

THE PEARL BUTTON

A film by
Patricio Guzmán



Silver Bear for Best Script, Berlin Film Festival
Prize of the Ecumenical Jury, Berlin Film Festival

Chile / Spain / France / 82 minutes / Spanish, Kawéskar, and Yagán with English subtitles

Opens March 18th

FOR ALL PRESS ENQUIRIES PLEASE CONTACT

Sue Porter/Lizzie Frith – Porter Frith Ltd
Tel. : 020 7833 8444 / porterfrith@hotmail.com

FOR ALL OTHER ENQUIRIES PLEASE CONTACT

Robert Beeson – New Wave Films
robert@newwavefilms.co.uk



1 Lower John Street
W1F 9DT
Tel: 020 3603 7577
info@newwavefilms.co.uk

www.newwavefilms.co.uk

SYNOPSIS

After the acclaimed *Nostalgia for the Light* (*Nostalgia de la Luz*, 2010), with its study of the desert, the stars, light and time, as well as the recent memory and remains of disappeared people in Northern Chile under Pinochet, Patricio Guzmán takes us on a journey into the water and ocean of Southern Chile.

The sea holds all the voices of the earth and those that come from outer space. Water receives impetus from the stars and transmits it to living creatures. Water, the longest border in Chile, also holds the secret of two mysterious buttons which were found on its ocean floor. Chile, with its 2,670 miles of coastline and the largest archipelago in the world, presents a supernatural landscape. In it are volcanoes, mountains and glaciers. In it are the voices and languages of the Patagonian indigenous peoples and their tragic history, the first English sailors and also those of its political prisoners. Some say that water has memory. This film gives it a voice. Using both rarely seen archival images and breath-taking new footage, *The Pearl Button* (*El botón de nácar*) manages once again to navigate different periods of history and geography in a gripping and lyrical tale of the world we live in.

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

WESTERN PATAGONIA

The largest existing archipelago. Located in the south of Chile it has endless islands, islets, rocks and fjords and is known as "Western Patagonia". There are estimated to be around 46,000 miles of coastline. Parts of this region have never been explored. It encompasses the far south of the continent and stretches from the Gulf of Penas to Staten Island (the southernmost point of South America). This immense labyrinth of water reminds us of men's aquatic origins. According to the German scientist Theodor Schwenk, the inner ear is a winding mollusc, the heart is the meeting of two underwater currents, and some of the bones in our bodies are coiled in a spiral, like a whirlpool.

WATER IN THE COSMOS

Water doesn't just belong to earthlings. It is a common element in the Solar System. It is found in the form of vapour in some planets: Jupiter and Saturn. It is found as ice on Mars, the Moon, Europa, Titan. Beyond the Solar System there is also a lot of water in other bodies. In Chile, in 2010, a few stars were detected from the "La Silla" observatory that may contain liquid water and that orbit the planet "Gliese", in the constellation Libra, 20 light years away from the Earth. At present, nobody can deny the possible existence of an archipelago such as Patagonia there.

THE WATER PEOPLE

Making a film about these places also inspired me to film part of its inhabitants' history. In the words of Theodor Schwenk: "...the act of thinking resembles water due to its capacity to adapt to everything. The law of thinking is the same as that of water, always ready to adapt itself to everything". Perhaps this explains how a group of humans managed to live here for ten thousand years, isolated and in polar temperatures, with winds of 124 miles per hour. It is thought there were eight thousand people in the 18th century. Now, around twenty direct survivors remain.



PATRICIO GUZMAN

Patricio Guzmán was born in Santiago de Chile in 1941. The director of the Chilean trilogy *The Battle of Chile* is one of the great filmmakers of Latin American cinema and one of the most important documentary film directors in the world.

As an adolescent, he was inspired by the work of Chris Marker, Frederic Rossif and Louis Malle. He studied filmmaking in Chile and Spain where he graduated in 1970. He returned to Chile in 1971 and directed his first documentary, *The First Year*, which covered the first twelve months of Salvador Allende's government. Chris Marker, impressed by the film, offered to help get it seen in France.

Two years later, Marker again provided invaluable assistance when he donated the raw stock necessary to commence filming *The Battle of Chile*, Guzmán's trilogy about what was to become Allende's final year. Filming on this project continued until the very day of the coup. That day, Guzmán was imprisoned in Santiago's infamous football stadium, where he remained for fifteen days. He was able to get out of Chile in late November 1973, with the film material for his trilogy in his luggage. The film was edited in Cuba and released to great acclaim.

He has since directed a number of award-winning documentaries, mostly focused on Chilean concerns, including *In God's Name* about the Catholic Church's fight for human rights in Chile, and *Chile, Obstinate Memory* which addresses collective political amnesia. *Nostalgia For The Light* won the documentary award from the European Film Academy in 2010. *The Pearl Button* is the second film of what will become a trilogy. It was awarded the Silver Bear for best script at the Berlin Film Festival (2015).



SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

2015 **The Pearl Button** (*El botón de nácar*)

2010 **Nostalgia for the Light** (*Nostalgia de la Luz*, 102').

2005 **My Jules Verne** (*Mon Jules Verne*, 52')

2004 **Salvador Allende** (102').

2001 **The Pinochet Case** (*Le Cas Pinochet*, 110').

1999 **La Isla de Robinson Crusoe** (43').

1997 **Chile, Obstinate Memory** (*Chile, la memoria obstinada*, 58').

1995 **Pueblo en Vilo** (52').

1992 **The Southern Cross** (*La Cruz del sur*, 80').

1986-87 **In the Name of God** (*En nombre de Dios*, 100').

1985 **Pre-Columbian Mexico** (5 x 30', TV).

1985 **Rosa de los vientos**

1979 **The Battle of Chile III** (*La Batalla de Chile: El poder popular*)

1977 **The Battle of Chile II** (*La Batalla de Chile: El golpe de estado*)

1975 **The Battle of Chile I** (*La Batalla de Chile: La insurrección de la burguesía*)

1971 **The First Year** (100'), with a prologue by Chris Marker.

1969 **El Paraíso ortopédico**

1968 **La Tortura y otras formas de diálogo**

CREDITS

Writer and Director
Producer and Artistic Advisor
Photography
Editing
Sound Recording
Original Soundtrack
Assistant Director
Additional Photography

Still Photography
Sound editing and Mix
Executive Producer and Production
Coordinator
Line Producer in Chile

Co-producers
Co-production Companies
Filmed in HDCAM
France - Chile - Spain - 82 minutes - 1:85

Patricio Guzmán
Renate Sachse (Atacama Productions)
Katell Djian
Emmanuelle Joly
Álvaro Silva Wuth
Miranda & Tobar, Hughes Maréchal
Nicolás Lasnibat
Patricio Guzmán, David Bravo,
Yves de Peretti, Patricio Gianfranco, Raúl Beas
Martín Gusinde, Paz Errázuriz
Jean-Jacques Quinet

Adrien Oumhani
Verónica Rosselot
Bruno Bettati, Fernando Lataste, Jaume Roures
Llop
Valdivia Film, Mediapro, France 3 Cinema



Conversation between Fred Wiseman and Patricio Guzmán

FRED: What is the relationship between this film and your last film “Nostalgia for the Light”?

PATRICIO: I think it's a diptych, the first is set in the extreme north, and the second in the extreme opposite. I considered doing something in the other extreme and perhaps I'll make the third film about the Andes mountain range, the vertebral column of Chile and America. But for now I have no concrete plan and don't even know if I'd be capable of it.

F: I was struck by the beauty of the introduction.

P: We filmed in two sailing boats under the command of Keri Lee Pashuk and Greg Landreth, who've undertaken 17 voyages in Antarctica. They took us to the extraordinary glaciers, the impressive mountain range of Patagonia. It's a labyrinth of islands. We sailed many kilometres, from Seno del Almirantazgo to the Beagle Canal.

F: In my opinion all good films always have two voices: one is the literal voice and the other is the abstract and metaphorical voice. I think that in this case the true film exists in the passage from one to the other. Can you give me an example of how these two voices were connected in your film?

P: When I am editing and finish a sequence of two or three minutes, I immediately create the narrative voice and write it down on a blank page. I write down four or five sentences and then record them over the image. So the voice is improvised although it's always indirect, only rarely is it informative. I then consider it done and give it no more thought. I move on to the next sequence. There's a kind of intuition in the story I want to tell that already exists within me. Describing what I've been holding inside for such a long time seems easy.

F: I really like how you reconstructed the map of Chile and how it is unrolled during the sequence.

P: My friend, the painter Emma Malig, has been making maps of fictitious continents she calls “errant” lands, lands of shipwrecks, of exile. In my film “Salvador Allende”, I filmed her imaginary lands for the first time. This time I asked her for a complete map of Chile- to scale- that is 15 metres long. It resembles the ochre coloured skin of a prehistoric animal. It's a unique and admirable work of art.

F: Why are you obsessed by the stories of Pinochet's coup d'état? Why do you believe it's so important that you always come back to this theme?

P: I can't get away from this moment. It's as if I'd witnessed my home being burnt down in my childhood. And all my story books, games, objects, comic books, had been burnt before my eyes. I feel like a child that can't forget this fire, that happened only recently, For me time is different for each person. In Chile, when I ask my friends if they remember the coup d'état, many of them say it's far away now, that it happened a long time ago. But for me, no time has passed. It's as if it happened last year, last month, or last week. It's as if I exist inside an amber filled capsule, like those ancient insects that have remained immobilised forever, inside a drop... Some of my Chilean friends tell me that I “live in a trap, that I'm sick”. I look at them and see that most of them are older than me, fatter than me, more stooped than me. And I conclude that I'm perfectly alive within my capsule.

F: Do you believe that the public and Chilean people want to forget these questions? Is this part of your motivation, I mean for it to never be forgotten?

P: The young people are eager to know everything about what happened. Their grandparents, their parents, their teachers, most of them haven't told them anything in real detail. That's why they're hungry for a past that they don't really know. Also they belong to the generation that is not afraid, they're open to understanding what happened. There's a strong student movement in Chile. We interviewed a few of its leaders (Gabriel Boric, Giorgio Jackson). For them Salvador Allende's project was a model...

On the other hand, "modern" Chile is a paradox. "Modern" Chile is far older than the Chile I knew. "Modern" Chile is a country in which homosexuals have no rights, in which abortion is illegal, and which lives under Pinochet's Constitution.

F: How do you explain this?

P: During 40 years, the right wing has maintained a Constitution that had many traps. The democratic opposition's votes could never outnumber those of the right entertaining the concept of the "internal enemy". This might change since the Parliament just approved a reform of the binominal system which will now be proportional (on January 20th 2015). Little by little Chile is getting rid of Pinochet dictatorship's legacy. I hope the country will return to a more interesting, diverse and democratic place. Salvador Allende was precisely this: a democratic and libertarian man. This is the great legacy he left to this country, as long as a spaghetti.

F: Why has Pinochet's Constitution remained the same for so long?

P: Pinochet was thrust from power by a popular movement. The agitation that was present in the working class neighbourhoods, universities, high schools, central Santiago, etc. was so strong that the CIA ordered Pinochet to organise a referendum to neutralise this possible rebellion. Pinochet organised it and lost it. The next day the professional politicians came to power and made a pact of silence with the military.

F: This happened because the army was involved?

P: The army has always been involved in Chilean affairs, even today. It is its main force. The idea of this pact of silence probably came from Felipe González's influence during the transition period. The pact, which was used in Spain after Franco's death, involved talking about everything except historic memory and the communal graves. In Chile, the popular masses that fought against the dictatorship were kept away from power. Power was taken back by the central left. But this "left" is a left that has become increasingly diluted up until present day. Around 40 percent of the dictatorship's crimes have been brought to trial. But the other crimes have not. The civilians involved in the dictatorship, for example, have barely been touched. Basically, Chile is one big solitary island on which people work a lot, work hard and get up very early. Sometimes employees have only one suit that their wives iron every night and they struggle to belong to a middle class in which there's no happiness. I believe that the coup d'état will hang around for a century. It's an island with no right to strikes, no freedom of expression, and whose church meddles with affairs of the state. When I was young, the Chilean church was one of the most tolerant on the continent. This is why I think that the real Republican "modernity" is behind, not in front of us.

F: In your current film, does water play the same role as the desert did in your last film?

P: I think this is true. What was solid in the last film is liquid in this one.

F: Bodies are found in both places... Are we talking about two cemeteries? Does this play a literary or metaphysical role in both works? I think it's a metaphor.

P: It does both. I like working on metaphor in order to take the documentary away from informative media and because it's a very rich narrative tool that provokes people to think. But there is also a "literal role" because these *natural* cemeteries really did exist. The first option when it came to making bodies disappear was the desert, next came the volcano craters and lastly the ocean. They tied the bodies to a piece of railway track so they'd sink with no trace.

F: Is the person you interviewed a pilot?

P: He's an ex-mechanic for the PUMA helicopters. It was Judge Juan Guzmán who gave me the lead. The judge's conclusion was the following: they've found around 100 bodies in the desert, where are the others? There are two possibilities: at the bottom of the sea or in the volcano craters. They looked in the sea and the judge ordered inspector Vignolo to find the rails off the Quintero coast. Embedded in one of the rails they found a shirt button. This rail is in Santiago, in the Villa Grimaldi museum. Judge Guzmán believes that further out at sea more rails might be found. If there were an enormous submarine boat they'd be able to carry out an extensive search in the great marine depths and they'd certainly find many more.

F: Who is the poet Raúl Zurita?

P: In my opinion he's one of Chile's best modern poets. He's an extraordinary, remarkably talented artist. I love it when he says that the military are cowards. He gave me the example of Achilles and Troy, and Hector's cadaver that was returned to the Trojans as a matter of honour to the enemy warriors. But I didn't use it in the film as he says many other important things in this sequence.

F: In your film there are some elements that lie between fiction and documentary because you asked people to do certain things. And there's real directing, like in a fiction film. Why did you do this?

P: I did a reconstruction of the rails with the bodies as I had read a book by a journalist (Javier Rebolledo) who'd carried out a very detailed investigation on this subject. I spoke to the journalist, who explained these hidden facts to me. For me, seeing the dummy prepared and ready to be thrown into the sea was a blood chilling experience, because it seemed like a real dead body. It also gives me a shock to think that behind all this there must have been a considerable amount of organising, to make 1.400 people disappear. If each flight took nine bodies, it means that there were hundreds of flight missions. They also threw bodies from boats. A small group of soldiers appeared one night in a port and forced the owner of a fishing boat to take "packages" on board, with bodies, to be thrown into the sea. This also happened in lakes and rivers.

F: What happens when you show your films in Chile?

P: I have a public who is familiar with my films. There must be around 5,000 of them. But no television channel broadcasts them. It has only happened once. They showed "Nostalgia for the Light" at one o'clock in the morning and with the film reels reversed. They made excuses and had to show it again, but almost at the same time of day.

INTERVIEW WITH PATRICIO GUZMAN

***The Pearl Button* presents the past of Chile's indigenous people and the horrors of the Pinochet regime. We hear from a woman in the film who says there is no word in her language for "god" – that's quite striking.**

Yes, she is a woman called Gabriela Paterito, she is a member of the indigenous Kaweskar people of southern Patagonia and lives in a little village there. She is the only representative of this indigenous group who is still able to talk about the past and who still has a global understanding of the history of her people. There are four more representatives of this group of indigenous people that still exist but they don't have that global vision or historical memory, so she's a sort of natural leader. She still actually goes out with the canoe rowing.

You have a focus on elements in your films. In *Nostalgia For Light* you used the desert powerfully and here you use water.

Yes, in a way the guiding principle of this film is water: it's a recurring element. I thought about water because I read the works of a German scientist called Theodor Schwenk, who wrote a book – *Sensitive Chaos*. In it he maintains that when a body of water is very still and then there's a very slight movement on the surface, it's the heavenly bodies, the planets and the stars that create this movement in the water. We of course have water in our bodies also, so, in a way, water is at the interface between ourselves and the cosmos, it's a kind of mediator. That was really the first idea that I had when making this film. Of course it's true that there are great similarities between this film and *Nostalgia for Light* and I might even turn into a trilogy, I don't know yet.

Why did you use such poetic language to present the crimes against Chile's people?

In order to talk about profound tragedies, genocide that takes place, looking at Palestine or Syria, talking about Chile or Argentina indeed for that matter, it's very important to use metaphor because metaphor is very expressive, very evocative. We've seen images of mass graves, we've seen images of the Nazi concentration camps and that has been with us for quite a while already. Nowadays we still need to talk about these events, but it is perhaps best explained in an indirect way using the language of poetry. I think it is indispensable, in a way, to seek out that language when talking about these phenomena because it is also important to speak about pain and this is a very effective way to do it.

The place of documentaries in cinema has changed, we see them being screened at big competitions and sitting alongside feature films. Has your way of working changed since the 1970s when you made *The Battle of Chile*?

It's very true that in the 70s there was a tradition that dominated, the so called "direct cinema", and that was the dominant genre of the time, but I think that nowadays independent film-makers work with narrative elements as well. We use description, action, music, and we use these elements to develop characters in the film as well. So there are certainly elements that are very similar to fictional cinema, but we employ them simply with the objective of creating a documentary. To put it in a nutshell, Gabriela Paterito can never be Juliette Binoche, she can never be on the same level, they are two separate realities and they cannot be confounded. We work with reality and of course each one of us as documentary filmmakers develops their own style, and for me I like to work with metaphors. What is really similar to fictional cinema, though, is that we work with stories and we find a means of relating these stories.

How do the memories of these deaths and murders of the Pinochet regime manifest in Chilean society now?

They don't exist. In Chile you don't talk about the past, there is no debate about the past. The armed forces have never faced up to their responsibilities. There is a sort of pact of silence. For example, the episode in which bodies were thrown into the sea, which is dealt with in the film, hundreds of civilians participated, though none of them were ever brought to trial. One of the major newspapers that supported Pinochet and ferociously attacked Allende, *El Mercurio*, rejected afterwards that there had been any torture or that any people had disappeared during the dictatorship. They have never been tried for the false claims that they propagated and remain a popular news outlet. So there is a transition that has not been fully realized, Chile is not a democratic country. There is no real freedom of the press, there is no right to industrial strikes, the level of unionization in Chile is very, very low and yet at the same time you have multinational companies installed in the country that hardly pay any tax. In a way Chile is a myth. It's certainly a country that has a high level of civilization, you can't compare it to countries such as Bolivia or Peru, and Santiago de Chile seems like any city in the USA, but there is a deep social imbalance that marks the country. If you look at education and health, it is a shambles. I think it's very important to talk about these things and to talk about the past so that we can overcome the legacy of the dictatorship. I believe that my films should be shown at schools, yet everybody's reaction when the proposal is made is "Oh Guzmán, he's a left winger, we don't want him to indoctrinate our youth, we'd better keep him out". That's how you stifle a debate that should really take place in the country.

So when will Chile be able to come to terms with its past?

I really believe that the tragedy of the coup d'état will take one hundred years to overcome. I think that there are gradual steps that will take place in society, and memories will resurface. Each year small steps are made and I believe that at some point the truth will be established. It might be in the next generation that this happens. My film for example, *The Battle of Chile*, will become a great success in Chile when I die, even 20 years after that. It's not me who has to disappear for that to happen, the entire generation of those who were responsible for the coup d'état and who have never lived up to their responsibilities, will have to disappear as well in order for these films to be seen. It is true that those people who are still around today do not face up to their responsibility. Time may be a slow actor, but it continues.

They say that history is written by the winners, but you have always looked to focus on those that have been marginalized.

That is very true and it's something that affects the entire continent. We have rather mediocre historians and very sketchy science in terms of analysis. The historians that we have are highly ideologized and there is also the fact that in all of Latin America we have these monuments to Generals who raise their swords, ready to rush into battle. And it's no different in Chile; it's the dominant class that has written history. Now though, there is a new generation of historians who are eager to set the score straight and praise history in a new way. Gabriel appears in the film and they're eager to get to the bottom of what really happened and to get the film out into the public sphere in Chile – for example, we've had 15 massacres that have taken place since the republic was founded 200 years ago, yet they have never been mentioned. So Chile is a country that is only now beginning to venture a new gaze at its own history.

Interview conducted by Benedict Mc Kenna during the Berlin Film festival and published in theupcoming.co.uk