Atacama Remains and Post Memory

Macarena Gómez-Barris

“Our humid planet has only one small brown patch that has absolutely no humidity. The vast Atacama desert...”
—Patricio Guzmán

It’s a matter of discovering the origins of mankind, of our planet, the solar system. Where do we come from is a key question.”
—Gaspar Galaz, ESO Astronomer

“I wish the telescope didn’t just look into the sky, but could see through the Earth so that we could find them. The women who look for their dead demand an answer from those responsible for the disappearances.”
—Mother of Disappeared Son

“Those who have memory, live in the fragile present. Those who have none don’t live anywhere.”
—Patricio Guzmán

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In the Atacama desert, located about one hundred kilometers northeast of Antofagasta, is Chacabuco, a place whose local trajectory condenses important aspects of Chile's economic and political history in the twentieth century. From 1924–1938, Chacabuco was the home of a mining company that extracted nitrate from ore for consumption on the national and global market. Covering thirty-six hectares, the town around the mine was organized on a grid system, and even included a theater. After 1938, the entire location was abandoned except for use by the military for training for brief periods of time. By the time the government of Salvador Allende took power in 1970, preparations were made to commemorate and preserve the site—that is, until Augusto Pinochet's regime overthrew the democratically elected government and transformed Chacabuco into a concentration camp, holding more than 2,200 prisoners. In addition to thick barbed wire, landmines were planted in the surrounding camp to discourage potential escapees. These landmines continue to haunt the landscape and have turned the location into a ghost town that is now guarded by a single man who keeps watch over this architectural register of the region's historical memory. As a collection of traces, the town of Chacabuco has become an icon for those places that are memorable as remains of forgotten cartographies, a deserted camp that forces engagement with the materiality of memory and its evacuation.

Two recent films about torture, disappearance, and memory, *Nostalgia for the Light* (France/Germany/Chile, 2010), directed by Patricio Guzmán and *My Life with Carlos* (Chile, 2010), directed by Germán Berger, feature scenes from the remains of Chacabuco prison and the spatial dislocation of the Atacama desert as sites for grappling with discontinuities produced in the wake of State violence. These films situate forms of spatial and public memory. In both films, stories from torture survivors and relatives of the disappeared form a narrative arc around the directors' aesthetic quest to represent missing bodies and masculinity through an emplaced accounting of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship (1973-1989). As such, these narratives counter a national story that perhaps too easily re-members the debris of state violence. Through these films it becomes apparent that much of the evidence for such an accounting remains buried within the driest desert on the planet, the Northern Atacama.
As a political exile, Guzmán narrowly escaped the violence of the authoritarian regime, a topic he has explored in many prior films, including living with and witnessing torture and murder, most poignantly that of his own cameraman. Jorge Müllner Silva who was killed while shooting The Battle of Chile (Chile/Cuba/ France, 1979). Guzmán earned early international acclaim by capturing the Chilean right wing’s counter-revolution over an eighteen-month period in this monumental film in three parts. In his more recent films, including Nostalgia for the Light, Guzmán positions himself as knowing exile, witness, chronicler, and survivor, while orchestrating a particular kind of historical memory of torture and disappearance as absent in the nation, despite ample evidence to the contrary. German Berger positions himself in Mí Vida con Carlos as temporally distant from the events of 1973–1989. His autobiographical narrative embodies the mediated experience of what Marianne Hirsch has described as the generation of post-memory. As such, Berger’s position of generational distance from his father Carlos’s torture and later disappearance is one of comparatively diminished memory, piecing together his story through fragments from silences and partial account. Berger’s mother, Carmen Hertz, and her legal case against the Chilean State, as well as a home video archive of Carlos Berger, ultimately allow Berger to access the intimate traces of his own story. In the spaces of memory, these films localize experience as personal longing and unrealized possibilities where the sea and desert embody and anchor the disappearances and traces of the past for the living.

In both films, the directors walk through and film Chacabuco to document stories of the physical and psychological torture that took place there from 1973 to 1975 by Pinochet’s henchmen, and the subsequent decades-long search by the mothers of the disappeared in the vast desert terrain for clues about those who were tortured there. The search for remains has been part of the larger social movements of human rights activists that connect the Atacama Desert to Santiago, to London, to Spain, to Canada, and to the United States. In their very local view that has broader geographical implications, the films overlap in their personalized approaches to spatial memory, documenting fragmented scenes of the prison grounds. For instance, layered sequences that move between the desert and the concentration camp enable a narrative of place, weaving a story that escapes linearity and instead recollects and renders architectural remains. The spatial dimensions of both
films expand viewers’ perceptions of the desert, and its political and social meaning as a site of memory and witnessing.

Early in her book *For Space*, Doreen Massey makes three propositions in relation to space: first, that space is the result of interrelations that are worked through at the level of interactions that move “from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny”; second, that space is a sphere of possibility and multiplicity, as a sphere of coexisting heterogeneity; and third, that space is always in process and being made. Massey argues, “It is never finished; never closed. Perhaps we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far.”

In this contingent, dynamic, and relational set of propositions, Massey conceptualizes the spatial as a formulation of the political through imaginative structures. The political is formulated in space, and extended by spatial encounters. If we take Massey’s proposition of the potentiality of the spatial seriously, then the films offer us an invocation of the desertscape as a co-shaping of place and politics in relation to memory. Witnesses to state violence continue to signify the expanse not as a container of memory, but as an invitation to its heterogeneous and unfolding political and social signification.

Both filmmakers employ the visual trope of the ephemeral desert where a sharp blue sky sits in contrast to the orange colored surface of the sand. Such empty visual backdrops suggest archaeological layers of imperceptible forms, desiccated by the harshness of the heat and landscape. These images of openness ironically compress the time and space of the deaths, making visible the search by the living to materially grapple with the impossible open territory. In these visual renditions, the desert becomes what Edward Casey describes as a “place of trauma,” a site of public memory in which mourning takes place for the victims, as well as for the locus of catastrophe.

The wounded place of the Atacama enables public memories of struggle and pain, and becomes a conduit for the stories of strewn bodies, their hiding places, and the orders of military men who have left a particular cartography of death. In both films, the camera also gives a portrait of the landscape combed by family members of the disappeared, exfoliating the amplitude of a space that is seemingly evacuated of life. The films thus visualize social marginality as an ongoing temporality experienced through political violence, and the duration of its effects. The camera observes lost
possibilities through the visual gesture of a potentially futile search. In the open Atacama memory is emplaced and endlessly remade.

Nostalgia for the Light

In each film, long takes of the desert, poetic time loops, and documentary footage from the 1960s and early 1970s evoke a similar sensibility of violence as a disruption of normative familial life and temporality. As is clear from testimonials and archives, thousands of former prisoners were later disappeared into unmarked desert graves at the hands of La Caravana de la Muerte, Pinochet’s secret police. In Nostalgia for the Light those who are
buried become phantasmatic figures of Guzmán’s uncanny scenes. Weathered and suffering mothers who continually search for their missing are the ghostlike figures of the desert, those who live in the symbolic and material weighty violence, who suggest no possible future until the materiality of the missing tortured body is recovered. Through a documentary realist style that is unromantic in its depiction of a continual and repetitive search, Guzmán suspends time and place, interspersing long silences with the whipping wind sounds of the desertscape. In the vein of third cinema, the camera stays focused on a continuous image of the desert through long takes that belie the advancement of time, yet the desert is also a site of shifting possibility, in this case through the non-normative temporality of searching mothers. The preoccupation with depicting the mothers’ search as endless is shot as undifferentiated and fixed time, suggesting that is there is no possibility of a different ending to their story. But the director’s own nostalgia minimizes access to a fuller story, the possibility of stumbling outside of a predetermined memory loop. The desert, as Massey would have it, is a complex mediator shaped by the search for another kind of temporality, one that is not foreclosed by the longings of the past and that hopes to resolve the future. While Guzmán’s spatial vantage point is often from the individual melancholia of the past, the mothers’ search is full of unpredictability. When will bones and pieces of torn clothing be found with small tools in the breadth of the desert?

Guzmán filmed *Nostalgia for the Light* only fifty miles from the San José mine, where the rescue of thirty-three miners captured the world’s attention in 2010. Unlike the story of miners who were returned from the Earth’s womb, *Nostalgia* does not deliver a redemption narrative. Even though Guzmán places some fundamental investments in nostalgia, he ultimately does not orchestrate a hopeful ending for these mothers. Such failure for narrative closure is an important place of excess and potentiality in the film. The epistemology of witnessing pushes beyond the narrative containment of nostalgia. Further, the representation of searching mothers, as more than just shadows in the desert, threatens to shatter the trope of nostalgia. The mothers’ longing, saga, and irreparable subjectivities make room for counter-memories and heterogeneity to emerge as a form of filmic witness.

Despite some of the voiceover narrative overlay, the visual elements of the Atacama begin to offer an alternative to the temporal impasse that has been
present in Guzmán’s prior work. Obstinate Memory (Chile, 1997) “brought memory back” to the Chilean people by first illegally transporting The Battle for Chile in his luggage, and later by screening the film in various venues within Santiago. The explicit purpose of the earlier documentary was to produce a rupture of concealment and oblivion in various institutional contexts (school, government, and memorials, for example). This dialectical relationship between filmmaker, social purpose, and audience is central to Guzmán’s oeuvre and to his ideological stance. For the director, documenting memory has fulfilled a larger structural objective of offering “a more truthful” rendition of the past than what has been enabled by the discursive politics of official memory. Such a position showcases the tensions of Guzmán’s often masculinist desire to produce a meta-historical corrective to the Pinochet era and its aftermath, shot through with his own frozen exilic memory.

In this more recent film, Guzmán invests in a poetics of the visual that imitates the layered temporal experience of torture, loss, and waiting. This is portrayed through images of the remains of mummies and of the Chacabuco concentration camp, and also through explorations of the much larger temporal structure beyond an earthly scale of time, through images of faraway planets and galaxies. Like the experience of torture and waiting, such temporal layering fractures a normative time-sense and counters linearity. The deliberately slow and meditative pace allows for a subjective encounter with the authenticity of living with the effects of torture and disappearance. While time stands still for many of the victims, time also has a profound duration where a mother’s suffering is evoked against the elongation of time and memory that is the cosmos above. The fact of the present is that we are already living in the past, Guzmán suggests through his interviews with scientists. The cosmos above remind scientists who study it that time is relative, especially from the vantage point of the European Southern Observatory (ESO) in the Atacama.

In the US, many of the contemporary documentary films on torture after September 11, 2001 focus on the aesthetic rendition of the tortured subject and give voice to the perpetrator using the techniques of legal narrative and framing. Guzmán’s film, The Pinochet Case (Chile/France/Spain, 2003) uses the techniques of testimonials from tortured subjects throughout. Guzmán conducts long interviews with mostly female survivors, many of whom have been sexually violated. He renders these women’s experiences and narratives
through slower sequences that frame groups of survivors standing together in silence. In passing from individual narratives to collective compositions, Guzmán refutes a political struggle that minimizes Pinochet’s guilt, and instead makes a strong case for the importance of social justice.

Though Guzmán also uses the strategy of the interview in *Nostalgia for the Light*, he no longer treats these subjects’ narratives as central to the project of legal witness. A more intimate approach allows him to register the dimensions of vernacular life and its pain, while also invoking the wait for justice as a feeling of being light years away, while making space a metonym for the unbounded time of searching mothers. And, in the analogy to universal time, Guzmán wants to reclaim the past as a potential site of mnemonic possibility, a rich archive of struggle and resistance. In a recent interview with *Filmmaker*, Guzmán discusses the dialectic of imprisonment and freedom that is at the core of the film’s exploration, a dialectic where
individuals are not bound to institutional change or legal justice. Here, he describes the case of Luis, a prisoner at the Chacabuco concentration camp:

In this concrete case, Luis, who was a political prisoner for one year in the desert, he felt free by looking at the cosmos. For him, the act of gazing upon the stars gave him a sense of perspective that life and existence was bigger than what was going on in Chile at that time. So he became relaxed looking at the stars. I don’t think you can extend his case to other people but that was his stance.6

Instead of planning for an escape that would end in death, because of the surrounding mines, the sky provides the horizon of freedom to this prisoner. Space here not only is political potentiality, but it functions as an immeasurable moment of undoing imprisonment, where gazing up gives perspective on the line between life and death and frees the prisoner from incarceration.

The move from the micro-existence of human life and its residues in the desert sand, to the macro expanses of universal time offers a different vantage point on the theme of historical recovery that has been overly rehearsed in Guzmán’s prior films as nostalgia. Here, the contested past is worked out through encounters with particular local histories and spatial locations. It seems to me that in Guzmán’s other films he is more invested in the nostalgia of nation, whereas in this film he has a more nuanced sense that memories are local and perhaps more meaningful as windows to larger universal themes of time, space, and the ontology of healing. Svetlana Boym, in the context of Eastern Europe, writes about places that do not return us to a national myth, but instead are grounded in local traditions and regions of subversion.7 Similarly, the prisons and deserts of Northern Chile cannot be fully assimilated and resist incorporation into nationalist discourses. Instead the emptiness represents contemplative possibilities and memory’s fractures, where the search is the symbolic refusal of nationalist projects. In contradictory fashion, Guzmán also produces a universalizing vantage point through a scientific and metaphysical search that depicts the galaxy beyond an earthly scale of time. Despite the aesthetic beauty of these powerful images of outer space, in these grander scenes Guzmán moves starkly away from contemplative sites of memory, the embodied experience of grief, and the problematic of generational witnessing. While the desert night sky could
provide an opportunity for discussion of generational memory as unfixed, fluid, and open, Guzmán fails to deliver a compelling narrative of space, time, and place that represents the multifold dimensions of local, spatial, and subversive memory.

Mi Vida con Carlos

An emergent group of Chilean and Argentine filmmakers, many in their early forties, has done the work of what Michael Renov describes as exploring the new subjects of documentary, where their personal and social worlds are documented through autobiographical practices. Removed from the personally affected subject of state violence, postmemory documentaries are organized around the memories of memories. Marianne Hirsch describes how “postmemory’s connection to the past is [thus] not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation.” What is characteristic of these documentaries is the need to fixate on local and often very micro locations, whether it be through region, natural landscapes such as the sea and desert, or former concentration camps. All can provide the affective terrain and metaphors for the scars of direct and mediated experience. Spaces of memory anchor the partial and incomplete character of the violent past, where archives are slim and physical evidence is often absent.

Growing up with an incoherent narrative about what actually happened during state violence, and the many silences in its wake, has propelled a search by the postmemory generation for pieces of the memory puzzle, a search that is structured by the post-dictatorship and neoliberal cultures of forgetting. Though the past five to seven years especially have seen startling changes in how the national past was remembered toward increased commemoration and transitional justice, the period right after dictatorship was marked by memory’s refusal at an institutional level, even while forgetting was an important weapon of distancing from levels of acute psycho-affective proximity to violence. At the institutional level, political amnesty for perpetrators, truth commissions as instruments of memory-
making and national consensus, and legal amnesty for perpetrators that was later rescinded, all set the stage for a national consensus.

A sense of shattered time and experimental space is present in postmemory documentary films. I use the term “fragmented recovery” to describe a filmmaking practice that documents the social self in search of truths, however partial, and in search of repair, however incomplete often in very specific spatial locations. The work of space here is to provide an anchor for memories that are otherwise mediated and indirect. Generational witnessing is less about forgetting, or obliteration of the past, and more about never really knowing, where mediation is the quintessential feature of the postmemory condition. What exactly is to be rendered and attended to by the postmemory documentary as a space of memorialization, struggle, or contested meaning? In a recent play entitled *Mi Vida Después* (*My Life After*), Carla Crespo, the daughter of a leader from a leftist guerrilla group proclaims, “I’ve heard so many versions of how my dad died that it’s as if he died several times, or as if he never died at all.”

The narrative of repetitive dying is precisely what the film *Mí Vida con Carlos* tries to capture through the voiceover and personal narration of director Germán Berger. The film opens with an encounter with Carmen Hertz, the well-known activist of the *Agrupacion de Familiares de Desaparecidos y*
Detenidos (Association of Family Members of the Disappeared-Detained, or AFDD), who has worked on behalf of survivors and victims for several decades. The shock of the film is to find out that one of the most visible female protagonists of the human rights scene has, in fact, transmitted very little about the life of her disappeared long-time companion, Carlos, to her son. Carmen says, “I know that you haven’t seen these much,” as she flips through several family albums. “No, you never show them to me,” responds a despondent Germán. The fact that photographs have been a central strategy of making visible “the missing” makes Carmen’s reluctance to show her son the album even more surprising, emphasizing the silences of memory in domestic spaces, even in the intimacies between mother and son.

As the film opens, we realize that Germán, the filmmaker, has very few details of his father’s vernacular existence. To access his father’s daily life, he replays a sepia toned clip of Carlos running into the ocean forward and backward at various speeds and intervals. The motion of the image is a central trope of the film, where the time, space, and embodiment of the paternal figure are approximations and experiments, rather than memories that emerge from physical encounter. The sea and water symbolize, throughout the film, the challenge posed by generational memory where water is nebulous and the motion of the waves successive, repetitive, and without definition. The relationship to elements is necessary for this generation as it connects to places of the past and is sedimented through what Jill Bennett calls “sense memories,” which are recalled only by living emotions anew.11 Early in the film, we see the younger cinematic version of Germán’s father playing in the sea. “The first time that I saw you was on a Super-8 image, I’d never seen your body in movement, or at least that I remember. I was one year old when they killed you and you were thirty.” Filled with direct addresses through letters, stories, and questions to Carlos, the absent and deceased father is mediated through cultural memory, which brings forward the issue of how to grieve the loss of a father who was virtually never known.

The first half of the film is an unraveling of the details and facts of Carlos’ life, before the climactic scene of a series of photographs that bubble under the water’s surface. In voiceover accompanying the drowning photographs, the director reveals that his grandparents both committed suicide after his father’s death. This moment is followed by the revelation that the
grandparents had survived the Holocaust only to have their son tortured and killed by Pinochet's secret military force, *La Caravana de la Muerte*. While the history of Holocaust survivors and dictatorship victims is one that is underexplored in the literature, there are dozens of such cases documented by human rights archives. Further, while the multifaceted character of familial losses is not uncommon for relatives of the disappeared, in the case of Germán Berger such loss is amplified by the paternal family's escape from Nazi Germany. The predominant emotion that emerges in this scene and the next is rage. Germán says, “One of the greatest difficulties I face is being able to expunge my rage. His uncle responds, “Is this rage for what you've lost?” and Berger replies, “Yes, I face it and visualize and think that little by little I'm getting over it, but then I realize I’m not over it. There are moments that I'm enraged because of what they took from me and that gets transformed in anger and resentment to the world.”

*Mi Vida con Carlos* has a predecessor, Silvio Caiozzi’s *Fernando Has Returned* (Chile, 1998), in which the spectacle of male anger in the face of the loss of the father is forceful. The central arc of the film is the family’s discovery of a male skeleton that indicates a political execution, rather than death from war. What such films bring to light is the degree to which the heteronormative discourses of family and nation perpetuated by the dictatorship are undercut by the fragmentation of the nuclear and extended families of the Southern Cone through torture and terror. Amidst a beautiful and peaceful setting of trees, Ricardo, Carlos’ brother, tries to explain the historical injustice that must be personally reckoned with, but as the audience we are privy to the restlessness of the search and journey that Germán continues to undergo. It is only at the end of the film, when he stands amidst the windswept desert of the Atacama with his two father figures, his uncle, that something shifts in his position. From the position of exile it is the haunting that has been emblematic through the figure of paternal absence.
The director, German Berger, with his two uncles in *Mi Vida con Carlos*

Saidya Hartman has spoken eloquently about her own work, *Lose your Mother* by suggesting, “To lose your mother is about losing your identity, your language, your country, and that’s the way they speak of it in West Africa. So, it’s about those losses that haunt us, those ancestors who we know but can’t name. We feel their presence but they’re without names for us.”

Hartman’s tracing is a constant search for the absent links in relation to the maternal line, and a fractured relationship to documentation as part of the inheritance of slavery’s missing archive. In Germán’s world, there are many photos, moving pictures, and fragments of visual memory. Yet the archive is put away and only reclaimed at a later point to make present the absent father.

Germán is acutely aware of his father’s absence, and from the age of nine has documented himself as someone who bears this knowledge, a fact that Chilean society around him so invested in the figure of the absent father and suffering mother won’t let him forget. We see Germán at nine years old saying, “It has been a huge loss, not having a father to tell new things too. I’m sad when I think about this. Because he thought differently that’s why this happened. No one likes to think about having a father that was murdered this way. On Father’s day I wanted to close my eyes and I wished that people didn’t look at me with compassion.” Much of the embodiment of such loss happens through masculinity and resentment at the military state, and the structural absence of the father that is so forcefully impressed upon the structures of the nuclear family. It is this male/son relationship, in which the idealized revolutionary father is killed at the hands of the State that emerges so forcefully and contradictorily in these narratives. The heteronuclear family unravels before our eyes in both films, yet the directors do not address this stark fact of violence.
Conclusion

Susana Kaiser discusses how for the postmemory generation in Argentina the primary way of reconstructing this past was from three main sources that were available: 1) intergenerational dialogue that includes the extended family, 2) friends, neighborhood, and community, education, 3) and the communication media. Kaiser focuses on the “average person” beyond those who were victimized to understand the main impact of dictatorship, especially the afterlife of torture as a memory that haunts the national landscape. Films like Mi Vida con Carlos that emerge from within the circles of survivors fill in the “gray area” and shades of unknowing through spatial metaphors. The sea, the forest, and the desert become the sites of memory’s interactions, as anchors of the past that reach toward efforts at psychologically and socially integrating loss.

Though Germán grew up around entire communities of witness activists, such as the AFDD, the work of stitching together the past came only after putting back together his own family through his own marriage and reproduction. Though this film is powerful and multi-directional regarding his own memories and the link between the intimate, the domestic, the nuclear, and the nation, it also forces narrative closure after opening up the question of loss, patriarchy, and heteronuclearity. In one of the film’s scenes, Germán’s own new family, with his wife and two children, has a picnic on a green hilltop. This new visualization of space is an idyllic counterpoint to the harsh reality of calling out to a missing father in the wind of the desert. Losing the father, and the persistent absence of the father, open up important possibilities: In the shards and ashes of the heteronormative family, this generation’s search for memory is often a story about not only personal tragedy, but also the opportunity for different kinds of affective communities of witness to emerge. Documenting the dialectic between personal loss and broader forms of sociality regarding traumatic memory produces what Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker call an “archive of social suffering that is tied to a particular locale,” where such specific locations inspire “the multiplication of perspectives and queries” and the limits and potentials of documentaries as a public record with global meaning. Like Guzmán’s mothers who are perpetually searching in the desert, these figures of longing wrestle with the impossibility of narrative closure produced by a militarized
state and the prefiguring of an internal enemy. Visualizing a regional location like the Atacama amplifies the potentials of publically witnessing the ongoing affective and political stakes. A spatial search for what remains points toward other potential social formations, outside of closed nuclearity, and other ways to know and represent the past, outside of nostalgia or official histories.

Notes

1 Nostalgia For The Light, Patricio Guzmán, 2010.
2 See Macarena Gómez-Barris, Where Memory Dwells: Culture and State Violence in Chile (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
8 Michael Renov, The Subject of Documentary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

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