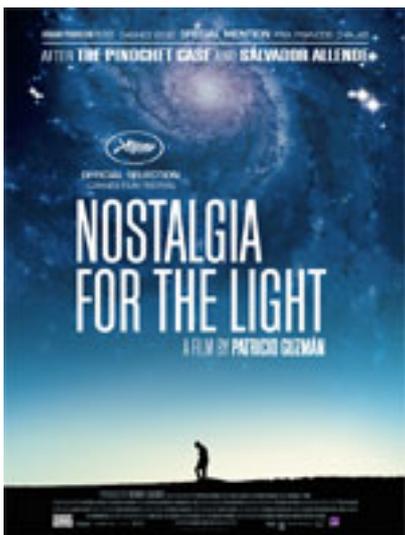




Images from *Nostalgia for the Light* courtesy of Icarus Films

Toward a New Temporality and Archive of “Revolution”: Patricio Guzmán’s *Nostalgia for/of the Light*¹

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Set in the heart of the Atacama desert, Patricio Guzmán’s new film *Nostalgia por la luz* (*Nostalgia for / of the Light*) probes the relationships between two vast and unending quests

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for answers: scientific inquiries into the earth and solar system for the origins of life and the search for an explanation of the brutalities of the Pinochet regime. Spanning the gritty materiality of the arid desert and metaphysics of the galaxy, these quests are linked by the eerie geography of the Atacama, where both the mothers of the disappeared in Calama and scientists search unrelentingly for different sets of answers. The driest desert in the Western hemisphere, Atacama is deemed to be a portal to the stars, due to its optimal atmospheric conditions. The nitrate-rich composition of the soil preserves everything buried beneath the surface, making it an important place for archaeologists, who search for an “indigenous past,” combing Atacama for ancient hieroglyphs and mummified pre-Columbian remains. Finally, Atacama is where Pinochet and his henchmen buried the bones of the disappeared during their reign of terror of that military dictatorship (1973–1990). Atacama is thus both a site of repression and discovery, creation and destruction, death and life; a place whose stunning beauty has long inspired artists and scientists alike; and a space for the literal burial suffocation of *el sueño revolucionario* by a regime seeking to cover over the very violence that brought it into being.

Anchored in this strange landscape, *Nostalgia* is a visually breathtaking film that draws its audience into a series of interlinked paradoxes regarding history, politics and the passage of time that appear as infinite as the galaxies that swirl in front of the viewer’s eyes. Invoked in the Spanish title, which translates both into *Nostalgia for the Light* and *Nostalgia of the Light*, is the claim of modern physics that the present itself does not exist. Rather, the present is always a composite of prior experiences, comprised of light particles that only reach us after their moment has passed. Simultaneously, the film makes the claim that our bones are literally comprised of stardust—the physical matter of the past. Light, which allows an experience of the “present” is hence inherently nostalgic, just as we are left nostalgic for a past that is always fleeting. The longed-for past thus never quite catches up with us at the same time that it is always already in our midst.



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In what follows, I explore the ways in which Guzmán’s film speaks directly to the conditions of its making. In the multiple temporalities this film yields, *Nostalgia* inserts ongoing quests for justice into a deeper epistemology of life that is cyclical, multi-layered, and larger than us all. Reading *Nostalgia* in the context of Guzmán’s larger body of work, I first argue that this film departs from the now canonical

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repertoire of images, sounds, and iconography of revolution and dictatorship that permeate Chilean cinema. Extracting revolution and backlash from a singular telos of history, Guzmán widens the scope, allowing for a fresh perspective on the problematics that have imbued his life's work. The story of dictatorship is thus no longer so tightly moored to a familiar affective economy of loss and longing. Second, I examine the multiple palimpsests of unending struggle that *Nostalgia* reveals. Symbolized, quite literally, by deposits of sedimented bone that merge both in the earth and sky, Guzmán's narrative plumbs several layers of submerged state violence that are rarely yoked together: dictatorial, gendered, and colonial. As such, Guzmán's narrative allows the viewer to place the unending tragedy and saga of the disappeared into a longer durée of struggle, if only unwittingly so.

In order to assess the work that *Nostalgia* does, it is first critical to locate this film in the context of Guzmán's larger *obra*. A key figure in the development of the genre of Latin American revolutionary documentary, Guzmán dramatically entered the cinematic scene with his films *El primer año* (*The First Year*, 1971) and *La batalla de Chile* (*The Battle of Chile*, 1978). Indexes of their unique historical moments, both films were forged in the crucible of revolution and backlash surrounding the defeat of Salvador Allende's Unidad Popular and Augusto Pinochet's rise to power in 1973. Ever since then, Guzmán's work has functioned as a barometer, chronicling the grueling twists and turns of Chile's political history. His work has offered forth a candid glimpse into the subjective forms and intimate registers of politics from the perspective of one of this history's protagonists. From the clandestinely rescued reels of *La batalla de Chile* smuggled out of Chile during Guzmán's exile, to his somber *Chile: Memoria obstinada* (*Obstinate Memory* 1997), a work that brilliantly succeeded in capturing the silences and foreclosures painfully enshrined into a post-dictatorial "peace," Guzmán has offered forth a close view into the subjective dimensions of one of the most decisive geopolitical clashes of the century.



IMAGE COURTESY OF ICARUS FILMS

Reading *Nostalgia* within the context of this trajectory, one is compelled to ask: what does *Nostalgia*—a film whose overriding ethos is that of an unending search—have to say about the conditions of our present? Does it diagnose a ceding of the Political to the realm of Metaphysics? Or, is Guzmán ambling toward a different temporality and archive of struggle, as he works to re-narrate a lifetime's search for answers—one that has, more often than not, left its

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participants grasping for bits of bone in the sand?

Above all, *Nostalgia* is a film about memory and the passing of time. On the surface it is inscribed within a historical telos that those familiar with Chile's political landscape over the last four decades know so well: that of the 1973 violent interruption of politics in a slumbering Chile. As critic Nelly Richard has argued: "the coup did not only materially destroy the political order that sustained the democratic tradition of Chile [...], it unleashed a series of breaks and ruptures within the whole system of intelligibility" (Richard 2000, 273). Articulating a common historiographical premise, Richard constructs Chile as a stable totality and the dictatorship as an "exception" from an otherwise ongoing democratic tradition governed by rationality and the rule of law.

On first glimpse, Guzmán's narration resonates with this commonly held story of an interrupted tranquility. A survivor of such tragic circumstances, Guzmán yearns for Chile as a soothing totality, perched sleepily at the edge of the continent. In an opening sequence, for example, the camera meanders slowly along a series of household objects. Sifted through soft light we see a chair, an old sewing machine, and a lace napkin on a plate. Guzmán's voice sets the tone as one of an equilibrium stolen. He states:

Chile was a haven of peace, isolated from the world. Santiago slept in the foothills of the Cordillera, detached from the rest of the world... *Nothing ever happened*. The Presidents of the Republic walked through the streets unescorted. *Only the present moment existed*.

Guzmán shares memories of looking through a telescope in Santiago and playing with smoked glass; of a little boy submerged in the pleasures of wellbeing and the wonder of scientific discovery. His voice lingers upon the phrases "*nunca ocurría nada*" ("nothing ever happened") and "*solo el presente existía*" ("only the present existed") and the camera moves in on the front of a typical Santiago home, refracted through swirling particles of dust. All is unified, cohesive, and at peace.



IMAGE COURTESY OF ICARUS FILMS

This peace is soon to be shattered by the all-encompassing *golpe* and the ensuing expropriations of life, justice, and a sense of revolutionary historical destiny itself. Guzmán narrates the story of Chile's plunge into "the center of the world," forced

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by the exigencies of the Chilean Revolution and, more importantly, the coup. Interestingly, however, Guzmán does not stay here for long. Nor does he draw from the trove of now-iconic images of *golpe*—the images, which Guzmán, more than any other documentarian has provided to the historical record and collective imagination. Absent are Andean flutes and *La Moneda* up in flames; absent are Pinochet and the stark marching forms of *Patria y Libertad* party members, unified resolutely in Nazi salute; and absent is the image from *Batalla de Chile* and *Salvador Allende* (2006) of a man with his cart, running fast in the wind, symbolizing the freedom never allowed to fully arrive.

Instead, the camera shifts its scale dramatically, panning back onto other images of vastness: the earth, the solar system, and galaxy upon galaxy. We meet the astronomer Gaspar Galaz and Lautaro Núñez Atencio, the archaeologist—both of whom emerge as prominent voices to narrate the rest of the story—alongside the Mothers of the Disappeared and the well-known torture survivor, artist, and architect, Miguel Lawner. We also meet dictatorship survivor and astronomer Valentina and hear the story of Luís Henriquez, who psychologically survived Chacabuco concentration camp with his comrades by setting up a telescope to view the stars. Disarticulating the tragedy of dictatorship from its familiar visual and sonic repertoire, Guzmán works to place it in a larger scope through a cast of characters both familiar and not. As such, he moves beyond the singular historical narrative of the coup disrupting an already existing continuity and stability.

As I have elaborated elsewhere, more than any other region in Chile, the Atacama region reveals several key structural antagonisms foundational to modernity, capitalism, and the (post)colonial nation. Located along the “border” of Peru and Bolivia, a key site of militant labor clashes, Atacama stands as emblematic of the *ongoing* colonial, gender and class violence—struggles that have been foundational to the creation and sustenance of “Chile” as we know it.² For example, it is impossible to speak of Atacama without an analysis of the ways in which its extreme geographical marginality has come to be encoded with marginal expressions of race, sexuality, and gender, alongside more fully known and ongoing battles punctuated along cleavages of a properly articulated “class qua class.” Thus, as feminist anthropologist Lessie Jo Frasier has brilliantly revealed, long before the dictatorship or Guzmán’s slumbering Chile, the Tarapacá region of Chile long stood as a national “symbol [of] state violence and rebellious vitality, repression and transformation” (Frazer 2007, 5). This includes hyper-visible labor clashes, such as the infamous 1907 massacre of over 2,000 miners and their families at the School of Santa Maria de Iquique.

Moreover, such inherent antagonisms also include occluded histories of struggle that have been less easily absorbed into structures of national memory, such as the exiling of “sexual dissidents” (i.e. queer and transgender people) who were placed with communists and “common criminals” in Pisagua Prison (Spira 2011). Additionally, it has been argued that the genesis of 20th century Chilean feminism actually has roots in militant and anarchist labor struggles of the north—an argument made in the 1970s by the Marxist feminist Julieta Kirkwood

and more recently by Diamela Eltit, both of whom credited Belén de Sárraga, an early twentieth century labor organizer, with laying the philosophical foundations of Chilean feminism.³ Moreover, as Erika Beckman has importantly argued, it was during the War of the Pacific (1879-1883), in which Chile battled for territory from Peru and Bolivia, that a “whitened” and “imperial” Chilean racial identity was forged (Beckman 2008).



IMAGE COURTESY OF ICARUS FILMS

By widening the frame of reference and turning to Atacama, with all of its inherent antagonisms, Guzmán allows for a richer composite of “pasts” that come to form the “present.” Light refracted through particles of stardust—the literal matter of the past—fills the frame. Stunning shots of the star-studded solar system are juxtaposed against this image, so as to reveal a semblance across magnitudes and scales. With this new visual archive accompanying the story of a world torn asunder, he moves to the northern Atacama Desert to chronicle the intertwining stories of astronomers, archaeologists and the family members of the disappeared.

Interestingly, Guzmán’s search for re-unification of a stolen whole is brought together with the unlikely pairing of science and politics. The male scientists Gaspar Galaz and Lautaro Núñez Atencio epitomize scientific rationality, serving as narrators who provide key facts that allow the story to progress. One of the most striking embodiments of the two intertwining quests for knowledge about the disappeared and scientific inquiry, however, takes form in the story of Valentina, featured in Guzmán’s film *Salvador Allende* as a child. Valentina’s story is particularly heartbreaking because, faced with the threat of her own murder as an infant, Valentina’s grandparents were manipulated into turning her parents in to the military police.

Now an adult, Valentina became an astronomer as a means for coping with the pain of the past. As she explains, she spends her days looking through a telescope, turning to the sky to find that which cannot be found in the earth:

Astronomy has somehow helped me to give another dimension to the pain, to the absence, to the loss. Sometimes when one is alone with that pain ... the pain becomes oppressive. I tell myself its all part of a cycle that didn’t begin and won’t end with me, nor with my parents, or with my children (*tal vez*). I tell myself we are all part of a current—of an energy—of recyclable matter. Like the stars which must die that other stars can be born, other planets, no life. In this

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context, what happened to my parents and their absence takes on another dimension. It takes on another meaning and it frees me a little from this great suffering as I feel that nothing really comes to an end.

Valentina stares sweetly into the camera, her eyes registering a lifetime of yearning but also a resolution she has found in her work and the larger knowledge it brings. Valentina adds strong emotional force to a scientific claim made earlier in the film that the physical matter constituting the bones of the dead is identical to the dust particles found in the cosmos. This empirical scientific “explanation” brings relief to both Valentina and the viewer, offering a kind of cosmic reunification for the forever disappeared and generations to come. With this greatly expanded archive spanning galaxies, Valentina achieves a more cyclical temporality in which to understand her overwhelming loss. This ability to find a measure of peace amidst irresolvable pain is poignantly underscored in the image of her holding her own sleeping baby tightly in her arms. The image of Valentina and her infant serve as powerful symbols of continuity and the cyclical nature of life that exceeds the cruelty of life cut short.



IMAGE COURTESY OF ICARUS FILMS

Nostalgia thus succeeds unlike any other Chilean film I have seen at dislodging the revolution-dictatorship-democracy triad from its now static framing of history, reliant upon a familiar repertoire of loss and longing. Instead, it re-inserts this history into a deeper epistemology of life as cyclical, multi-layered and larger than all of us. Shifting the narrative frame, it is undoubtedly the work of an aging filmmaker coming to terms with his own mortality after a lifetime of struggle. In so doing, Guzmán opens up a new space from which to engage painful and unresolved issues of loss that are both sensitive and sacrosanct.

And yet, despite this re-framing of the story, the larger story Guzmán provides is still rife with inequalities. At play, for example, are the classed and gendered divisions between the protagonists of *las dos búsquedas*: the young, educated, male scientist astronomers and the now elderly women of Calama who have, for over 35 years, been wandering the desert, shovels in hand, in search of missing lovers, children, and friends.⁴ While the male scientists spend their days immersed in the pleasure of scientific inquiry, the search for bones is relegated to women who are still considered social pariahs—a dynamic encoded in the wizened face of Violeta Berríos who has been searching for her son for over thirty years and whose greatest wish is not to die before finding her son’s bones. The film’s ending and narrative resolution

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comes when Guzmán brings together Galaz and the women of Calama, who have been invited to the large telescope. Underscoring the inequality left intact in this (nonetheless beautiful) encounter, Berríos stares boldly into the camera and states: “I wish the telescopes didn’t just look into the sky but also could see through the earth so we could find (the disappeared).”

Finally—undergirding the whole narrative of *Nostalgia*—there is “the indigenous question.” It is precisely the presence of “pre-Hispanic” culture that secures the “marvel” and “mystery” of the north itself for Guzmán. In fact, I’d argue that it is this presence/absence of indigeneity that allows Guzmán’s story to be told precisely because it opens up alternative ontological understandings, including a much longer *durée* of struggle foundational to Chile (as well as the Americas). Shattering the myth of a tranquil or “slumbering” Chile that was thrown into chaos only by the coup, this subtext reveals the utter violence and instability that was always inherent to the project of modern nation building. Throughout the film, the “magical” quality of the north is yoked together with both implicit and explicit references to indigeneity—ancient hieroglyphics etched on rocks, tarnished photos of indigenous miners that once populated the abandoned *salitre* factories and even mention of the striking paradox that for a country so deeply embroiled in debates about the astrological and political past, it is curious that histories of race and racialization are so elided from the national narrative. For example, Núñez Atencio mentions the taboo fact that, while so much effort has been put into understanding the deep geological history of the north, little work has been done to think critically about the lives of indigenous miners who worked the nitrate factories that once served as the economic powerhouse of the nation.⁵

Visually referenced in *Nostalgia* by the abandoned *salitre* factories and the presence of the iconic images of Luís Emilio Recabarren, the north is home to a rich history of militant labor organizing—a history whose entrails remain in eerie ghost towns along vast stretches of desert sand.⁶ However, as they literally emerge from the parched desert earth, these struggles far exceed the single axis of class or Revolution’s singular temporalities of struggle.⁷ Thus, and returning directly to *Nostalgia*, while, in 2011, as Guzmán works toward resolution and closure, Chile is once again wracked by a new generation of struggle. This new struggle is led by Mapuche communities and youth, who are at the forefront of these protest movements and represent sectors of society who were either not yet born during the epic moment of *La batalla* or whose concerns were overwhelmingly disregarded at the time by a Left built upon generations of unresolved colonial antagonisms.

In this sense, *Nostalgia* remains consistent with Guzmán’s relentless project to bring to consciousness the very contradictions that punctuate the contemporary moment. Reaching toward pressing social questions in the moment of their emergence, Guzmán both diagnoses our current situation and ascertains history in the making. Culling lessons learned from one particular history of struggle, he reveals himself to be a subject who is simultaneously enmeshed in a lifetime’s quest for justice and who is also a product of the very hierarchies of race, gender and nation that will continue issuing a challenge to the nation-state until they are

heeded.

By widening the frame in which such stories can be told, Guzmán thereby unwittingly reveals the pre-histories of multi-layered palimpsests of loss and violence—injustices that may currently be lodged within contemporary formations of neoliberal capitalism masquerading as “democracy,” but violences which have roots that reach back even further than the history of the dictatorship—or even capitalism itself. In so doing, he raises critical issues for the viewer interested in questions of social transformation—particularly in our current moment when neoliberalism is retrenching across the hemisphere and it has become abundantly clear that our global “dictatorship of the market” enshrined within deep ecological imbalance can no longer hold. With this beautiful film, Guzmán therefore beckons a deep meditation upon the conditions of its emergence in which we must all partake. Placing history in a new narrative frame so the story can be told differently, he opens up the space for new questions to emerge and for old questions to be asked anew.

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Notes

¹ I thank Alison Merz, Emily Davidson, Lupe Arenillas, Michael Lazzara, Keith Feldman, and Carl Fischer for discussing this film and piece with me. I am also indebted to the reviewers of this essay whose engagement and probing questions assisted me in sharpening my argument.

² For a more fleshed out analysis of the gendered, racialized and sexual contradictions embedded in Pisagua, and the north more broadly, please see Tamara Lea Spira, “Neoliberal Captivities: Pisagua Prison and the Low Intensity Form.”

³ De Sárraga is credited as being a spark to Chilean feminism by the great Juileta Kirkwood in her brilliant treatise, *Ser política en Chile: las feministas y los partidos* (Santiago-Chile: Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, 1986). De Sárraga also appears in the contemporary works, such as Diamela Eltit’s *Mano de obra* (2002). I thank Carl Fischer for

reminding me of this.

⁴ Valentina is the only female scientist featured in a highly masculinized domain in a male-dominated domain. Her story stands undeniably one of the most powerful symbols of the unified quests for answers in the sky and the earth, perhaps because it unites different strands of Guzmán's search unlike no other figure in the film.

⁵ The racial origin of the miners is not racialized as "indigenous" or "mestizo" per say in the official historical record, classifications which themselves slip outside the very silenced framings of the nation mentioned here. However, as in the rest of Latin America, class is deeply embedded in racial hierarchies, as is geography, particularly in the far northern desert and the southern stretches of Patagonia. For an excellent discussion on the racialization of the North, and specifically Chile's racial imaginaries vis-à-vis more overtly marked indigenous communities in Peru and Bolivia, and Chile's internal racial indigenous others, please see Ericka Beckman's "Imperial Impersonations: Chilean Racism and the War of the Pacific" (2008).

⁶ Recabarren is one of the most prominent figures of Chilean labor radicalism of the 20th century.

⁷ Here, I refer both to the telos of revolution that was taken up in Chile and far beyond. For an important analysis of the telos of history in which historical revolutionary struggles of the late twentieth century were inscribed, please see Achille Mbembe, "African Modes of Self Writing."

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