Tribute

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Nostalgic for Patricio Guzman

Patricio Guzman (11 Aug 1941 – 15 Sept 2026)

The camera resembles a telescope— one sees reality, one films it, and we see that reality doesn't exist. And cinema is also a time machine. When one watches a film the images unfold before using the present but they're already images of the past. — Patricio Guzman

At the age of 85, on 15 September 2026, the greatest Chilean documentarian Patricio Guzman died. My first encounter with his cinematic essay was at Nandan, the venue of the Kolkata International Film Festival in 2015. *The Pearl Button* made in the same year literally mesmerised my inquisitive self- leaving indelible images in memory. Patricio Guzman's documentaries usually explore themes of the recent past which haunted the Chilean psyche, chiefly the country's past under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.

The dimensions inextricably extend far beyond, as the film philosopher in him tried to understand life as an outcome of correlation between the planet and the universe, the inward and the outward thus entangled. But the aforesaid film title was inspired by a shirt button discovered during a decade old investigation prior to making of the film. Victims of the infamous regime were sometimes dumped in the sea by tying a rail track metal into their bodies so that they didn't surface on the water and looked to have disappeared.

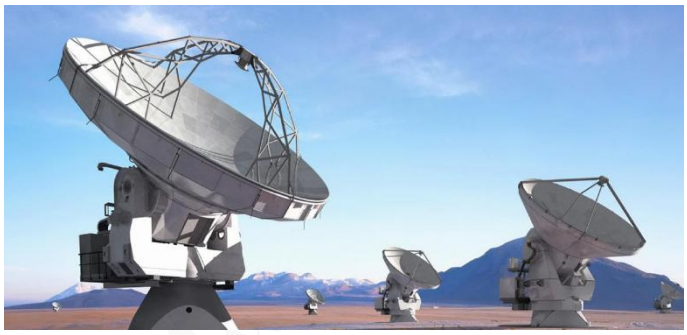
Guzman at a young age

Shot in the Patagonia region and the Atacama desert on the Pacific coast of South America, the film's focus on a button found with a rail trunk had generated certain suspicion about its origin. It came out as a metaphor of atrocities committed on political dissenters, but Guzman took the viewers to an altogether different era of suppression on the native inhabitants of Chile. That button had its own historic past as it was named after Jemmy Button, the Yaghan native who was lured to England by the colonisers and Christian missionaries far back in the early 19th century. The interconnection between two persecuted groups— the indigenous people and the victims of a genocide— were thus skilfully introduced. In fact General Pinochet ran concentration camps to torture people of ethnic origin after his predecessor President Salvador Allende, the first democratically elected Marxist leader in the West, rehabilitated them. Bodies of murdered political opponents were buried in secret mass graves inside the colossal desert, before some being excavated out and thrown into the waters of the Pacific from helicopters.

The content invites further inquiry of the geography and history of the land with simultaneous focus on water on earth and inaccessible universe of the sky. They are so engaging on a subjective level that the spectator tends to immerse in a vortex of ideas, intuitions and artistic work, notwithstanding that the narrative delves deep into facts and cuts to the essay film format. It's hard to forget how a large and lengthy parchment map of the unique country is spread out in a long studio floor, water being explained as an element associated with undocumented experiences of life past and present, scenes of the desert land known as the driest place on earth which is also home to the world's largest radio telescopes studying the galaxy, shots of dead bodies weighed with rail trunk dropped from helicopter into the ocean, grieving members of indigenous tribes, and, last but not least, close up of one of those rusted rail trunk retrieved from the ocean that displays a shirt button encrusted onto it.

A Silver Bear winner for best screenplay at Berlin, *The Pearl Button* (2015) is part of a trilogy which was enormously sensitised by the past, forming a part of nostalgia held by its creator all his life. The film is the second instalment of Guzman's 'Nostalgia trilogy', the others being *Nostalgia for the Light* and (2010) and *The Cordillera of Dreams* (2019). Stressing on 'nostalgia' as the thematic focus of these films, he said in an interview, "It's a film about the past, a demonstration that the most important thing in life is the past, because the whole territory of the past is fundamental for people and the future. In as much as we are human beings, we are the inheritors of generation upon generation going back to prehistory, the matter of our bodies is the matter of the stars. We belong to the Milky Way— that's our home, not just the Earth." (*Sight and Sound*, 6 July 2012)

Guzman's films are incomparably a synthesis between archaeological and astronomical interests: the obsession with the universe had its origin in his fascination for the deep sky, a recurring metaphor in his films. It's like "a renovation, or a renewal". In his words, "astronomy and archaeology have so much in common." In *Nostalgia for the Light* Guzman was very keen to reflect on the relationship between human life and the life of the cosmos. Images reveal women digging for traces of murdered kith and kin, archaeologists unearthing vanished Indian settlements, astronomers surveying the sky, and so on. A dream of his childhood was to become an astronomer, a dream that drove different expressions in his films. But his interest in filmmaking grew stronger through making amateur 8 mm shorts at first— then, the interest took him to Madrid and he graduated in film direction from a historic state film school in 1970.



By the way, *Nostalgia for the Light* wasn't a science documentary, but unmistakably was grounded in philosophical reflection on human memory and the memory of the universe. One of the key exchanges in the film is with an astronomer while another interaction is designed with an archaeologist, both of whom talk about not only mathematics and history but also music and poetry. Over and above all this, the narrative is deeply rooted in the country's political memory and geographical identities. When they're visually connected simultaneously to the barren wilderness of the desert and the night sky, all of them presumably silent witness to an overpowering melancholy, the images autogenerate a sense of pure poetry. There are multiple ways to define astronomy's relation to grieving humanity in those images: as it opens up a mental fulcrum, a way of thinking and consoling in the aftermath of state-sponsored barbarism, a past that might look tiny against the mysteries hidden in the cosmos. It was not a coincidence

that the atrocious regime forbade access to the astronomical observatory in Atacama, lest it would serve the sceptics with evidence of those ghastly acts in the desert.

No one held time at ransom for cosmological, archaeological and historical values like the way Guzman did. Coming back to his pet themes again and again, he created a grand narrative, as vindicated by his two other trilogies— one was the 'Battle of Chile trilogy 'and the other was 'trilogy of Memory'.

The Battle of Chile (1975-1979) lasting 260 minutes in total was an epic three-part documentary that took on President Allende's attempt at overhauling the system to democratic socialism that failed due to a bloody military coup resulting in Allende's death and grabbing of power by General Pinochet notoriously backed by the US. The trilogy of memory consists of *Chile, Obstinate Memory* (1997), *The Pinochet Case* (2001) and *Salvador Allende* (2004). The vast desert and the same landscape being excavated, as well as suffering under dictatorship and yearning for justice, have found visual references in parts of every trilogy.

Philosophical and poetic at once, Guzman's 'Cinema Verite 'style might have chronicled Chile's political strife of the 1970s, but he refused to be dubbed a political filmmaker. However, his last film *My Imaginary Country* (2022) made on the backdrop of Chile's 2019 street protests proved otherwise, presenting a 'Direct Film ' by a politically charged filmmaker. He exulted, telling that Chile had gotten its memory back, as people marched for more democracy, for a more dignified life, better education and better health system for all. Yet there were no hints in sight that he wanted to take back his wish of being recognised as a filmmaker who interpreted reality through his own personal way of looking. (Quoted in *The Guardian*, 20 July 2012)

Understood. But the moot question is: why did a period of political turmoil keep returning to his films? The answer lies in an apparent forgetfulness of the public and the institutions, albeit deceitful, of a country with a deep scar which a sensible filmmaker's conscience couldn't digest. So with a sense of regret he made it a point to come back to that scar. It's clear from another statement he made during the interview with *Sight and Sound*: "It's not historical amnesia that's my obsession— the coup d'état, Allende, etc— it's the amnesia of the hundred years of the life of the republic."

Guzman went on to lament that official Chilean history was "written by the historians of the Chilean aristocracy who lie systematically". The school texts were inappropriate, the polity tried to erase the bitter truth; the institutionalised history of the Americas in fact was dictated by the conquerors and by those in league with them. A void was felt and Guzman's 'obsession'— in his own preferred term— thrived in it, thrived on the 'disappearance 'of true history,

of indigenous people in the same way as seen at the times of the conquest of the Far West as in the time of the oppressive Pinochet regime.

The 'obsession 'intact, the reality of disappearance of the political dissenters found a relatable chord anyway. Not only the opposing activists, but Guzman's own crew members met with the same fate.

The Battle of Chile even retained footage in which the camera operator Leonardo Henrichsen captured his own death as he kept the camera running when he was shot and killed by the army on the spot. The horrifying street scene became one of the most cited sequences in the history of documentary cinema. However, the film's cinematographer Jorge Muller Silva was arrested along with his girlfriend who was a Chilean actress and other crew members. They were tortured, and the couple's fate remained unknown, adding yet another instance of 'disappearance'. Guzman himself was luckier though, arrested but eventually released. The filmmaker's ordeal in the face of such hostility didn't confine there. For film stock and other vital needs, the French documentarian Chris Marker played a generous role by supplying 25,000 feet of raw stock at first. In an earlier visit to Santiago, Marker was actually impressed by a young Guzman's first feature-length work titled *The First Year* (1971) which captured the initial twelve months of Allende's government.

It was a time of revolutionary turmoil across Latin America. The year Marker met Guzman was 1971. Two years later Allende's government was toppled; Guzman already started shooting for *The Battle of Chile*. He continued to shoot in the fashion of a newsreel film up to the day of the coup, the 11th September 1973. He was arrested and held for about two weeks in a stadium compound in Santiago. When freed, he left the country in November 1973. All the reels of the film, approximately twenty hours of footage, were hidden at the home of Guzman's uncle and later sent out of the country with the help of the Swedish embassy at great risk. Marker again helped him with finance from Cuban Institute of Cinematography. One of the foremost proponents of New Latin American Cinema, the German-born Chilean filmmaker-editor Pedro Chaskel, then exiled in Cuba, came on board as co-writer and editor of the film. Cuban filmmaker and noted Third Cinema theorist Julio Garcia Espinosa also served as artistic supervisor, mainly co-writing the film. While in Santiago, Chaskel recorded the bombing of the presidential palace during the coup and those footages formed a vital part in *The Battle of Chile*.

The finished trilogy titled as *The Insurrection of the Bourgeoisie* (1975), *The Coup d'Etat* (1976) and *Popular Power* (1979) combined to a total of about four-and-a-half-hour. As a whole the film isn't constructed in chronological order. The first part deals with interviews, speeches, rallies in the rundown to the general election of 1973, concluding with its Argentine cameraman Henrichsen killed by the captain of a military

unit during a street skirmish. The second part shows various stages of the prevailed anarchy, confrontation of unarmed masses with aggressive armed forces, ending at the violent overthrow of Allende government with bombing of the radio station and the presidential palace. The third part analyses the events depicted in the previous two parts and focuses on the working class response to them with extensive interviews during the popular government's initiatives of land reform and industrial reorganisation. *Sight and Sound* cited it as one of the greatest documentaries ever made. Guzman continued to make documentaries while in exile in Cuba, Spain and France. Several of his later films were devoted to the memory of those who fought for social justice and dared the secret police and death squads of the military junta in Chile.

In the 1960s-70s 'Latin America, mass movements were on the rise leading to socio-economic transformation starting from Cuba to other countries. In this backdrop political uprising on one hand and artistic awakening on the other were spreading like wildfire in the whole continent. So, at one level, the government of a popular front led by a Marxist was seen as a threat to the comprador class, their fear of losing hold over Chilean resources got doubled on account of a nationalisation process initiated in no time. The international free market aggression led by the US in entire Latin America got a fillip in post-Allende Chile coupled with political vengeance. And, on the other level, the new film movements like Cinema Novo in Brazil, Third Cinema in Argentina, Imperfect Cinema of Cuba, etc saw a generation of daring filmmakers taking bold new aesthetics to the next stage. The new connoisseurs included Glauber Rocha in Brazil, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in Argentina, Santiago Alvarez and Tomas Gutierrez Alea in Cuba, Raul Ruiz and Miguel Litin in Chile, Jorge Sanjines in Bolivia, among many others. They used both documentary and fiction as tools— hardcore evidence and distortion of reality with a purpose— for countering systematised lies and economic-political exploitation, advocating for an end to discriminatory policies. Patricio Guzman's subversiveness was a new addition to the already mushrooming growth of the new trend which was best amplified in a text declaration by Solanas and Getino: "… the birth of a third cinema means, at least for us, the most important revolutionary artistic event of our times." (*New Latin American Cinema, Vol. 1*, 1997)

Against the outrage and threat to life, Rocha, Solanas, Chaskel, Litin, Guzman and most of their fraternity had to take refuge outside their home countries. Guzman returned to his homeland after more than two decades of exile to shoot for *Chile, Obstinate Memory* in 1996 which examined the country's political amnesia as an outcome of a long-standing dictatorship and people's reactions to seeing his epoch-making *The Battle of Chile* for the first time. "It's

legitimate to dream to fight for your own dreams," a student tells on camera in the penultimate sequence of *Chile, Obstinate Memory* after a group of college students saw *The Battle of Chile*. They were shell-shocked and overwhelmed by their first encounter with a history they had little knowledge of. They vented out their feelings with overpowering emotions when they sat together to watch Guzman's epic film from which scenes were incorporated with the writer-director's own narration and himself visiting scenes of happenings that shook the country, thereby making *Chile, Obstinate Memory* a unique semi-autobiographical documentary. The revolutionary Chilean poet and diplomat Pablo Neruda, known as Allende's friend, would also have been moved by Guzman's filmography, had he escaped Pinochet's Chile and lived in exile again!

Guzman was critical of a palpable neglect of the authorities who refrained from telecasting *The Battle of Chile*, though Pinochet's legacy is no more with democracy returning to the land. Allegedly every time someone was talking about Salvador Allende, they stole images from his film but used them in a context different from the original. One may relate this experience with a less discussed aspect associated with his counterpart, legendary Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieslowski whose career in filmmaking began with documentaries. Kieslowski's *Workers '71* (1971) documented a workers 'strike against price rise in basic amenities, but screening of the film was disallowed, interviews were cut from it, sound rolls suddenly disappeared from the editing room and Kieslowski was falsely accused of smuggling the recordings to foreign media. A regime under the Communist leadership was hell-bent upon erasing images of its bad reputation from public memory and used the repressive state apparatus to do so. During shooting of his another documentary *Station* (1981), police confiscated footage of the film for a different reason, for suspected evidence of a stray incident at the location. (Source: *Kieslowski Publication*, 2026).

Kieslowski was aggrieved for outside interferences in whatsoever manner at that point and circumstances saw him depart quickly from documentary filmmaking. Although he sought to give limitations of the form as a reason for abandoning it, the prime reason of the disillusionment was lack of freedom in artistic expression and in necessary command over technical aspects that go into documentary production. A notable difference in outlook and perception comes up if comparisons are made between Kieslowski's and Guzman's. Both were having conflict of interests with their respective state power. But Guzman didn't abandon his path. For him, documentary film was an essential act of collective memory. Documentary is "the critical conscience of a society", Guzman declared: for him it's "the historical, ecological, artistic and political analysis of a society". Researchers love to

quote him saying that a country without documentary film is like a family without a photo album. Naturally his reputation and such an unparalleled commitment made him one of the most influential documentarians of entire Latin America.

It has been observed that a master in moving visuals usually starts with short films and documentaries and then shifts to fiction features. Solanas for example, along with Getino, made the groundbreaking three-part documentary *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968) that upheld the spirit of the well-known cinema movement. The very next year the duo followed it up with their manifesto *Towards a Third Cinema* which set its dictum as; "The camera is the inexhaustible expropriator of image-weapons; the projector, a gun that can shoot 24 frames per second." (*Towards a Third Cinema*, 1969).

A major documentarian of Solanas ' caliber, a theorist of his own film style, preferred later on to make narrative features, one after another. Documentary elements nevertheless remained vital for the movement to sustain and in many occasions the distinctions between fiction and documentary were blurred in effect. However, Guzman didn't turn the focus of his cinematography to the other format. His firm belief in the documentary form remained intact. This individual trait set him apart from his great contemporaries. History of cinema cannot be complete without a study of Guzman's works: this is the kernel of truth in this eulogy.

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