History and Memory in Neoliberal Chile:
Patricio Guzmán’s Obstinate Memory and
The Battle of Chile

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In 1973, September 11 also fell on a Tuesday and, in Santiago de Chile, produced a tragic act of international terrorism. The Chilean military, with support from the U.S. government, brought down the democratically elected socialist Unidad Popular (Popular Unity, UP) government of Salvador Allende (1970–73) and initiated one of Latin America’s longest and bloodiest dictatorships. In another striking coincidence, the terrorism of September 11, 1973, involved planes; fighter jets belonging...
to the Chilean air force bombarded the presidential palace (La Moneda), leaving this symbol of Chilean democracy in flames.

Extraordinary scenes of the assault on La Moneda open Patricio Guzmán’s recent documentary, *Memoria obstinada* (Obstinate memory, 1997), as they began his award-winning three-part documentary of the Allende years, *La batalla de Chile* (The battle of Chile, 1975, 1976, 1978). *Memoria obstinada* then jumps to the present, as Guzmán and his crew go on a tour of the presidential palace in the mid-1990s. Included with the crew is a former member of Allende’s presidential guard, who recounts his experiences of the 1973 coup, including being shot in the attack on the presidential palace and imprisoned in a concentration camp. Subsequently, a number of the other members of the guard who survived the coup look at photos of the attack on La Moneda and identify the fate of their comrades who appear in the images held at gunpoint by soldiers: most are dead or disappeared.

During first the Pinochet dictatorship (1973–90) and then the governments of the center-left Concertación de los Partidos por la Democracia (Coalition of Parties for Democracy, 1990–present), which includes Allende’s Socialist Party, *La batalla de Chile* was not shown in Chile. Even after the lifting of military censorship during the transition to democracy, Guzmán could not find a distributor willing to show his films. In *Memoria obstinada*, Guzmán returns to the country after years of exile to show his film to groups of students and to interview people who had participated in making *La batalla de Chile* or who had appeared in the footage of the revolutionary process. The censoring of *La batalla de Chile* stands in for the problem of memory and repression. After almost two decades of military rule, how do the participants in the making of the documentary remember the events it documented? What is the relationship between contemporary recollections of events and the documentary images in *La batalla de Chile*, between memory and history? How, in a context in which both the military and the democratic opposition seem to have colluded in producing amnesia as a condition for democratization, does memory remain obstinate? Or, does it? Is the claim to history asserted by personal memory a condition for producing change in the present? How can a generation born and raised under military rule remember and record the Chilean road to socialism, as Allende called it, and the devastating state terrorism of the military regime?

In *Memoria obstinada*, Guzmán explores these questions through interviews that focus on individual memories. He talks to the member of Allende’s guard about his experiences during and after September 11, recalls his own detention in Chile’s Estadio Nacional (National Stadium), and interviews friends and family members of *La batalla de Chile*’s cinematographer, Jorge Müller Silva, who with his compañera, Carmen Bueno Cifuentes, remains among the thousands disappeared by the Pinochet regime. A fellow filmmaker makes the important point that Müller Silva’s disappearance was strategically aimed at producing terror among the circles of peo-
ple who worked in film and, more broadly, the media. Guzmán also interviews an uncle who helped him to smuggle the reels of film that would later become *La batalla de Chile* out of the country. After traveling through Denmark and France, the footage was finally made into the three documentaries in Cuba during the mid-1970s. *La batalla de Chile* and its makers represent, then, the fate of Chileans who suffered detention, torture, execution, and exile after September 11. The film’s focus on the subjective individual experiences of the makers and protagonists of the *La batalla de Chile* produces a mood of nostalgia, loss, and melancholy, underscored by the film’s musical motif, the opening movement of Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata.

Guzmán also interviews high school students to whom he has shown the three-part documentary. As a sign of the times, Guzmán received almost all rejections when he wrote to forty high schools in Santiago asking for permission to show his earlier work and then interview the students. School administrators said “that it would be negative, that it was necessary not to reopen old wounds, and that, more over, we weren’t modern at all.”¹ The interviews with students provide a stunning portrait of the problem of memory for a generation born after 1973 and living in a political context defined by a consensus between the military, its allies in the right-wing parties, and the concordación about the need to subordinate the demands for truth and justice to the imperatives of consolidating a new institutional order and maintaining the free market economic model inherited from the dictatorship. Some students, after viewing the film, ventriloquize pro-Pinochet arguments about the Chilean military’s surgical efficiency in extirpating Marxism and saving the nation from communism: human rights abuses were limited in Chile, compared to other Latin American countries, and the Chilean armed forces initiated the first step in bringing down the Soviet Union in the global cold war. Others argue that radicalized workers and peasants provoked the violence: “Why did they occupy factories?” In response, one student argues that the UP’s “ideals were good, but utopian.” Another, referring to the military regime’s much-vaunted “economic miracle,” contends that “economic progress doesn’t justify killing.” Finally, at the end of the film, a group of young people who are relatives of victims of the Pinochet dictatorship find themselves moved to tears and rage after seeing *La batalla de Chile* and defend their parents’ generation’s revolutionary ideals.

Perhaps one of the most affecting interviews in *Memoria obstinada* is with a woman who, Guzmán is told in other interviews, appears in footage of a pro-Allende demonstration in *La batalla de Chile*. Guzmán shows her the images of the demonstration and asks for her memories, but she will only say that she doesn’t believe that she is the woman in the demonstration, stating: “Maybe, I can’t be sure. I have my doubts. That photo is very old.” Finally, Guzmán asks about her experience of the coup, and she names five members of her family who were disappeared: her husband, son, brother, sister-in-law, and nephew. In this one scene, *Memoria obstinada*
communicates the terrible tragedy of September 11, 1973, the fate of those who participated in the making of the film and in the making of the revolution, and the problems of history, memory, and trauma. What is history here? How does it relate to subjective memory? What role can the documentary play in bringing history and memory together and overcoming trauma in the present?

Recent debates within the discipline of Latin American studies about testimonial literature have questioned the value of oral history, ethnography, and testimonial witnessing to history. Critics have argued that testimonials, like oral histories, do not provide unmediated or direct access to experience, that they cannot be read positivistically as transparent windows onto past experience. But does this mean they are useless to history? The interview cited above illuminates the problems of memory and oral testimony, as well as the complicated relationship between the interviewer and the person whose memories are being interrogated. But it also demonstrates that even memory’s gaps, distortions, and mistakes may prove as meaningful as “objective accounts,” and that it directs historians toward unexplored areas. As Dominick LaCapra suggests in his work on history, memory, and the Shoah, while history is not memory, neither are the two starkly opposed. While memory guides history to issues of critical importance for the present, history critically engages personal memory to establish the conditions for collective forms of recollection and solidaristic action.

The device of recovering memory and overcoming the censorship of the experience of Chile’s socialist experiment by showing La batalla de Chile to the people he interviews, raises the important question of the relationship between memory, trauma, and history. More than a straightforward testimonial or witnessing, Memoria obstinada employs Guzmán’s earlier documentary as a history that can help free memory from repression, both political and internal, produced by the trauma of the 1973 coup. Yet while Memoria obstinada seeks to resuscitate memories of Chile’s socialist experiment, it does not situate this memory in relation to contemporary realities or debates. Both former UP militants and high school students locate memories of the Allende years in a distant past disconnected from the present. In the case of those who lived the revolutionary process, memory becomes nostalgia, and for the students, the past, although important, seems closed and inaccessible.

Memoria obstinada leaves us with an acute sense of the shattered lives and the trauma of those who lived through the Allende years and survived the military dictatorship. It also evokes the isolation of memory in contemporary free market Chile, where the past is viewed as an obstacle to Chile’s “miraculous” movement out of the Third World toward modernity. Former UP militants describe Chile’s socialist period as “a dream” and “a ship of fools,” implicitly echoing the charge of impracticality or lack of realism frequently launched at contemporary critics of the neoliberal model, as well as at those who worked to build a socialist society during the
1960s and 1970s. The students also talk about the UP as “utopian.” But what is perhaps even more significant is that these students feel compelled to defend those who suffered repression because of their support for the UP by arguing for the individual’s right to personal beliefs: “Everyone has to fight for his own beliefs”; or, “it’s legitimate to dream, it’s legitimate to fight for your personal dream.” Despite Guzmán’s own view that “the free market is worthless” and that “the economic success that is so often spoken of is very doubtful,” no one interviewed in the film defends the UP’s socialist project, critiques the military and concertación governments’ neoliberal policies, or confronts contemporary political problems—such as the trials of military officers for human rights violations or the political system designed by the dictatorship, which contains institutional limits on democratic representation and governance.4 The film’s powerful evocation of personal tragedy and loss produces a sense of memory that is restricted to the individual and defined by nostalgia, rather than a form of collective memory engaged with current political questions. One wonders: is this a sign of the hegemony of free market ideology and political consensus in 1990s Chile or a sign that the filmmaker is no longer interested in the questions that animated La batalla de Chile?

This points to a central difference between La batalla de Chile and Memoria obstinada. While the former took as its subjects the social groups and movements central to the revolutionary process of the UP years, the latter focuses on individuals and their subjective experiences. Guzmán describes the difference between the two films in this way: “The first one is cinema verité. It was an unrepeatable social experience. The second is a more personal film about remembering.”5 In part, this may reflect profound socioeconomic and political changes wrought by the dictatorship. Deindustrialization decimated the urban working-class protagonist of the early 1970s. The development of commercial export agriculture displaced rural workers and peasants and undermined the radicalized peasant movement. And repression destroyed the rural and urban labor movements and their left-wing allies. In the 1990s, it would be difficult to find heroic or even clearly defined social subjects for a documentary. The shift in focus from collective identities and social classes to individuals reflects the atomization and dispersion of social life in free market, post-coup Chile.

Memoria obstinada raises the question of how personal memory might be made public and collective. As sociologist Maurice Halbwachs argues, memory takes place through language and socially constructed symbolic systems and conventions.6 La batalla de Chile and Memoria obstinada highlight both the historical difference between the periods when the films were made and the importance of language and social traditions to memory. The narrator of La batalla de Chile speaks an ideological language infused with the debates of the era in which the actors are “the bourgeoisie,” “the peasantry,” “the working class,” and “imperialism.” The individuals interviewed by Guzmán are participants in demonstrations, strikes, land seizures,
and political meetings, and they use a language shaped by the ideological vocabulary of the era as they condemn “the reactionaries” or proudly assert their faith in the “worker’s government.” In *Memoria obstinada*, however, those interviewed speak a language free of political concerns or ideological lexicon as they recuperate painful personal memories or respond to first-time viewings of *La batalla de Chile*. In part, this shift represents the changes produced by the dictatorship and the success of Pinochet’s efforts to stamp out the Chilean left and depoliticize social life, as well as the obvious differences between the radical early 1970s and the post–cold war 1990s. But too, the change in language reflects the film’s focus on individual memory, free of the political vocabulary that might reorient memory collectively to engage the present.

A number of writers have argued that collective memory is rooted in space, tied to markers, icons, memorials, and places.7 In *La batalla de Chile*, the camera focuses on rural estates occupied by peasants, worker-run factories, the presidential palace, the congress, the streets, plazas, the squatter settlements of Santiago, in short, the public sites of the revolution.5 In contrast, the spaces of *Memoria obstinada* are the interiors of homes or high schools, places with no social context or location in the city. What neighborhoods are they in? Which high schools are they? What social classes do those interviewed belong to? Does social class influence the way they remember the Allende years? Do men and women remember differently?9 Perhaps one of the major successes of the Pinochet dictatorship was to fragment the collective identities and movements of the 1960s and early 1970s by imposing a combination of state terror and neoliberal “shock therapy.” In this context, memory and mourning, like most of social life, were driven indoors and out of public sight. The kinds of remembering portrayed in *Memoria obstinada* are personal, taking place in closed spaces. The film produces a sense of places of public memory—the political party, the union hall, the factory, the plaza and street—closed down in 1990s Chile.

*Memoria obstinada* represents the difficulty of keeping memory obstinate in neoliberal Chile. Yet the film ignores the political struggles that have sought to recuperate the history of the UP and challenge the Pinochet dictatorship’s legacy of free market amnesia. Beginning in the mid-1970s, human rights groups, most notably the Agrupación de Familiares de los Detenidos-Desaparecidos (Organization of Relatives of the Disappeared), the Agrupación de Familiares de Ejecutados Políticos (Organization of Relatives of the Executed), and the Comité en Defensa del Pueblo (Committee in Defense of the People), among many others (including the labor movement, grassroots organizations of the urban poor, women, and leftist parties), fought to protect the human rights of Chilean citizens, to hold the regime accountable for its terror, and to locate those who disappeared behind an institutional wall of secrecy upheld by the dictatorship and its allies in the judiciary and the Chilean right-wing parties. Through the 1990s and until today, these groups, and more militant groups like Acción, Verdad, y Justicia (H.I.J.O.S.—Chile) and the FUNA, have
made memory a political and public process by organizing protests, publicly unmasking human rights violators living in impunity, and initiating numerous judicial processes and investigations that have led to the discovery of clandestine mass graves and the trials of a significant number of military officers in recent years. Human rights organizations have also been successful in building “memory places,” like museums at the sites of former torture centers and monuments to the dead and disappeared. Strikingly, Memoria obstinada does not include these groups and their struggles to bring members of the military dictatorship to justice or to contest various forms of “official” memory and history.

Chilean historians have also worked to make memory public. In 1999, while under arrest in London on an international warrant, Pinochet published a “Carta a los Chilenos” (Letter to Chileans), in which he put forward a rendition of the history of the 1960s and 1970s that consecrated the military’s historic role in rescuing the nation from civil war and communism. Pinochet’s letter was then endorsed and translated into more professional historiographical language by prize-winning historian Gonzalo Vial in the Santiago daily, La segunda. In response, a number of Chile’s most important historians, some of whom had suffered at the hands of the dictatorship or who had lived years in exile, wrote a manifesto in which they provided a history of modern Chile which explored the historical causes of the 1973 coup and revealed the distortions, deceptions, and ethical bankruptcy of Pinochet’s “Letter.” The Manifiesto, published as a small pamphlet, is available in bookstores all over Chile and provides, with museums and memorials, another place where memory meets history. In 2000, a number of academic institutions and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) held an interdisciplinary conference on “Memory for a New Century” in Santiago and published the presentations in an edited volume. Essays covered a wide terrain, including the psychology of memory, indigenous Mapuche forms of memory, and social movements, the struggles of social groups like the urban poor and women to build memory through collective action, and the role of popular poetry, music, and art in producing forms of memory engaged with contemporary political problems.

It may be that it is in the encounters of history and memory produced in the activities of human rights organizations and historians committed to making history relevant to memory, and vice versa, that the individual melancholy evoked by Memoria obstinada can become collective mourning, a working-through in the present, to produce change in the future. Walter Benjamin wrote in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that “to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize ‘the way it really was.’ It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.” In Chile today, the danger is that the uncontested commitment to neoliberal reforms may lead to a repression of the memory of both the Pinochet’s regime’s terrorism and the hope inspired by the socialist political project of the 1960s. As
Benjamin put it presciently: “Only that historian will have a gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.”

Memoria olvidada’s focus on personal, rather than collective, memory reflects profound changes in Chilean society since 1973 and the difficulty of making the past relevant to the present in the contemporary context. But the film also has another function. As a “memory place,” it may produce a dialogue between history and the memories of the UP and the 1973 coup. Memoria obstinada may “fan the spark of hope” of the Allende years and the memory of those who died struggling to build a socialist society.

By the late 1990s, after almost a decade of democratic rule, La batalla de Chile had still not been shown in Chilean theaters or on television. After a year of protracted negotiations, Guzmán received negative responses from the head of the state-run television station, the only public television channel in Chile, appointed by the concetration government. Media conglomerates tied to the country’s major financial groups and right-wing political parties dominate the other stations of open television.

Finally, in one of those ironies produced by intensified economic integration and the globalization of the telecommunications industry, in 1999 and 2000 both La batalla de Chile and Memoria obstinada appeared on television sets in Chile for the first time. The films were broadcast by SKY, the multinational satellite television company, on pay-per-view, and thus became available to only those Chilean households that could afford satellite dishes.

In 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. Two years later, two cinemas in Santiago, including a multiplex belonging to the international Hoyts chain, for one week showed the entire cycle of Guzmán’s films to full houses composed largely of young people. Since then the films have not been shown in Chile again.

Notes
All uncited translations in the review are the author’s.


2. A number of responses to critics of the testimonial genre and the significance of memory to history may be made. First, the same criticisms might be leveled at documentary sources; the line between a historical document and an oral testimony might not be as clear as it seems. Second, the distortions, silences, gaps, and denials in testimony are as important and informative as what is said. And third, testimonial and memory provide access to areas that may lie out of reach of history, not just in the sense that they provide information, but, too, in the ways they map out problems and questions for historical research. For a discussion of the genre of testimonial, see John Beverley, Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); and Florencia Mallon, “Bearing Witness in Hard Times: Ethnography and Testimonio in a Postrevolutionary Age,”


7. On memory and place, see Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les lieux de mémoire*,“ trans. Marc Roudebusch, *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–25. Nora argues that museums and memorials, as memory places, represent the last traces of memory repressed and eclipsed by historicism, and he opposes history to the immediacy and intimacy of personal memory. I would argue that, at least in Chile, these memory places play an important role in building collective memory and engaging public debates about history with immediate political importance, and that rather than being isolated fetishes, they belong to the dynamic social movements of human rights organizations and left-wing political parties.

8. Guzmán has stated that in making *La batalla de Chile*, “it was very organized: on one wall we had three columns containing possible activity in the political, economic, and ideological arenas. . . . Shooting was based on what was going on in those three columns. There were basically three places where events would take place; the parliament was the political sphere, the university was the ideological sphere, and the factory was the economic.” Meyer, “Shooting Revolutions with Chile’s Patricio Guzmán.”


11. The *Manifiesto*, originally published in *Punto Final*, February 5–18, 1999, is available as *Manifiesto de los historiadores*, ed. Sergio Grez and Gabriel Salazar (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones LOM, 1999), and contains the original manifesto, a “Letter of Adhesion” by North American historians that emphasizes the role of the United States in the 1973 golpe, the response by Gonzalo Vial to the *Manifiesto*, “Reflexiones sobre un manifiesto,” published in the newspaper *La segunda*, February 12, 1999, and a reply to Vial. All these documents are also available online at a number of Web sites, including www.remember-chile.org.uk.
12. Garcés et al., *Memoria para un nuevo siglo*. Similarly, in 1998, two historians, Julio Pinto and Gabriel Salazar, published the first two volumes of their multivolume *Historia contemporanea de Chile* [The history of contemporary Chile] (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones LOM, 1999), a groundbreaking history of modern Chile in which, according to Salazar, they attempt “to make the memory of those without history” a “critical history . . . that might engage a public memory that has been manipulated by historians tied to the oligarchy . . . . we realize that it is necessary to win the fight for memory.” (*La tercera*, March 15, 1999). *Historia contemporanea* continues to ride the bestseller list in Chile, three years after its initial publication.


