

AFTER-EFFECTS: INTERVIEW WITH PATRICIO GUZMÁN

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ROB WHITE spoke to Chilean director Patricio Guzmán about his most recent documentary, *Nostalgia for the Light*, in London, February 2, 2012. (Main photo: courtesy of New Wave Films. Thanks to Corina Poore for expert interpreting.)

At the end of *Salvador Allende*, Guzmán's 2004 portrait of his country's president from 1970 to 1973, there is haunting black-and-white footage of the poet Gonzalo Millán enunciating a revisionary dream of time's undoing: "Bullets fly out of flesh, / Balls return to their cannons, / Officers put away their pistols / ... Concentration camps become empty, / The disappeared reappear, / The dead rise from their graves." These words both commemorate and repudiate the Pinochet coup during which Allende killed himself. Guzmán's three-part masterpiece, *The Battle of Chile* (1975–78), does something similar. The first parts, *The Insurrection of the Bourgeoisie* and *The Coup d'État*, document the downfall of Allende's government after a relentless Establishment campaign of obstruction, subversion, assassination, and clampdown. But the third part, *The Power of the People*, turns back the clock to the brief time when popular socialism started to flourish in Chile. The film concludes with pipes slowly playing "We Shall Triumph," the anthem of Allende's Popular Unity coalition, as the camera zooms out from an image of a saltpeter mine in the desert. The last image is a freeze frame that protests, by failing to arrive at, what the previous parts show happened next. Thus *The Battle of Chile* stays true to what the coup savaged, which is not a denial of history—what occurred has already been horrifyingly recorded in the film—but rather a refusal to accept that the violence of the coup is conclusive. History is not finished; what has disappeared can reappear, even if the tortured and killed must stay in

their graves.

“We Shall Triumph” returns in *Chile, Obstinate Memory*, which Guzmán filmed in 1997 during a long-delayed return visit to Chile. (The filmmaker, currently based in Paris, has lived in exile since 1973.) He assembled a marching band that for the first time in twenty-three years plays the anthem in the center of Santiago. It is fascinating to watch the bystanders: a middle-aged man applauds, another raises a fist in solidarity, but so many faces are blank. What *Chile, Obstinate Memory* makes clear is that the coup was a phenomenon of psychic repression as well as physical brutality. The citizens’ lack of expression may derive from sheer ignorance, collusion, fear, apathy, but it is here that a disorder of memory and knowledge is to be found, not in the counter-chronology of *The Battle of Chile*. How much this impairment of consciousness costs is suggested in the overwhelming last section of *Chile, Obstinate Memory* in which students respond to *The Battle of Chile*, having just seen it for the first time. Some simply cannot speak for grief; those that do acknowledge despite their distress what the film lets them understand. “I feel proud of my people,” says one, “even though we failed.” Sobbing, another says, “I don’t understand how men can be so barbaric. Killing a family because it doesn’t think like you.” *Chile, Obstinate Memory* contrasts these young faces awakened by anguish with the boisterous marching band’s impassive witnesses; in so doing, the film raises the problem of how the recent past can become secret even to its own participants.

The students’ pain and tears are signs of defiance; the hurt is hopeful. Guzmán’s latest reflection on the coup’s aftermath, *Nostalgia for the Light*, is arguably—though not obviously—a much more ambiguous and despairing work. It revisits the Chilean desert, but whereas in *The Battle of Chile* the barren landscape is the productive home of heavy industry, in *Nostalgia for the Light* it is an eerie territory of loss and apotropaic obsession. Women restlessly search in a scattered group for the remains of the disappeared; the site of a miners’ camp that was turned into a concentration camp bears the weathered traces of its former

inhabitants. The Atacama Desert is, though, also the site of a high-tech observatory, and *Nostalgia for the Light* includes interviews with scientists who ponder the mysteries of the universe, as though light speed or the fact that calcium is the common substance of stars and skeletons really mattered at all when set against the story of how the bones of the coup's victims came to be strewn in the sand. The astronomers' enthusiasm for the enigmas of space requires that they look far away from the desert; one interviewee's somber acknowledgment of the preoccupation of nearby grave-hunters and bedraggled Antigones encapsulates the problem because his evident sympathy involves a whimsical displacement: "I don't know what I'd do if a sister, a brother or one of my parents were lost somewhere in the desert, in this vast expanse. Personally, as an astronomer, I would imagine my father or mother in space, lost in the galaxy somewhere. I would look for them through the telescopes." And in such a fashion the matter of the coup's terrorism starts to be downplayed even as it is broached: projected onto a starscape, it starts to turn secret again. A similar difficulty arises from the wholly unexpected sequence early in *Nostalgia for the Light* that most explicitly accounts for the first part of the film's title. Tranquil images of a little house are accompanied by a voiceover invocation of an idyllic past: "The Presidents of the Republic walked unescorted through the streets. Only the present moment existed." Then there is a slow dissolve to a mini-cosmos of shimmering dust particles. If disavowal is one way of deactivating the past, then nostalgia is surely another—and maybe, noble as they are, the aging women who tramp the Atacama in their quest for victims' remains are some of kind of nostalgists too.

What this new film offers, with profundity and subtlety, is not the shocking, energizing breakthrough to dreadful events that occurs at the end of *Chile, Obstinate Memory*, but rather the calcification-like process whereby Pinochet's and every other great or small-scale coup gains protection for itself—whereby abuses of power are gradually, numbingly accepted. From a certain point of view, the shots of sunlit motes and astral vistas are the most sinister images in *Nostalgia for the Light*

because, apart from being familiar motifs of natural beauty, they most directly express distraction and the way a field of vision begins to blur, to blank out. Patricio Guzmán's film refuses all easy answers; there is no equivalent to the catharsis of *Chile, Obstinate Memory*, and when *Nostalgia for the Light* focuses near the end on an astronomer called Valentina whose parents were both killed by the junta, but who claims that the coup's barbarous influence is now at an end, her strangely phrased optimism—"I'm a product with a manufacturing defect which is invisible ... I realize that my children don't have this defect, nor does my husband and that makes me happy"—is possibly an even sadder expression of the national tragedy than silence and stony faces.

ROB WHITE: In *Chile: Obstinate Memory* there are several definitions of memory: transport back to the past, confusing hall of mirrors. How do you define memory and its relation to history?

PATRICIO GUZMÁN: I think that life is memory, everything is memory. There is no present time and everything in life is remembering. I think memory encompasses all life, and all the mind. I'm not simply me—I'm my father and all that came before me, who are millions. *Nostalgia for the Light* sprung from this concept. It involves body and soul but also matter, the earth, the cosmos, all combined.

But there's a constant contradiction between memory and history. It's a conflict. The official Chilean historical record in regard to the 1973 coup d'état is a disaster. For nearly forty years now there has been denial of memory (like there was in Spain too after Franco's death). Nothing seems to alter in the government's account. Some of us want to work with memory and there are many of us, including new historians of Chile, but we work in solitude. I think memory is a problem of very long duration. You need a lot of time to find equilibrium and I think in Chile we will get there—but perhaps in a hundred years. That's the sort of time that memory needs in order to superimpose history and memory, which is a very slow process. It's almost like archeological work,

although it's passionate too.

In *Nostalgia for the Light* a woman searching for remains of the disappeared in the desert says, "I find it hard to believe what I'm told. They taught me not to believe." How was it possible for history to be distorted in Chile after the coup?

There were two factors. The victims were traumatized. They had to forget in order to continue living. At the same time the government, and Pinochet in particular, completely denied what had happened. Allende and the whole revolution—the workers' organizations, the workers' press, in fact a hundred years of proletarian life—were erased systematically in the subsequent political culture, which is why it is important that it was documented in *The Battle of Chile*. The last part of the film ends with the beginning, which was Allende's revolution. It's in the third part where you can see the popular revolution that was developing. The previous parts were the actual facts and tactics—but they don't explain the nature of the revolution itself, which is what's explained in the last part. Thus I find that part the most interesting, even though it's incomplete. Maybe you could say it's like an embryo and today it gives Chileans a very strong message.

But elsewhere this whole section of history disappeared from view: there was not even one book published in Chile. Pinochet governed with terror: no professor could even make a reference to the coup in a classroom. It's an extraordinarily strange thing because Chile was a very cultured and sophisticated country. All culture disappeared. Music disappeared. Painting and culture disappeared. There was like a freezing, a paralysis. For many years there was a process of trying to slow down history, with history textbooks devoting half a page if you're lucky to the coup, and nothing about Pinochet's methods. The subsequent democratic governments continued to be afraid. It was only when Pinochet was detained in England that the fear began to subside or fragment, but very slowly.

It was a tremendously powerful oppression, in contrast for instance with Argentina where there has been a much more comprehensive memory work. Argentina lost the Malvinas war and therefore the army lost its prestige entirely, which helped this process, but President Cristina Kirchner did a very big job in trying to deal with the memory problem, which President Michelle Bachelet didn't do in Chile. She in fact did absolutely nothing apart from creating a museum, which was ornamental, lacking any analysis of what happened. Chilean civilians have been responsible for new history books, but without official assistance of any kind. Memory has begun to be recuperated by NGOs, honest journalists and judges, families of the disappeared and victims. But the state hasn't had a part in it. The government is still living in a cave.

Only now is there no fear. Some victims are beginning to talk, finally. We're seeing again a student movement, which is not only fighting for a better education, health, working conditions, but also for the memory. I meet students when they arrive to study in Paris at the political school where I have taught seminars for the past five years. They're twenty-five, twenty-six and they're still discovering what happened for the first time. They arrive without any background information. They could have come from Mars. They know absolutely nothing and it takes about a year for them to really register what happened. Many of these students still have no idea at first that thousands were thrown into the sea. They watch all my movies and invite me to have discussions afterwards, and there's always one or two at the back of the hall who are speechless. Some of them are right-wingers but even they must confront the contradiction. It's the first generation not to be marginalized by the coup d'état. They're able to be lucid. I have a lot of rapport with this new generation—but not the one in between, many of whom detest me. They're like a lost generation and so there's nothing that we can talk about, but with younger people it's different. For them I'm not old and there's a meeting point and a rapport.

Is there a problem of guilt in the middle generation?

Yes, very much so. I ask myself about the armed forces and police. Those who actually committed the crimes are a very small section of it. Maybe three or four hundred people were guilty. Yet somehow the whole of armed forces protect this group. Why don't they separate from it, and let those people defend themselves? And the church, which is very right-wing now, is involved too. At the time Pinochet took power, the church defended victims, but not any longer. The current church avoids acknowledging the position of the earlier church. I feel that the whole coup d'état was totally out of proportion and that's the reason for the sense of guilt. The main newspaper, the *Mercury*, denied the disappeared, denied that there was torture. For thirty years it spoke badly of Allende. It tried to destroy his reputation morally, politically, and technically. Now that same newspaper sells itself as a democratic newspaper. It's hard to believe. So the result is that it's impossible to believe any of the Chilean institutions and you can't believe in justice as a result. Most human-rights violations—perhaps 60%—haven't come to a court. Yet all the evidence is there. There are files, reports, dossiers. I don't understand why the armed forces don't say a thing. That's why in *Nostalgia for the Light*, the archeologist says that bodies were dug from the desert with earth-movers. Lots of people must have known about the graves but nobody said anything. Only one helicopter pilot had the courage to confess that he had actually thrown bodies into the sea. That's nothing.

You've spoken about suffering six years of depression after finishing *The Battle of Chile*. What happened next?

The period of inactivity lasted ten years in fact, which is what you would normally lose after a coup d'état. I have spoken to many people in the same position and that seems to be common: eight, nine, ten years. Even the Argentines I have spoken describe something similar. But as a result I feel ten years younger! The body somehow stays still, as if it had been frozen, and then gradually you wake up again. In my case this occurred through filmmaking, starting with *In the Name of God*, which was about the Catholic Church, which I made in 1987. That was when I

started to wake up, but it was a slow process. I really recuperated when I moved to France. That change of countries was the last wakeup slap to my face. So I feel I've lost a lot of time, but on the other hand that's not strictly true because memory needs that time to reflect. It's not something that can be produced on the spot. It's a long and profound reflection, and I'm actually happy that I went through that process. It's the best way to resolve a stain—a wound that has marked my life, and the lives of another five million in Chile. And it's very interesting because for me as an artist perhaps it was vital to have that experience. It's not in the end a negative thing.

There are sunlit evocations of childhood and home in *Nostalgia for the Light*. Doesn't this evocation of tranquility and seclusion risk downplaying the history of political struggle that led to Allende's election?

Political history goes a long way back—to the desert where the original workers' syndicates were born in the mines. But I myself was never a militant. My family wasn't leftwing. We were normal petit bourgeois and for our class group the rise of Allende wasn't an eventful time. I put in these scenes to reflect my personal experience. A lot of people awoke with Allende's election, having never participated politically. When I was a child and even an adolescent I was never politically active and I felt it was relevant to say so. Allende was the spark. My political conscience actually awoke in the Spain of Franco, when I went to study there. I didn't give a damn that Franco was in power. It was 1965 and Spain was an explosive place because the dictatorship was losing its grip and there was a large popular movement coming up. That's when I began to understand. It was an extraordinary period. The dictatorship had basically died and the Spain of the future was taking form—which was better than what we have now in Spain. Things have regressed. This is a problem with transitions. In 1985 the mass movement in Chile was quite extraordinary and that's what created the refusal of Pinochet, but when the transition actually arrived that movement was suppressed, and I don't think the U.S. wasn't a participant. It was a dangerous time.

There was the possibility of another popular uprising, that Chile would become a modern progressive country.

The shots evoking my childhood were images of a kind of paradise, the magical world of objects in which I lived as a child. It took me three months to find the house in which we filmed. My childhood home had actually been demolished. I found the house we filmed in a provincial town of just five thousand people and I couldn't believe it. All the things I had had in my own home were there. I discovered that in the provinces time moves more slowly. If in Santiago we're in 2010, in a little provincial town it's still the 1960s in respect of the objects. I'm interested in these different kinds of time. There's also a difference in how time passes in different countries. In Ecuador, for instance, they're all in the 1960s: the clothes, shoes, all the paraphernalia, and the sounds. It's very interesting.

The beautiful shots of sunlight spilling through windows anticipate the recurring images of floating dust motes, but also the astronomer talks about how he imagines searching for his father and mother in the heavens, and Valentina recalls her happy childhood despite the coup. But there's such sadness involved in this collective assertion of a happy family past, given the actual historical context.

Again there's a big contradiction, although of course happiness can live with sadness and pain. I wanted to touch on that particular subject. You can be happy but still be the victim of a tragedy at the same time. That's how life is. Valentina sees in the Milky Way the atoms of her parents and of course she's talking about eternal life, and even from a scientific rather than a religious point of view.

As for the dust: for half the film we were very conscious of the texture of the different materials we were filming. In the desert you can only film in the morning and the evening. The sun is too powerful in the middle of the day. So at that time, when we couldn't film in the desert, we chose

to film little things—little details, tiny stones, rays of light, reflections, shadows, cracks between objects and their undersides. The resulting images of the substance of materiality look abstract, and it's really quite impressive. We took masses of shots like that. We weren't sure why, but that's how the documentary developed. You look intuitively with film and you find the theme. Sometimes it's successful, sometimes not. But that dust became fundamental. We found a big astronomical cupola from which the telescope had been removed. It was disused and actually full of rubbish. When I saw that space I actually saw the whole process of the coup d'état in the destruction and the absence of what was supposed to be there. I saw this dustbin place as a metaphor. It was thick with dust. There was lots of powdered glass and at one point we started throwing it in the air when the light that was entering the building was like the light you might see in a cathedral. When we did this it was like you could actually see the Milky Way there. We were captivated by this sight for a whole day. The director of the observatory said, "What on earth are you doing there? We've got the telescopes over here!" She was absolutely baffled! She had prepared this whole official visit and we spent the day throwing dust in the air. But that's what you need to do with documentary cinema. It's a path you have to discover and explore. You don't know where it will lead, if anywhere, but the process is often very moving.

The women who search in the desert finally meet with the astronomer in another observatory and although it's a polite encounter it seems that there's an underlying tension, and a fundamental contradiction between their outlooks.

You are right. Exactly. There's a moment of apparent reconciliation, when the astronomer is with the ladies by the telescope. But it's a show, it's on the surface. The three of them share a moment. They are friendly, but that's it. That scene is interesting because the women didn't want to go and do that. They didn't want to talk to the astronomer. They asked me, "What are we going to say to this astronomer? We're ignorant." And the astronomer said, "What am I going to say to them?"

They're actually more important than I am." So when they got together it was quite difficult to begin with, but the astronomer had a very good idea. He said, "The moon has been watching the earth for millions of years. The moon knows everything that has happened on earth. Therefore we should ask the moon where those disappeared have gone." This metaphor prompted a very emotional moment. He gained their trust and they were able to continue with this meeting. But I didn't want to put in all this dialogue. I felt a little bit of music was enough.

Is memory inextricable from loss and mourning?

For some it is one thing and for others it's another. When you think about the absence and the loss of pain. There are many ways to die. Even dreaming is a form of dying. The disappearances are another form of death. To forget is a form of death. All these different deaths are present in these different people, even in the astronomer when he invokes the idea of his own relatives being lost in the stars, or the archeologist who says to me, "Patricio, you're obsessed with the coup d'état. What about the Indians? Who killed the Indians? We killed them." All these different deaths inhabit the film. I was actually afraid of being so close to the theme of death in the film because the sequence of the asteroids and the bones, I actually thought of that when I was at home in Paris: to compare the bones with asteroids—because they look the same and are made of the same substance (as the American George Preston explains in the film) and that's the circle, the circle of death.