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# Stardust<sup>1</sup>

*The Atacama Desert ... is one place on the planet incredibly full of and alive with traces and footprints.*

– Patricio Guzmán<sup>2</sup>

Patricio Guzmán's film *Nostalgia for the Light* is set in the Atacama Desert in Chile.<sup>3</sup> The immense desert is visible from space: it is the only brown patch on the earth's surface. It is devoid of moisture, and hence devoid of life: no insects, birds, or vegetation are to be found there. The air is clear – transparent – and that makes the desert an ideal site for astronomers to set up their observatories. Its saline dryness means that objects – including human bodies – are preserved intact: mummified. It is thus a territory that archaeologists share with the astronomers: they gently probe the ground for signs of previous inhabitants, while astronomers scan the skies to find the origins of the universe. The desert was a place of transit: indigenous peoples traversed it on their way from the mountains to the sea. Miners came and went at the bidding of the mineral industry. And a miners' camp became the site of a concentration camp during the Pinochet dictatorship. Traces of all these comings and goings remain, eerily preserved in defiance of time, blown by an interminable wind, and under the watchful eyes of the stars.

The film explores themes of memory and existence, past and present, interweaving archaeology, astronomy and forensics. It is a film that has resonated with me ever since I first saw it, at a showing for the Performance and Politics group in Aberystwyth in February 2015. A deeply moving segment of the film for me, then, was when, towards the end of the film, one of the women searching the desert for

the remains of her husband, disappeared during the 1970s, dreams of the possibility that the telescopes, now focused on the stars, could instead be turned downwards to scan the desert for traces of human remains. It was not only the pathos of that dream, and its impossibility, that I found moving, but her apologetic yet barely concealed anger at the injustice of the fortune spent on cosmological research while the needs of relatives of the disappeared were disregarded. In this chapter I explore how this contrast and its politics is brought out in the film.

The film also spoke to me, as I realised much later, because it brought together many of the themes that have inspired my work over the years, and that are reflected in this book: the contrast between academics and activists; the slow, painstaking work of remaking the world; the impossibility of certainty; the connections between the living and the dead, stars and mountains; the wisdom of the everyday; and the absence of the present. It places my past as a scientist alongside my work as a scholar, but does more than that. At the end of the film, Guzmán talks of a time when ‘each of us could carry the entire universe in the depths of our pockets’.<sup>4</sup> I would want to say that we still do that, whether we know it or not. That is where dreams – and memories – live: in the dust and fragments at the bottom of our pockets.

Portions of Guzmán’s voice over in *Nostalgia for the Light* are reminiscent of Chris Marker’s *La Jetée*, the film discussed in Chapter 5. Towards the beginning he talks of ‘moments frozen in time’, and in his account of the history of Chile, the phrase ‘some time later, a coup d’état swept away democracy, dreams and science’ seems to echo Marker’s ‘sometime after came the destruction of Paris’.<sup>5</sup> The pacing is similar, as is the tone of the voice-over, and the stillness of the moving images. Marker and Guzmán met, in Chile, in May 1972. Guzmán told Marker, twenty years his senior, that he had watched *La Jetée* fifteen times.<sup>6</sup> However, despite these echoes, for me Guzmán’s work contains the potential for a demand for justice absent from *La Jetée*. It refuses an easy demonisation of the perpetrators, and it demands a politics. Archaeologist Lautaro Núñez, one of the film’s protagonists, explains how bodies of the disappeared were dug up and loaded onto trucks to be taken elsewhere. He reminds us

that it was people who did this, working under military command. He calls on the military to reveal what they know so that the dead can be given a proper burial.

*Nostalgia for the Light* can be seen as what Mike Pearson calls chorography. His writing entails ‘the scrutiny of the lived experiences of land, of the interrelationships of performance and the everyday, and of the entangled nature of land, human subject and event’.<sup>7</sup> Chorography, as he enacts it, involves paying attention to geology and landscape, movement and trace, memory and remains, practice and performance. It acknowledges the body as located in place, and the specificity of place in a larger region. Biography becomes *mystory*, which ‘blurs the boundary between critical and creative writing, autobiography and cultural history, one text and the next’ and moves between ‘personal, popular and expert’.<sup>8</sup> But it is a *mystory* that is firmly situated in a landscape that ‘owes its character not only to the experiences it affords – as sights, sounds, etc. – but also to what is done there’. Pearson continues: ‘Human activities are written into the landscape and daily passages become biographic encounters with traces and memories of past activities.’<sup>9</sup> It is no accident that Pearson, a theatre performer and director but trained as an archaeologist, brings a forensic sensitivity to landscape and to scenes of crime in particular.<sup>10</sup>

In this chapter I trace *Nostalgia for the Light* as chorography. I explore how it rewrites the idea of the past through its superposition of astronomical, archaeological, personal and political pasts, and, centrally, through its destabilizing of the idea of the present. Guzmán’s chorography is not earthbound: it integrates sky and stars into the landscape. The cosmos is imagined, and photographed, from the Atacama Desert, ‘an absolute, universal archaeological site in which *everything* comes from the past’.<sup>11</sup> I explore whether in the end the film disappoints: whether it raises but ultimately perhaps fails to address questions of justice and politics.

### Astronomers and archaeologists

As the film begins, the sounds of metal on metal echo around us as an old German telescope in the Atacama Desert slowly opens. Wheels

turn, cogs engage with cogs, chains link element to element, tracks guide the movement, and markers align precisely with scales engraved on polished brass. Circles within circles, wheels within wheels, turning slowly but inexorably as the mechanism comes to life. Viewers are invited to slow down themselves: this is not going to be a film that reveals itself swiftly: patience will be required. There is something vaguely threatening about the scene, though. The power and precision of the instrument, man-made for sure, but somehow its movement is now beyond control: an instrument, but of what?

The circles are repeated in shots of the surface of the moon that follow. The next scene is a domestic, everyday setting. Sunlight through rustling leaves reveals a kitchen and household objects: a radio, chairs, tapestry-work cushions, a picture of the last supper, an old-fashioned sewing machine. The voice-over tells us these objects could have come from the narrator's childhood home. We are shown the outside of the house, and a tree, green in the wind: a simple, everyday life, where nothing happens. Then came revolution, and alongside it, the arrival of the scientists and their machines for looking at the sky. Later, the revolution was swept away, but the astronomers remained, doing their work. A cloud of dust slowly covers the view of the outside of the house as we move to the next scene.

The juxtaposition of the telescopes with other scenes continues throughout the film. Interspersed are images of the cosmos: star sequences generated digitally from still images photographed by a camera positioned in a telescope.<sup>12</sup> Modern telescopes are shown: beautiful contraptions moving into position with steely precision and the same echoing sounds that accompanied the old German telescope we were shown at the start. Observatories ranged with geometrical accuracy side by side on mountain tops overlook the desert like white domed temples. Early on in the film we meet the first of its 'characters': astronomer Gaspar Galaz. He reflects on the connection between religion and science, and the big questions both ask: 'Where do we come from, where are we and where are we going?' Science, he says, is 'never resolved. That's what I like about it.'

Later in the same conversation, Galaz broaches the question of time and the past. Guzmán sees *the past* as a notion he can use to frame the film and to connect archaeologists, astronomers and the women

searching for remains. Galaz explains how everything is past: how the present doesn't exist:

All of our life experiences, including this conversation, happened in the past. Even if it is a matter of millionths of a second. The camera I am looking at now is a few metres away and is therefore already several millionths of a second in the past in relation to the time on my watch. The signal takes time to arrive. The light reflected from the camera or from you, reaches me after a moment. A fleeting moment, as the speed of light is very fast.<sup>13</sup>

The implication is, Galaz explains to Guzmán, that 'The present doesn't exist.' 'It's true', he asserts, presumably responding to a sceptical look from Guzmán. Astronomers are looking at what happened a very long time ago indeed, given the time that light from the stars and distant galaxies takes to arrive at the telescopes in Atacama. Galaz explains, 'The past is the astronomers' main tool. We manipulate the past. We are used to living behind the times. That's how it is.' At the end of the conversation, Guzmán says, 'The present is a fine line.' 'A puff of air would destroy it', the astronomer replies.

After we have met Galaz for the first time, archaeologist Lautaro Núñez, the second protagonist of the film, shows us carvings made by pre-Colombian shepherds on rock faces and boulders. Back in his office, he talks to Guzmán of the connection with the astronomers: 'They study one past and we study another. They are in the present recording a past which they have to reconstruct. They have only minute clues. They are archaeologists like us.' The astronomers and the archaeologists share the same space – the Atacama Desert – because the unique dryness of the climate suits them both. Guzmán suggests that the Atacama is a gateway to the past. Núñez responds, 'That's right. It's a gateway we know how to go through. But when we come out again, will we have made discoveries that will shake our lives forever? This remains a mystery to me.'

Despite this gateway, a paradox remains: Chile has not yet considered its own nearest past. Núñez points out that little is known of the nineteenth century, with its mining history, or the fate of the indigenous peoples. The camera takes us back into the desert and shows us the graves where, 'like geological layers, layers of miners and

of Indians are swept by a relentless wind'. In a haunting scene, set in the remains of a miners' camp, their shoes, their jackets, their other belongings lie abandoned and preserved. Spoons hanging from the ceiling make the gentle sound of a wind chime as they knock against each other.

We return to the echoing interior of an observatory for a time, before we are shown a more primitive device for observing the stars that was used by prisoners in one of Pinochet's concentration camps – Chacabuco – set up by just adding barbed wire to the remains of a nineteenth-century miner's camp like the one we visited earlier. We meet Luís Henríquez, a former prisoner there and part of a group who found a sense of freedom through observing the stars from the camp. And we meet architect Miguel Lawner, who was held in five different camps, and who made measurements and drawings from memory to preserve a detailed record of the camps and what it was like there.

Then we are back at the telescopes, this time a new radio telescope in the process of being constructed. It is somehow surprising to see the engineers at work, apparently disembowelling this invincible mechanical creature that otherwise seems to have a life of its own, rotating inexorably, the sound echoing once more.

At this point the narrative turns. We meet a young engineer working on the project, Victor Gonzáles, and his mother, who is not named. She works with ex-prisoners who were tortured. They both work with the past, but there is a difference. His mother explains:

The women who search for their dead demand an answer from those responsible for the disappearances. These women come across those who participated in the disappearance of their relatives in the streets of their villages. The torturers who walk free in the streets. This kind of situation is traumatic for those affected. Crossing paths with someone who arrested their husband or son traumatises them all over again. Maybe this is one of the differences between the two searches of the past.<sup>14</sup>

As Galaz puts it later, the astronomers' search of the past doesn't disturb their sleep; in contrast, the women 'must find it hard to sleep after searching through human remains, looking for a past they are

unable to find'. For him, there is *no comparison* between the two ways of working with the past. Then he makes an interesting remark:

What is strange is that society should understand these women better than it does astronomers. But the opposite is true. Society has a greater understanding of the astronomers, in their search for the past, than of these women who search for human remains.<sup>15</sup>

### The search for what remains

We see the women of Calama digging with their spades for the first time just over half-way through the film: diminutive figures against the vastness of the desert. The initial group of women grew to over one hundred at one point in the 1980s. Working with archaeologists, they learned how to comb the desert on their own.<sup>16</sup> Now down to very few, they continue to search. The archaeologists say they learned from them. In the film, Núñez describes how the women had found tiny fragments at one place in the desert; they turned out to be pieces of human bone. When they took archaeologists to the spot, there were signs that the soil had been disturbed. One of the women searching, Vicky Saavedra, picks some of these bone fragments from the ground as we watch. She holds four or five in the palm of her hand, and describes them to us, turning them over with her fingers. They are not more than a centimetre long and bright white, calcinated by the sun. Some are smooth and flat. These are from the outside of a thighbone or arm, she tells us. Others are thicker and porous: these come from the inside of a bone.

The next segment of the film is Saavedra's moving account of how the remains of her brother were found in the mass grave: a foot, still in its sock and shoe; fragments of his skull, with bullet holes; some teeth. She describes how she sat with her brother's foot for a long time, in shock, unable to think. In a television interview later, in 2013, which is not part of the film, she described how the grave was found:

I remember that day very well, when we found the grave. The ground was completely dug up. I was walking over the ground and suddenly I stopped and looked and everywhere there were tiny pieces of bones. I couldn't move because I was afraid of

stepping on them and destroying what was left. I didn't understand what had happened. I walked off to the side and I sat down. The ditch was about this high and the bones were down below. I sat down on the ledge, my feet were hanging down, and then I cried for a long time.<sup>17</sup>

Back in the film, we see Núñez describing how the archaeologists summoned to the site reconstructed what had happened: 'The bodies of Calama were dug up with a machine. A machine that digs, with five teeth.' He demonstrates with his hands. I am reminded of the machines that were brought into Ground Zero in Manhattan in 2001 to speed up the clearing of the remains of the Twin Towers. I discussed in Chapter 2 how this led to protests and the eventual removal of the crane known as 'Big Red'. In the case of Calama, Núñez tells us, 'these bodies were dug up on the orders of the military high command'. They were to be taken elsewhere and dumped. We still don't know where they were taken. But as the digger loaded the remains into trucks, 'fragments of skulls fell from the right side of the machine, and of feet, from the left side'. He points out, anger in his voice:

The truck had a driver. There were soldiers to unload the bodies. And, most importantly, the truck was part of a detachment, a division under military authority. It's up to the military to provide this information so that our friends from Calama can give their dead the burial they deserve.<sup>18</sup>

Another of the women of Calama, Violeta Berríos, then tells us how she will go on searching. Her words echo those of Galaz earlier: 'I find it hard to believe what I'm told. They taught me not to believe. It's hard for me. Sometimes I feel like an idiot because I never stop asking questions and nobody gives me the answers I want.' Though there are echoes of the scientist's endless questioning earlier in the film, the difference is stark. Someone *knows* the answers. Someone knows what was done with the remains. But they won't come forward.

There is a pause, and the film shows us images once again of the vast Atacama Desert. We return to Berríos. She says:

I wish the telescopes didn't just look into the sky, but could also see through the earth so that we could find them. Like this ...



[she gestures with her hands]. Then, a bit further on. We would sweep the desert with a telescope. Downwards. And give thanks to the stars for helping us find them. I'm just dreaming.

Guzmán leaves us there, at what for me is the culmination of the narrative, and moves on: the film takes us back to the astronomers and their dreams. But Berríos's vision is surely not just a dream. If the money that is spent on searching the sky, or even a part of that money, were to be spent on developing a technology for scanning the desert floor, might that dream not turn out to be practicable? In New York, after 9/11, money was no object in the attempts to identify the dead. A figure of US\$80 million has been quoted as having been spent in phase one of that operation; the construction costs of the radio telescope were US\$800 million, and running costs US\$33 million.<sup>19</sup>

Back to the film, where the astronomers tell us that the calcium in our bones – or the bones that the women of Calama are searching for – is the same as the calcium in the stars, atoms made shortly after the time of the Big Bang. George Preston says this is what he tells people when he gives public lectures: 'We live among the trees; we also live among the stars; we live among the galaxies. We are part of the universe. The calcium in my bones was there from the beginning.' Does he suppose that people think the stars are made of some magic material unknown on earth? That we are not part of the universe? Guzmán shows us pictures of the stars, the surface of the moon, bones, and finally another sphere that reveals itself to be not the moon again but the top of a human skull, to document this similarity. Is this to be read as a source of comfort for the relatives who are searching for remains? Galaz has spoken much earlier in the film about how, if his parents or a brother or sister were lost, he would search for them among the galaxies, but he said this as a demonstration of how difficult the search is, not as a source of solace.

We go back to Núñez, who tells us, with passion, how we must not forget, but continue the search. While he speaks, we are shown archive footage of the excavation of a mass grave at Pisagüa in 1990. He is sure that one day we will find a trace of the disappeared. Berríos presents a harsher judgement:

It suits them that there are fewer and fewer of us women. Fewer problems. Because we are a problem. For society, for justice, for everyone. For them we are the lowest of the low. We are Chile's leprosy. That's what I think.

Again, Guzmán does not tarry here; he shows us some of Paula Allen's photographs of the Women of Calama, and names the many other groups of women searching.<sup>20</sup> The visual as he lists the names is once again the moving mechanism of the modern telescope. The women never cross paths with the astronomers, he tells us.

The final segments of the film seem to be Guzmán's attempt to make those paths cross. His final interview is with a young woman, Valentina Rodríguez, whose life seems to represent what he's looking for. She works for a leading astronomy organization, though not as an astronomer as far as we are told, and her parents were detained and disappeared when she was an infant. She tells the story of what happened: how her grandparents were detained when she was one year old; how they were threatened until they revealed where her parents were; how her grandparents brought her up. She continues:

Astronomy has somehow helped me to give another dimension to the pain, to the absence, to the loss. ... I tell myself we are all part of a current, of an energy, a recyclable matter. Like the stars which must die so that other stars can be born, other planets, a new life. In this context, what happened to my parents and their absence takes on another dimension. It takes on another meaning and frees me a little from this great suffering, as I feel that nothing really comes to an end.

At the very end of the film, Guzmán arranges for Galaz to take Saavedra and Berríos inside an observatory and let them look at the sky through the telescope. The encounter is strangely moving – perhaps because in these sequences we see the two women enjoying the experience, and Galaz enjoying showing them a part of his world. At the beginning of the sequence, we hear again the echoing movement of the telescope as it manoeuvres into place. But Guzmán does not let us hear what is said; he does not ask what they made of it; he does not tell us at what point the visit took place or how it was arranged. The

cloud of stardust that appeared at the beginning of the film drifts over the images.

Finally, Guzmán shows us a cluster of marbles on a table. They reflect the pebbles collected by prehistoric inhabitants of the Atacama that he showed us shortly before. He tells us, 'I found in these marbles the innocence of the Chile of my childhood. Back then, each of us could carry the entire universe in the depths of our pockets.' He speaks of memory, and its 'gravitational force': 'Those who have a memory are able to live in the fragile present moment. Those who have none don't live anywhere.' The film ends with an image of the city of Santiago at night, 'each night, slowly, impassively, the centre of the galaxy passes over Santiago'. As David Martin-Jones puts it, 'the city becomes a star-scape, crystallizing with the universe'.<sup>21</sup>

### Disrupting from within

There is something wonderful about the way *Nostalgia for the Light* connects the cosmos with the struggles of Chile. It questions notions of past and present, animate and inanimate, and challenges such distinctions. Its focus on the Atacama Desert shows how the history of the universe can be read through the details of happenings in one small – or in this case, not so small – place on the earth's surface. It provides a chorography encompassing land, people and movement. It tackles questions of appearance and disappearance – and the impossibility of anything ever disappearing, as discussed in Chapter 7. Disappearance, like the existence of a present moment, is impossible. Traces always remain, even if only in the atoms that endure. These are important and challenging questions, questions that echo those that, as Galaz remarks, have 'always been at the core of our civilisations'.

And yet, in some profound way, it disappoints. Though many of its interlocutors do not do this – in fact they do quite the reverse – the film as a whole seems to me to elide or perhaps just sideline the very questions – those of justice – that demand more attention. Brad Epps argues that there is an 'aesthetic sublimity' in *Nostalgia for the Light* 'that at times comes close to overwhelming the horrors of economic exploitation and military oppression'.<sup>22</sup> I would go further. There is a contradiction, Javiera Barandiaran says, in examining the deep origins

of the universe in a country 'full of poverty and injustices'. For him, *Nostalgia for the Light* is a 'masterpiece' that captures this feeling of contradiction and asks, 'as a society, why do we dedicate so many resources to understand the distant past, when we know so little about our recent political and social history? Why study the stars, when the soil beneath holds so many secrets?'<sup>23</sup> However, although the questions may be posed, for me Guzmán's personal fascination with astronomy gets in the way of a fuller response.

The film focuses on what memory means. It becomes, according to Rob White, a 'calcification-like process whereby ... abuses of power are gradually, numbingly accepted'.<sup>24</sup> Guzmán's preoccupation with memory becomes clear in his interview with White: 'I think that life is memory, everything is memory. There is no present time and everything in life is remembering.'<sup>25</sup> As Verne Harris puts it, 'Guzmán posits an absence of presence and an interminable play of multiple pasts.'<sup>26</sup>

However, memory on its own is not enough. The ghosts of the Atacama seem to demand justice. It is reminiscent of what Jacques Derrida calls hauntology, as opposed to ontology. Derrida reminds us that

no justice ... seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of war, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism.<sup>27</sup>

The film's protagonists continually call attention to the question of justice. Núñez draws attention to indigenous peoples and nineteenth-century miners, and we are shown how the desert has preserved the remains of both. Placing these remains alongside the violence of disappearance, as Guzmán does, shows 'the circular, repeated cruelty of humanity', which Cristina Ruiz-Poveda Vera analyses as a Benjaminian move.<sup>28</sup> Guzmán sees the mummified bodies as objects belonging to universal culture, and his filming of them goes against indigenous peoples' demand to respect their ancestors.<sup>29</sup> However, he does not go beyond juxtaposition; he does not discuss either the

colonial decimation of earlier inhabitants of the Atacama region or the capitalist exploitation inherent in the mining industry.<sup>30</sup>

One of the women of Calama, Berríos, points out that what they need is telescopes that search the floor of the desert, not the sky, but again, Guzmán does not probe further. He lets Berríos's remark that she is just dreaming pass without challenge. He does not ask the astronomers what they think of the funding that enables them to do their work, and why that work should be funded, rather than the work of the women. Galaz remarks that society seems to accept the need for the astronomers but questions the women's search, yet the film fails to follow up on this thought. It shows us the telescopes in motion, their inexorable unfolding and the sounds that echo powerfully as they move, reflecting, for me at least, some external authority that is immovable and unapproachable: the Chilean state perhaps; the international system, even. It returns time and again to this movement and the sound – the modern world, its mechanisms and its instrumentalisation – but leaves it to the viewer to make of it what they will.

There is a history and political economy of astronomy in Chile. Barandiaran details this history and explores how establishing international observatories in Chile has maintained global and local hierarchies and a particular economy of dependency.<sup>31</sup> Foreign scientific interests take priority over those of Chilean astronomers, who are not generally consulted by the Chilean government, and observatories have significant tax exemptions. The environmental impact is not assessed. An observatory involves the creation of an artificial oasis, highways and huge base camps for employees. Electricity and water are provided, but with no attempt to co-ordinate with provision for neighbouring villages.<sup>32</sup>

Guzmán identifies two turning points in the film: the interview with Galaz, where he says that the present is a fine line, and the conversation with Núñez, where he juxtaposes archaeologists and astronomers who both are looking at the past.<sup>33</sup> As I discussed above, for me the pivot of the film is the point at which we turn from the scientists – archaeologists and astronomers – to activists, to 'the concrete search for the concrete – for bones and other palpable remains – that motivates the women in the desert'.<sup>34</sup> I don't think it a coincidence that the searchers in Guzmán's film are women, and the scientists, men. Epps notes that

there is ‘a gendered division of labour adumbrated in [Guzmán’s] very reference to “archaeologists, geologists, women and astronomers,” in which the professional scientific researchers are overwhelmingly men and the “amateur searchers” are overwhelmingly women’. He regards this as an instance of ‘a longstanding, ideologically laden division between reason and emotion’.<sup>35</sup> Nor is it a coincidence that the scientists are interviewed in their offices and the women either in the desert or in their kitchens.

Whatever Guzmán’s intention – and Epps argues that he acknowledges the narrative authority and knowledge of the women – the effect is rather different. Even as they explain in detail the nature of the bone fragments found in the desert, or express a clear understanding of the political opposition they face, they are seen as part of the landscape, part of nature, part of the private sphere – not apart from it, in the neutral position of a scientific observer.<sup>36</sup> And what Guzmán surely fails to adequately acknowledge is the women’s political stance and activism. His voice-over ‘directs his audience to hear and see, think and feel, in certain romantically resonant ways’. It promotes a ‘serene, even reposeful remembrance of things past’, even when those things include the violence of exploitation, torture, imprisonment and death.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps I am asking too much of a filmmaker. Perhaps, as Harris suggests, ‘what Guzmán creates with this record of pain – this archive of feeling, this nostalgia for illumination and lightness – is a space offering multiple creative energies’.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps this is enough. Like Caroline Steedman, he draws attention to the immortality of dust: there is nowhere it can disappear to.<sup>39</sup> Like *Footprints of Memory*, he follows the traces left by women searching for bodies and justice.<sup>40</sup> Like Frayn’s *Copenhagen*, he tells us there is no certainty, only ghosts, though he goes further: his ghosts do not disappear.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps, what he focuses on is a slow remaking of the world, step by step, and how ‘the ordinary lives of the survivors continue after the tragedy’.<sup>42</sup> He offers us immortality: ‘the discovery of atoms that are immortal, that are in us, that transform and don’t die ... well, it’s eternal life’.<sup>43</sup> And he provides a perspective that moves beyond the human, embracing the universe as ‘a heritage of universal matter that stretches back beyond human origins’.<sup>44</sup>

In view of the repression of memory in Chile, and the importance of documentary filmmaking in that context, perhaps all this is enough, or more than enough. Kaitlin Murphy argues that '*Nostalgia for the Light* studies time, space and matter, but by focusing on the very materiality of the historical event and its after effects, they in turn produce and create new intersections among time, space and matter'.<sup>45</sup> She reminds us of Jacques Rancière's notion of 'a suitable political work of art', one that works by 'disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable'.<sup>46</sup> The film, then, doesn't just show us evidence and present information, as other forms of documentary do. Instead, it induces new ways of seeing, and as such, can be seen as a politics, in Rancière's terms.

Ruiz-Poveda invites us to consider *Nostalgia for the Light*, alongside Walter Benjamin's understanding of history, where 'the traumatic past can only be redeemed and recovered through a messianic exercise of memory'.<sup>47</sup> She concedes that drawing parallels between the universe and victims could bypass action, but she argues that 'the metaphysical and the political productively co-exist' in the film.<sup>48</sup> She reminds us of what Benjamin says about Paul Klee's angel of history:

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. ... 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. <sup>49</sup>

What is necessary is a pause, to stop the progress of history and enable reflection on the past, in what Benjamin calls now-time, a present that 'comprises the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation'.<sup>50</sup> Ruiz-Poveda argues that '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'.<sup>51</sup> Through this approach, the film can be seen as a call to its spectators for action: 'the film points at the impossibility of moving forward unless amends are made, making

everyone responsible for the sustainable unfolding of the collective present'.<sup>52</sup>

The past does not go away. It is the present that can disappear, as Galaz says, in 'a puff of air'. The material persistence and coexistence of the past, evoked so convincingly in the film's choreography, challenges a perception of the world that argues for moving on, turning the page, burying the past – the view promoted by a government, and a politics that insists that forgetting is possible. We see the world differently and political possibility is reanimated. The linearity of time is questioned. If memory is central to life, if 'those who have none don't live anywhere', as Guzmán tells us at the end of the film, then we cannot escape. The stars are watching, the film reminds us. Those responsible, those that refuse memory, are being kept under observation, their movements monitored by an unforgiving universe. Re-visioning the world is a politics, and therefore also, perhaps, a demand for justice.

## Notes

- 1 I thank Danielle House for introducing me to the film and for her comments on an earlier version of the chapter.
- 2 Haden Guest and Eduardo Ledesma, 'Ad Astra Per Aspera: An Interview with Patricio Guzmán.' *Cineaste* (Summer 2011): 20–5; 22.
- 3 *Nostalgia for the Light*. Directed by Patricio Guzmán (Spanish with English subtitles), 90 minutes. New Wave Films, 2010. Quotations from the film are from the subtitles by Katie Henfrey.
- 4 *Nostalgia for the Light*. Unless indicated otherwise, subsequent quotations in this chapter are from the film subtitles.
- 5 Chris Marker, *La Jetée: ciné roman*. New York: Zone Books, 1992; no page numbers.
- 6 Patricio Guzmán, 'What I owe to Chris Marker.' *Sight and Sound Magazine*, 13 February 2015. BFI <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news/what-i-owe-chris-marker>.
- 7 Mike Pearson, *In Comes I: Performance, Memory and Landscape*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006: 4.
- 8 Pearson, *In Comes I*, 9.
- 9 Pearson, *In Comes I*, 12.
- 10 Mike Pearson, *Marking Time: Performance, Archaeology and the City*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2015.
- 11 Guest and Ledesma, 'Ad Astra Per Aspera', 21. Original emphasis.
- 12 Guest and Ledesma, 'Ad Astra Per Aspera', 24.



- 13 *Nostalgia for the Light*, 17:22 mins.
- 14 *Nostalgia for the Light*, 45:52 mins.
- 15 *Nostalgia for the Light*, 49:30 mins.
- 16 Guest and Ledesma, 'Ad Astra Per Aspera', 21. See also Paula Allen, *Flowers in the Desert: The Search for Chile's Disappeared*, 2nd ed. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013. The group is known as the Women of Calama, though Guzmán does not use this name.
- 17 The Laura Flanders Show, 'Chilean Women Seek Justice 40 Years after Coup.' Interview with Paula Allen and Victoria Saavedra González, 18 October 2013. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9EBobyb\\_bA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9EBobyb_bA). A report in a local paper in 2014 sheds doubt on the identification of the remains returned to Saavedra (Caravana de la Muerte: ninguno de los restos periciados corresponde a José Saavedra González, *El Mercurio de Calama*, 11 April. <http://www.soychile.cl/Calama/Sociedad/2014/04/11/242332/Caravana-de-la-Muerte-ninguno-de-los-restos-periciados-corresponde-a-Jose-Saavedra-González.aspx>).
- 18 *Nostalgia for the Light*, 58:20 mins.
- 19 Shiya Ribowsky and Tom Shachtman, *Dead Center: Behind the Scenes at the World's Largest Medical Examiner's Office*. New York: Harper, 2007: 237; Javiera Barandiaran, 'Reaching for the Stars? Astronomy and Growth in Chile.' *Minerva* 53 (2015): 141–64; 149.
- 20 Allen, *Flowers in the Desert*.
- 21 David Martin-Jones, 'Archival Landscapes and a Non-Anthropocentric "Universe Memory".' *Third Text* 27, no. 6 (2013): 707–22; 715.
- 22 Brad Epps, 'The Unbearable Lightness of Bones: Memory, Emotion, and Pedagogy in Patricio Guzmán's Chile, La Memoria Obstinada and Nostalgia De La Luz.' *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 13, (2016). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2016.1229661>. For other discussions of *Nostalgia for the Light*, see, for example, Patrick Blaine, 'Representing Absences in the Postdictatorial Documentary Cinema of Patricio Guzmán.' *Latin American Perspectives* 40, no. 1 (2013): 114–30; Nilo Couret, 'Scale as Nostalgic Form: Patricio Guzmán's Nostalgia for the Light (2011).' *Discourse* 39, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 67–91; Macarena Gómez-Barris, 'Atacama Remains and Post Memory.' *Media Fields Journal* 5 (2012). <http://mediafieldsjournal.squarespace.com/atacama-remains-and-post-memor/>.
- 23 Barandiaran, 'Reaching for the Stars?', 144.
- 24 Rob White, 'After-Effects: Interview with Patricio Guzmán.' *Film Quarterly*, 12 July 2012. <https://filmquarterly.org/2012/07/12/after-effects-interview-with-patricio-guzman/>.
- 25 White, 'After-Effects'.
- 26 Verne Harris, 'Antonyms of Our Remembering.' *Archival Science* 14, no. 3–4 (2014): 215–29.
- 27 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf.

- London: Routledge, 1994: xix. Quoted in Harris, ‘Antonyms of Our Remembering.’
- 28 Cristina Ruiz-Poveda Vera, “‘Those Who Don’t Remember Don’t Exist Anywhere’”: Historical Redemption in Patricio Guzmán’s *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010).’ *Journal of Religion & Film* 21, no. 2 (2017): 17–18. <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol21/iss2/19>.
- 29 Guest and Ledesma, ‘Ad Astra Per Aspera’, 23.
- 30 Of course, there are choices to be made, and Guzmán explores the stories of indigenous inhabitants in another film *The Pearl Button* (2015): Epps, ‘The Unbearable Lightness of Bones’.
- 31 Barandiaran, ‘Reaching for the Stars?’
- 32 Barandiaran, ‘Reaching for the Stars?’, 153.
- 33 Chris Darke, ‘Desert of the Disappeared: Patricio Guzmán on *Nostalgia for the Light*.’ *Sight & Sound Magazine*, August 2012. <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/desert-disappeared-patricio-guzman-nostalgia-light>.
- 34 Epps, ‘The Unbearable Lightness of Bones’, 14.
- 35 Epps, ‘The Unbearable Lightness of Bones’, 13. Epps is quoting Guzmán’s words in the Guest and Ledesma interview ‘Ad Astra Per Aspera’ here.
- 36 See Martin-Jones’s discussion of how Berríos ‘blends with the landscape’, seeming to give voice to it (Martin-Jones, ‘Archival Landscapes and a Non-Anthropocentric “Universe Memory”’, 717–18).
- 37 Epps, ‘The Unbearable Lightness of Bones’, 7.
- 38 Harris, ‘Antonyms of Our Remembering.’
- 39 Carolyn Steedman, *Dust*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001.
- 40 Mariana Rivera García, ‘Huellas Para La Memoria/Footprints of Memory.’ Vimeo, 8 minutes, 2017. <https://vimeo.com/203656930>.
- 41 Michael Frayn, *Copenhagen*. London: Methuen Drama, 1998.
- 42 Ruiz-Poveda Vera, “‘Those Who Don’t Remember Don’t Exist Anywhere’”: 15; for making and unmaking the world, see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- 43 Chris Darke, ‘Desert of the Disappeared’.
- 44 Martin-Jones, ‘Archival Landscapes and a Non-Anthropocentric “Universe Memory”’, 707.
- 45 For a summary of this context, see Kaitlin M. Murphy, ‘Remembering in Ruins: Touching, Seeing and Feeling the Past in *Nostalgia De La Luz/Nostalgia for the Light* ([2010] 2011).’ *Studies in Spanish & Latin American Cinemas* 13, no. 3 (2016): 265–81.
- 46 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Translated by Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum, 2004: 63.
- 47 Ruiz-Poveda Vera, “‘Those Who Don’t Remember Don’t Exist Anywhere’”, 4.

- 48 Ruiz-Poveda Vera, ““Those Who Don’t Remember Don’t Exist Anywhere””, 5.
- 49 Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: Vol. 4, 1938–1940*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006: 392, quoted in Ruiz-Poveda Vera, ““Those Who Don’t Remember Don’t Exist Anywhere””, 18. Original emphasis.
- 50 Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin*, 396, quoted in Ruiz-Poveda Vera, ““Those Who Don’t Remember Don’t Exist Anywher””, 19.
- 51 Ruiz-Poveda Vera, ““Those Who Don’t Remember Don’t Exist Anywhere””, 23.
- 52 Ruiz-Poveda Vera, ““Those Who Don’t Remember Don’t Exist Anywhere””, 26.