

# The Battle for Chile: a heartfelt testament to Pinochet's victims

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The Human Rights Watch Film Festival offered London audiences a rare chance to see one part of Patricio Guzman's documentary trilogy about the Allende government in Chile and the Pinochet coup of 1973. Part Two of *The Battle for Chile, The Coup*, was shown alongside Guzman's 1997 documentary *Chile: Obstinate Memory*. Extra screenings had to be arranged to cope with the demand for tickets for a film not seen in Britain for 20 years.

As Guzman acknowledges, much of *The Battle for Chile* was filmed almost at random. His crew filmed widely around Santiago during the election of Allende's Popular Unity government and then through the coup. There is footage of demonstrations, debates, occupations and military searches. The crew interviewed workers, as well as incorporating televised interviews with government leaders and political activists. The result is a powerful collage of the political turmoil of the period, out of which emerges a clear picture of some of the political debate taking place within Chile at the time.

Part One of the trilogy details the far right's attempts to organise against Allende, while Part Three deals with local anti-fascist organisations. *The Coup* itself covers the period between late June 1973 and the coming to power of the generals in September. It is perhaps best known for the footage of the aerial bombardment of La Moneda presidential palace, during which Allende was killed.

The film opens on June 29, when one battalion of the army prematurely moved against the presidential palace. The military were stepping up their attacks and there was a mass presence on the streets. One of the most moving sequences in the film is that of an Argentinian cameraman filming his own death, as soldiers fire into the crowd. The tanks were unsupported by the rest of the army and were eventually withdrawn. Most of the generals (Pinochet included), although in favour of a coup, did not support one at this stage.

Something that the voice-over narration emphasises from the outset is the willingness of the Chilean workers to come out onto the streets to defend Allende. What it does not state,

but which still emerges from the juxtaposition of footage and narration, is the extent to which Allende's actions were often hostile to those workers prepared to fight in his defence. While workers were coming out against the military and taking over factories, Allende is seen constantly manoeuvring within parliament.

Guzman described the trilogy at a question and answer session after the screening as a tribute to the Popular Unity government period and Allende particularly. This was clearly the intention of *The Coup*, but because of the way the film was made, a more critical picture of the situation in Chile still emerges. It is clear, for example, that the workers were a huge and potent force. In the middle of July workers took the streets of the Vicuna McKenna district. In the ensuing stand-off the mayor of Santiago had to be called in to move the police two blocks away. Workers are repeatedly seen demanding arms to defend Allende, arms which Allende was denying them. An old member of the Communist Party is seen warning that if the workers lose it will be like Spain after the civil war.

The issue of arms crops up repeatedly. Allende, who refused to create a workers militia, dismissed his police from La Moneda before the bombardment began, leaving only 40 bodyguards. As the coup approached, the military stepped up weapons searches in order to gauge the strength of the workers. At the question session, Guzman expressly disagreed that the refusal to arm the workers had been a mistake. It would have been impossible, he said, because the military would have known it was happening. In any case, it was already known that the military were preparing a coup. In other words, once it began the coup was inevitably going to be a success. Yet even in the last few days before the coup, the streets of Santiago were filled with mass demonstrations in defence of Allende.

One of the most illuminating sequences shows a meeting of the CUT (the Committee of Organised Workers, Chile's largest trade union organisation). Here a worker demands the expropriation of factories. A harassed union official makes it clear that factory seizures are seen only as emergency

measures against fascism and suggests that expropriation would alienate Swiss investors. The worker makes it clear that he does not share this concern for the international banks. The evidence is clear that the desires of the workers were thwarted by their leaders.

It is in such exchanges that the film is at its strongest. Here is the real human stuff of a political crisis. A mother watches the military search a graveyard for weapons and demands arms "to protect those who cannot protect themselves". This film, which wants to idolise Allende, gives a voice to those who were becoming critical of him and were betrayed by him. In its clumsy, painful way the film presents an honest picture of events as they unfolded. Its deficiencies are offset by the raw truth of its images. Smuggled out of Santiago in the boot of a Swedish embassy car while Guzman was facing probable death in Santiago Stadium, *The Battle for Chile* stands as a heartfelt testament to the victims of the coup.

The limitations of Guzman's political outlook become more pronounced in *Chile: Obstinate Memory*. Made in 1997, the film charts both Guzman's visits to Chilean schools with *The Battle for Chile* and the question of how memory works in relation to 1973. Where the earlier film was an attempt to film anything and everything of interest happening around him, *Obstinate Memory* has a much more leisurely and reflective pace. In discussion, Guzman made clear that he is hostile to "journalism" in documentaries, even though that is the greatest strength of *The Battle for Chile*. He said that a documentary must contain poetry in order to convey its truth. In *Obstinate Memory* it is memory itself that is used as a poetic concept. To this end artists, academics, and Guzman's uncle Ignacio (who smuggled the film out) discuss both their own memories and their own conceptions of memory. It is stressed that without the full information, no attempt can be made to confront the past. Memory was taboo under the dictatorship and Guzman is part of a movement towards reliving the past cinematically.

The point is made several times that the youth of Chile today, having grown up under the dictatorship, have no idea at all of what actually happened in 1973. Guzman speaks of the need to defend Allende's reputation against those who describe him as a madman, a drunk, a womaniser, etc. But the real problem is actually explaining to the schoolchildren that the economic miracle of Pinochet's rule was not what they were told it was. There is some astonishing footage of pupils repeating in good faith the lies of the ruling elite--for example, that only 2,000 people were killed during the whole 17 years of the dictatorship--which is then contrasted with their appalled faces as they watch the trilogy.

The film is an awkward patchwork of a number of Guzman's favoured motifs. In order to glorify Allende he

interviews several of the president's domestic staff, as well as some of his bodyguards who try to identify themselves on photos and film clips. (He explained later that he wants to make a documentary about the guards who stayed and fought at La Moneda, one of whom we see revisiting the palace for the first time since he was wounded at the gates after Allende's death). He was trying to find some of the people he filmed during *The Battle for Chile* and we see several audiences who remember 1973, weeping as they watch that film.

It is clear that Guzman is facing his own memories too. Part of the film is devoted to his cameraman on *The Battle for Chile*, Jorge Muller Silva, who was later arrested, tortured and killed. There is some discussion of Guzman's own experiences in Santiago Stadium with a doctor who treated him there, and some eerie footage of the stadium both empty and full of a riotous football crowd.

The moving moments here are more dignified in the aftermath of defeat, but less potent. Allende's widow, Hortensia Bussi, talks of still waiting to have his personal belongings returned to her. A youth band play "Venceremos" in the streets of Santiago for the first time since 1973. It is the younger faces that look enthusiastic, the older faces look stunned. A school teacher, almost unable to face her students, reveals for the first time her belated sympathies with Popular Unity.

Guzman spoke of his desire to take a travelling exhibition of films from the Allende period up and down Chile in order to have a dialogue, especially with the young. He denounced talk of a "transition" to democracy in Chile, pointing out that many of the figures behind the coup are still behind the military today. Clearly this makes it difficult for anyone attempting to discuss the past. The difficulty is compounded in Guzman's case because he idealises those who ultimately bear political responsibility for opening the door to the military dictatorship. His portrayal of Allende does not serve to illuminate the political lessons that need to be learned from both the coup and the history of the Popular Unity government itself.



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