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“Those who don’t remember don’t exist anywhere:” Historical Redemption in Patricio Guzmán’s *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010)

Abstract

The poetic aesthetic of Patricio Guzman’s documentary *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010) ponders the nature of memory and history. The film uses a metaphysical approach to explore the traumatic past of Chile, creating a sense of historical redemption as defined by Walter Benjamin (1940). Contemporary Latin American documentaries have abandoned the idea of objectivity to focus on subjective portrayals of memory as a way to capture the plurality of personal experiences of historical events. As a result, these documentaries have become more artistic and formally innovative than the previous epic informative films of the region. In the case of Guzman’s *Nostalgia for the Light*, this new articulation of memory draws from the tradition of “transcendental style” as theorized by Paul Schrader as a result of the evolution of documentaries in Latin America. I analyze the redemptive potential of the film’s aesthetics to portray political events and ponder about the potential of “transcendental style” in the documentary mode. I suggest that this approach facilitates a reflection about memory, history, and political trauma in the Chilean context, echoing the heritage of liberation theology as a way to make sense of political oppression through spirituality in Latin America.

Keywords

Patricio Guzmán, *Nostalgia*, documentary, transcendental style, historical redemption, Paul Schrader, Walter Benjamin, Liberation theology, Latin American

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Set in the heart of the Atacama Desert in Chile, *Nostalgia for the Light* (*Nostalgia de la luz*, Patricio Guzmán, 2010) follows two main narrative threads. On the one hand, the film portrays the search for answers of archeologists and astronomers that explore the nature of the universe. On the other hand, the documentary also focuses on a group of women whose family members were executed during Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship. Years after the end of his regime, these women keep looking for the bones of their loved ones in the desert, where the authorities threw them to destroy the evidence of their executions.¹ Additionally, *Nostalgia for the Light* develops secondary motifs that intermingle with the two main narratives. Personal anecdotes about the filmmaker's childhood, testimonials of survivors of the regime, and the portrayal of pre-Columbian art in the Atacama Desert interlace, resulting in a reflexive display of apparently unrelated events. The combination of the different narratives illustrates the contradictions of exploring the past: while science can apparently study the far distant past, Chilean society still has not reached a consensus to access the recent historical period of the dictatorship. However, the film establishes connections between these seemingly unconnected threads, such as the irony that both the scientists and the victims search for traces of the same matter: calcium. As a result of the combination of these narrative layers, the film takes a subjective and poetic approach to different moments of history.

Nostalgia for the Light explores the expressive potential of the tensions between corporeality and abstraction through film form. The film unfolds as a constant negotiation between opposites. It presents pairs of counterparts and brings them into mutual recognition, such as the stars and the bones, scientific research and personal storytelling, and history and memory. The repeated juxtaposition of ideas ultimately becomes the conductive thread. However, even though these might seem like conflicting categories, *Nostalgia for the Light* connects them through reconciliation, as inseparable codependent parts of the same whole. As a result, the documentary

reflects about the specificities of Chile's recent past while simultaneously pondering universal concepts.

The film relies on the minimalist, anti-dramatic tradition of transcendental style to depict concrete geopolitical realities. Dominant discourses about spirituality and cinematic form argue for contemplative aesthetics based on austere formal choices. The phenomenologists Amèdèe Ayfre and Henri Agel, André Bazin's disciples, started this minimalist, contemplative trend in the early 1960s. For them, film cannot be analyzed separate from the viewing experience because it depends on the complex personal predispositions of the spectator.² Therefore, "in the aesthetic evocation of the transcendent, film demands the active participation of the spectator" to interpret the mysterious meanings beyond the surface.³ For Ayfre and Agel, contemplative film has the potential to evoke and capture the traces of the divine, but this divine is transcendent: it exists beyond the image, in the invisible, and film can only portray signs of its presence. At the same time in the United States, scholar Susan Sontag developed a similar model in her essay "Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson" (1964), in which she argues for the same austere "spiritual realism" of Ayfre and Agel. Sontag argued that Bresson's plots and acting method made his films spiritual because the confusing, inexpressive emotions of the characters suggested the mysterious and ambiguous nature of the "human action and the human heart."⁴

But Paul Schrader epitomized this anti-dramatic, introspective aesthetic paradigm with his book *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, and Dreyer*. According to Schrader transcendental style describes a "representative filmic form which expresses the Transcendent."⁵ For Schrader, the transcendent refers to what "is beyond normal sense experience": the holy and the human experience of the divine.⁶ Influenced by his predecessors Bazin and Ayfre, he argues that due to the influence of specific cultural and artistic traditions, transcendental films need to

rely on formal austerity. He argues that this “style seeks to maximize the mystery of existence” and, to that end, it uses a minimalist and less openly expressive form.⁷ Schrader considers cinematic elements such as montage, camera movements, narrative action, expressive acting, and non-diegetic music as “excessive” and identifies them with the mundane and the immanent. Therefore, transcendental films progressively eliminate those aspects to become subtler through a process based on the following steps: first, the depiction of the everyday as a hostile space; second, the “disparity” or conflict that emerges between the main character and the mundane; and lastly, a decisive action that leads to “stasis,” the enlightenment of the film or the transcendence of the character. As a result, Schrader’s definition of transcendental style aims to be universal and to apply to all cultural contexts because it implies a contemplative, introspective understanding of spirituality that exists in transcendence, in the beyond, and not within the physical and mundane objects of social reality.

Nostalgia for the Light appropriates some stylistic elements of transcendental style while it adapts them to the demands of historic memory in contemporary Chile. The tensions between corporeality and abstraction in the film mirror those between immanence and transcendence defined by Schrader. Transcendental style privileges the ethereal, the transcendental, the beyond, and neglects the corporeal as less spiritual. For Schrader, the transcendent can only emerge through the elimination of the mundane. As a result, immanence and transcendence cannot coexist; they negate each other. However, *Nostalgia for the Light* navigates the tensions between immanence and transcendence differently. The relationship between the two emerges as a fluid and productive coexistence: the analogies between the bones and the stars create space for simultaneous reflection on the specific and the abstract. As a result of the coexistence of the corporeal and the transcendental, *Nostalgia for the Light* does not follow the linear structure prescribed by Schrader.

Additionally, geopolitical realities belong to the realm of the mundane and thus they do not have spiritual potential according to transcendental style. Such reasoning implies that documentaries cannot offer Schrader's stasis, or revelatory experiences for the audience, because the mundane cannot express sacredness. I argue that such abstraction indirectly eschews reality and cultural specificity. In fact, it is partly because of the film's documentary nature that the binary between the mundane and the beyond becomes constraining. Yet it is productive to consider transcendental style in the analysis of *Nostalgia for the Light*. Schrader's ideas are still highly influential in the conversation about spirituality and cinematic form, a conversation that often overlooks both documentaries and Latin American cinema. Revising the notion of transcendental style in the context of a political documentary will help elucidate the potential and the limitations of universalizing discourses about spirituality. How does the detached dimension of transcendence apply to a documentary? *Nostalgia for the Light* uses these tensions expressively to capture the elusiveness of memory and traumatic experiences and to problematize the ineffable nature of history and humanity. By analyzing a specific political issue, the film uses cinematic form to ponder the cruel nature of humanity as well as the essence of life in the universe as a whole. Ultimately, such spiritual approach creates a cinematic hierophany, but in this case, such hierophany emerges in a specific geopolitical context infused by traumatic past events. Thus, as I will elaborate in the coming pages, in this film transcendence does not emerge by overcoming the mundane reality but by engaging it. *Nostalgia for the Light* presents a political type of transcendence which takes the form of historical redemption in a Benjaminian sense: the traumatic past can only be redeemed and recovered through a messianic exercise of memory.

However, eliminating the distinction between the specific and the abstract through the portrayal of historical events could pose ethical challenges in documentary filmmaking. As Bill

Nichols argues, style is what makes documentaries untrustworthy because the medium of film itself has the potential to challenge the objective intentions of informative discourses through form.⁸ In the end, the film utilizes the suffering of the victims of the Pinochet regime to reflect upon abstract concepts. The parallel between the universe and the victims ultimately tries to alleviate their suffering but, in doing so, the film could compromise the hardships of the survivors, bypassing a much needed confrontation with historical events and creating a false sense of national forgiveness. In other words, the abstraction of this particular episode of Chilean history could erase its specificities.

However, I argue that the metaphysical and the political productively coexist in *Nostalgia for the Light*. The film reconciles abstract concepts with specific political realities through memory by revisiting the traumatic events with testimonials and interviews. To analyze this process, I first provide a contextualization of Guzmán's career and of the aesthetic evolution of documentaries. Then I analyze the aesthetic choices of the film such as editing and voiceover, to explore how the past and the present coexist in the film. Finally I explore how *Nostalgia for the Light* appropriates Schrader's notion of transcendence and transforms it into historical redemption. I analyze how Benjamin's ideas about memory and the approach of Liberation Theology serve to adapt Schrader's transcendental style to the political nature of the film. Through historical redemption, the film reconciles immanence and transcendence, the personal and the political, the subjective experience and scientific knowledge.

Patricio Guzmán and Latin American Documentaries

The evolution of Guzmán's career, the trends of political Latin American documentaries, and the process of historic memory in Chile explain the aesthetic approach of *Nostalgia for the Light*. For over thirty-five years, Guzmán has worked as a documentary filmmaker. Highly educated in philosophy, film studies, and documentary production, he has made over twenty films and is actively engaged in the documentary industry as a jury member of multiple festivals and as a teacher in film schools internationally.⁹ His *oeuvre* explores memory, history, and nature in general but his most acclaimed works are his political films about Chile. *The Battle of Chile* (1975-1979) constitutes Guzmán's most renowned work. This trilogy, for which Guzmán risked his life, is one of the few audiovisual evidences that focuses on the events that occurred in Chile between 1972 and 1973, including the execution of the democratically-elected Salvador Allende and the military coup led by Pinochet. The trilogy soon became evidence of the tragic events occurring in Chile at the time. It functioned as a global document, which "generated international awareness and solidarity against the crimes that had occurred and were still taking place" in the country.¹⁰ In fact, Jorge Ruffinelli suggests that the film's enormous political impact probably influenced the unfolding of other crucial historical events, such as the indictment and arrest of Pinochet in London in 1998 ordered by Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón, which debilitated his leadership. Guzmán has widely documented this and other episodes dealing with Chilean historical memory and postmemory, the indirect experience of remembering of those who did not witness traumatic events in person but who are deeply connected with them.¹¹ Guzmán's topics of exploration have remained consistent, but his style has transformed concurrently, also mirroring the renewal of the documentary genre itself. Ruffinelli explains:

Guzmán evolves and matures historically as a documentary filmmaker while he also contributes to the evolution of this mode (or genre) ... Documentaries as a film mode and as a practice evolved in unpredicted directions, while at the same time the critical understanding of this genre also changed. Patricio Guzmán was not only sensitive and receptive to these changes; he has been and still is a driving force of such transformations. To put it simply, think about how far contemporary documentary is from fulfilling those prejudices and pre-requisites that cloistered it in an 'objective' and 'impersonal' modality. Today we have (we enjoy) a more documentary cinema that is personal, *auteurist*, narrative, subjective, creative, and fresh in many different ways.¹²

The films of Guzmán consistently focus on issues of historical memory, but as Ruffinelli suggests, his style gradually evolved from the epic political documentary into a more *auteurist* and poetic aesthetics. In this sense, Guzmán has liberated his films from the burden of documentary objectivity.

What is more, Guzmán acknowledges the theoretical challenges of documentary cinema and is therefore profoundly conscious of the implications of his stylistic choices. In his reflections about documentary published in Ruffinelli's *El Cine de Patricio Guzmán*, Guzmán argues against the "false polemic" of the objective director. He claims that the *auteur* always influences the documented reality, and thus "subjectivity is always imposed."¹³ The *auteur* participates in the world, and in turn the main concern is whether the filmmaker applies her or his subjectivity to the represented reality morally rather than neutrally. In an interview about his film *The Pearl Button* (*El botón de nácar*, 2015), which stylistically resembles *Nostalgia for the Light*, Guzmán explains that he started using a more "poetic" style in his films once the necessity to document specific political issues was not imminent.¹⁴ He claims that he could not have used such an approach in *Salvador Allende* (2004), since his goal was to document the life of the leader rather than to reflect on it. Guzmán's style has evolved along with the specific historical circumstances and the transformation of Latin American documentary filmmaking in general.

Some scholars consider Guzmán's aesthetic evolution to be influenced by his own experience of exile. In her reading of *Nostalgia for the Light*, Argentinian scholar Julieta Vitullo has noted that one of the main factors of such stylistic evolution comes from his condition as an exiled director. The nostalgia of the film can be understood as the longing from exile. In her article, Vitullo explains how Michel Chanan applies the concept of diasporic cinema coined by Hamid Naficy to the films of Guzmán.¹⁵ As a result of diasporic nostalgia, his films constitute “a never ending question due to the ways in which historical events are remembered, an exploration of the intersections between public and private memory, a philosophical concern about time, a reflection about remembrance and amnesia.”¹⁶ Indeed, other secondary literature about *Nostalgia for the Light* emphasizes the importance of uncertainty and unresolved questions¹⁷ as well as the relevance of exile, migrations, and transnationalism in the film and its production process.¹⁸ Guzmán makes independently produced films that deal with historical events constructing a non-institutional memory. His tenet about non-fiction cinema can be summarized in his well-known statement, “a country without documentaries ... is like a family without a photo album.”¹⁹ In *Nostalgia for the Light*, Guzmán keeps elucidating the past and expanding the album of Chile, but with a new perspective.

To better understand *Nostalgia for the Light*, it is necessary to consider the aesthetic trends of contemporary documentaries in the region as well as the limits of cinema to represent traumatic experiences. In his book *Latin American Documentary Filmmaking*, David William Foster highlights the importance of the non-fiction mode in the region as a response to oppressive discourses and convulsive political circumstances. Besides the specificities of each country, Foster argues that documentaries provide an empowering tool to rewrite history in Latin America. In his analysis of *La Batalla de Chile*, Foster explores how Guzmán represents his account of a

monumental historical event through his own experience, as an analysis of the impact of a major conflict on the everyday lives of those who lived through it. Therefore, even though his early works tend to be considered more orthodox and objective, it can be inferred that in those films Guzmán's articulation of personal experience and memory vis-à-vis history already left room for subjectivity.

Additionally, the articulation of unfixed memories since the 1980s has characterized the process of memorialization in Latin American documentaries, especially those from Chile and Argentina.²⁰ These films have engaged with the multiplicity of heterogeneous personal memories to ensure that such subjective experiences do not collapse into official fixed history, keeping them “active,” alive, and in discussion.²¹ This approach to history through diverse fluid subjectivities responds to official narratives of history and to institutionalized constructions of memory. Of course, filmmakers face the “impossible burden of making meaning for various constituencies.”²² Guzmán recognizes this challenge and uses aesthetics to address it. As different authors have noted, Guzmán evokes this fluid conception of memory through the narrative device of spatial representation.²³ According to Juan Carlos Rodríguez, in his second trilogy²⁴ Guzmán represents spatial ruins as allegories of different aspects of Chilean history because the “ruin of the image invites us to rethink the limits of memory, testimony, and representation.”²⁵ Guzmán's films acknowledge the boundaries of representability of time, memory, absence, and most importantly of traumatic experiences, concepts that documentaries cannot fully represent.

In this context, *Nostalgia for the Light* constitutes the “culmination of many of the themes and devices used in the rest of his work,” which all respond to the impossibility of representing reality, yet push “the boundaries of historical memory ... [to] their limits.”²⁶ As I elaborate in my analysis, in *Nostalgia for the Light* Guzmán's approach becomes more apparently subjective than in his previous works, and the juxtaposition of nature and history mirrors the blend of expository

and observational documentary modes present in the film. Therefore, the aesthetics of *Nostalgia for the Light* result from an evolving stylistic and conceptual engagement with memory, an approach that adapts to particular historical contexts. Lastly, the poetic formal configuration of the film reveals the limits of documentary representation due to the impossibility of registering trauma. As a response to the unrepresentability of traumatic experiences, which can only be suggested, the documentary abstractly reflects on political events to evoke the marginal aspects of history: personal experiences and trauma.

Nostalgia for the Light: The Present Past

Remarkably, this film emerged in a context in which the urgency to document the facts of the Pinochet era was not as great as the need to reflect about them. In 2010, when the film was released, Chile was commemorating its independence from Spain and celebrating its bicentennial. The country engaged in an intense process of historic reflection encouraged by official and institutional discourses about the nation. In that situation and directed by an independent filmmaker, *Nostalgia for the Light* offered an alternative perspective. On the one hand, it presents a memory that is not officially constructed. Throughout his career, Guzmán has articulated a historic memory outside of institutions and critical of dominant discourses. In fact, the National Chilean Television (TVN) aired *Nostalgia for the Light* in 2013, but the screened version differed greatly from the original, which led Guzmán to accuse the network of censorship.²⁷ On the other hand, by creating a sense of historical redemption, the film aims to offer a sense of mourning and justice that the Chilean political system has not found, rather than elucidating what happened during the period of the dictatorship. In a short review of *Nostalgia for the Light*, Chilean theologian Carlos Ignacio Casale

suggested that in this film, Guzmán behaves like Walter Benjamin's angel of history. In the midst of Chile's oblivion, exemplified for instance by the attempts of the government to reduce the hours of history classes in middle schools and high schools in 2010, this reflective documentary becomes an act of resistance.²⁸ As Casale's argument implies, *Nostalgia for the Light* opens a necessary national dialogue about historical redemption.

Under these circumstances, Guzmán presents his goal from the beginning of the film: to offer a subjective perspective of history. Yet the film also appeals to the international viewers, as it turns the national conversation about the victims of the dictatorship into a reflection on universal concepts such as history and memory. The voiceover, which belongs to Guzmán himself, provides reflections on the past, using first person and framing every observation as openly subjective. The film starts with Guzmán's voice reflecting on his peaceful childhood and his innocent understanding of a past when "nothing ever happened." According to Nichols, "documentary subjectivity strengthens the sense of human engagement within the historical world,"²⁹ which makes this subjective approach a strongly committed way to look at reality. In addition, the voiceover contributes to the sense of Benjaminian historical redemption of the film. Guzmán behaves as an *acousmètre* as defined by Michell Chion, a mysterious disembodied voice that has special "powers" due to the invisibility of its source. The voice is self-referential: it talks in first person and it addresses the filmmaking process, so the audience knows unequivocally that it belongs to Guzmán. Yet the abstract quality of his reflections as well as the streaming nature of sound turns this voiceover into a fluid presence. The different narratives are presented through parallel editing, constantly contrasting the personal stories of the families with scientific reflections. Guzmán's commentary reconciles such juxtaposition and keeps the consistency of the narrative, establishing comparisons, parallels, and transitions between the different threads,

ultimately creating a fluid acoustic continuum that sutures all the apparently unrelated fragments of the film.

To question the objectivity of constructed history, *Nostalgia for the Light* is a self-conscious documentary that openly presents itself as a discourse. From the very beginning, the film includes long takes portraying nothing more than lenses, telescopes, and mediated images that reveal the apparatus. Such images contribute to clarify that this film does not attempt to show the truth, but to depict a particular perspective about the truth, a perspective that differs from his previous portrayal of the victims. Gaze and perception become important components of the film's conceptualization of time. In addition, at certain moments of transition, images of glowing dust superimpose with the shots, emulating specks of stardust. These sparkling dots seem out of place, but their appearance on screen does not disrupt the narrative. Such a relative and stylized approach to reality challenges the categories of documentary filmmaking, but it does not conflict with history. As Nichols says, "we cannot love documentaries if we are looking for the truth."³⁰

In a country in which officials have denied historical events despite the existence of evidence, the aesthetics of *Nostalgia for the Light* grants an effective rhetorical strategy. Instead of relying on the impressiveness of on-screen violence, the subtle approach of the film provides an accessible style for the average citizen. Without omitting the facts, Guzmán avoids a combative discourse, presenting reality in an anti-dramatic way, making the film seem apparently depoliticized. For example, violence never appears explicitly. Instead, the testimonials of the victims or the portrayal of physical evidence imply a violence that has occurred but is now absent. Guzmán does not ask the victims about their brutal past during the interviews, but rather about how they cope with the past in the present, evoking the simultaneous coexistence of different layers of temporality.

As a result, the film appeals to a wider audience that could otherwise be desensitized to openly political discourses. Chilean spectators who do not have a defined political stance are able to connect with the victims emotionally. One of the women interviewed in the film claims to feel like a social scourge, like an uncomfortable inconvenience for the country. It is because of this perception of the survivors that alternative portrayals of the victims of the dictatorship are necessary. In her research about the representation of the Chilean dictatorship on the TV show *Los 80*, Macarena Moraga argues in favor of the potential of such portrayals to incite conversations about collective memory.³¹ *Los 80* focuses on the events that occurred in Chile during the 1980s as experienced by the Herrera, an urban middle-class family. Its immense popular success made the show into “a point of reference both for people who remembered these years and also those who did not experience the dictatorships first-hand.”³² In spite of the partiality of its subjective portrayal, which provoked the skepticism of some Chilean historians about the show, according to Moraga these representations brought awareness to citizens who did not remember the events and created spaces for productive discussions about the past. Partly because it avoided a confrontational and openly politicized tone, the show reached a general audience. *Nostalgia for the Light* differs greatly from *Los 80*, yet it similarly provides an accessible approach to historical reflection. In spite of the absence of specific references in these subjective representations, they both initiate productive public debates about the past.

Additionally, the film humanizes the victims and validates their everyday lives in the present. The portrayal of their existence in the contemporary world articulates new narratives about their personal experiences and negotiates the unrepresentability of their trauma. The audience gains access to an unfamiliar aspect of Chilean victimhood: the integration of trauma and absence in the current lives of the survivors. Through these representations, *Nostalgia for the Light* avoids

what Jill Godmilow refers to as the “pornography of the real,” the objectifying portrayal of the victims which “involves the highly suspect, psychic pleasure of viewing 'the moving picture real'... a powerful pornographic interest in real people, real death, real destruction and real suffering, especially of 'others', commodities in film.”³³ Instead, the individuals exist beyond dominant articulations of victimhood: the film does not trap them in the past but rather facilitates a dialogue between their experiences and the present. They transform from objects of the gaze to empowered subjects, as they are depicted performing normal routines while discussing their past. In a very revealing scene, the camera shows one of the astronomers called Victor interacting with his mother while she prepares dinner. Her name is not specified, but it is explained that she was exiled during the dictatorship and now works as a therapist for other victims with similar experiences. Her son works on the observatory decoding information about the stars. In the interview he explains how he analyzes data that “comes from the past in the present.” He was born in Germany during his mother’s exile, but he considers himself Chilean. As she cooks, his mother explains to him how one of the most painful experiences for the victims is to run into those who tortured and murdered their loved ones in the streets on a daily basis. Such encounters “re-traumatize” them, in her own words, as they are constantly reminded of their loss.

This conversation exemplifies how these subjects exist in the present as well as how memory is transmitted in private spaces, often by women, to those who did not experience the dictatorship first hand. According to Marianne Hirsch, postmemory is the transgenerational transmission of trauma to those born after the cultural or collective trauma occurred. Thus, the second-generation victims form memories of their own based on “the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up.”³⁴ Scenes like this one provide access to the everyday

moments of the victims' lives while also evoking the violence of the historical events. In this sense, through postmemory, the past and the present coexist in the lives and in the embodiment of the



subjects. Their lives unfold in a permanent concurrence of presence and absence. This approach allows the public to think about historical trauma through subtle actions that books and documentaries often ignore. How do the ordinary lives of the survivors continue after the tragedy? What are the consequences of the loss for their lives today? The violence of their personal stories is not explicitly visible, as there is no perceptible signifier of their past other than their memory. Ultimately, the abstraction of this historical trauma does not negate its existence, but rather makes it more accessible for the average viewer. As Nichols claims, “The pleasure and appeal of documentary film lies in its ability to make us see timeless issues as timely topics.”³⁵ The theoretical reflection on time and history emerges from the specific subjective stories voiced by those who experienced historical trauma.

Political Transcendence

As a political documentary, *Nostalgia for the Light* aims to engage and confront reality. Even though Guzmán's reflections have a universalizing approach, they do not erase the specificities of the victims' suffering. In this sense, Schrader's understanding of transcendence does not apply to the film, as it would not account for Guzmán's commitment to historical reality. For Schrader, the mundane is to be transcended by overcoming the everyday. However, *Nostalgia for the Light* offers a different resolution to the tensions between immanence and transcendence present in transcendental style. Guzmán establishes and then collapses the aforementioned binary by letting the mundane and the beyond coexist in the film, thus the abstract does not outstrip the specific. As a result, Schrader's detached transcendence is replaced by a political one, in which there is room for the political and the metaphysical.

The confluence of social commitment and spirituality has a long tradition in Latin America as a means to make sense of human existence in the midst of convulsive political realities. Christian liberation theology constitutes the clearest example of such concurrence, a precedent that Guzmán has acknowledged in his commentary about the film.³⁶ Even though the premises of liberation theology have evolved in the contemporary context, their impact during the 1970s and 1980s in the process of the creation of national identities in Latin America still influence cultural and spiritual manifestations in the region.³⁷ According to the *Encyclopedia of Global Religion*, liberation theology "rejected the separation of politics and religion, proposing the imperative that the Catholic Church politically commit to social change."³⁸ In this context, Roman Catholicism "became an agent of transformation and social progress in contrast to its traditional role of preserving the social order."³⁹ This understanding of spirituality does not separate the "promise of

eternal salvation from the historical process of liberation of oppressed peoples.”⁴⁰ As a result, the experience of oppression, often referred to as “life” or “reality,” becomes as relevant as the religious dogmas, which mirrors the way in which personal experience becomes as important as abstract conceptions of time and history in the film. In a strictly political sense, these stipulations manifested in a revolutionary Marxist agenda, even though the specificities of each country and intellectual background left room for different interpretations. Notably, liberation theology played an important role in Chile during the government of Salvador Allende (1970-1973), when the “Christians for Socialism movement defended the compatibility of evangelical and socialist values” in the public sphere.⁴¹ In fact, continuing with this tradition, the Catholic Church had a progressive role in Chile during the dictatorship with the creation of the Comité Pro Paz and the Vicaría de la Solidaridad, which provided legal and social assistance to the victims. Therefore, through narrative and aesthetics, *Nostalgia for the Light* appeals to a culturally specific way of making sense of the world in violently oppressive societies, reconciling the political and the metaphysical.

Additionally, the convergence of salvation and politics in *Nostalgia for the Light* can also be comprehended with a Benjaminian understanding of history, which combined Marxism and Jewish mysticism. Importantly, Benjamin developed his ideas as a German Jew who tried to escape the Third Reich, and thus the political tragedy occurring at the time greatly influenced his understanding of history. He argued against the dominant post-enlightenment interpretation of history that situated utopia at the end of a linear and gradual evolution propelled by progress. Instead, in his famous essay, “On the Concept of History,” he proposes an understanding of history as a cyclical, discontinuous process written by the powerful and full of oppression. In fact, he states that “there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”⁴²

While the post-enlightenment understanding of history utilizes progress to forget about the suffering and the oppression of the past, for Benjamin moving forward is only possible through historical redemption, by confronting and remembering the past. He argues against linearity because he considers that moments in history are not cumulative.⁴³ Therefore, according to this non-linear approach to history, “past suffering is not abolished even by a triumphant future.”⁴⁴ In *Nostalgia for the Light*, the circular, repeated cruelty of humanity becomes apparent through the depictions of an indigenous graveyard, documents about the miners that worked in the desert in conditions of slavery during the 18th century, and reflections on the concentration camps of the Pinochet era. All the aforementioned abuses took place in the same part of the Atacama Desert, close to the observatory where the telescopes are now located, a space in which the different layers of history exist simultaneously, illustrating the noncumulative nature of history.

For Benjamin, historical materialism cannot be successful without a messianic intervention, personified by the angel of history. In other words, the historical redemption, which constitutes the only possibility to come to terms with the past and move forward, requires a pause that only a messianic presence can achieve. In his ninth thesis Benjamin introduces this famous figure, the angel of history:

There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm.⁴⁵

At this point, Benjamin incorporates Jewish messianism in his understanding of history, an aspect of his theory that scholars often overlook in favor of his Marxist ideas. The angel of history

would like to stay in the past to make amends, but progress drives him away. According to this reading, mysticism and politics cannot be divorced in reflections on political violence in the past. In fact, Benjamin considers the messianic intervention of the angel as a “revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed.”⁴⁶ Casale hints at this aspect of Benjamin's angel of history in his review of *Nostalgia for the Light*. In his argument, Casale explains how the film was released in a kairotic moment for Chilean society, a present full of historic possibilities. The angel of history has the power to create a messianic pause in that moment to stop the course of history to reflect about the past. Such messianic pause embodies the only possibility of redemption, a moment full of historical potential. Without such pause, the progress immediately moves forward and history is doomed to repeat itself. In his sixth thesis, Benjamin claims that “articulating the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up...”⁴⁷ Therefore, Benjamin problematizes the accessibility to the past as well as its objectivity. He suggests that historical redemption requires an exercise in memory. If the past is not remembered, it will be unavoidably repeated.

The messianic pause, the moment to remember, occurs in what Benjamin defined as *now-time* (*jetztzeit*). For him, “as a model of messianic time, [now-time] comprises the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation.”⁴⁸ In other words, the past and the present coexist in the *now-time*, which is a present in which historical time is actualized.⁴⁹ In his deep exploration of the angel of history, Stéphane Mosès sheds light at the importance of Jewish messianism in Benjamin's ideas. With this in mind, Mosès argues that this angel is clearly one of the angels in the Talmud, who are ever-renewed, created and destroyed endlessly in each moment to sing to God. As a result, history is constantly creating itself in the *now-time*, a temporality in which all the historical time is concentrated in the present simultaneously.⁵⁰ The messianic pause in turn creates

a moment of historical coexistence: the “angelic present is no point on the line of historical causality, but a moment, imprinted by eternity, in which the totality of history, all its material exigency, can at last be grasped.”⁵¹ The articulations of cinematic space in film offer a formal element to convey such “angelic present.” The portrayal of the Atacama Desert as an historical archive thus evokes this eternal messianic pause in which history as a whole is unfolding in the *now-time*. David Martin-Jones has referred to this use of space as a landscape-archive, a place that documents history in its physicality.⁵² The desert, however, is more than a document in the film. This location embodies the coexistence of past and present, as suggested by Martin-Jones, but it does so by epitomizing the Benjaminian moment of historical redemption. Importantly, the sense of historical redemption incited in *Nostalgia for the Light* emerges from the convergence of political reflection and metaphysical exploration in the film.

In addition, the film constantly articulates messianic pauses through cinematic choices, evoking the *now-time*. In contrast with the voice-over narration and similarly to Schrader’s transcendental style, *Nostalgia for the Light* also relies heavily on silence. After each commentary, Guzmán provides what we can consider interludes: contemplative shots without words that give audience members a chance to reflect and explore their emotional response. In these pauses, the camerawork makes use of long takes, slowing down the pace of the film as a means to evoke the *now-time*. Some of these interludes depict places and objects that illustrate the passing of time



through their embodied existence: the Atacama Desert and the stars, whose physicality documents history; the cemetery of the miners, whose dead bodies coexist with those of the indigenous nomads; the Chacabuco concentration camp, whose buildings used to host miners in the 19th century before the Pinochet regime used them as a prison; the belongings of the miners, which show the erosion caused by the wind throughout time.

Other interludes show long shots of individuals interacting with the landscape, such as the women looking for bones in the dessert and the astronomers observing the sky at night. These shots portray the subjects in relation to space, illustrating the tension between subjectivity and the big picture presented in the film, between the present moment and the entirety of history. In addition, these shots illustrate the interaction of the subjects with their environment, evoking the second stage of Schrader's transcendental style, disparity. Such disparity shows the conflictive relationship of the characters with their environment, the "growing crack in the dull surface of everyday reality" that motivates them to make a decisive action to reach the "stasis" or the spiritual revelation.⁵³ At the same time, these shots conjure up questions and illustrate the subjects' endless search for answers that, eventually, lead to more questions, as the astronomer Gaspar Galaz claims in his interview. However, while in transcendental style the characters need to overcome their "dull" everyday reality to find revelation, in *Nostalgia for the Light*, the answers to the subjects' concerns are somewhere in their environment, physically embodied with a powerful metaphor:



calcium. Both the victims and the scientists look for the same matter. In the case of the women, the bones are hidden in the desert, and in the case of the astronomers, the stars are somewhere in the sky.

Lastly, other interludes consist of contemplative long takes of the victims posing for the camera in silence. Such images emulate moving portraits, temporal photographs in which the subjects are still but the camera keeps filming, registering the passing of time. As a result, these shots explicitly exhibit the embalming potential of the photographic image as described by Bazin, which can capture a time in the present that only exists in the past. *Nostalgia for the Light* clearly problematizes the existence of the current moment, as the film situates the present always in tension with the past. At the beginning of the film, Guzmán reflects about his innocent childhood and explains that “only the present moment existed” not only for him, but for Chile as well. In his perspective, the past was not worrisome either for him or for the country. However, later in the film, astronomer Gaspar Galaz explains that the present does not really exist because our perception always processes it with delay, as a past moment. Perception and subjectivity define our experience of time and consequently of history. In the moments of transition between narratives in the film, the artificial stardust reappears, signifying a suture, a “glue” of reconciliation that keeps the aforementioned contradictions in union. These different interludes problematize the temporality of the film, making the paradoxical coexistence of all layers of history apparent.



Eventually, the contradictory nature of time and history presented in *Nostalgia for the Light* only makes sense with a Benjaminian understanding of the *now-time* in which all moments in history exist simultaneously.

In addition, these interludes rely on the absence of words; besides the occasional use of subtle non-diegetic music, they unfold in contemplative silence. The silence and the slow pace of these shots give the audience space to reflect, to explore their reactions about the events presented in the film. Silence and slowness become gaps to be filled through active contemplation, requiring the participation of the viewers. The mini-pauses in the film become explicitly phenomenological moments, since they can only be understood as an individual experience. As a result, these mini-pauses work as embodiments of the messianic *now-time* in which the angel of history can bring redemption through reflection and memory. According to Benjamin, it is the whole of humanity that has to endure the “angelic present”: the redemptive potential of the messianic pause can only materialize with the participation of all citizens in a collective process of historic memory. In this sense, with these interludes, the film makes the viewer engage in the process of deliberation and memorization required to achieve historical redemption. As a result of these mini-pauses, the film reinforces the coexistence of the personal and the political, of the individual and the collective. In addition, these interludes align with Schrader's inclination for subtlety to evoke the ineffable. For him an anti-dramatic style honors the mysterious nature of existence because “the sacred only emerges when certain things remain unexplained.”⁵⁴ This method of articulating metaphysical concerns favors introspective ways of cognition. In the context of this documentary, an introspective approach grants the space for reflection and mourning that Guzmán wants to impact the public opinion of Chile in the contemporary *kairotic* moment. Ultimately these subtle interludes configure a participatory messianic historical pause, a *now-time* in which the audience

partakes as well. Thus, memory is privileged over official history because it is the only way to access the violent past, as Benjamin suggested. In the closing statement of the film, Guzmán concludes: “Those who have memory are able to live in the fragile present moment. Those who have none, don’t live anywhere.” These words capture the contradictory nature of time both in terms of mourning and historical redemption. Through the articulation of a Benjaminian messianic pause, in which personal experience and shared memory concur, *Nostalgia for the Light* responds to the challenge of representing political trauma, bringing the individual and the collective into mutual recognition.

In this way, *Nostalgia for the Light* questions the credibility of history. One of the juxtapositions reconciled in *Nostalgia for the Light* is the distinction between scientific knowledge and subjective ways of cognition. According to Benjamin, memory constitutes the only possibility of historical redemption, but memory is not objective and stable. The orally-transmitted experiences of the victims acknowledge the aforementioned multiplicities of memorialization vis-à-vis monolithic history. Most of the victims interviewed in the film have no palpable evidence of their past, but intermingled in the conversations, the camera captures old documentary footage and physical evidence of the massacre, such as bones and pictures of the missing individuals. As a result, the past and the present coexist in the image. In this sense, the film represents reality through the combination of immanent evidence with the testimonials of ethereal personal experiences in a space in which they can coexist and have equal credibility, establishing links between the documentary character of evidence and its metaphysical value. The astronomers think about time from a scientific point of view, while the victims reflect about it from a personal perspective. In the end, the combination of the two main narratives shows that both approaches are valid (and necessary) to understand history in general and the history of Chile in particular. At one point,

astronomer Gaspar Galaz admits that science “is never resolved” because in the process of trying to answer a question, five other questions emerge as a response. As a result of these comparisons, articulated through parallel and graphic editing, the everyday experience of the victims becomes as truthful as scientific facts about the universe, while scientific knowledge becomes as inconclusive as subjective perception. Through this approach, *Nostalgia for the Light* makes an intervention about the construction of history as an objective discourse: the film legitimizes the importance of subjective experience while it problematizes the reliability of scientific knowledge. The personal becomes political.



The last scene of *Nostalgia for the Light* clearly symbolizes the moment of Benjaminian historical redemption facilitated by the messianic pause. To reconcile all the tensions and juxtapositions in the film, this scene portrays the visit of two of the women to the observatory, where the astronomer explains to them how the telescope works and, together, they look at the sky. Sparkling dots emulating specks of stardust superimpose on the images one last time as non-diegetic music takes over the soundtrack. Guzmán's version of the stasis epitomizes the interconnectedness of history, memory, subjectivity, and objective knowledge, elusive concepts that, for Guzmán, only make sense in relation to each other. This moment reconciles the juxtapositions presented in the film: the ineffable (the stars) and the immanent (the victims) coexist in a symbolic space of historic memory. Similarly, the subjective and the objective overlap, past

and present coexist, and memory becomes the world. *Nostalgia for the Light* uses a metaphysical exploration of history to put the suffering of the victims in perspective, but it does so without minimizing the pain of their experiences. Instead, the film calls the spectators to actively engage in the process of remembering and it urges Chilean society to pause historical time for a necessary confrontation with the past. Through this approach, the film points at the impossibility of moving forward unless amends are made, making everyone responsible for the sustainable unfolding of the collective present.

¹ Many of these disappearances are documented in the *The National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation Report*, known as “Rettig Report” (264-270), written in 1991 by a special commission under the government of president Patricio Aylwin. Other sources documenting such violent disappearances include Lessie J. Frazier’s *Salt in the Sand*, Eugenio Ahumada et al.’s *Chile, la Memoria Prohibida*, and the works of Patricia Verdugo.

² Sheila J. Nayar, *The Sacred and the Cinema: Reconfiguring the “Genuinely” Religious Film* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 39.

³ Nayar, p. 42.

⁴ Susan Sontag, “Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson,” in *The Films of Robert Bresson: A Casebook*, ed. Bret Cardullo (London: Anthem Press, 2009), 32.

⁵ Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 9.

⁶ Schrader, p. 5-6.

⁷ Schrader 10

⁸ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 33.

⁹ Detailed information about his education, his awards, and his work in festivals and film schools can be found on his official website www.patricioguzman.com and in Jorge Ruffinelli’s monograph *Patricio Guzmán*.

¹⁰ Jorge Ruffinelli, *Patricio Guzmán* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2001), 9.

¹¹ Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 106.

¹² Ruffinelli, *Patricio Guzmán*, p. 10.

¹³ Ruffinelli, *El Cine de Patricio Guzmán. En Busca de las Imágenes Verdaderas* (Santiago de Chile: Uqbar Editores, 2008), 275.

¹⁴ Javier H. Estrada, "Entrevista Patricio Guzman. La Historia a la Sombra del Glaciar," *Caimán Cuadernos de Cine* 46 (2016). doi: <https://www.caimanediciones.es/entrevista-patricio-guzman-version-ampliada-de-caiman-cdc-no-46/>

¹⁵ Julieta Vitullo, "Nostalgia De La Luz' De Patricio Guzman: El Cine Como Máquina Del Tiempo," *Kamchatka: Revista de Análisis Cultural* 2 (2013): 186

¹⁶ Vitullo, p. 186.

¹⁷ See Didem Durak's "Nostalgia for the Light: A 'Documemory' and the Conflict between History and Memory" (2013).

¹⁸ See David Martin-Jones' "Archival Landscapes and a Non-Anthropocentric 'Universe Memory' in Nostalgia De La luz/Nostalgia for the Light (2010)" (2013).

¹⁹ Ruffinelli, *El cine de Patricio Guzmán. En busca de las imágenes verdaderas*, p. 276.

²⁰ Gray, p. 236.

²¹ Gray, p. 236.

²² Gray, p. 247.

²³ See, e.g., Rodríguez and Gray.

²⁴ The trilogy includes *Chile, The Obstinate Memory* (*Chile, la memoria obstinada*, 1997), *Robinson Crusoe Island* (*La isla de Robinson Crusoe*, 1999), and *The Pinochet Case* (*El caso Pinochet*, 2001), according to Rodríguez.

²⁵ Juan Carlos Rodríguez, "Framing Ruins: Patricio Guzmán's Postdictatorial Documentaries." *Latin American Perspectives* 40, no. 1 (2013): 131-132.

²⁶ Patrick Blaine, "Representing Absences in the Postdictatorial Documentary Cinema of Patricio Guzman," *Latin American Perspectives* 40, no. 1 (2013): 127.

²⁷ Guzmán addressed an open letter to Mauro Valdes, the director of TVN at the time, that can be found on the official website of *Nostalgia de la luz*. Valdes responded that such modifications resulted from technical problems with the coding system used to air audiovisual content and reprogrammed a second screening of the film.

²⁸ Carlos Ignacio Casale, "Filme de Patricio Guzmán: Nostalgia de la Luz y el 'Ángel de la Historia.'" *Mensaje* 59, no 597 (2011): 53. doi: http://biblioteca.uahurtado.cl/ujah/msj/docs/2011/n597_52.pdf

²⁹ Nichols quoted in Vitullo, p. 182.

³⁰ Nichols, p. 35.

³¹ Macarena Moraga, *Memory Ether: An analysis of the Brazilian and Chilean Dictatorships as Represented in Anos Rebeldes and Los 80*, (Gainesville: University of Florida (Master's thesis), 2016), 111.

³² Moraga, p. 28.

³³ Jill Godmilow, "What's Wrong with the Liberal Documentary," *Peace Review* 11, no. 1 (1999): 95-96.

³⁴ Hirsch, p. 106.

³⁵ Nichols, p. 13.

³⁶ Estrada, web.

- ³⁷ Celis, "The Legacy of Liberation Theology in Colombia: The defense of Life and Territory," *Latin American Perspectives* 43, no. 3 (2016): 70.
- ³⁸ Mark Juergensmeyer and Wade Clark Roof, *Encyclopedia of Global Religion*, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2011), 2.
- ³⁹ Juergensmeyer and Clark, p. 2.
- ⁴⁰ Juergensmeyer and Clark, p. 1.
- ⁴¹ Juergensmeyer and Clark, p. 3.
- ⁴² Walter Benjamin and Michael Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: Selected writings. Vol. 4, 1938-194*, (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 392.
- ⁴³ Stéphane Mosès, *The Angel of History: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 10.
- ⁴⁴ Mosès, p. 11.
- ⁴⁵ Benjamin and Jennings, p. 392.
- ⁴⁶ Benjamin and Jennings, p. 396.
- ⁴⁷ Benjamin and Jennings, p. 391.
- ⁴⁸ Benjamin and Jennings, p. 396.
- ⁴⁹ Mosès, p. 10.
- ⁵⁰ Mosès, p. 9.
- ⁵¹ S. D. Chrostowska, "Angelus Novus, Angst of History." *Diacritics* 40, no. 1 (2010): 47.
- ⁵² David Martin-Jones, "Archival Landscapes and a Non-anthropocentric 'Universe Memory' in Nostalgia de la Luz/Nostalgia for the Light (2010)," *Third Text* 27, no. 6 (2013): 711.
- ⁵³ Schrader, p. 42.
- ⁵⁴ Schrader, p. 10-11.

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