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The Scenographic Object as embodiment of social unrest: Baquedano Statue, Santiago, Chile

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the Baquedano statue as a scenographic object, arguing that this urban monument embodied social unrest and acted as an active participant in the 2019–20 estallido social (social revolution) in Santiago, Chile. Operating as a relational scenographic object, the statue became a medium through which protesters, artists, and citizens articulated socioeconomic demands within the contested space of Plaza Baquedano. Drawing on Hann's concept of the scenographic as an analytical method, the article outlines how successive interventions and reappropriations—alongside government countermeasures—generated a social dramaturgy that positioned the monument as an actor within the unfolding sociopolitical climate. Attending to themes of absence and disappearance, the article examines the statue's material transformations and its removal, including the temporary emptiness of its site during curfew and pandemic restrictions, which left a charged vacant pedestal. These transformations generated scenographies of absence, in which disappearance did not diminish the statue's cultural significance; rather, its physical withdrawal amplified its presence across social media and digital circulation, situating the Baquedano case within global movements of de-monumentalization and anti-colonial resistance.

Introduction

This article examines the role of the Baquedano statue during the 2019–20 *estallido social* (social revolution) in Santiago, analyzing how the monument became a scenographic object at the centre of the city's political and urban life. More than a commemorative symbol, the statue functioned as a material site where protesters, artists, and citizens inscribed competing narratives of history, identity, and belonging. Its repeated interventions, re-significations, removal, and eventual return reveal how scenographic objects, in both their material presence and resonant absence, codify and condense the social co-construction of meaning and catalyze collective action.

To explore how the Baquedano statue participated in the civic dramaturgy of the *estallido*, the article draws on a scenographic analysis of photographic records, social media, and in situ interventions, alongside the urban and political history of Plaza Baquedano

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and its monument. Through this approach, I argue that the statue operated as an object-actor whose successive transformations—whether enacted by protesters or imposed by the state—composed a political dramaturgy that both reflected and shaped the unfolding social context.

Global Context

Statues and monuments in public spaces tell us a history of a place, its peoples, and their national narratives; more often than not, they reflect an official history that, through their construction of reality, elevates certain figures and locations as worthy of remembrance. In doing so, they bolster who becomes part of our collective memory—often without social scrutiny. In recent years, however, skepticism toward so-called national heroes and the invisibility of the many has intensified, especially as evolving social values challenge older narratives rooted in colonialism and systemic racism.

In the United States, for example, the debate surrounding historical monuments—particularly those depicting Confederate leaders—has become a focal point of national reckoning. Sparked by high-profile events such as the Unite the Right rally in 2017 and the 2020 murder of George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter movement transformed calls for police reform into a wider re-evaluation of historical representation and racial justice (Jameson 2024, 155-178). Protesters across the country toppled statues of Confederate generals and other historical figures, such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, whose legacies are intertwined with slavery and oppression (Historic Statue Removal 2025). According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, more than 160 Confederate monuments were removed or renamed in 2020 alone (Montgomery 2021). Another well-known example is the Colston statue in Bristol, which was toppled during a Black Lives Matter protest in June 2020 and is now on permanent display at the M Shed museum. The statue is exhibited horizontally, in its graffiti-covered state, as part of a broader exhibition on the history of local protest. A new, updated plaque has also been installed on the original plinth, offering contextual information about the statue's history and the circumstances of its removal (Farthing 2021, 5-7). These removals reflect a growing public desire to interrogate whose histories are being memorialized in civic spaces and whose have been suppressed or erased.

Across Latin America, monuments to Christopher Columbus have been increasingly contested, leading to removals, relocations, or replacement with Indigenous figures. In Mexico City, the Columbus statue on Paseo de la Reforma—long criticized for symbolizing colonial violence—was removed in October 2020 and later replaced by *Tlali*, an Indigenous woman, as part of a broader program of decolonial urban re-signification. Similarly, in Bogotá, the Columbus statue in the airport roundabout was toppled by protesters in 2021 during nationwide demonstrations against inequality and state violence; an act interpreted by scholars as part of a hemispheric movement to dismantle colonial symbolic orders in public spaces (Zamorano Villarreal 2021, 40–52.) (Gutiérrez 2022, 118-120).

These acts of defiance reveal that statues are not neutral historical artifacts but contested objects that articulate complex narratives of power, exclusion, and identity. As Judith Binney argues, the Western histories embodied in such monuments perpetuate colonial attitudes that silence Indigenous presences and alternate historical voices (2004, 28—33). The Baquedano statue, shown in Fig. 1 during the early weeks of the



Fig. 1: Baquedano statue during the Chilean social uprising, 22 October 2019. Photograph attributed to Susana Hidalgo. Creative Commons licensing.

estallido social, participates in this broader field of representational struggle. Its transformations illuminate how public monuments can become active sites for negotiating memory, identity, and state power.

Many of these international struggles have culminated in the literal disappearance of monuments, with statues toppled, removed under cover of night, or relocated to museum storage, leaving behind empty plinths that function as mute witnesses to a contested past. The pedestal in Mexico City was vacant for more than a year, becoming temporarily occupied by feminist and Indigenous groups who transformed the site into a forum for decolonial intervention (Zamorano Villarreal 2021, 45–47). A similar dynamic unfolded in Bogotá, where protesters toppled the Columbus and Isabella statues leaving an empty pedestal as a 'symbolic void' reflecting widespread disillusionment with national historical narratives (Gutiérrez 2022, 119–20).

Beyond Latin America, the removal of King Leopold II's statue in Ekeren, Belgium, also resulted in an unfilled plinth that became a site for public mourning and re-signification amid renewed debates on colonial memory (De Baets 2021, 233–34). Earlier precedents include the 2015 removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town, where the deliberately preserved empty base functioned as an active platform for speeches, performances, and ongoing critique of colonial epistemologies (Nyamnjoh 2016, 77-82). These empty bases have themselves become stages, presenting what we might call scenes of disappearance. In contrast, the Chilean case extended the temporal frame of contestation: before and after the Baquedano's statue was removed, it

underwent a prolonged period of scenographic transformation, during which its presence, partial occlusion, and eventual absence were all mobilized as part of the struggle over memory, justice, and the terms of public visibility.

Local Context

To understand the scenographic significance of the Baquedano statue during the *estallido social*, it is necessary to locate it within Chile's distinctive landscape of public protest, which is still shaped by the constraints and legacies of the 1980 Constitution, imposed under Pinochet's dictatorship (1973–89). For more than thirty years, Chileans have gathered in symbolic urban sites, such as *Plaza Baquedano*, *Plaza de Armas*, and *La Moneda*, to articulate demands for structural change; turning these civic spaces into recurring stages where the built environment, memory and political life intersect.

The symbolic power of Plaza Baquedano operates as a site-determined environment—a spatial and circulatory container that structures the conditions of protest. The square's openness, central visibility, and infrastructure enable large gatherings, processions, confrontations, and celebrations. Baquedano's statue, at the centre of the site, served as the site-oriented actor. Positioned on an elevated pedestal, it became the material anchor of protest performance. Protesters climbed it, covered it, painted it, encircled it, and defended it, while police forces repeatedly attempted to retake the site. The statue's agency emerged precisely because the plaza did not share it; the built environment provided the conditions for action, while the monument absorbed, refracted, and performed the political meaning-making of the estallido social.

The event igniting the estallido social unfolded on October 6, 2019, when *los secundarios* (high school students) organized a coordinated "mass evasion" to protest a 30-CPL increase in public transportation fares. The mobilization was organized via social media under the hashtag *#EvasiónMasiva*, students jumped metro turnstiles across Santiago (Johanson 2019). Their collective action disrupted public transport and triggered a wider wave of demonstrations that rapidly spread nationwide. Within days, public anger solidified around the refrain "*No son 30 pesos, sino 30 años*" (It's not 30 pesos, but 30 years); referencing three decades of deepening inequality under neoliberal policies[1]. On 18 October 2019, these demonstrations escalated into the *estallido social*, a sustained uprising that lasted until March 2020, when Covid-19 restrictions curtailed public gatherings.

The government's response intensified the unrest. Rather than addressing structural inequity, President Sebastián Piñera's administration deployed military forces and authorized aggressive policing, reinforcing public resentment. *Plaza Baquedano*, which was renamed *Plaza Dignidad* by the popular will of the protesters (Vigil 2022), became the central site of confrontation. As shown in Fig. 1, the Baquedano statue stood at the centre of this transformation, serving as a political stage.

Plaza Baquedano's strategic importance emerges from its position within Santiago's layered urban history. Established in 1875 as *Plaza La Serena*, redesigned as a modern roundabout in 1928, and later renamed for General Manuel Baquedano González[2], the square occupies a crucial junction linking major arteries such as the *Alameda* Avenue, Providencia Avenue, Vicuña Mackenna Avenue, and the Pío Nono Bridge (Subsecretaría Regional Gobierno de Chile, n.d.). Its elliptical configuration, shown in Fig. 2, renders it



Fig. 2: Left: Aerial view of Baquedano roundabout. Photograph by Christian Van Der Henst S. from San Francisco, USA- 20 November 2010. Right: Plaza Baquedano by Muñoz LC – 10 February 2019.Creative Commons Licensing

a hinge of metropolitan mobility and consequently, a natural site for collective convergence.

This elliptical configuration overlays the earlier orthogonal colonial grid established under the *Leyes de Indias* (1573). The colonial grid, also known as the checkerboard plan, was more than a geometric tool: it operated as a spatial ideology that structured colonial authority, regulated movement, and reinforced visual control through standardized *manzanas* (city blocks) and a central *plaza mayor* (Mumford 1961; Hardoy 1973). *Plaza Baquedano* thus occupies a historical continuum in which colonial spatial logics and modern circulatory infrastructure intersect, rendering it a highly visible and symbolically saturated urban node during the uprising.

During the *estallido social*, the district surrounding *Plaza* Baquedano—bounded by Alameda Avenue, the Paraguay diagonal, Seminario Avenue, and Portugal Street—became known as *Ground Zero*, a fortified territory defended by the *primera línea* (front line), who built barricades and engaged in direct confrontations with police to maintain control over the square. Urban surfaces accumulated layers of graffiti, stencils, paste-ups, and posters, generating a dense visual palimpsest that articulated political grievances. Protesters reclaimed and controlled this zone for months, transforming it into a scenographic environment of resistance.

The imagery combined contemporary political figures (Salvador Allende **[**former Chilean president], Clotario Blest [labour leader and social activist]), cultural icons (Violeta Parra [folk musician and visual artist], Gabriela Mistral [poet and Nobel laureate]), and new symbols of dissent, such as Camilo Catrillanca (Mapuche[3] farmer killed by police in 2018), Perro Negro Matapacos (stray dog emblematic of student protests), and "Aunt Pikachu" (protester dressed as Pikachu, who became a viral symbol of the uprising). These images entered spatial dialogue with Santiago's architecture and its colonial grid. Fig. 3 illustrates the textual, graphic, and three-dimensional density of this visual field. Found objects, frames, reliefs, and sculptural interventions contributed to an aesthetic of occupation, turning the district into a lived scenographic terrain shaped by collective agency.



Fig. 3: Left: Paste-up *#Renuncia Piñera* by Caiozzama, showing a winged angel holding a banner inscribed "Piñera, resign," layered over graffiti and protest signs. Right: Paste-up of former president Salvador Allende wearing a black T-shirt with the *kultrun*[4] cross drawing, alongside a frontline fighter in a gas mask, a woman in a pro-abortion scarf, graffiti, protest signs, and (top right) Camilo Catrillanca. 2019-2020. Creative Commons Licensing

Scenographic Lens

To situate this analysis, I draw on Rachel Hann's distinction between scenography and the scenographic. Following Hann, I use scenography to denote the relational practice that arises among designed elements—light, environment, object, sound, and costume—within theatrical contexts. By contrast, the scenographic refers to practices that draw on the methods of scenography but unfold beyond the theatre; it highlights the agency of design practice as an act of revelation (Hann 2019, 31). This distinction provides the conceptual foundation for understanding the Baquedano statue not as a fixed commemorative monument but as a scenographic object whose successive transformations enact, expose, and circulate political meaning. As seen in Fig. 2, the statue's initial state before the *estallido social* already situates it as a charged civic presence.

Within this framework, the Baquedano statue operates as a *site-oriented* object: its public significance is inseparable from the square where it stands and from the shifting political and social relations that activate it. As Miwon Kwon explains, 'the site-oriented artist approaches the site as a set of relational coordinates, a network of social, economic, cultural, and institutional forces. The site is no longer a fixed physical location but a process, an operation occurring between elements within a discursive field' (2014, 29). The statue exists within these relational co-ordinates, continually shaped by the symbolic and affective forces that define its successive transformations during the *estallido social*. The range of interventions documented in Fig. 4— flags, banners, sculpture additions and embodied actions— illustrates the continual reconfiguration of the statue as a site-oriented object.

Plaza Baquedano functions, by contrast, as a *site-determined* environment, one in which spatial conditions set the parameters for action. As Kwon notes of early site-specificity, 'the scale, size, and location of works are determined by the topography of the site' (2014, 11). The plaza's elliptical design and central urban position shaped the collective behaviors that emerged there. The spatial configuration shown in Fig. 2 highlights how the square's circulatory logic channels bodies, actions, and attention toward the monument at its centre.

To account for the full range of operations enacted upon the Baquedano statue, it is important to consider not only its material transformations but also the scenographic



Fig. 4: Composite of photographs of the Baquedano statue at Ground Zero during the social revolution. Right: Artistic Intervention, Photograph by Javier Collao, 18 October 2020. Left: Feminist Protests by Valecorteselastra, 25 October 2019.Creative Commons Licensing

force of its disappearances. Within the dramaturgy of the *estallido social*, absence itself became scenographically active, producing a sequence of ephemeral gestures that shaped the monument's political life as profoundly as the more visible interventions. These actions constitute scenographies of absence: practices through which covering, erasure, emptiness, and social media circulation generate their own affective and political intensities.

The emptiness of the pedestal following the statue's removal generated a particularly charged form of scenographic absence. Devoid of its figure, the pedestal did not become an inert remnant; instead, it operated as a residual stage, a site whose emptiness accrued symbolic charge. Its stubborn visibility—as a fragment too saturated to ignore and too contested to resolve—created a suspended temporality between disappearance and anticipated return. In this interval, absence became a resonant scenographic condition, transforming the pedestal into an object that staged the unresolved tensions of Chile's political present.

Taken together, these scenographies of absence reveal that disappearance is neither negation nor endpoint but an active mode of performance within the civic dramaturgy of the *estallido social*. Through covering, erasure, emptiness, and social media reappearance, the Baquedano monument demonstrates how the politics of memory unfolds not only through presence but through the charged and often contested operations of making things disappear. Its materiality condensed multiple temporalities—colonial expansion, authoritarian memory, and revolutionary aspiration—into a single visible form. This resonates with Giselle Beiguelman's concept of 'nomadic bodies'; material presences whose meanings migrate across sites and media (Beiguelman 2006, 285-290).

The analysis that follows approaches these successive transformations through a scenographic lens. Each intervention—Indigenous reappropriation, colour-based protest, feminist action, or state-directed restoration—constitutes an act within the sociospatial dramaturgies through which the *estallido social* articulated its demands and political imaginaries. Framing the Baquedano case in this way situates it within broader global debates on monuments, collective memory, and de-monumentalization, in

which contested public sculptures have become sites for interrogating colonial legacies, racial violence, and the politics of remembrance.

Baquedano Statue

Installed in 1928 as a state project to memorialize the military hero, the General Baquedano Monument combined Virgilio Arias's bronze equestrian statue with a granite pedestal designed by Gustavo García Huidobro. The pedestal incorporates two sculptural allegories: a female figure offering a garland of copihues (Chile's national flower) and laurels, and a Chilean soldier representing the rank-and-file troops who fought under Baquedano's command. Completed and assembled in early September of that year, the monument reconfigured the traffic circle into a prominent civic landmark. Its inauguration on 18 September 1928, Independence Day, embedded Baquedano's figure within Chile's commemorative landscape, establishing the spatial and symbolic conditions that would later make the site a focal point of contestation during the *estallido social* (Memoria Chilena 2003). Its location at the centre of the square made it a highly visible focal point, but it was the statue's capacity to absorb, reflect, and amplify the political energies of the movement that transformed it into a site-oriented actor. Fig. 2 presents the statue in situ prior to the uprising, illustrating its position within a convergence of Santiago's urban flows.

During the protests, the Baquedano monument came to embody military oppression and governmental disregard, particularly for those who identified as *los de abajo* (those from below). As dissident groups demanding pension reform, health care, reproductive and Indigenous rights, immigrant protections, a living wage, and basic social dignity converged on the square, they reclaimed the square as Plaza Dignidad (Dignity Square). The statue stood at the heart of these confrontations, its surface accumulating layers of political meaning and material transformation. Fig. 4 documents some of these interventions.

One of the significant interventions involving the Baquedano monument was its Mapuche reappropriation, which reframed the statue not as a military tribute but as a site of colonial reckoning. General Baquedano played a decisive role in the nineteenth-century occupation of *Wallmapu*[5], a history that resurfaced forcefully during the *estallido.* Protesters and digital social media creators quickly generated images replacing the statue with Mapuche heroes, such as Lautaro (Mapuche military leader) and other anti-colonial figures. Circulating widely on social media, these reimaginings asserted Indigenous sovereignty at the symbolic centre of the capital. As Fig. 5 shows, even the monument's empty base—so recognizable that its silhouette alone carries meaning—became a platform for alternate iconographies. The viral circulation of these images demonstrated how reworking monuments can unsettle dominant historical narratives and foreground suppressed ones, allowing the Baquedano site to bind disavowed colonial pasts to emergent Indigenous futures.

In Fig. 4, photographed on 25 October 2019, the pedestal became an even more intensely contested site, saturated with feminist, queer, and anti-patriarchal interventions. The equestrian statue was partially concealed beneath layers of fabric—bright cloths wrapped around the horse's head and draped across the general's torso—visually disrupting the monument's authoritative silhouette. Below, a large vertical banner reading *ABORTO* (abortion) cascaded down the front of the plinth, transforming it into a temporary pro-



Fig. 5: Baquedano's empty base by Rjcastillo, 6 November 2021 - Creative Commons Licensing

abortion platform. A masked nude protester stood beside it, her raised fist and painted slogans marking her body as a defiant scenographic medium. Around her, additional protesters occupied the ledges of the pedestal, their presence contributing to a dense layering of flags, garments, and painted symbols that obscured the monument's original form. Together, these material and embodied gestures re-staged the statue as a site of feminist resistance, converting its height and visibility into a counter-monumental stage that contested state power, gendered violence, and the institutional disciplining of bodies.

On 16 October 2020, protesters painted the statue entirely red, saturating the figure and horse in the color of blood. The gesture immediately invoked the case of Gustavo Gatica, the 21-year-old psychology student blinded by two police-fired projectiles on 8 November 2019, one of the uprising's most emblematic instances of state violence. The red surface monumentalized this brutality, making visible, on a massive scale, the human cost of police repression. Within twenty-four hours, the mayor of Santiago ordered the monument restored to its original appearance, signaling the state's urgency to suppress the scenographic revelation enacted by protesters. This rapid erasure underscored the monument's agency: its surface became a contested terrain where competing narratives of power, responsibility, and memory were materially inscribed and just as swiftly denied.

A pattern of state response accompanied the paint interventions. After protesters marked the monument—most visibly through the red paint, but also through other colour-based actions such as rainbow or green—the statue and its surroundings were repeatedly cleaned and repainted. These overnight operations, often justified through discourses of hygiene or restoration, functioned as deliberate acts of visual erasure,

attempts to return the monument to a condition of apparent pre-protest neutrality. As Nancy Armstrong argues, such 'rules of purification' operate as mechanisms of social control (Amstrong 1993, 1–27.), transforming the removal of paint or graffiti into an act of political disappearance. The resulting cycle of inscription and erasure created an oscillatory visual rhythm around the statue, underscoring the futility of stabilizing meaning through material maintenance.

In Figure 4, on 18 October 2020—one year into the commemoration of the *estallido*—protesters transformed the empty pedestal by installing a large wire-constructed eye atop it. The structure is an improvised, skeletal outline of an eye whose lower lid extends into bright red, drop-shaped appendages that evoke dripping blood. Suspended at the centre hangs a fabric banner reading *Dignidad* (Dignity), visually anchoring the intervention within the ongoing visual dramaturgy unfolding between protesters and the government. By the first anniversary of the *estallido,* police repression had resulted in at least thirty deaths and more than 460 permanent eye injuries from projectiles. The bleeding-eye sculpture responded directly to this accumulated violence, reframing the statue's absence as a memorial to state brutality. In doing so, it transformed the pedestal into a potent scenographic site that materialized the trauma of ocular injuries—one of the *estallido's* most devastating and emblematic markers of police violence—and extended the critique from the figure of Baquedano to the void it left behind.

On 15 November 2019, during a police operation involving water cannons, 29-year-old Abel Acuña collapsed at *Plaza Dignidad*. A paramedic attempting to perform CPR was shot at, and an ambulance—though dispatched—could not reach him due to continued police aggression. Acuña died that night. By dawn, the statue had been draped in a white canvas inscribed *Paz* (Peace), marking the site of his death. Similar banners soon appeared on monuments in other Chilean cities, extending the spatial resonance of this gesture (Hernández Serrano 2020). A second draping occurred the morning after the national plebiscite approving a new constitutional process, again covering the monument and the square ellipse in white fabric (emol 2019). Although presented as an image of unity, protesters interpreted the drape as an act of erasure. Memes depicting police officers sweeping dirt beneath the fabric were circulated — "sweeping it under the rug"—mobilizing the cloth as a metaphor for concealment and revealing how scenographic acts at the statue generated digital afterlives that contested their meaning.

The white drape thus staged a conflict between appearance and disappearance: it offered an image of pacification that depended on obscuring the violence that made the call for peace necessary. Protesters' counter-imagery exposed this logic, insisting that reconciliation premised on covering over bodies, injuries, and grief constitutes a scenography of disappearance. In this tension, the statue became the site where opposing dramaturgies—sanitizing erasure and insistent remembrance—collided. Through Indigenous reclamation, symbolic use of colour in protest, feminist and queer interventions, state-imposed drapings, and digital reimaginings, the statue operated as a non-human actor in the social revolution—an object through which Chileans wrote, rewrote, and contested their collective memory.

The statue's disappearances also generated a parallel field of digital intervention. As photographs, memes, and composited images proliferated across social media, Baquedano migrated from a fixed material site into a regime of distributed presence. Online re-imaginings—ranging from Mapuche heroic substitutions to colour-saturated

exaggerations and satirical overlays—circulated widely, producing scenes of disappearance in reverse: visual returns that counteracted the statue's physical absence. These digital afterlives did more than document the monument's transformations; they sustained its agency across media, ensuring that its removal could not achieve symbolic closure. In this expanded field, Baquedano persisted as an object continually rewritten, reinscribed, and recast by collective imagination.

The preceding examples situate the Baquedano statue as a scenographic object whose agency unfolded across the *estallido social*. Its iterative transformations trace a clear dramaturgical history: protesters reframing the monument through Mapuche and feminist interventions; marking its surfaces to denounce state violence; and reappropriating the empty pedestal by installing new symbols that made absence materially expressive. The monument's life, however, extended beyond the plaza: photographs, memes, and digital composites circulated widely on social media, generating parallel reimaginings that countered physical erasure and sustained the statue's presence across mediated space. Taken together, these material, embodied, and digital acts reveal the contested and multilayered nature of Chilean identity, and demonstrate how the monument's afterlives continue to shape the city's evolving narrative and its ongoing struggles over collective social and historical memory.

Scenographic Memory and the City

The urban landscape of Santiago during the 2019–2020 uprising materialized what Manuela Badilla Rajevic theorizes as a field of 'multiple urban memories,' in which layers of past and present struggles became spatially inscribed onto the city's surfaces; a condition in which the city itself becomes a medium for scenographic memory (2020, 286 –292). Graffiti, banners, scorched buildings, Chilean popular heroes' iconography, and improvised memorials produced what Caldeira describes as an 'urban patchwork'—a distributed archive through which the movement narrated, recognized, and legitimized itself (2009, 393–419). This accumulation of visual and material traces resonates with McKinney and Palmer's formulation of *expanded scenography*, in which scenographic meaning emerges relationally through the interplay of environment, object, and action rather than through discrete theatrical forms (2017, 3–4). During the *estallido*, memory operated scenographically: it was generated *through* these interventions and circulated *across* them, creating a multi-temporal field in which memories of dictatorship-era violence, post-transition inequities, and the emergent demands of 2019 coexisted (Jelin and Langland 2003, 23–34). Such layering transforms the city into what Kwon describes as a site constituted by flows of history, social relations, and embodied practices rather than by fixed geography (2002, 10-12). In this sense, urban memory becomes both spatial practice and scenographic method, animating the city as a medium capable of sustaining political imagination even under enforced dispersal during quarantine.

This urban memory framework clarifies the centrality of the Baquedano statue and pedestal within Plaza Dignidad and enables a translation of urban memory into the operations of this single object-site. If, as Hann (2019) argues, scenography emerges through relational practices that foreground the agency of designed and design-like elements, then, the monument functions in this framework as a nodal site within the city's mnemonic network. State attempts to assert control through curfews, mobility restrictions,

repainting campaigns, and hygienic "purification" measures constituted counter-scenographic interventions aligned with what Armstrong identifies as 'rules of exclusion' and 'rules of purification' (1993, 1–27). Yet each act of erasure provoked renewed layers of inscription—slogans, paint, banners, sculptural additions—that reanimated the monument's surface as a living palimpsest. In Kwon's terms, the statue became a *site* not by virtue of its monumental function but because of the dense, repeated social interactions that transformed its pedestal into a platform for political revelation (2002, 29-32). Through this lens, urban memory and scenographic practice converge to illuminate the monument as an active participant in the city's political life.

In dialogue with these perspectives, Alberto Mayol's (2019) interpretation of the *estallido social* as a "Big Bang" intensifies this scenographic understanding by framing the uprising as a moment of urban implosion/explosion that renders Chile's neoliberal contradictions suddenly and viscerally perceptible. Drawing on Lefebvre's (1970) theorization of implosion/explosion within the urban fabric, Mayol describes the *estallido* as the release of structural pressures long embedded within the neoliberal spatial order; from a scenographic standpoint, this corresponds to a reconfiguration of the city's visual and material field, one triggered not by conventional design intention but by collective spatial performance. Extending Amstrong's notions of exclusion and purification to this urban scale makes visible how state efforts to sanitize, regulate, or contain these manifestations through curfews, policing, campaigns of visual restoration, formed part of a continuous struggle over what could be seen, remembered, and contested in the city. The Baquedano statue and its pedestal became central within this implosive–explosive reading because they served as material condensers of these forces: surfaces where accumulated grievances, affects, and memories were repeatedly inscribed, layered, and reactivated. In this sense, the monument functions as a scenographic object whose agency emerges through its relational entanglements—its surfaces storing the 'implosion' of social discontent while its public visibility amplifies the 'explosion' of collective presence in the square (Mayol 2019, 213–230). Mayol's metaphor thus extends the concept of urban memory by revealing how these traces do not merely document rupture; they co-create it, transforming the Baquedano monument into a site where the contradictions of the neoliberal model are staged, materialized, and made perceptible as an ongoing performance of dissent.

Through this convergence, the Baquedano statue stands revealed as a charged site of urban memory and scenographic action, condensing the spatial and political intensities that defined the *estallido social*.

Conclusion

Building on this understanding, the Baquedano statue demonstrates how public objects become crucial actors in the sociopolitical processes through which memory is constructed, contested, and transformed. Throughout the *estallido social*, its pedestal and sculptural form did not merely witness the social struggle; they became scenographic agents, activating what Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer term an expanded field in which environment, object, and action co-produce meaning. As layers of paint, banners, scorch marks, and makeshift memorials accumulated on its surfaces, the monument mediated between past and present struggles, enabling Chileans to confront unresolved histories while imagining alternative futures. Understood in this way, Plaza

Baquedano and its monument functions as a dynamic stage—one where objects, bodies, and practices intersect to animate the temporal layers of collective life.

These dynamics also echo Mayol's interpretation of the *estallido social* as a moment of implosion/explosion, in which the latent contradictions of Chile's neoliberal model suddenly became visible and spatially expressive. The Baquedano monument, functioning as a scenographic object, condensed these forces: its surfaces storing the implosive accumulation of social discontent, its visibility amplifying the explosive emergence of collective presence. The ongoing redesign of the plaza, which is already transforming the former ellipse into a pedestrian esplanade that opens directly onto *Forestal Park*, further underscores the monument's mnemonic density. Although the urban space has been materially reconfigured, and the statue is expected to return to its pedestal, these alterations only add to the deep entanglement of material objects with social memory. Collective memory remains an embodied and relational practice; it is produced not only through narrative but through sustained engagement with the city's inhabitants.

As a scenographic object, the Baquedano statue illuminates the political potential of public objects. Its transformations show how urban artifacts can catalyze historical reckoning, challenge dominant narratives, and foster new modes of civic engagement. In its presence, its removal, and its afterlife, the Baquedano monument makes visible how scenographies of absence are not subtractive gestures but active, contested processes through which the stakes of memory, representation, and justice are renegotiated in public space. The monument demonstrates that struggles over representation—over whose histories are made visible and whose are suppressed—continue to unfold in the material world as much as in discourse. The Baquedano case thus provides a powerful lens for understanding how urban scenographies become engines of social transformation, revealing the capacity of objects to carry memory, shape affect, and participate in the ongoing work of imagining—and demanding—more just futures.

Note

1. Chile remains the most unequal country in the largely developed countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), with an income gap 65% wider than the OECD average (Unequalscenes.com 2019).
2. General Manuel Baquedano González (1823–1897) was a central figure in nineteenth-century Chilean military and political history. As Commander-in-Chief of the Chilean Army, he directed key campaigns during the War of the Pacific (1879–1883), culminating in the occupation and capture of Lima. During the 1891 Civil War, he briefly assumed the presidency as a transitional authority (Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile. nd).
3. Mapu-che: "People of the Land" in *Mapudungun* (language); indigenous group inhabiting south-central Chile and parts of Argentina.
4. *Kultrun* is a sacred Mapuche drum used primarily by the *machi* (healer-ceremonial leader). It is one of the central ritual instruments in Mapuche cosmology.
5. The term *"Wallmapu"* in the *Mapuche* language (*Mapudungun*) refers to the historical territory of the Mapuche people, which encompasses lands both west and east of the Andes Mountains in the Southern Cone of South America.

Disclosure

I utilized Chat GPT 5.1 for grammar, citation and style checks.

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