual montages. The No ads have become part of the Chilean popular culture since their airing. The following sequence describes one of the most memorable ads of the campaign against Pinochet: «Un caballo galopa en la pradera, es el caballo de la libertad. Se mueven los limpiaparabrisas de un taxi. Es el No de la libertad. ... Sobre la cabeza del barbudo rey, una corona de cartón piedra se enchueca, va a llegar la libertad. A ver esas palmas, chiquillos, marcando el ritmo así, ... la libertad» (Skármeta, 213-215)<sup>19</sup>. The quote communicates, frame for frame, the montage of the famous *franja* and even references the upbeat, catchy jingle: «Vamos a decir que no» (“We are going to say no”) of the era. The novel intentionally shows the importance of emotion and idealism as a powerful political tool to appeal to a broad, disparate, and contradictory voter base. Rojo describes the ads produced by Adrián as the equivalent of a folkloric German *Märchen*, «un cuento de hadas porveniristas» (“a futuristic fairy tale”), or a fantasy of the future (238). The ads conjured by Adrián were to be so different from the present that the public would be dismayed by how distant the idyllic images seemed from their daily life in dictatorial Chile. The use of the montage allows for an appeal to emotions compel the TV viewer

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<sup>18</sup> “[Fernández:] “—Many people worry for no reason. Sometimes my men ask a couple of routine questions and then the detainees can go back home as if nothing had happened. [Adrián:] —Mr. Minister, more than three thousand people are missing. [Fernández:] —Those statistics are an exaggeration! The country has already overcome the crisis” (17).

<sup>19</sup> “A horse gallops on the prairie; it is the horse of freedom. The windshield wipers move on the taxi. It is the No of freedom. ... On the head of a bearded king, a papier mâché crown falls; freedom is coming. Let's see those claps, kids, keeping time like that, ... freedom” (my translation).

to imagine an alternative society that is empowered to reject the dictator as a jubilant collective. Skármeta's depiction of the ad repeats the ideal of *libertad* (freedom/liberty) as a utopian equivalent to democracy. This branding and commodification of democracy through media production within a neoliberal economic framework also highlights the collapse of market and society in Chile as Avelar and Fornazzari sustain. Adrián, both victim of dictatorship and functionary of neoliberal capitalism, symbolizes the complicity and conflict within Chilean society at-large during and after military rule.

The various examples of dictatorship and the desire for democracy fall into utopian and dystopian characteristics in the novel. The need for liberation aligns with the utopian ideals of the No campaign message: it is a social protest as well as a social project within a marketing strategy. The novel's use of narrative suspense revolves around both the need for freedom on the collective level as well as the individual survival of the characters. Nico's father, Rodrigo Santos, survives and returns home to his son, wounded and traumatized, but alive. He is an incarnation of Chile in the post-Pinochet era: damaged, but still here, and struggling towards a more hospitable future. As the narrative suspense is broken in the triumphant win of the No campaign and the survival of Rodrigo Santos, the trauma of military rule persists. Avelar comments on the end of the Chilean dictatorship in the following way: "The victory however, was a partial one, because the military cannot be said to ever have lost its hegemony over the so-called democratic transition. Rather, the military ultimately managed to impose a highly paced and restrained return to democracy" (48).

The suspension of utopia is prolonged in this way in the novel as well. The return to democracy was and still is partial in that the military apparatus that held up Pinochet from 1973-1989 is composed of the same individuals, values, that implemented the Transition to Democracy. The military did not "lose" to democracy, it conceded to the will of the populace and assisted in the replacement of democratic practices in the Chilean government over the next several years. Additionally, the novel uses suspense as narrative strategy as well as an allegorical one: through Nico, Rodrigo, and Adrián, the novel humanizes and creates empathy for the victims of the Chilean dictatorship.

## Conclusion

In a haunting final scene, Skármeta warns the reader that the dictatorship has indeed kept a foothold on the state even during the new democracy, and that the ideal of a utopian, inclusive, and equitable nation is held in a suspended, still-distant future. At Nico's graduation ceremony, Adrián speaks with the Pinochet official, Fernández: «-El próximo paso es ganar las elecciones con Olwyn y luego meter a preso a Pinochet. -Eso no lo van a lograr, Bettini... A mi general no me lo tocan ni con un pétalo de una dama» (231)<sup>20</sup>. Pinochet was never convicted of any crimes committed during his regime. He was indicted for human rights violations by the Spanish judge Baltazar Garzón in 1998 and held under house arrest in London until 2000 and then in Chile until his death in 2006<sup>21</sup>. Fernández continues: «-Vamos a volver al poder, Bettini -le susurró [Fernández] al oído-. Esta vez paso a paso, pasito a pasito, votito a votito» (232)<sup>22</sup>. Following Rojo's David v. Goliath leitmotif in Skármeta's literature, Goliath's defeat, in this instance, is not definitive. This final threat is issued as a warning to the reader to beware the dystopian elements of dictatorship and its incursions into democratic institutions. These issues of impunity and complicity are major qualifiers when considering Chilean democracy to-date. According to Juan Pablo Rodríguez, while the Concertación government broadened social services to formerly marginalized people, it did so within a neoliberal economic model:

The Concertación sought explicitly to reform some aspects of the socio-economic model imposed during the dictatorship, by increasing social spending and widening access to many people previously excluded from the benefits of Chilean modernisation. In so doing, though, the pervasiveness of market logic deepened. As a consequence, social rights were commodified, inequality was reproduced, and

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<sup>20</sup> «-The next step is to win the elections with Olwyn and then send Pinochet to jail. -You will never do that, Bettini... My general won't be touched, not even with a lady's petal» (228-229).

<sup>21</sup> Ingrid Wuertth offers a detailed analysis of the attempts to limit Pinochet's immunity in the context of international law for the violation of human rights (731).

<sup>22</sup> «-We are going to return to power, Bettini- [Fernández] whispered in his ear. -This time, step by step, little step by little step, little vote by little vote» (229).

new forms of social exclusions and normalised violence arose. (109)

While the transition to democracy offered hope for a more transparent and participatory government, it did nothing to disentangle itself from the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. Skármeta underlines the fact that although the utopia of democracy won over the dystopia of dictatorship in 1988, the realization of utopia is incomplete, contradictory, and a flawed work-in-progress, as Sargisson would put it (“Curious” 25).

In Skármeta’s novel, the story of Adrián’s marketing and political win for the No campaign coincides with Rodrigo Santos’ release from political imprisonment. These events are presented as utopian elements alongside the No campaign’s future-oriented message and the characters Nico and Patricia’s utopian ideals, romance, and personal freedom. Likewise, various dystopian elements build suspense in the narrative, offering an experience of empathy for the reader to align themselves on the side of utopia. The dystopian dimensions are seen in the Sí campaign’s attempt at intimidation, violence, and sabotage that offer a glimpse into the inner workings of the dictatorial state and its methods of securing military and economic influence in future decades. The assassination of Professor Paredes, and the suffering of the main characters are fictional, yet serve as suspenseful, compelling, and realistic evidence of the human rights crisis caused by the Pinochet regime. Furthermore, Skármeta warns the reader of the foothold of dictatorship that is already present in the new democracy, highlighting the fact that utopia will remain suspended out of reach.

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