

Telling stories about yesterday's hero for today's world:

The script development of the Chilean TV series *Heroes* (2006-2007)

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Abstract

This chapter address the ways in which screenwriters create the persona of the anti-hero in the Chilean TV miniseries *Heroes* (2006-2007), a six-part historical series about Chilean national heroes, currently used as educational material in Chilean schools. In the writing of this celebratory series, the key challenge was to create engaging characters who could be perceived as national “heroes” in the context of a contemporary series, when in fact, their historical actions were those of “un-heroic” real people, people an audience would consider to be “anti-heroes”. To consider this challenge, this chapter traces how the screenwriters of *Heroes* created the character of the hero/anti-hero as both protagonist and antagonist. In the chapter, firstly we outline the situation the writers were faced with in researching and recreating the real life characters of Bernardo O’Higgins, José Miguel Carrera and Manuel Rodríguez. This includes the challenge of delving into the psychology of characters who were by present day standards prejudiced misogynists who mistreated women, ordered murders and fathered illegitimate children whom they ignored - and presenting them as heroes, particularly when the target audience was school children. Secondly, we consider key strategies developed in the study of the anti-hero in TV studies. Finally, we distill these as a means of considering a way in which to frame the creation of the anti-hero in the script development of *Heroes*.

Introduction

The TV miniseries *Heroes* (2006-2007) is a six-part historical series produced to commemorate Chile’s 200 years of independence from Spain (1810 – 2010). The series, currently used as educational material in Chilean schools, commenced as an audiovisual project for the bicentennial anniversary of independence and was produced by Channel 13, one of the four biggest national TV stations in the country. The first episode was aired on 23rd March 2007 and the last on 19th May 2009. Each episode revolves around one Chilean figure who participated in defining events for the independence of the nation. Against this production background, this chapter addresses the ways in which the screenwriters created the persona of the anti-hero in the writing of this celebratory series. It is a narrative where the key challenge was to create engaging characters who could be perceived as national “heroes” in the context of a contemporary series, when, in fact, their historical actions were those of “un-heroic” real people, individuals whom the audience would actually consider “anti-heroes” by today’s moral standards.

Thus, in this chapter we trace how the screenwriters of *Heroes*, created the character of the hero/anti-hero as both protagonist and antagonist. Firstly, we outline the situation the writers faced in researching and re-creating the real life characters of Bernardo O'Higgins, José Miguel Carrera and Manuel Rodríguez. This included the challenge of delving into the psychology of characters who were by present day standards prejudiced misogynists who mistreated women, ordered murders and fathered illegitimate children whom they ignored—and presenting them as heroes, particularly when the target audience was school children. Secondly, we consider key strategies developed in the study of the anti-hero in television studies (Blanchet & Vaage, 2012; García, 2016) and distill these as a means of considering a way in which to frame the creation of the anti-hero in screenwriting. As we will outline, there are four dramatic tools –moral comparison, family as a moral balm, victimization and remorse – used to build allegiance in the viewer. These strategies allow for a better understanding of the motives and the context that justify or explain the reprehensible actions of the protagonists, despite the moral revulsion that those actions could cause in the spectator. Finally, we delve into the specificity of the script development of *Heroes* in relation to the depiction of antiheroic protagonists.

The narrative strategies involved in creating the figure of the anti-hero, while also exploring the complexity of the process of writing and producing that was derived from the transposition to television fiction of historical facts that could be controversial, are of particular interest from a screenwriting perspective in considering this series. The main narrative question was how to maintain and renew narrative interest while dealing with morally complex issues that cast these Chilean “heroes” as anti-heroes with whom an audience would not wish to identify.

The link between script development, television studies and antiheroes

This chapter therefore contributes to the field of script development in what Mittell (2015) has termed ‘Complex TV’, by specifically focusing on the development of character. It complements Fernando Canet’s recent essay on relationship arcs in serial antihero narratives (2019); Paulo Russo’s article regarding story lining and audience engagement (2017) – which focusses on the development of multiple story lines across the episodes of the TV series, *Gomorra*; and Radha O’Meara’s study around character change in episodic television (2015). It also builds on Carmen Sofia Brenes’ (2018) work around issues and decisions the screenwriter must make when creating a feature film based on reality.

Therefore, in this chapter, we focus on the development of the character in *Heroes*, in particular the development of the “hero” character, specifically the creation of characters based on historical fact. To this end, we draw upon concepts from the established arena of Critical Television Studies where there exists a significant body of literature around the topic of audience engagement

in television series, particularly with anti-heroes (Blanchet & Vaage, 2012; García, 2016). In doing so, it builds on the work of Margaret McVeigh in her integration of narrative and screenwriting theory to consider the creative decisions made by the screenwriter. She notes that “the field of critical television studies [...] rather than focus on the structural aspects of storytelling” is to foreground thematic and aesthetic analysis (2019, forthcoming). We will draw findings from this field to help us understand ways in which the audience can engage with characters who we would not historically have engaged with as the “hero” before the recent Series TV lead characters of, for example, *Breaking Bad*’s “everyday Dad” turned drug dealer, Walter White, or *The Sopranos*’ “beloved” Mafia Dad, Tony Soprano.

Notwithstanding, as the title of this volume makes clear, script development is the core aspect of this study, and both Television Studies and Antihero theory are subordinated to it. Research into script development is an emerging field. In their article, ‘Script Development: Defining the Field’, screenwriting researchers Batty et al., interrogate the definition of script development and note that there is still much research to be done (2017, p. 240). Batty et al. also note that notions of plot, character, story, theme and emotional impact are central to script development and they question: “What development actually entails: which aspects of screenwriting craft beyond plot are used in/by/for script development, and what tools are used to achieve this?” (2017, p. 228). The practice of script development may take many forms including primary research, writers’ rooms, readers’ reports and investor feedback. Kerrigan and Batty posit that “These aspects give script development a strong sense of not only industrialization, but also emotion whereby constant negotiations are made between the self (ideas, visions, feedback) and the commercial product” (2016, p. 136). This investigation of script development in this chapter will be undertaken by investigating decisions made by the writers from the perspective of one of the writers involved in the project and a co-author of this chapter, Alejandro C. Reid.

Writing and producing *Heroes*, an historical biopic

Producing *Heroes* was a complex task. The first proposal was about the unknown heroes, the ones who built Chile with their ideals and effort, because a lot has already been told in relation to the revolutionary ones. Thus, the first approach was to build the series around the lesser known heroes, those who did a lot for the country but their lives were more those of the “common folk”. Any script based on a real character must be adapted to follow traditional script development techniques, so the challenge was greater with “common” characters. However, in South America, there is no powerful public television entity, hence the networks depend on big local audiences, and those audiences want the same stories once and again. In fact, the *Heroes* executive producers undertook a focus group study and the results of this changed everything. The people in the focus group did

not really know the chosen characters and they felt that those chosen characters didn't represent the values of Chilean Independence. After losing the "first battle" – that is, the original idea of telling stories of unknown historical personas, the team went back to the traditional characters, the "national heroes" popular to everyone, and developed the six episodes (Reid, 2018).

In any case, the writing of an historical television series provides significant challenges to the creative team. Any documentary, film or series, based on fact usually starts with research. Because the majority of the past is only partially known, this process involves researching many types of documents: paintings, personal letters, private diaries and places, if they still exist. In the *Heroes* case, the screenwriters managed to get as much information as they could from factual sources: old letters, pictures from the national gallery and private diaries of the characters. Historical documents can record the actions of the characters—what they did, when they did it, and where they did it. As Producer from Canal 13, the production house that developed *Heroes*, Alejandro Reid observes: "We can track a character to a specific place, and to a specific moment. We can research and understand how those places were in the past from the architectural point of view and in a contemporary series develop them carefully to replicate them as they were" (2018).

Once the writers had the facts, the task was to build the psychology of the characters. This is the most difficult phase in the research. For to understand the psychology of the characters, the psychology of the writer must also come into play. For example, the two main characters of the series, O'Higgins and Carrera, had opposite approaches to independence, and depending on which researcher you ask, they will "prefer" one of them as the real hero. Consequently, the writer is the one who will make the psychology of the character work. You need the experience to make the theory work, and you need the theory to drive experiences (Indick, 2004), because the key challenge in writing an historical biopic is to try to understand the character behind the facts. How and why they performed certain actions and what were they thinking when they performed these actions.

One device used in the series to reveal this character psychology is the figure of the confident secretary or the friend. "Having someone from the circle of the character who helps the writer to develop the story, although in real life he or she never existed, helps the audience to understand the internal world of the character and the inner motives that drive him" (Reid, 2018). However, this is a script construct. To be able to construct the psychology of the character, the writer aligns different sources of information, and, above all, works to find his "own version of truth" (Bingham, 2010, p. 10). This act of "interpretation", as Rosenstone puts it (2014, p. 13), "necessarily implies taking a stand on what is narrated" (Brenes, 2018, p. 214). As Reid explains, "Every historical series has a central spine which is based on the facts, writings, diaries and documents gleaned from the character's life. But all that surrounds that central spine is fiction" (2018). The decisions that a

writer must make in telling reality depend on the key ideas that the writer wishes to adapt from reality and as Adaptation theorist, Thomas Leitch, proposes the process of adaptation allows for the removal or decreasing attention paid to source texts to allow adaptation to suit the purposes of the writer as the “work-in-progress” of institutional practices of re-writing” (Leitch in Thornley, 2018, p.3). Consequently, the writers decided to sacrifice historical fidelity for dramatic reasons, that is, fictionality and spectacle overcame rigorous truth. Writers kept the central facts of history, but embellished some details to increase the dramatic impact of them. For example, Reid notes, “During the writings of O’Higgins we had to exaggerate some relations, for example Carrera hits O’Higgins in one scene, which resulted in a duel, which was illegal in that time. But for today’s audience it is a clear representation of the tension between them” (2018).

Complex TV and the antihero

In the case of *Heroes*, the *de facto* Screen Idea Work Group (SIWG) – the writers, producers and directors who were involved in the project – (Macdonald, 2013), aimed to tell the story of six Chilean leaders, depicting them as “heroes”, that is, as people who had played a vital and valuable part in the Chile’s history. This perspective immediately required that the SIWG work on the present perception of past events. As traditions have changed, it became apparent that “what was once perceived as a good or bad way of behaving is now perceived in exactly the opposite manner. The biggest challenge during the writing and producing process was to tell the story in a way it could be socially acceptable” (Reid, 2018). This tension between fact and fiction in *Heroes*, as Brenes notes regarding another biopic film, was “not so much that each scene should be ‘historically correct’ (Vande Winkel 2007, p. 206), but that we understand why the authors have opted for presenting a particular scene in a particular way, [...] without betraying the larger narrative” (Brenes, 2018, p .214).

In real life, the lives of these three characters were problematic. Bernardo O’Higgins was an illegitimate son, and he fathered two illegitimate children himself. He was also a misogynist, denying women the right to an education. José Miguel Carrera, the strategist behind Chile’s independence, was much more focused on the military cause than on his neglected family. Manuel Rodríguez also fathered an illegitimate son, born the year he was killed. Rodríguez was so popular that an upset O’Higgins ordered him killed in 1818.

Given these unpalatable facts, what strategies may a screenwriter employ to create a “hero” as required by the series brief to celebrate and emotionally engage new generations with the heroes of Chile’s independence? How can a screenwriter create a character based on the life of a person who is, in fact, someone audiences today would regard as an “anti-hero”? What can we learn or theorise about script development regarding these antihero narratives? To propose an answer to this question

we turn to the field of critical television studies, where the moral engagement between audience and antihero has been widely studied. Critical Television Studies theory will allow us to shed light, later, on how the screenwriters tackle problematic moral and dramatic issues during their script development. In this field, we specifically consider the work of cognitive media scholars, Joanna Murray Smith (1995), Noel Carroll (2004) and Carl Plantinga (2010), who have provided some of the most comprehensive surveys of an audience's emotional engagement with cinema and television characters. According to Smith (1995), Carroll (2004) and Plantinga (2010), the audience identifies with a fictional character when they observe their positive merits: their remarkable skills, courage in face of adversity, or benevolent dedication to others—attributes which are examples of classical heroic traits. However, in the case of antiheroes – such as those populating the Chilean TV Series *Heroes* – these honorable talents coincide with some salient murky traits, including infidelity, violence and psychopathy. In such cases, in writing the script the screenwriter must use strategies that reduce the dramatic impact of the undesirable qualities by providing a wider contextual knowledge of the characters including their backstory, their positive relations with other characters and several sympathy-triggering attributes.

Drawing from Smith's (1995) "structure of sympathy", for allegiance to be successful in the case of an antihero narrative, the audience needs to build a balanced system of moral values for the character, the situation, and the fictional world in which they operate. To be precise, the latter cannot happen without the former. Thus, what takes place is not an annulment of the moral criterion, but rather a reconfiguration of judgment grounded on dramatic and narrative causes (relating to the character and the situation, respectively).

Consequently, when a character such as Bernardo O'Higgins performs immoral actions, our moral sympathy towards him gets affected. This moral tension emerges as part of the dramatic appeal of antiheroic narratives. In this sense, the very nature of the serial narrative helps the audience's engagement with the antihero, because one of the essential sorts of the antiheroic serial is that it questions, for dramatic purposes, our allegiance to the antihero as a strategy to advance the plot, generate suspense, and renew its dramatic conflict again and again. Writers have to rekindle cyclically the sympathy that viewers feel towards the antihero—despite his/her immoralities—so that the conflicts reproduce and the narrative can develop across multiple episodes or seasons. In short, we can recuperate our sympathy at regular intervals, precisely because of the specific form, duration and dramatic needs of television narrative. This affects how scripts are developed, because of the need of maintaining the dramatic tension over many episodes.

This accent on a sufficient narrative and dramatic elaboration are noteworthy since TV series offers a wider prospect than other formats to develop characters, relationships, and plots, thanks to their protracted textual duration. This is, obviously, the first and most striking difference between

the television narratives and others of shorter length, such as feature films. As Blanchet and Vaage note, the duration of the serial narrative allows viewers to forge a more intense dramatic link with characters, since it increases the viewers' perception of sharing a story with them, due not only to the duration of the narrative, but also because the audience's life evolves alongside a show's seasons (2012, p. 28).

The broader and deeper knowledge of the character's life—a more multifaceted understanding that is not limited to their criminal role—as well as the long accompaniment of the audience, manages to generate a familiarity between viewer and protagonist that allows the former to develop affective ties capable of overcoming the moral rejection of the actions of the latter. The greater the access to the intimate life of the characters—to their inner worlds, the foundations of their life projects, the understanding of the reasons for their conduct and conflicts—the greater the emotional complicity of the audience with them. Here, the “friendship” metaphor proposed by Blanchett and Vaage as a characteristic of television antiheroes acquires its fullness: the television narrative, expanded for hours, enables familiarity—friendship—with characters, thus promoting allegiance (2012, p. 28). However, the mere temporal exposition does not generate by itself moral sympathy for a character, particularly when the latter exercises questionable behaviours. Therefore, all television narratives have a number of tools designed to strengthen allegiance.

The narrative strategies of the antihero in the script development of *Heroes*

The stories told in *O'Higgins*, *Carrera* and *Rodríguez* present a common enemy: the Spanish crown, which since the conquest, exercised power in Latin America. However, it is interesting to note that in the episodes, there is no Spanish character that has enough development to be considered an antagonist. This decision was made to present the audience with the idea that sometimes your enemy is closer than you think. Therefore, the true antagonists of each story are the same patriots who star in the other two episodes: *O'Higgins*, *Carrera* and *Rodríguez*. The three “heroes” have the same goal—to achieve the independence of Chile, however, their actions do not align in doing this. From a script development point of view, each of the heroes were intended to also be enemies of each other at the same time. As Reid recalls, “We were trying to explain that one fact always has different perspectives and points of view” (2018).

First, the antiheroic protagonist enjoys a moral advantage over other evil characters because “moral comparison” operates. There are different degrees of evil and, as *Heroes* progresses, the narrative predisposes the audience to interpret the Chilean dignitaries' actions as “the lesser evil”. Without denying their ethical failings, the audience shows emotional loyalty for Carrera and O'Higgins, despite their violent actions, because their choices are perceived as much better than the other moral choices within this fictional world (the evilness of Spaniards). To observe the use of the

strategy of the confrontation of evil as a way of configuring the antihero, we will analyze two scenes from *Carrera, the prince of the roads*, where the antagonism between the protagonist Carrera with Bernardo O'Higgins occurs.

In the first scene (18 min.), O'Higgins does not appear in person, he is only mentioned by Carrera, then Supreme Chief, when he tells his subordinates that he will hand over command to O'Higgins to avoid a civil war and because he considers he is the only general who "will not run to sign the peace with the realists" (Chileans in favor of the Spanish regime). A few minutes later (28 min.), we know that O'Higgins has signed a peace treaty with the Spaniards because he considered it "the most sensible" thing to do. In this second event, the character does appear on the screen. The scene occurs after a strong defeat by the Spaniards. Reid detailed how this issue was handled during the script development: "Each of the stories' points of view reflects today, different perceptions of the characters, so the ones who believe that O'Higgins is the real hero will prefer his episode. From the point of view of the script development we equalized the different forces with a unique perspective on each chapter" (2018).

Carrera arrives at the camp and finds O'Higgins worried. There is an argument between both characters that is filmed as suggested by the script through Carrera's dialogue. O'Higgins appears as an ambitious person who wants to achieve "glory, power" and is portrayed as a fool and traitor, who "has provoked a battle between brothers". The action ends with a gesture of goodwill on the part of Carrera: he will reconcile with O'Higgins to appear united in front of the troops and prevent them from becoming demoralized. This scene marks the trend of the rest of the film where Carrera's ambition and personality appear as evil, but never as bad as the ambition and personality of O'Higgins. "The characters are moved to perform facts by internal deliberations", Reid clarifies, "which we normally suppose or rebuild, but the real fact is unknown" (2018). In addition, he continues: "We had the story; we needed to preset a perspective from each of the characters. We needed to move the character to the audience, so then the audience could feel with the character" (Reid 2018).

Another dramatic mechanism used to emphasize the moral sympathy for the antihero has to do with the family. The antihero's family becomes a morally noble motive with which the audience sympathizes. From a script development point of view, therefore, family acts as a justifiable "excuse" to perform drastic, dangerous, and ethically problematic deeds. However, in addition to being a pretext and a dramatic motivation necessary to sustain the narrative, the family unit acts as an element of characterization for O'Higgins, Carrera and Rodríguez. The sincere affection for their loved ones - which is threatened by the Spanish demands and brutality - takes the protagonists closer to a quotidian drama, where the audience can sympathise with the anti-hero. In the episodes that we have discussed, these noble motives are focused on two areas, the good of the Chilean

homeland and the family of heroes. This is demonstrated, for example, in O'Higgins' voice over in scene eight of "*Live to deserve his name*", *the O'Higgins* episode, where he laments the decisions he had to make:

BERNARDO (OFF)

This is the moment. How many sacrifices have been necessary to build this enterprise that nobody had faith on! We did it!(...) This has been my mission, and I have fulfilled it... now the future of America depends on the destiny of these four boards. Look at me father; have I been the worthy son of your name?

(Kalawski & Larraín, 2007, pp. 43-44).

The heroic and at the same time tender tone of the scene, justifies all the decisions and actions that we have seen before and we will see later, including as we will see later, the order to shoot the brothers of José Miguel Carrera, O'Higgins' staunch enemy.

Victimization is the third strategy to create a dramatically effective antihero. As Plantinga has explained, "we sympathize with characters when we believe that they are in danger and must be protected, when they are suffering or bereaved, or when we believe that someone has been treated unfairly" (2010, p. 41). Hence, the suffering of cruelty and injustice by others are usually sources of sympathy, both in real life and in fiction. To illustrate this strategy, we will use the first sequence of *Rodríguez, the son of rebellion*. The movie is told in a flashback by his father's voice-over. At the beginning, we see the sick mother of Manuel Rodríguez and then we see a scene of a very young Rodríguez with his father. As Reid states, society at that time was so different from today, so the writers "needed to emphasize the distance between fathers and children; the kids where raised by the mothers" (Reid, 2018). They talk about the act that will occur the next day, in which the court of the University of San Felipe will give its resolution on whether or not to give Manuel the title of doctor in law, taking into account that he has not been able to pay the expenses attached to the procedure, even if he has met the corresponding requirements. Manuel's father doubts that they will give it to him, and he hurts for not being able to give his son an education. Manuel is convinced that they will give him the title. The following lines are exchanged:

MANUEL

Why you are so pessimistic? They
can't reject it! That would be an
injustice.

CARLOS [FATHER]

When decision is in men's hands, you
cannot always expect justice,
Manuel...

(Cuevas, Ugalde & Galaz, 2007, p. 3)

Remorse is the last strategy employed by the screenwriters to promote sympathy for a morally compromised character. When a protagonist trespasses the limit of what the audience can morally stomach, writers usually re-humanize the character through a strong reaction of guilt. This can be seen when Carrera is devastated after witnessing the brutality his “montonero” army committed on innocent civilians on his way to the Andes. By assuming their portion of culpability, the protagonists of *Heroes* get to decrease the scope of their wrong-doing, so that the audience can re-establish a marred moral sympathy for them. To illustrate this last strategy - remorse - we consider a scene from *Carrera, the prince of the roads*. It occurs in the last third of the Carrera episode (82 min).

The men of Carrera travel with great difficulty through the Argentine *pampa*, their objective is to reach and cross the Andes Mountains and enter Chile. They are tired, without water and without enough ammunition to confront the army of José de San Martín, who has ordered their capture. When they arrive at a poor village, Carrera's men enter and devastate the few soldiers who shelter in it, killing their children and chasing their women. In the scene we discuss, Carrera had just given the order to stop the looting. He gets off his horse and sees a woman crying, hugging her dead son. The sequence as suggested by the script, is intercut with a medium shot, zooming to a close up of Carrera, intercut with point of view shots of the woman with her child. The work of the actor, the music and the slow movement of the camera on the face of Carrera, allows us to understand his confusion and remorse. At that moment, the hero hears a girl screaming defending herself from a man who drags her. Carrera orders the soldier to stop. Turning, he sees one of his trusted men, who apologizes saying: “But general, you said we could take what we wanted”. There is a close-up shot of the man's hand caressing the neck of the girl, who is terrified. Carrera slowly raises the weapon and shoots his soldier killing him. Then, he drops to his knees in front of the girl, hugs her and says: “Shhh, quiet, Javierita, quiet. Here is *the dad* [the article before the word *dad* is a Chilean idiom]”. Undoubtedly, Carrera is thinking about his daughter Javiera, whom he has left in Santiago with her mother. “We needed to build in one scene the atrocity of war, the remaining (sic)

of a moral structure in our hero, the violent behavior of soldiers and at the same time redeem our character” (Reid 2018). The trait of conversion is added to the strategy of remorse, which helps to make the character acceptable.

Conclusion

The writers of *Heroes* were presented with a challenging task. As Producer Reid observes in the writing of this series based on real people and the creation of their characters:

We can investigate the psychology of people of that time, we can try to follow some patterns to understand the normal behavior, but normally the heroes will not follow normal behaviors, the people who changed the history were special people, they didn't followed (sic) the common path (2018).

The characters who are the heroes of this television series were, following Reid's comment, people just like O'Higgins, Carrera and Rodríguez. In this chapter, we have investigated the narrative strategies involved in creating the figure of the anti-hero, as one aspect of script development while also exploring the complexity of the process of writing and production that was derived from the transposition to television fiction of historical facts that were controversial. As we have discussed, those whose lives are explored in this series are characters – when viewed through a modern cultural and social lens – who would be characterized as non-heroic. By drawing on Smith's (1995) “structure of sympathy” and applying Garcia's (2016) theory of creating audience engagement with an anti-hero, we have considered how the screenwriters and producers of *Heroes* were able to retell the story of “anti-hero” figures from the past in a way that maintained narrative interest and audience engagement. The contribution to the Script Development field comes from the valuable insights that one of the *Heroes*' writers provide, engaging his writing process with the theoretical issues we have explored herein.

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Filmography

O'Higgins, vivir para merecer su nombre (O'Higgins, Live to deserve his name) (2007, 115 min.),

Writer: Andrés Kalawski and Ricardo Larraín. Director: Ricardo Larraín. Production company: Canal 13 and Cine XXI.

Carrera, el príncipe de los caminos (Carrera, The prince of the roads) (2007, 113 min.) Writer:

Rodrigo Cuevas Gallegos. Director: Cristián Galaz. Production company: Canal 13 and Delirio Films.

Rodríguez, el hijo de la rebeldía (Rodríguez, Son of rebelliousness) (2007, 119 min.) Writer:

Rodrigo Cuevas Gallegos, Andrea Ugalde and Cristián Galaz. Director: Cristián Galaz. Production company: Canal 13 and Delirio Films.