

“The Unbearable Lightness of Bones:

Memory, Emotion, and Pedagogy in Patricio Guzmán’s *Chile, la memoria obstinada* and

Nostalgia de la luz”

“Tu silencio es de estrella, tan lejano y sencillo”

Pablo Neruda, *20 poemas de amor y una canción desesperada*

“Helo allí Helo allí

suspendido en el aire

El Desierto de Atacama”

Raúl Zurita, *Purgatorio*

“In the sunset of dissolution, everything is
illuminated by the aura of nostalgia, even the guillotine”

Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

I offer no well wrought urn, no burnished bronze, no finely scanned sonnet, merely a mournful scattering of shards, some of them opaque, some of them scintillating, but only because they shine with the refracted lustre of what some might style, ectopically, as “ill-starred events”, that is to say, as disaster. I would mine, like some verbal archaeologist, the word “disaster” or “desastre” for its etymological import: “from *dis-*, here merely pejorative + *astro* ‘star, planet,’ from the Latin *astrum* and the Greek *astron*. The sense is astrological, of a calamity blamed on an unfavourable position of a planet”.¹ With regard to Patricio Guzmán’s lyrical and meditative documentary film, *Nostalgia de la luz* (2010), my grandiloquent mixing of astral and archaeological metaphors is anything but arbitrary. For in this extraordinary film by the director of the celebrated three-part *La batalla de Chile* (1973-1979), archaeologists and astronomers engaged in a daily, professional inquiry into the grand are brought into contact with a group of women, some quite elderly, who continue to search for the scattered remains, the shattered bones, of their loved ones, some forty years after their detention and disappearance. The site of their encounter is Chile’s Atacama Desert, the most arid place on earth, a vast region whose air is so dry that it functions as some grand mummification

machine; the event that motivates their encounter, so many years later, is a man-made disaster in the form of the military coup of September 11, 1973 that overthrew, with the advice and support of the government of the United States of America, the democratically elected Salvador Allende and that installed in his stead General Augusto Pinochet as dictator. Past events in a particular slice of the world will thus be central to the shards here presented in an attempt to grapple with, amongst other things, the complex interplay of memory and history, pedagogy and emotion, the unbearable lightness of being (abstract, luminescent, metaphysical) and the no less unbearable lightness of bones (concrete, opaque, physical).

Intricately intertwined, these well-worn topics, themes and objects of study suggest others whose subjective implications and emotional ramifications are as insistent as they are multifarious. Accordingly, another of my aims is to cast light—splintered and sporadic—on the subject presumed to know and, in so doing, to query the critical force of distance, both temporal and spatial, that has been enshrined, but also questioned, as a linchpin of intellectual value according to which we, as critics, are expected to separate ourselves from the objects, and subjects, of our studies in order to render an unbiased, impartial or objective assessment of them.² Here too etymology is instructive, for “critique” and “criticism”, or “crítica”, related to “crisis” (that not-too-distant semantic cousin of “disaster”), stem from the Greek *krinein*, meaning “to separate” and “to decide”, from the Proto-Indo-European root *krei*, meaning “to sieve, discriminate, distinguish”, related to the “Latin *cribrum* ‘sieve’ and the “Middle Irish *crich* ‘border, boundary’”. The task of the critic is thus, if one were to be true to the *etymon* or “true sense” of etymology, to separate, sift, discriminate and decide, to demarcate, draw and respect boundaries and

borders, to know and, in knowing, to master something that is *other* than the critical self, something detached, disengaged and removed from it. Geological strata and astral planes, no less than the buried past of words, would appear to provide just the sort of distance and detachment for intellectual inquiry in its presumably purer forms. Guzmán appears to know this, and to know, nonetheless, that the subject who studies, inquires, searches, and claims to know, is, for all his or her devotion to objectivity, still a sentient *subject*, still subject, that is, to feeling in all its psychological and physical guises.

It is with feeling very much in mind (the pun is deliberate) that I will be reconsidering *Nostalgia de la luz* in the light of a previous film by Guzmán, *Chile, la memoria obstinada* (1997), an openly personal documentary, occasioned by the director's return to his "homeland" that centres on the screening, in the space of the classroom, of a still earlier film, *La batalla de Chile*, that masterpiece of politically engaged *cinéma vérité*. In so doing, I shall be arguing that *Nostalgia*, with its grand metaphysical gestures, cosmic panoramas, sublimely austere landscapes and elegiac cultivation of beauty is shot through not only with emotion—most memorably in the figures and testimonies of the women, the so-called "mujeres de Calama", who scour the desert for the brutalised bones of their loved ones—but also with a pedagogical passion that makes of the Atacama Desert what Alejandro Valenzuela calls "an open book" (119) and what I prefer to call an unbounded classroom, whose singular aridity is moistened by the tears of myriad spectators and whose intimidating, awe-inspiring vastness is rendered uncannily homey by the recollections of Guzmán himself. As Valenzuela notes, "the question of memory that the documentary installs does not aim to establish itself in the domains of the objective. From the outset, it carries the subjective traces of Guzman's autobiography and

emerges precisely from the domestic space of his childhood” (119).³ There is a lesson here, and it is that the science, knowledge and learning of all things high and hard, stars and stones, can be riddled with feeling, with unsuspected, unfathomable and intense *senses* of attachment and implication.

Now, in many academic settings, those of the so-called Humanities included, emotional attachment, intersubjective identification, empathy, compassion and co-feeling, though granted increased visibility and credibility with the so-called “affective turn”, are still kept studiously at bay, suspected, discounted, derided or abjected as a falling and failing of intellectual prowess whose cooler calculations presumably shield the critic from the snares of sentiment, from the morass of all that is maudlin and mawkish.⁴ The critiques of feeling—typically cast as critiques of sentimentality and sentimentalism—are legion and are often charged with radical reason: emotion can be, undeniably, both manipulated and manipulative just as compassion can be, as Walescka Pino-Ojeda and Mariana Ortega Breña rightly note, a rhetorical lure which compulsively undergirds a “privatization of feelings” that nourishes “judicial oblivion” and dovetails the neoliberal assault on the public sphere (136). But the disparagement of feeling, for all its radical appeal, may likewise be charged with neoliberal reason, with what Nelly Richard calls the “passive conformity with the insensitive—‘disaffectivated’—tone of the mass media” in which “technical rationality and methodological efficacy [serve] as samples of a *distance of knowledge* [una *distancia del conocimiento*]” (1998: 46, 48). Like Richard, Pino-Ojeda and Ortega Breña push against the “ethical and emotional distancing” (135) that fuels the rationalised perpetuation of the existing economic order and champion instead films and other artistic practices that mobilise the “performative character of

listening” (144) and viewing and that acknowledge “‘individual’ traumatic memories . . . as shared social ones” (135).

The references by Richard, Pino-Ojeda, Ortega Breña and others to the social, political and ethical implications of the neoliberal economic order are not idle. Guzmán’s entire corpus, from its tumultuous beginnings to its deceptively tranquil present, is bound up in struggles, at once symbolic and material, in which the economic, however diversified, is arguably determinative in the last instance—at least on this little planet. Guzmán’s films do not let viewers off the hook of such questions, such realities, perhaps especially if they work in the areas of science and/or education that figure so prominently in *Nostalgia de la luz* and *Chile, la memoria obstinada* and that place a premium on objectivity. In today’s globalised economy, in which science and education are increasingly conceived with regard to “impact”, “value for money” and financial success, objectivity, in even its supposedly purer aesthetic varieties, may function as one of the lures of market-oriented forces in which “freedom” and “liberty” become a matter of trade, commodities and services rather than of human beings in their diverse, fractured entirety. As Ernesto Laclau remarks, social objectivity necessarily presupposes the repression of that which its installation excludes (quoted in Richard, 1998: 29). According to Richard, who cites Laclau in one of her many brilliant essays on post-dictatorial Chile, what has been excluded as other than “objective” is the project of social and economic justice that animated the *Unidad Popular*, a project that, in its violent defeat, has been pronounced utopian, dreamlike and/or irrational and that Patricio Guzmán himself, in the opening sequences of *Nostalgia de la luz*, wistfully calls “a noble adventure”. But what has also been excluded, Richard argues, is the messy, recalcitrant

emotional charge of a past of state terror and violence, all that popular, yet personal, feeling that cannot quite be made to cohere—and “disappear”—as *past* and that remains wavering, *over and again* in the present, between melancholy and amnesia, nostalgia and disavowal.

After all, *Nostalgia de la luz* proposes, by way of one of its most authorised scientific subjects, an astronomer, that the present is suffused with the preterit, that the light of the stars that reaches our eyes is millions of years in the past and, more unsettlingly, that the light that reaches one visible body from another is milliseconds in the past. The present of plenitude, remember, is—or rather, was—the quasi-ahistorical time of infantile idyll with which *Nostalgia* opens and in which the director calls Chile “a haven of peace isolated from the world”, “un remanso de paz aislado del mundo”. Philosophical in its import and starry-eyed in its enunciative style, this conception of time in which the present is imbricated in the past, the past in the present, is also profoundly political. Patrick Blaine, in a subtle overview of Guzmán’s “postdictatorial documentaries”, remarks that “[h]istorical memory is . . . antithetical to the ideology of neoliberalism, which depends on ‘forced obsolescence,’ creating a present essentially devoid of substantial meaning” (121), a present in which the past, reduced to a store of fetishised images and pre-processed emotions, *matters* not. Blaine is in agreement with Richard, for whom, “the official consensus of the Transition jettisoned the private memory of the dis-agreements”, which it deemed to be “inconvenient” (1998: 29). At once self-congratulatory and restrained, “the consensus that represses this emotional unleashing of remembrance only names memory with words bereft of any convulsive meaning” (31). “It would therefore seem”, Richard insists, “that political consensus is

only capable of ‘referring to’ memory (of evoking it as a theme, of processing it as information), but not of practicing it or of expressing its torments” (1998: 30). In short, in place of a potentially disruptive overflow or “desborde” of names, bodies, experiences and memories (1998: 27), democratic peace, Richard argues, is purchased, in post-dictatorial, neoliberal Chile, through regulated diversity, pacts and negotiations.

Behind the negotiated pacts, so redolent of big business and of other postdictatorial transitions, lies what Tomás Moulian calls an “almost atavistic negation of what the Unidad Popular had been” and a concomitant “rejection of the poor and their illusions of power, the repudiation of communism and its expectation of a classless future” (25). For Moulian, the new “strategists of State reason” used the phantasm of fear as “a resource for achieving forgetting and demobilisation, the ideal conditions for a paradigmatic transition” (39), in which “political modernisation” was rife with “Hobbesian resonances of an order imposed through the threat of chaos” (45)—or the threat of terror, whose cachet as an excuse for military intervention has become a new global narcotic. Interestingly, in Richard’s work, the emotion repressed by the “objective rationality” of negotiated consensus appears to be primarily, if not exclusively, that of those “defeated” by the dictatorship, but in Moulian’s work, it is also that of the most fervent supporters of the capitalist counter-revolution, with “its irrational impulses” and its “sentiments of rage, vengeance and hatred” (25). The point is important, for as Allende’s opponents—and Pinochet’s supporters—amply demonstrate in *La batalla de Chile* and elsewhere, it is not, by any means, that emotion is necessarily in the service of a more politically and economically just society, or that it necessarily undergirds ethics in the form of empathy, compassion or “co-feeling” (the distinction is Kundera’s), or, as

already indicated, that empathy and compassion are devoid of problems. What Moulian signals, however, is how the putatively primal emotion of fear is deployed to keep all other emotions in check:

There already existed a crushed, traumatised society. Instead of activating it, of reviving it, the strategy that was used fostered regressive fear and condemned as irrational any divergence, stigmatizing it as a sin against the real and thus against the survival of a precarious transition. The consensus became an admonishment to silence. (39)

It is doubtless for similar reasons, similar fears, that thirty-six of the forty schools that Patricio Guzmán approached as sites for screening *La batalla de Chile* twenty-three years after it was made and then recording the audience's reactions rejected his request. As Guzmán himself recounts: “they told me that the kids could be traumatised, that the past had to be forgotten” (quoted in Ruffinelli, 204).

The film in question is the aforementioned *Chile, la memoria obstinada*, which Jorge Ruffinelli has aptly characterised as “one of Patricio Guzmán's most emotional films” (190-191). Its emotion issues, as intimated, from two general sources: 1) the responses of four groups of students of varying ages—older males at the Universidad Católica, younger females at a high school, students of varying ages and genders at a theatrical institute (Ruffinelli, 204)—who view *La batalla de Chile* for the first time, and 2) the reminiscences of a number of people who supported and admired Allende, including his bodyguards; his widow, Hortensia Bussi; Rodolfo Müller, father of Jorge Müller Silva, *La batalla de Chile*'s director of photography who was tortured and most likely killed in the infamous Villa Grimaldi, and Ignacio Valenzuela, Guzmán's uncle,

who helped to smuggle the film out of the country to Sweden and from there to France and Cuba, where it was edited. Banned in Chile until 1996, *La batalla de Chile*, like all of Guzmán's films, has had limited screenings in the country; it was finally broadcast, along with *Chile, la memoria obstinada*, in 1999 and 2000, "by SKY, the multinational satellite television company, on pay-per-view, and thus became available," as Thomas Klubock notes, "to only those Chilean households that could afford satellite dishes" (279), prompting the critic to add that "[i]n Chile's neoliberal democracy, memory and history are subject no longer to the censorship of military dictatorship; today they are commodities contingent on the vicissitudes of the market and decisions made by multinational corporations" (279). Klubock does not mention other venues of distribution, such as You Tube, but even here the force of commodification and the vicissitudes of the market are still very much at play. Objects of uneven exchange, the films are also objects of academic study, folded into courses of instruction in universities, colleges and schools that are increasingly dependent on the vicissitudes of the market and decisions made by multinational corporations and that remain susceptible, in some cases, to more localised censorial interventions.⁵

The reference to academic institutions has a specific charge. For one of the most compelling aspects of *Chile, la memoria obstinada* is what might be called a pedagogical *mise en abîme* of cinematic viewing: even as Guzmán's camera captures the reactions of the Chilean students—most of whom were born after the coup or were very young when it happened—as they watch and reflect on images of popular demonstrations, labour rallies and the bombing of La Moneda included in *La batalla de Chile*, the film travels far beyond these viewers, these sites, to assume an open-ended international dynamic.

Screening it to an otherwise diverse group of students from the United States in a seminar I conducted in Santiago de Chile in 2012, I watched my students as they watched the students in *Chile, la memoria obstinada* watch *La batalla de Chile*.⁶ Many of them cried, likely compelled by the contagious, cathartic intensity of the crying they saw both on and off the screen, but almost all *seemed* moved—and/or made uncomfortable—by the film’s depiction of emotion in a space of learning. Katherine Hite describes a similar pedagogical experience with a group of largely American students in Argentina, with whom she visited a number of more or less formalised “spaces of memory”—not unlike the aforementioned Villa Grimaldi in Chile—which range from former clandestine detention and torture centres to “Memory Park”, with its sculptures and monuments to the victims of state terrorism. Though aware of the possibilities for “trauma tourism” (41), Hite nonetheless defends an empathic “co-performance” of the “outsider within” that, at its most effective, has the potential for “cross-border solidarities” (39).

The empathic co-performances that Hite posits at the intersections of pedagogical and cultural sites resemble, in many respects, the multidirectional memory that Michael Rothberg advances, a memory—or perhaps more rightly, memories—characterized by “ongoing negotiations, cross-referencing and borrowing” that are “productive and not privative” (3). The multidirectional memory at the heart of Rothberg’s work “holds memory open to . . . different possibilities, but does not subscribe to a simple pluralism either” (16). The potential for mobilized modes of memory and solidarity that derive their ethical and political traction from an engagement with situated events, sites and stories is, in other words, rarely if ever free-floating or undirected. There is, of course, little question that Guzmán, like virtually all filmmakers, *manipulates* his material—montage

is rarely if ever innocent—and that his insistent, deliberately downtempo vocal commentary, which prompts Adrián Cangi to call him a “fabulador” (158), *directs* his audience to hear and see, think and feel, in certain romantically resonant ways: for instance, that of emotion recollected in tranquillity. The serene, even reposeful remembrance of things past, ripe with emotional possibilities, is even more in evidence in *Nostalgia de la luz* than in *Chile, la memoria obstinada*. *Nostalgia* opens, as noted, with the director’s idealised account of Chile as a country “where nothing happened” and of Santiago, the capital, as “sleeping at the foot of the mountain range, with no connection to the world”. As if to illustrate, or anchor, Guzmán’s voiceover narration, the camera, after showing the reactivation of a superannuated instrument of scientific inquiry, the creaking old German telescope of Santiago’s planetarium, lingers, caressingly, on various objects—a napkin folded on a plate, a lace pelmet, an old radio, a couple of armchairs, a Singer sewing machine, a framed reproduction of *The Last Supper*, a covered mattress—in a domestic interior whose placidity is heightened, so to speak, by the whisper of the breeze and the trill of songbirds.

Enveloped in a diffuse gold-green luminosity in which coruscating specks of dust flicker in the air, the poetic, haptic introit of *Nostalgia* is soon contradicted by historical reality, signalled by black-and-white aerial archival footage of the Chacabuco concentration camp, the largest of the Pinochet dictatorship. Invoking a timeless present now past, that of his childhood, Guzmán, who was approaching the age of seventy when filming *Nostalgia*, was more than aware that Chile was not a place “where nothing happened” before the coup. Indeed, in *El botón de nácar* (*The Pearl Button*, 2015), the aqueous follow-up to *Nostalgia de la luz*, set in the south of Chile, Guzmán presents, in

the same lilting, lambent style, the stories of the indigenous inhabitants who were subjugated and interned, hunted and murdered, during the “foundational” years of the Chilean state and links that history of persecution with that which accompanied the dictatorship, which transformed part of Dawson Island—where, as Guzmán notes, hundreds of indigenous people died in Catholic missions—into another concentration camp. Dawson constitutes what Guzmán describes in *El botón de nácar* as a “chapter” in the “accumulated impunity of centuries” of violence, a violence and an impunity that stretch the full length of the country, from Atacama to Patagonia, Iquique to Punta Arenas.

With respect to the north of the country, the site of *Nostalgia de la luz*, documentary filmmakers in Chile had already exercised their critical attention as early as 1971, just two years before the coup, when, as Zuzana Pick reminds us, Claudio Sapiaín (*Santa María de Iquique*) and Angelina Vázquez (*Crónica del salitre*) went “in search of the historical traces of mining installations by workers who fell to military violence” (115). For his part, Guzmán, nearly forty years later, as part of the filming of *Nostalgia*, pays homage to this history of violence by visiting the ruins of Chacabuco, which was erected out of a former mining camp. As Guzmán laconically notes, “the military had only to put up barbed wire” and what had been a site of exploitative labour *before* the triumph of neoliberalism, became a site of incarceration, torture and death. It is also a site of frangible inscription, where a former inmate who accompanies Guzmán reads out the barely legible names of some of those once interned there, scribbled on the now pitted, peeling walls. The Neverland opening of *Nostalgia* is thus arguably less a manifestation of what Richard calls “the melancholy-depressive symptom that affects the subject of the

postdictatorship” (1998: 38) than a sly invocation of a childhood that is wrenchingly reanimated—as always already lost—in the previous *Chile, la memoria obstinada*. In this film, the deceptively reassuring cadence of the director’s voice is counterpoised with the strident derision of the older male students at the Católica and the disconsolate sobs of the students at the Taller de Teatro, almost all of whom were too young to remember—at least in its fullest social sense—the military uprising of 1973.

Emotion, in all its shrill and subtle variety, is thus in force in all of Guzmán’s documentaries and engages the audience in ways that merit reflection, perhaps especially for those of us who teach the humanities and who often contend that our “real” work takes the form of research and publications, or public service and political activism, beyond the classroom. Working within a system that valorises a disinterested balance that risks sliding into ethical relativism, it should not be surprising to encounter students who complain, as one of mine did, about the lack of a vigorous pro-Pinochetista perspective (in Guzmán’s films, in my classes) that would “balance” criticism of the regime or who proclaim, more pointedly, that the recent economic “success” of the country, wildly uneven though it is, effectively “justifies” the military coup. The memory of these students—my memory of my students—haunts me and inflects my reading of Guzmán’s films, films that played an important part in these same students’ reconsideration of their earlier statements about the virtues of Pinochet and the economic merits of the regime that he led. None of us was, is, Chilean. All of us were, are, from another country, albeit one that has left some devastatingly imperialist marks on the country in which we were studying, that we were studying. In keeping with the pedagogical *mise en abîme* that *Chile, la memoria obstinada* unfurls, I thus find myself trying to come to grips with the

implications of geopolitical and historical distance, gainsaid, *but only in part and always problematically*, by the “co-feeling”, empathic co-performances and multidirectional memories generated by Guzmán’s films and other works that engage traumatic events—and that do so *through*, but also *beyond*, personal memories.

Through, but also beyond, personal memories: Marianne Hirsch, in an influential reading of family photographs and loss, coins the term “postmemory” in an attempt to account for memories that are not first-hand or of an eyewitness. In Hirsch’s words:

postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through imaginative investment and creation. This is not to say that memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. I have developed this notion in relation to Holocaust survivors, but I believe it may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences. (1997: 22)

By “unpacking” memory as a function, practice and experience of different subjects, Hirsch offers a compelling reading of the subjective layers of history and of the now familiar, now uncanny, ties, tensions and traces that modulate it. Developed in relation to the Holocaust, her conception of memory is mobile, endowed with a diasporic openness

as it “describe[s] other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences”. But it is also a conception of memory whose coordinates are preponderantly generational and familial, that is to say, *relatively* ordered and circumscribed. Hirsch’s postmemory propounds, after all, varying degrees of connection and separation, of proximity and distance, of fixity and mobility, but remains largely—despite the occasional reference to an “adoptive” or “affiliative” postmemory—within a domestic, family-oriented framework.⁷

I would therefore supplement Hirsch’s formulation with what might be called a post-postmemory, but which might be less clumsily called a mobile or, better yet, moving postmemory, one that is nourished on what Hirsch calls “imaginative investment and creation” and that nonetheless recognises that, to greater or lesser degrees, virtually all human beings “grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth”. By a *moving* postmemory, I mean something that partakes of a complex diachroneity in which the memories and senses of the past of one subject become intertwined with those of another subject, *beyond* familial and national bonds, beyond, that is, the naturalised appeal of the nation and the family unit that is conventionally assumed to be its foundation. In so doing, I make common cause with Cecilia Sosa, who aims “to expand the productivity of ‘post-memory’” in order to implicate “less proximate audiences” and to “reanimate a sense of being together beyond bloodline restrictions” (2014: 5). Along with Sosa’s interest in performance, I would gesture to something international, in the Marxist sense, which critically inhabits something global, in the multinational sense, and to something both universal, in the sense of a mortal human condition, and polyversal, in the sense of human diversity and difference.⁸ Tentative as it may be, my gesture nonetheless strives to

think, perchance to practise, such grand binaries as the public and the private, the collective and the individual, the “unfamiliar” and the “familiar”, as an involute and non-teleological dialectical process in which the self is folded in and out of itself, partially altered, removed and reconnected: re-membered.

Such re-membrance is anticipated by Nelly Richard, who in a short essay on Guzmán’s *Chile, la memoria obstinada*, notes the differential pull between the documentary photographs of the bombing of La Moneda and the family album photographs of the wedding of Juan Osses, one of only a handful of Allende’s guards to survive the assault. According to Richard, “what is played out is the photographic tension between the private rituality of sentimental recollection and the public monumentality of historical citation: a double task of remembrance (to remember: to join scattered members) that seeks to exorcise loss through the reiteration of successive identificatory mechanisms” (1997: 58). The focus on photographs and photography—literally, the “writing of the light”—is central to Guzmán’s work and, indeed, to the work of virtually all associations concerned with the fate of the disappeared, that *euphemism*, as the Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense insists, which refers to, even as it muffles, systematic kidnapping, detention, torture and murder—typically in the name of national unity and traditional “family values” (154). As Hirsch remarks, “[p]hotographs in their enduring ‘umbilical’ connection to life are precisely the medium connecting first- and second-generation remembrance, memory and postmemory. They are the leftovers, the fragmentary sources and building blocks, shot through with holes, of the work of postmemory. They affirm the past’s existence and, in their flat two-dimensionality, they signal its unbridgeable distance” (1997: 23).

An unbridgeable distance that is also an enduring ‘umbilical’ connection (Hirsch takes the “umbilical” from Roland Barthes) is, of course, a paradox, which is precisely why it is so dialectically compelling. Hirsch’s reference to the flat two-dimensionality of photographs—which film puts in motion, as it were, at 24 frames per second—recalls, as she well knows, Barthes’ claim that “[w]ith the Photograph, we enter into *flat Death*,” by which he means not just that photography “freezes” life—or death—as it is happening but also that the “horror of Death” is “precisely its platitude” (92). Barthes writes of flatness in reference to that most poignant of events, “the death of one whom I love most” (93), which is for him the death of his mother; in so doing, he renders flatter still the death of the many whom we do not know, the nameless (designated as “NN”, “ningún nombre”), the faceless, the defaced, the disappeared. Flat, two-dimensional and presumably preterit, the photograph would appear to be the perfect prop of objectivity; it is not for anything that “objetivo” also means “lens” in Spanish. And yet, the photograph is also the site of all sorts of memorable activity, a vital, visual stage of sorts in which and through which the subject, to use Hirsch’s terms, imaginatively recreates and reassembles him or herself, itself, by engaging in acts of cordial remembering. As Ernesto Malbrán, who appears in such films as *Machuca* (Andrés Wood, 2004) and *Post Mortem* (Pablo Larraín, 2010), remarks in *Chile, la memoria obstinada*, “recordar”, “to remember”, means “volver a pasar por el corazón,” “to pass again through the heart”, to prick it even. It is just such an act of memorable poignancy that Barthes describes by way of a *punctum*, a subjective touching that *disturbs* the photograph’s more objectively staged *studium*.⁹

A luminous, material trace of the past that can nonetheless be shot through with a personal poignancy, the photograph, in its indexical, objective capacity, bears more than

a passing resemblance to landscape. Lest the resemblance appear excessively surprising, or forced, it is worth remembering that photographs and landscapes may function as spaces in which a subject is, or was, situated and, moreover, that they may function as sites of relatively enduring inscription and often intensely emotional investment, most notably in the form of the “family photograph” and the “homeland”. Both sites allow for painfully personal projections and returns that are shadowed in and as “nostalgia”, but they also allow for more mobile, open-ended and, as Rothberg reminds us, multidirectional engagements. Although Guzmán is not from the Atacama Desert but from the capital, Santiago, the desert nonetheless figures, in the imagined communitarianism that is fundamental to national identity, as part of his homeland. And yet, Guzmán approaches this “unfamiliar” part of his “homeland” as a long-time resident of France and other countries, where his experience of exile has arguably morphed into something no longer simply or solely “exilic”. He approaches, that is, the “homeland” by way of photographs and films, static and moving pictures, through which a number of interactions become possible.

In a recent interview, Guzmán says that “[t]he desert is a time machine full of incredible images and many different possible films” (Guest, 23); a photograph is also a time machine full of incredible images and, as Guzmán clearly knows, many different possible films. Indeed, the entire, fissured corpus of Guzmán’s work plays with the tensions between movement and stillness that undergird the relations between film and photography, exile and homeland, and, for that matter, the quick and the dead. It is perhaps not entirely beside the point that Chris Marker, famous for one of the great experiments in filmed photography and mobile stillness, *La jetée* (1962), produced *La*

batalla de Chile and even provided Guzmán with virgin 16mm black-and-white stock after Guzmán's supplier from the United States withheld material out of ideological differences. Nor is it beside the point that, as Guzmán notes in an interview published in *Essaim*, the stars that periodically fill the frame and the screen in *Nostalgia de la luz* are not filmed but photographed, their distance being so great and their movement so slow that they can only be shot photogram by photogram (127).

In *Chile, la memoria obstinada* stillness comes not in the form of photographs of the cosmos but in the form of photographs both documentary and personal, the same sort that are affixed in the form of tiles to the Muro de la Memoria, or Wall of Memory, designed by photographers Claudio Pérez and Rodrigo Gómez at the Bulnes Bridge in Santiago, where more than twenty people were summarily executed during the coup.¹⁰ Guzmán includes images of the Muro de la Memoria in *Nostalgia de la luz*, right after interviewing Valentina Rodríguez, a young astronomer whose parents were disappeared, murdered by the military regime. Valentina Rodríguez's story rings in our ears as the camera moves on to show the deteriorated state of an assembly of personalised photographic tiles left largely unattended in the "expanded field"—the phrase is Rosalind Krauss'—of the urban landscape.¹¹ Although the deteriorated state of the photographic tiles, some of which are missing, may prompt some to call for the restoration and/or completion of a memorial that is necessarily unfinished and that is being gradually eroded and washed out by sunlight and smog, they also suggest an isomorphic relation to the flaking names on the walls of the Chacabuco prison and, more generally, to the remnants that mark the desert landscape of Atacama, which Guzmán describes as "a great book of the past in which are preserved dinosaurs, petrified fish, skeletons of lost

European explorers, smugglers and even Incas, because the Inca road that started in Cuzco passed through the desert” (Guest, 21).

It is at this juncture that, had I more space, I would venture into the “land art” of Raúl Zurita, controversial Chilean poet and visual artist whose words, “Todos somos arroyos / de una sola agua”, “We are all streams / of the same water”, provide the epigraph to *El botón de nácar*. Zurita appears directly in *El botón de nácar*, where he speaks about the relations between the drawings on indigenous bodies and the stars, but his written work resonates with *Nostalgia de la luz*. Zurita’s surfaces of inscription are by no means limited to paper or screen but range instead from the blue sky of New York to the rocky terrain of the Atacama Desert itself. The former is the site of the ephemeral skywriting, in 1982, of fifteen verses of a poem titled “La vida nueva,” subsequently published in photographic form in *Anteparaíso*; the latter is the site of the decidedly more permanent excavation, in 1993, of the verse “ni pena ni miedo,” which closes a lengthy book of poetry also titled *La vida nueva*. As Juan Soros notes, “ni pena ni miedo” is barely legible except when photographed from the vantage point of the sky, from which it appears as if printed in that “great book of the past” that Guzmán identifies with the landscape of the Atacama Desert. For Soros, what matters is thus not “the location of the work, the site” but rather “the point of view, the gaze” (136).¹² Zurita’s verse evokes the regret, sadness, pain and fear of the military dictatorship; but it also evokes, in its appeal to a “transcendent” point of view, the wonder of the ancient Nazca Lines in Peru (Soros, 125). The upshot is at least double: on the one hand Zurita’s land-poem nods to the recent national past and on the other hand to a much older pre-national past. It therefore provokes, in the realm of writing and reading (inscribed in the land and photographed

from the sky), a temporal back-and-forth that is arguably even more acute in Guzmán's *Nostalgia*, a film in which time acquires cosmic significance and in which, in the same heart-rending sweep, one of the astronomers remarks that it is easier for many people to examine the immemorial past of the stars than the recent past of their fellow human beings.

Zurita's endeavours in the realm of poetry and land-art, in which words, images, the landscape and the heavens are interconnected, resonate evocatively with Guzmán's endeavours in the realm of film and photography. Differences, nonetheless, abound. The title of *Nostalgia de la luz* derives, for instance, not from the theologically attuned works of Dante, as is the case with Zurita's *La vida nueva*, but from an eponymous book in French by astrophysicist Michel Cassé. Its scientific trappings do not, however, restrain its poetic, even religious, import, for the film draws on images and words that mix earth and sky, ground and air, bone fragments and stardust, both of which contain calcium salts, just like the desert.¹³ A major astronomical site, the Atacama Desert is also, as Guzmán remarks: "an absolute, a universal, archaeological site in which everything comes from the past. This shared idea of an absolute past became my foundation. Yet the different stories of the archaeologists, geologists, women and astronomers stood like separate pillars and it was necessary to somehow connect them" (Guest, 21). Guzmán, who, as noted, has lived most of his life in exile, does not place any familial or national limit on "this shared idea" of the past. Yet even as he signals the material universality of planet earth within the cosmos he acknowledges its discursive fragility, the fact that the "readers" and "listeners" of the figurative book that is the desert also tell stories about it that in their subjective particularities are far from unified.

The lack of unity extends, furthermore, to a gendered division of labour adumbrated in the very reference to “archaeologists, geologists, women and astronomers”, in which the professional scientific researchers are overwhelmingly men and the “amateur searchers” are overwhelmingly women, a longstanding, ideologically laden division between reason and emotion that is partially undercut by the one woman scientist to appear in the film, the aforementioned Valentina Rodríguez.¹⁴ Separated by age and profession, Rodríguez participates, along with the women who comb the desert in search of the bones of their loved ones, in a testimonial performance, a narrative act. In this sense, Guzmán places them on equal, if tenuous, footing: tenuous because as one of the women, 70-year-old Violeta Berríos, declares, they, not the scientists, are “la lepra de Chile,” the leprosy—not the lepers—of Chile. Berríos thereby insinuates a figurative disfigurement in the form of age, gender, class and education—her own self-reflected position as an old, poor woman who combs the desert in a search more subjective than scientific—that complicates the aesthetic sublimity that at times comes close to overwhelming the horrors of economic exploitation and military oppression. In acknowledging the narrative authority of these women, in treating their stories with the same care as the stories of the scientists, Guzmán also acknowledges their knowledge (here too, verbal archaeology, or etymology, reveals, through the root “gnarus”, a deep connection between narrative and knowledge), a knowledge that has been all but discounted by the powers that be, even as late as 2009-2010, when the film was made.¹⁵

However fragile, the emotionally charged connections by way of narrative and knowledge implicate not only the subjects filmed but also the filmmaker himself. In *Nostalgia de la luz*, Guzmán builds not only on his previous films, especially the

emotionally charged *Chile, la memoria obstinada*, likewise replete with photo-filmic images and verbal tales, but also on the work of documentary photographer Paula Allen, specifically her photo-essay *Flores en el desierto*, or *Flowers in the Desert*, which depicts the women of Calama showing photographs of their missing husbands, fathers, brothers, children, lovers and companions, sitting in their homes, scouring the desert and commemorating the lost and dead. Allen, who has photographed a wide array of people and places states that she first came to know about the disappeared of the Atacama Desert, and Chile more generally, through the 1989 film *Dance of Hope* by Deborah Shaffer, in which musicians Sting and Peter Gabriel also participated. A newcomer and outsider to Chile, with no familial, national, or linguistic ties to it, Allen produces a work of *moving* postmemory, visiting and revisiting Calama and interviewing and interacting with the women. A participant observer, she writes of her commitment to the Chilean women, with whom, she claims, “[a] bond was formed that transcended the relationship of photographer and subjects, connecting us deeply as women and friends” (18). At least two of the women, Violeta Berríos Águila and Victoria (Vicky) Saavedra, reappear in *Nostalgia de la luz*, their static black-and-white figures animated in vibrant, high-quality colour. Although Allen does not, cannot, draw, as Guzmán does, on an idealised, childhood version of the Chilean past, she stresses her emotional involvement with the women and declares that she “wept with them when they couldn’t recover the bodies of the men they loved, then set out again the next day with flashlights and shovels following rumors and intuition” (18).

The reference to tears, to the photographer’s renunciation of dispassionate distance, of “objectivity,” intersects with Leonilda Rivas’s narrative account, included in

Allen's book, of abuse at the hands of soldiers:

I was in Antofagasta when they took my son, Manuel, to prison. I traveled back to Calama with tortillas to give him. When I arrived to the prison some soldiers started hitting me. I began to cry. Some lieutenant came over and said, 'Get out of here, lady, no one comes here to cry'. (22)

Against a backdrop of proper names, oral testimonies and photographic images, the references to crying and to its authoritarian prohibition, amid emotional identification and physical injury, confer greater specificity and heft on the largely abstract theorisations of Richard and Moulian with which I began. For abstraction and theorisation are themselves "problems", removed as they are from the concrete search for the concrete—for bones and other palpable remains—that motivates the women in the desert.¹⁶ They are, to be sure, "problems" that the film itself engages by way of the scientists, whose intellectual investment in times and places before the advent of humanity one of the astronomers, Gaspar Galaz, questions in a self-reflective vis-à-vis with the women: "We can sleep peacefully", he notes, "and the next day, return, untroubled, to [study] the past."

It is just this sense of something "problematic" in abstract, theoretical approaches to such searchingly concrete searches that appears to motivate Mary Beth Tierney-Tello to remark, in one of the few sustained readings of Allen's Chilean photo-essay, that "[w]ith the inclusion of the testimonies and the historical explanations, the photographs cannot be reduced to free-floating images of strange, stark landscapes and unknown persons in pain" (93). Anchored, as it were, in knowing narratives, in moving, memorable stories, the photos acquire an emotional density that dovetails Allen's account of her subjective involvement and of the redemptive turn that she gives to her experience with the project:

“[i]nspired by [the women’s] refusal to be silenced in the face of potentially grave consequences, I have learned how it is possible to summon one’s dignity in spite of injustice, maintaining a loving spirit under the weight of enormous pain” (19). The humanist tenor of Allen’s self-assessment risks falling into platitudes of a verbal, not visual, sort and prompts Tierney-Tello to remark, in a gesture that has become all but unavoidable in cultural critique, that “such ‘healing,’ however predicated on empathy and identification, can be dubious when it entails a seemingly easy appropriation of another’s pain” (88). For Hite, empathic identification entails, moreover, a risk of a temporal order: “[e]mpathy may also be fleeting, and is certainly no guarantor of solidaristic [sic] action” (40). The challenge that such “risk assessments” entail is thus not merely one of positioning but also of timing, of “how much” as well as “how long”. Tierney-Tello goes on to quote Hirsch, who, in her essay “Projected Memory”, warns that “‘the challenge for the postmemorial artist is precisely to find the balance that allows the spectator to enter the image, to imagine the disaster, but that disallows an overappropriative identification that makes the distances disappear, creating too available, too easy an access to this particular past’” (1999: 10; quoted in Tierney-Tello, 88).

It remains to be seen, however, what makes the appropriative overappropriative and what, if anything, makes for a *proper* empathic duration and for a *proper* balance between “entry into”, and “identification with”, an image of disaster. In a profound respect, such balancing acts—situated as if in the “shaky middle” that Hite, via Dominick LaCapra, links to “emphatic unsettlement” (41)—are as important as they are doomed to failure, at least if posited as some general rule for all alike. For in the open-ended, highly fraught politics and ethics of empathic some misstep is all but inevitable. And yet, the

misstep, once accepted as all but inevitable, might allow for an imperfect, even “queer” approximation whose success is not measured in straightforward terms of ethical rectitude, political correctness, and triumphant critical competition, but, just perhaps, in terms of a certain failure.

For in *Nostalgia de la luz*, no less than in the world that it showcases in all its pettiness and grandeur, failure lurks everywhere: in the project of economic and social justice violently undone by militaristic capitalism; in the sombre dream of finding the remains of a loved one destroyed by the dictatorial regime; in the attempt to capture the past and assuage its affliction; in the hope of rewriting and reworking “pena y miedo” and of beginning a “new life”; in the creation of works of art in which engagement and denunciation coexist, tensely, with beauty and horror; in the valorisation of emotionally charged histories, stories and ways of knowing that exceed the institutionalised spheres of the sciences and the humanities in an age dominated by globalised neoliberalism; in the striving for a mode of teaching and learning in which feeling and thinking collaborate instead of compete. It is the failure of memory but also the failure of forgetting, bound up, in its unsettled positivity, in the queering of kinship, as Sosa suggests (2012: 221), but also in the queering of spectatorship and empathic identification that allows for a fragile, non-presumptuous form of community building. As Guzmán intones at the close of *Nostalgia de la luz*, years after *La batalla de Chile* and *Chile, la memoria obstinada* and as the screen fills with a panoramic shot of the Valley of Santiago under a starry night: “those who have memory are able to live in the fragile present time; those who do not have it do not live anywhere. Every night, slowly, impassively, the centre of the galaxy passes above Santiago”. And every day, slowly, impassively, the centre of the galaxy, it

would appear, passes it by, fails to stay put.

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¹ All etymologies are culled from the *On-line Etymology Dictionary*.
<http://www.etymonline.com/>

² The impersonal and passive formulation “are expected” is itself critical to a certain normative functioning of criticism.

³ All translations from the Spanish of this and other works are mine.

⁴ The so-called “affective turn” that arose some years ago in certain quarters of the Anglo-American academy, primarily the Humanities, should not be taken as the standard for academic work more generally, be it in Chile or the United Kingdom, where “Research Excellence Frameworks” are hard pressed to “process” emotion, let alone affect, in presumably quantifiable terms of “impact.” Jo Labanyi, notes that “affect theory” is largely an Anglophone construction and concern, though a number of works included in the present article might be said to engage in it (Richard, writing in Spanish, and Sosa, Pino-Ojeda and Ortega Breña, amongst others, writing in English). According to Labanyi, the distinction between affect and emotion poses “a problem for scholars working in Spanish studies, since in Spanish ‘afecto’ remains equivalent to ‘sentimiento’ (emotion). Curiously, the Spanish ‘emoción’ designates ‘excitement’; that is, a strong response to a stimulus (as in ‘¡Qué emoción!’). Emotions (in the English sense) are by definition conscious” (224). Clearly, I would modify Labanyi’s reference to “Spanish studies” to studies of works written or spoken in Spanish, but even so I worry about the possibility of an erasure of differences *within* Spanish and, for that matter, *within* English. The important point, I think, is that the *meanings* of “emotion” and “affect”, “emoción” and “afecto” or “sentimiento”—but then why not also “sentiment” and so on?—are

intrinsically *linguistic* and can be *defined* or *determined* only at the risk of an imperious imposition and stabilisation. Brian Massumi, whose work Labanyi cites, maintains that affect is a matter of intensity, “preconscious and prelinguistic” (225) in Labanyi’s gloss. Massumi contrasts, quite categorically, affect with emotion, which he claims is “qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized” (28). Massumi’s assertion that “[i]t is crucial to theorize the difference between affect and emotion” (28) and that they “follow different logics and pertain to different orders” (27) underestimates, however, the persistence of *messiness* across and within languages, across and within individuals, communities, people, places, times and things. Indeed, the manner in which Massumi declares that emotion is “intensity owned and recognized” short-circuits the socially, culturally and economically charged significance of “ownership” and “recognition”. Still and all, Massumi’s assertion that “[s]omething remains unactualized, inseparable from but unassimilable to any *particular*, functionally anchored perspective” (35, emphasis original) resonates with the fragile empathic sharing that I am here exploring by way of Guzmán’s documentaries. For Massumi, “all emotion is more or less disorienting”, which is “why it is classically described as being outside of oneself, at the very point at which one is most intimately and unshareably in contact with oneself and one’s vitality” (35).

⁵ In an “Open Letter” to the Chilean Minister of Education dated 6 October 2010, Guzmán protests the suspension of a screening of *Nostalgia de la luz* in Curacaví, in central Chile, in relation to which the Director of the School claimed that videos that

referred to dictatorship were amongst those “things that cannot be treated in the classroom”. Denouncing the “daily fascism that still prevails in many corners of Chile”, Guzmán indicates in his letter that for all the political and cultural changes since the screening of *La batalla de Chile* the aversion to “revisiting” the dictatorial past remains strong in many quarters (“Carta abierta”).

⁶ Although I agree with Idelber Avelar—in reference to the early textual experiments of Diamela Eltit—that “de-anecdotalization” (173) can constitute a mode of progressive critique, in citing my own pedagogical experience, I clearly refuse to conflate the two *tout court*.

⁷ Hirsch develops the concept of affiliative postmemory in “The Generation of Postmemory,” though, as the title indicates, the generative and the generational remain central.

⁸ Importantly, Guzmán himself appeals to the international, if not indeed universal, dimension of art and action in his personal, open letter to the Chilean Minister of Culture, Luciano Cruz-Coke, in which he impugns the decision by the Consejo de la Cultura to reject—that is to say, to deny funding to—all audiovisual projects that came from outside Chile (“Carta personal y abierta”). Guzmán offers a dazzling list of Chileans who, for a variety of reasons (from exile to travel), produced work outside of Chile; the list includes, among others, Raúl Ruiz, Vicente Huidobro, Claudio Bravo, Violeta Parra, Pablo Neruda, José Donoso, Antonio Skármeta, Ariel Dorfman and Roberto Bolaño.

⁹ Malbrán’s remark resembles Teresa Brennan’s that “[r]ather than the generational line of inheritance (the vertical line of history), the transmission of affect, conceptually, presupposes a horizontal line of transmission: the line of the heart. The affects are not

inherited, or not only inherited” (75).

¹⁰ For a detailed reading of the Muro de la Memoria and the Puente Bulnes, see Nelly Richard’s essay “Marcas, arquitecturas y relatos” in *Crítica cultural*, especially pages 262 to 271. For a close examination of other “sites of memory”, see Cara Levey’s article on the Memorial de los Detenidos Desaparecidos in Uruguay.

¹¹ As Richard notes, “instead of concentrating memory in a reverential site (the cemetery) which invites recollection by withdrawing itself from the traffic of the city, the Bulnes Bridge wants to open out of itself [‘desensimismar’] the act of remembering by forcing the memory of the disappeared to intersect the routines of a living community that stumbles upon its traces randomly in the multifarious daily activities that populate the urban warp and woof” (2010: 262-263).

¹² For more on the poetry of Zurita and *land art*, see the articles by Jens Andermann, Macarena Ortúzar and Benoît Santini. Sky writing, photographed, forms part of Zurita’s *Anteparaíso*.

¹³ This is not to suggest that the religious resonances of *Nostalgia de la luz* are perforce Christian. Indeed, as *El botón de nácar* makes clear, the cosmovision that *Nostalgia de la luz* advances is in many respects more consistent with that of the indigenous people of the south of Chile.

¹⁴ Macarena Gómez-Barris, who engages the concept of postmemory in relation to *Nostalgia de la luz* and other films by Guzmán, refers to “Guzmán’s often masculinist desire to produce a meta-historical corrective to the Pinochet era and its aftermath, shot through with his own frozen exilic memory” (7), but unpacks neither the “masculinist

desire” nor the “frozen exilic memory.” She accordingly misses the ways in which the desire of a group of women animates Guzmán’s film.

¹⁵ As Guzmán recounts in “La odisea financiera”, the project for the film was rejected by a long list of media venues as well as by FONDART and CORFO, the two main funding sources from the Chilean government (26).

¹⁶ As Susannah Radstone notes with respect to the work of Cecilia Sosa and others, the challenge to “the disembodiedness and unlocatedness of theory . . . is in no way a naive retreat to ‘the real’, or to the reality of bodies *over* theory” (354, emphasis original). Instead, she argues, it constitutes “a caution *to* theory and its conceptual assemblages, from the ragged ground of an all too located history, to beat their *own* situatedness in mind, even as they travel” (354, emphasis original).