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# Every Night the Universe Passes over Santiago. Transnational “Ecocinema” and Visualising Environmental Histories in Patricio Guzmán’s *Nostalgia for the Light*

John Parham<sup>1</sup> and Pippa Marland<sup>2</sup>

This paper tests the capacity of media and popular culture to articulate complex ecological ideas, carrying out an analysis of Patricio Guzmán’s 2010 documentary *Nostalgia de la luz* [*Nostalgia for the Light*]. Through applying and developing arguments involved in the study of “ecocinema”, including the concept of “flow”, the paper also considers the possibility that texts situated within a transnational media industry might articulate localized perspectives on place, nature, and people, able to resonate with a global audience. The film is set in the Atacama desert, a location which brings together cosmologists, palaeontologists, archaeologists, women searching for traces of the “disappeared”, and men who were imprisoned in the desert’s Chacabuco concentration camp – also the site of early twentieth-century nitrate mining. According to Guzmán, these people are united by a common purpose: their ongoing attempt to uncover the stories of the past, from the origins of the universe to more recent social and political narratives. Through this emphasis on memory, the paper argues, Guzmán develops a radical form of nostalgia which reveals the desert’s significance not only to Chilean history but also its connection to the matter of the cosmos and to flows of global capital, a connection which implicates the film’s global audience both ecologically and socio-politically. Thus, the paper makes a case for the ecological significance of the film both in terms of the relationship it establishes between deep environmental and planetary history and a recent human history embedded in modernity, and its ability to foster a form of transnational eco-cosmopolitanism.

**KEY WORDS:** transnational ecocinema; eco-cosmopolitanism; green media; media ecology; radical nostalgia; Patricio Guzmán *Nostalgia de la luz*

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Patricio Guzmán's *Nostalgia de la luz* [*Nostalgia for the Light*] (2010) extends the project of his previous work, a body of documentary films which analyse the Pinochet regime (1973-90) and the coup against Allende's socialist Popular Unity coalition (1970-3), and excavate the memories and experiences of people who lived through these brutal upheavals in Chile's recent history. In *Nostalgia* Guzmán places that history within a "deep history" understood both environmentally and cosmologically. The film is set in the Atacama Desert, which lies 10000 metres above sea level, and which, thanks to its almost zero humidity and transparent atmosphere, is both a privileged site for accessing the material past and an exceptionally clear window on the cosmos. Guzmán also supplements his habitual practice of combining photographs, archive footage, interviews, etc. with visual spectacle – in this case, startling telescopic images of the universe and quite beautifully filmed depictions of the desert. As a reviewer in *Le Monde* asserts, the film encompasses:

an unusual science of montage, a magic of association between things and beings, an art of bringing to light unsuspected connections. Mummies and telescopes, marbles and galaxies, blue skies and darkness, traces of the past and projections of the future, infinite pain and sidereal peace enter here into a dance of the poetic spirit that celebrates them.  
(Mandelbaum n.p.)

The poetry complements the personal, however, with interviews characterised by the dignity, tenderness, resolve of Guzmán's subjects. These include astronomers, palaeontologists, archaeologists, women scouring the desert for remains of their "disappeared" loved ones, and men who were imprisoned in the desert's Chacabuco concentration camp – previously the site of an early twentieth-century nitrate mining town– during the Pinochet regime. One of the latter is the "architect of memory" Miguel Lawner. Incarcerated five times under the military dictatorship, Lawner painstakingly memorised the dimensions of his prison cell and of the camp and later rendered these into meticulous monochrome line drawings that left the authorities "dumbstruck". While, from the UK, which is where we are writing, the published versions of these exquisite

drawings are near impossible to find, they are available to us by virtue of the immersion of Guzmán's work in a parallel ecology – that of the global media and popular cultural ecosystem.

### **Media/Ecology**

This paper will test the resilience of media and popular culture's capacity to articulate complex ecological ideas. It examines *Nostalgia de la luz*, a documentary that conjures with the layers of complexity that lie in the relationship between deep environmental and planetary history and a recent human history embedded in modernity. At the same time, the film itself emerges from the complex ecosystem of global media production and reception which, it's been argued, encompasses the potential of popular culture to foster a transnational eco-cosmopolitanism.

The relationship between these two ecologies was foregrounded as ecocritical theory and environmental humanities began to consider visual media and popular culture and as theorists were struck by the coincidence of ecology *per se* having a counterpart in what is called "media ecology" (see Parham 2; Rust 87-8). That coincidence has arisen because both are attending to what have become ever-more complex ecologies characterised, broadly, by the fact that beings, beliefs, understandings, even products co-evolve from interplays of contrast and equivalence, competition and cooperation.

Ecological theory has increasingly stressed its own complexity: "postmodern" scientific ecology, for example, presents a paradigm in which entities co-exist not harmoniously but in a discordant state of competition and interdependence (Botkin); biosemiotics emphasises, correspondingly, complex communicative patterns in the form of "semiotic loops flowing ceaselessly" between the environments and the inner worlds of mutually engaged creatures "each making each in a ceaseless living ecological process" (Wheeler 272); a new ecological materialism extends the interrelation and co-creation of beings to *all* matter, and considers, for example, how humanity's degradation and pollution of the planet with (say) plastic microfibers or mercury (see Alaimo 19-20) rebounds in the shape of health impacts that fall on humans and animals alike; environmental justice traces the common ground between social disadvantage (e.g. as a result of

class, gender, or race) and polluted, toxic environments. Lastly, most recently, ecocritical theorists have (like Guzmán) been exploring epochal interrelations, notably how the “Anthropocene” – the apparent new geological age marked by humanity’s indelible mark on the geological strata and atmosphere – is, nonetheless, intertwined within a “deep history” that, notwithstanding its profound interconnection with human history, remains stubbornly autonomous and mysterious, questioning human assumptions of mastery by insisting upon the “sheer contingency” of what we know about the Earth and the cosmos (see Rudwick 307, 299).

“Media ecology” studies the correspondingly complex networks of technology, media production and distribution, governmental control, texts, audiences, and – in “green media” or “ecomedia” studies – the materiality of media products (e.g. their resource use, production and disposal). Gradually answering Andrew Ross’ earlier call that “images of ecology” ought to be considered in relation to the “ecology of images” (171), critics have begun to explore the actual ecological ramifications of key concepts in the study of the ecology of media systems. A notable example is Rust, Monani, and Cubitt’s division of *Ecomedia: Key Issues* into three parts: “frames”, “flow”, and “convergence”.

Framing refers to the organising perspective, idea, or formal device (genre, narrative, visual codes etc) by which media and popular cultural texts evoke or steer us towards certain perceptions or values (see Cox 16). While environmental content can often be trivialised or negated by a humanist and/or ideological framing (Willoquet-Maricondi 227) – e.g. nature documentaries that reinforce human ideologies of family or heterosexuality – frames can also be deployed as effective ways to convey ecological messages to the public. Similarly, “flow” and “convergence” are concepts that while invariably understood ideologically can also be applied more broadly. Flow customarily refers to the “entire stream of content [...] being broadcast at any one time” and to how that content transmits “layers” of discourse and meanings to audiences (Rust 88). Convergence, likewise, designates media organisations working across different platforms (e.g. dual print and online publication) and is often seen as motivated by a

desire to sustain or increase profits by merging previously self-contained media components (Dwyer 2-3). Rust et al suggest, however, that we could broaden our understanding of flow to encompass the common interest and communicative networks of humans and nonhumans alike (i.e. “the interlocking presence of ecosystems”) (5). Comparably, a broader interpretation of “convergence” in Henry Jenkins’ *Convergence Culture* (2008) encompasses (to use Jenkins’ terms) participatory cultures (i.e. the blurring of producer and consumer in fan interventions) and, consequently, formations of “collective intelligence”. This broader understanding insists, therefore, that networks of action and alternative sources of media power exist beyond the control of the “marketplace”, a perspective we can apply to environmental activism and/or environmentally-minded media practitioners (Lioi 169-70).

In a previous work, John Parham has argued that a space for the ecological imagination in mainstream media and popular culture opens up from two main types of convergence: the symbiosis between “dissonant” and industry-produced popular culture; and the possibility that texts situated within a transnational media industry might bring local perspectives on place, nature, and people to a global audience (Parham 21-8). It is the latter, of course, which applies to *Nostalgia*, as we can begin to understand by looking further at the notion of “flow”.

Exploring potential (eco)media conceptions of “flow”, Rust draws on the work of Manuel Castells, who posits media texts as situated in a global society itself “constructed”, writes Castells, from “flows of capital, flows of information, flows of technology, flows of organizational interactions, flows of images, sounds, and symbols” (see Castells 442; Rust 90). Like media flows, these are “purposeful”, programmed by “dominant social structures” who operate “a circuit of electronic exchanges” that in turn “shape social practices and social consciousness” (442). Despite that, Castells continues, we nevertheless still experience ourselves as living in particular places. These “relationships between the space of flows and the space of places, between simultaneous globalization and localization, are not predetermined in their outcome” (458) and so he advocates building “bridges” between the “two forms of space”.

Castells does seem to conclude that “the dominant tendency is toward a horizon of networked, ahistorical space of flows, aiming at imposing its logic over scattered, segmented places” (458-9). Nevertheless, in the context of eco-media, his analysis points towards an ongoing dialogue by which, however uneven the balance of power, popular cultural texts might at least attempt to apply a specific consciousness of place towards nourishing alternative flows of social and ecological “collective intelligence”.

This could take many forms. Drawing a distinction between “world” and “global” cinema Kapur and Wagner reject the presumption of “autonomy” in the former – which seems to regard particular film/makers as “a separate entity marked mostly by national origin” – in arguing that cinema is characterised by a model of “interdependence” and that “any and all cinema is the localized expression of a globalized integration” (4). Though dominated, they stress, by both the economics and values of neoliberalism – i.e. free market capitalism (4) – global cinema also invariably exhibits a paradoxical “mourning” for other ways of life which partially resist or reject neoliberalism’s values (6-7). Without recourse to the sometimes overstated claims of “world cinema”, that Kapur and Wagner rightly critique, other critics have highlighted that more localised perspectives can emerge, for instance in processes of “glocalisation from below” where local producers “tamper” with the conventions of global forms such as television soap opera or Hollywood cinema (see Hannerz 124) or from what David Morley has called the “counter-flow” (35) of local, glocal, and national products to worldwide audiences. Cultural products exported to a global market have the potential, that is, to explore the complex relations between animals, land, place, and global economic structures, either to critique those structures (as Kapur and Wagner suggest) and/or to nurture what Ursula Heise has called “eco-cosmopolitanism”. For Heise, as cultural forms generated in specific places find wider (regional or international) audiences they have an opportunity to convert a place-based sense of human “ties to territories and systems”, “advocacy on behalf of the nonhuman world”, or a locally-forged awareness of “socioenvironmental justice” into sensibilities that just

might “encompass the planet as a whole” (10). Though this must always be qualified with a sense of the negative ramifications of cosmopolitanism and globalisation (Heise 58-9), by the overshadowing dominance of the neoliberal “space of flows”, the ecosystem of contemporary media and popular culture clearly does allow for the co-existence of a querulous “transnational ecocinema” (Gustafsson and Käätä 3).

### **Guzmán, Documentary, and Transnational Cinema**

Statements about the complexity of media texts invariably limit themselves to emphasising the complex media and cultural ecosystems from which those texts emerge. Yet we would argue that the emergence of media texts from within patterns of flow and convergence also imbues the form, modes of representation, frames, and content of the texts themselves. Popular and media texts are often, in other words, complex and therefore well equipped to represent a corresponding complexity in ecological ideas (Parham xviii).

This applies not least to Guzmán’s chosen medium, documentary film. His practice is premised, first, on the elasticity of a documentary form well equipped to handle the complex themes explored in *Nostalgia*. At the same time, *Nostalgia* (and Guzmán’s practice in general) exemplifies the intricate formations that comprise “global” and “transnational” cinema, thus enabling the social-ecological themes of *Nostalgia* to resonate with audiences beyond Chile.

Documentaries tend to proliferate at times of political and cultural crisis (see Hughes 101-2). This applies, for example, both to the spate of environmental documentaries that have appeared at the start of the twenty-first century and to post-1973 Chile where, whether in exile or at home (the latter largely as the new video activism of the 1980s), documentary took the form of “resistance” and/or “keeping alive the memory” of the deposed Socialist coalition (see Pick 117-18, 126-7; Traverso and Liñero 167-9). As a medium, documentary has conventionally underpinned forensic, ostensibly objective representation of its subject matter with the points of view of people directly involved, working, that is, to assiduously accumulate authentic source material (e.g. witness testimony, and direct capture of people and events through the camera)

(see Saunders 12, 16). Yet documentary has also increasingly supplemented factual accuracy and critical objectivity with an affective or poetic mode that Keith Beattie terms *Documentary Display*. Encompassing techniques such as meditative “stillness”, performance, image enlargement, slow motion, and visual experimentation (Beattie 4), “documentary display” has evolved as a recognition both that “truth”, realism, or veracity are always constructed – and often implicated in regimes of power (Beattie 5) – and that, rhetorically, affective modes can often be at least as effective as rational persuasion. Poeticism seems particularly apposite to visual media like cinema which couldn’t possibly match but can augment the pragmatic mode of (say) policy documents or scientific papers (see Cubitt 1; Parham 29-30).

Documentary has evolved, then, into an adaptable and fluid form (Hughes 23) well-fitted to the multifaceted and emotive dimensions that accompany environmental or political themes. This is certainly a perception that might be applied to *Nostalgia*. Thomas Steinmetz argues that documentary is, for Guzmán, the most rich and inclusive of forms, able to move beyond reportage through combining the kind of creativity more usually associated with the fictional *mis en scène* with a powerful sense of the extraordinary and the poetic in the everyday (15). Guzmán’s approach is characterised, for example, by the use of a wide angle lens to achieve distance and comprehensiveness of coverage and a systematic working method, in which screenplays have been mapped around 15-20 “key points” (see Burton 50-1; 55), alongside personal testimony, narrative storytelling, and “montage[s] of images and sounds” (Pick 115). Guzmán himself articulates this in describing *Nostalgia* as an “authored documentary”:

I’ve always thought that the domain of the authored documentary lies somewhere between the documentary and the essay. That’s been my definition for most of my life. We take something from journalism and something from the essay. But our work isn’t scientific, it’s a form of artistic work, so it’s subjective, a matter of ideas, intuitions, comparisons and the juxtaposition of interesting things. (cited in Darke n.p.)

While the conjunction of analysis, craftsmanship, art and affect might explain the aesthetic and thematic complexity of his films, and thus their appeal to a documentary audience, his worldwide popularity also emanates, at the level of a media ecology, from three types of transnational convergence: the origins of Guzmán's practice in terms of a dialogue between national, regional, and international traditions; the funding, production, distribution and reception of his films within the matrix of the global film industry; and a resonance that comes from Chile's embroilment close to the centre of the history of global capitalism.

Zuzana M. Pick has documented a long transnational tradition in Chilean documentary cinema which, with a pronounced political edge, gathered apace from the late 1950s (110-13). Chilean documentary was influenced from the start by international practitioners such as the British school of John Grierson and Italian neorealism (Pick 111). Conversely, it also played a role in the growth of a burgeoning and "socially conscious" Latin American documentary tradition, evidenced by the international Latin American film festival originating at Viña del Mar in Chile in 1967 (see Lopez 270-1). Consequently, with most filmmakers in exile after 1973, films were financially and practically supported by sympathetic film institutes abroad, as well as trades unions and political organisations, and therefore flavoured by other national traditions (Pick 120-1). As a result, Chilean filmmakers developed working methods and modes of representation that "would enable them to communicate the specifics of their own cultural and political practices to European and North American audiences" (Pick 120). Guzmán was a product of this cross-fertilisation. Having originally studied at the Escuela de Cine in Madrid in the 1960s (Burton 57), Guzmán, by his own account, extracted the "essential elements" of his documentary practice from Cuban documentary cinema (notably Julio Garcia Espinosa's *Tercer Mundo, Tercera Guerra Mundial* [*Third World, Third World War* (1970)]) and from film theorists from Russia and France. In practical terms, his early career was supported by the French documentary-maker Chris Marker, who sent him film stock (Burton 52-3; 55), while, in exile, his three-part *La Batalla de Chile* [*The Battle of Chile*] (1973-

9), was supported by the Cuban Film Institute (where Guzmán received advice from Espinosa (see Burton 64-5; Lopez 275)).

Where Guzmán's work has always been transnational, in terms of both style and production, the network of production, distribution, screening and critical reception that underlies *Nostalgia* also testifies to his status as an internationally renowned filmmaker. The film was co-produced by Cronomedia (Chile), Atacama Productions (a Paris-based vehicle for Guzmán's films), and a German production company Blinker Filmproduktion & WDR, but also with support, for example, from Télévision Espagnole, the Region of Île de France, and the Sundance Foundation. It has been distributed worldwide (Europe, North America, Australia, and the Far East) and screened at Cannes, the US Environmental Film Festival, and at international film festivals in San Francisco, Melbourne, Toronto, San Sebastián, Rio de Janeiro, Hong Kong, and Yamagata. *Nostalgia* was reviewed in major international newspapers and film magazines and prompted a wave of retrospectives of his work in the US, including the Harvard Film Archive's "History, Memory, Cinema" exhibition, the Brooklyn Academy of Music's "Obstinate Memories: The Documentaries of Patricio Guzmán", and the UCLA Film and Television Archive.

Surveying Chilean documentary, Pick writes that "worldwide interest in Chilean events provided the necessary conditions of political and financial support to sustain the cultural and artistic expressions of a community in exile" (118). Beyond cross-currents of aesthetic style and documentary production, there are then fundamental ideological, political and cultural reasons why Guzmán's work – traversing both "resistance" and "keeping alive the memory" of the Popular Unity coalition – connects with a global audience. At university in the 1980s, we ourselves experienced the solidarity campaigns in the British socialist movement by which Chilean exiles exported "the political and artistic slogans of the Popular Unity government" (Pick 117), slogans that filtered into wider popular culture – for example the jazz-pop band Working Week's 1984 single "Venceremos – We Will Win", a tribute to the protest singer Victor Jara. In

terms of the political Left, *The Battle of Chile* has been instructive as an analysis and case-study of the process and downfall of a Socialist revolution and for contributing to the long historical narrative of Internationalist socialism.

Guzmán himself regards the revolution in Chile as “a sort of twentieth-century Paris Commune” (see Burton 50, 66). Conversely, he also interprets the coup as “the mass uprising of the middle and upper sectors of the population, in collaboration with foreign interests” (Burton 50). That position, articulated in Part I of *The Battle of Chile* – “The Insurrection of the Bourgeoisie” – might engender corresponding reflection at several levels. Firstly, for us, the authors of this piece, it stimulates reflection on the UK’s political involvement with Chile, e.g. Thatcher and Pinochet’s mutual support, and, later, Pinochet’s 1998 arrest and detainment in London. Secondly, and more generally, it encourages consideration of “how invisible [...] imperialism can be”, as Guzmán himself has argued (see Burton 66) i.e. the role of western governments in pursuing and protecting blocs of political alliance, trade networks, and resource supplies. And thirdly, it raises questions about whether the lifestyles of the global audience watching his films might in some way have been upheld by our own governments’ foreign trade and exploitation of overseas resources (i.e. international audiences have to examine whether they themselves might be implicated). All three of these levels of reflection acknowledge the notion that the flow of global capital and the political operations that sustain it pass through Chile. Thus it is, consciously, a more than cosmological observation when Guzmán concludes *Nostalgia* with the words “Each night, slowly, impassively, the centre of the galaxy passes over Santiago”. Yet in making his films, some of the consequences of that flow have been fed back, the particular innovation or extension represented by *Nostalgia* being to supplement the political preoccupations of Guzmán’s previous work with the concerns of a contemporary ecological consciousness.

Guzmán continued developing ecological themes in his most recent film *El botón de nácar* [*The Pearl Button*] (2015) which, on the surface, is more explicitly “ecological”. However, *Nostalgia*

remains ecocritically significant because in it Guzmán extends social and political history, and an associated dialogue of the present with the past, to encompass, first, a deeper cosmological history and, secondly, a specific place, the Atacama desert. Yet with the Atacama itself located in global political and economic flows, in re-framing his narrative of post-1973 towards an emphasis on space, environment, and place, *Nostalgia* eventually draws out an explicit *social* ecological dimension liable to resonate with the lifestyles of his global audience.

### **Nostalgia: social and human ecology**

The means by which Guzmán draws these strands together is through his overarching focus on memory. For Guzmán, the people whose stories are woven together in the film – the astronomers, archaeologists, palaeontologists, ex-prisoners and grieving women – are united by a common purpose: their ongoing attempt to uncover to the eyes of the present the stories of the past, from the origins of the universe to more recent social and political histories. In fact, memory has been identified as a central and ongoing theme in Post-Dictatorial Chilean documentary (see, for instance, Traverso). One critic, José Miguel Palacios, has argued that more recent films, including Guzmán's *Chile, la memoria obstinada* (1997), have been

taking the concerns with mourning, loss, and disappearance that were prominent in the films produced by filmmakers in exile to another level, one in which the loss is not exhausted in the pain of its mourning and not limited to its pastness; rather it is drastically confronted with its present remains, whether material, bodily, psychological, or political. (109)

These very real, very political notions – that memories are not limited to their “pastness”, and that they have a concrete, material presence in the present – underlie the ostensibly cosmic concerns of *Nostalgia*, as Guzmán himself has indicated:

in *Nostalgia* there is, of course, an element of philosophical reflection on the relationship between human life and the life of the cosmos, on human memory and the memory of the stars, of infinity. It's a film about the past, a demonstration that the most important

thing in life is the past, because the whole territory of the past is fundamental for people and the future. (Darke n.p.)

This confrontation with the materiality of the past is framed by two connected things: the sense of haunting that has pervaded Guzmán's recent work; and a nostalgia for the time of Allende's Popular Unity government. While specific Chilean concerns, both are also symptomatic of a global unease about modernity that is, simultaneously, social and ecological.

### **Haunting: the Atacama Desert and Environmental Injustice**

Influenced by Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994), "haunting" has become a key theme in describing a generalised condition of modernity. In critical and cultural theory, history, literary studies, and postcolonial studies, it has been adopted to denote both the residual trauma induced by revolution, counter-revolution, colonialism or postcolonial upheaval and the various "spectres" (inequality, injustice, environmental degradation) that lurk within modernity's prevailing dominant ideology, global capitalism. Though powerful as a critique of modernity's "dark side", a fundamental criticism of haunting has been epitomised in Roger Luckhurst's essay "The Spectral Turn" (2002). Luckhurst warns that the evolution of ghosting into a "routinize[d]" discourse about modernity' renders it meaningless and defuses its power (Luckhurst 541). He suggests that this has occurred because an invariably "generalized structure of haunting is symptomatically blind to its generative loci" (528). As well as negating the power of "haunting" as critique, such generalisations, as Michael F. O'Riley argues in an essay specifically about "Postcolonial Haunting", run the risk of memorialising trauma. This leads to a "stasis" and "imprisonment" in the past (7) by which, in turn, we neglect contemporary, continued inequalities. One way to avoid these pitfalls is to attach depictions of haunting to a particular place for, as Ruth Heholt argues in her introduction to the essay collection *Haunted Landscapes: Super-Nature and the Environment*, ghosts often are placed – they appear in, are generated by, or impact upon specific environments or locales. The argument here is that only the grounded,

circumstantial aspect of a particular form of ghost, haunting, or “loss” can allow for, Blanco and Peeren have argued, the “possibility of historicity” – of learning specific lessons from the past which can be applied to concrete visions of the future (13-14). This is the basis on which Guzmán in *Nostalgia* turns towards the Atacama: the desert can materialise what haunts Chile.

But it can also materialise what haunts the world about Chile. While, in a sense, the trope of haunting has emerged separately from critical theory and, more closely aligned to psychoanalysis, trauma studies, wars and the postcolonial and post-revolutionary experience clearly demonstrate, as Cathy Caruth has pointed out, that post-traumatic stress is not just a product of the unconscious but a “symptom of history”. As she writes, “the traumatized individual is catapulted [for example] into the larger, multi-subjective experience of a global culture” and is left trying to come to terms with a history that the individual is a symptom of but can never “entirely possess” (cited Blanco and Peeren 12). On a parallel line, having argued that hauntings are often specific to a place, Heholt then also quotes the contention of Berberich, Campbell and Hudson (in *Land and Identity: Theory, Memory, and Practice*) that “landscape is not one thing, but always *multiple* and connected relationally to a host of other cultural and political concerns” (13).

Hauntings located in the trauma experienced by a particular moment, place, or individual can materialise the consequences of (say) military dictatorships or colonial power. We see this in the trauma visibly etched on the faces of the women scouring the Atacama for remains of their loved ones, the disappeared. *Nostalgia* also articulates, however, what many postcolonial critics know – that the hauntings induced, in the twentieth century, by revolutionary turmoil or postcolonial upheaval have often been connected to the generalised flows of global capital that frame most people’s experience of modernity. This is evident in the literally concrete connection, as illustrated by Guzmán, between the concentration camp at Chacabuco – brought about by a regime bolstered by foreign interests – and the nineteenth-century mines that, in their original function, serviced a global market. Both these dual purposes were, as Flora Vilches has argued,

founded on “a new [i.e. Modern] production system but also a new system of social relations based on the capitalist economic model” (241). Accordingly, Caruth’s acknowledgement that individual traumas are experienced within the flow of history, and Heholt’s that “haunted landscapes” are “connected relationally” to broader political and economic flows, indicate that localised hauntings are, simultaneously, indexical signs to global ecologies. Guzmán’s depiction, likewise, of the dual flows that link not only the Atacama to the world but also past to present, shows why the material evidence of past environmental injustice might still resonate with a global audience today.

Like Vilches, Guzmán’s film suggests a continuity between the concentration camp that served a regime partly brought to power by US “imperial” interests – and motivated by political stability, trading arrangements, and resource needs – and the early twentieth-century mining industry that bequeathed those buildings. This ties Chacabuco into another of the long-held, but often hidden narratives haunting modernity – the environmental injustices inflicted by the ongoing need of other countries for resource supplies. Rob Nixon has described the cultural representation of “slow violence”, the processes by which western multinational powers’ habitual attempts to get and then control access to resources (70-1) bequeath gradual despoliation of land, economies driven by fluctuation and uncertainty, and often unstable, corrupt or volatile regimes in mineral-rich countries (69-71). While engineered by the rapacious expansion of multinational companies and the cynicism of governments and politicians, this underbelly of nineteenth and twentieth-century modernity, which Nixon (with a focus on oil) terms “petro-modernity”, is activated, he argues, by the desire of western societies and consumers to maintain their existing lifestyles, a need likely to be “evermore desperate” in the twenty-first century as a response to “uncertain petrol reserves” (68).

Both the history and potential future of the Atacama desert exemplify “slow violence”. Chacabuco was a nitrate, or saltpetre, mining town servicing an industry that peaked between 1880 and 1930. This “white gold” was used for explosives and, predominantly, in agricultural

fertilizer (Penrose 30-1) apparently transforming farming practices and productivity in America and Europe until eventually being replaced by synthetic nitrate, which transformed settlements like Chacabuco into ghost towns. Servicing consumer needs abroad, the mining business in the Atacama was underpinned by a new capitalist system and its multifaceted components: industrial processes of extraction and refinement of crude nitrate; transportation networks that extended internationally to primary markets in the US and Europe (Penrose 28); ownership of the mining towns by international companies (albeit with taxation and some (frequently flouted) controls on levels of extraction levelled by the Chilean government (Penrose 30; Vilches 241)); and a system of social relations in which indigenous Indians and economic migrants from Bolivia and Peru (Vilches 243) were housed in “mud-covered corrugated iron, adobe walls, and rammed earth floors” (Vilches 246), organised in grids to enable easy surveillance, as later utilised by the military, and worked to the bone in the graphic, literal ways disturbingly depicted in *Nostalgia*. Here, we see a forest of the graves of “men who died working”, their bodies fossilised and laid out in the open air like “geological layers”.

Contemporary indicators suggest, much as Rob Nixon does, that the slow violence carried out on and in the Atacama may continue. With uncanny echoes, a recent article in the British *Financial Times* magazine argues that vast reserves of lithium that lie under the salt-flats (*salar*) of the Atacama, dubbed “white petroleum”, are a potential resource that “could help the world move away from its dependence on fossil fuels and into a new era of battery-powered energy” (Sanderson 14). Though relatively even-handed, in citing a report from the US Geological Survey that “Lithium supply security has become a top priority for technology companies in the United States and Asia”, Henry Sanderson, the *FT*’s “commodities correspondent”, bemoans the fact that wrangling between government and private companies is stalling free trade and preventing the resource being “exploited” (16). His article concludes with the slightly menacing assertion that “if Chile cannot find a way to take advantage of the shift to a new set of resources, others will” (18). Though not directly apparent from *Nostalgia*, a concerted

Western/US “Capitalist Realism” continues, therefore, to exert pressure on Chile as a result of its mineral reserves. In the “light” of a broader understanding about the continuing narrative of slow violence, Guzmán’s graphic imagery ought to compel his own global audience – in the US, Asia, Europe, Australasia – to examine how far their lifestyles threaten to restore the ghosts of social and environmental violence that *Nostalgia* depicts. Fortunately, what the film also offers is an alternative, and more ecologically productive, vision of the future.

### **Radical Nostalgia; or “back to the future”**

The British critic Mark Fisher has identified another type of haunting within modernity – the ghosts of utopian futures that never came to pass (16-29). His elaboration of this is indicative of a growing body of theoretical and critical work which has re-framed nostalgia as unsettling, quietly transgressive, and radically pulling against existing discourses of progress and development (see Bonnett). Such work constitutes not a sentimental privileging of the (imagined) past at the expense of a progressive present but a potentially vital tool in recovering suppressed histories as a means to shape the future (Glazer).

Fisher effects a visionary nostalgia by sifting the connotations of the Freudian dialogue between melancholy and mourning. The latter is conventionally depicted as a process from which we move on; the former as lingering, unproductive sadness. Fisher, however, argues that what he calls “hauntological melancholia” is not without merit. While melancholia can sometimes be construed as “failed mourning” – in metaphorical terms, a failure to “give up the ghost” – it can also be “the refusal of the ghost to give up on us” (Fisher 22). There are two key implications here. Firstly, one reason the spectre will not allow us to settle, Fisher continues, is because this is a melancholia that “consists not in giving up on desire but in refusing to yield” or to “adjust to what current conditions call “reality” – even if the cost of that refusal is that you feel like an outcast in your own time” (24). He means specifically a refusal to yield to what (in his first book) he called “capitalist realism”, the same “capitalist realism” which pervades globalisation and which brought the nitrate mines and, later, in part, the 1973 coup to Chile.

Secondly, turning to the question of whether a haunted melancholy is simply nostalgia, Fisher responds combatively that “It seems strange to have to *argue* that comparing the present unfavourably with the past is not automatically nostalgia in any culpable way” (25; his italics). Nostalgia is only “culpable”, he is arguing, when it freezes us into the past and prevents the “possibility” of historicity, of engaging with the present moment. In that context, while there is often a danger in falsely overestimating the past, more problematic is the fact that, actually, we often underestimate it (25). This neglects to acknowledge that we are haunted by visions of the better worlds that never came to pass (the “spectres of lost futures” (26)). This likewise frustrates the productive capacity Derrida attributed to haunting when he argued that by invoking, in the “spectre”, what has become hidden, invisible, not-present, the ghost can be (as paraphrased by Blanco and Peeren) “both *revenant* (invoking what was) and *arrivant* (announcing what will come)” (13). The re-emphasis placed by Fisher on nostalgia and melancholy is very similar to the “politicized melancholic sensibility” that Cate Mortimer-Sandilands has put forward as a foil to “nature nostalgia” (333). Both seem particularly applicable to *Nostalgia* where Guzmán consciously re-works “nostalgia” alongside a similar re-working of environmental representation: the past, the desert, the cosmos; all are actively re-imaged towards an environmentally and humanly better future.

To state the obvious, Guzmán’s film is framed by “nostalgia”, in its title, and by foregrounding memory at both the beginning and end of the film. Yet his deployment of nostalgia is partly rhetorical, partly ironic, opening up a far more complex and profound dialogue of past and present than that conventionally attributed to the term. This takes on a particular urgency given the profound haunting experienced by post-dictatorship Chile. Noting Derrida’s influence by psychoanalysis, Blanco and Peeren suggest that the negotiation of what they call “presence-absence” compels, as Derrida wrote, a “*politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” (7). In that light, the complex related strands of the film seek to “drastically confront” the past’s materiality in the present: the search for the origins of the universe by the astronomers working

at the telescopes of the Atacama Desert; the palaeontologists and archaeologists, uncovering the histories of pre-Columbian travellers and 19th century copper miners respectively; and the women searching for the remains of their “disappeared” loved ones. In this, Guzmán presents a version of how the material reality of the Atacama can make the “invisible” forces of global imperialism visible.

Ultimately, though, the confrontation is, as with Derrida, not only about the present but also about the future. Against the backdrop of this imperative to uncover the past, Guzmán’s “nostalgia” is actually for the upheaval, dynamism, *change* of the Popular Unity coalition which he and his generation lived through:

A revolutionary tide swept us to the centre of the world. I was lucky to be part of this noble venture which woke us all from our slumber. The time of hope is forever engraved in my soul.

He invokes, that is, the moment of the Allende coalition as something not to lament but to be inspired by. Similarly, the Atacama – evoked visually, that is, “displayed” in the mode now typical of the documentary medium – affects a vision of other pasts that point towards alternative, eco-cosmopolitan futures.

The impetus to *Nostalgia*’s vision is the affective potency by which Guzmán displays the desert, for example in the varied scale and textures we see in a series of shots about 12 minutes into the film and which fulfil his conviction that documentary should find the poetic amongst the real (Steinmetz 15). While the “visual excess” of these images may well stimulate, as Pat Brereton (2005) has argued, an ecological utopianism, at the same time, in purposeful edits where images of the matter of the cosmos or the desert literally “materialise” into depictions of the human body, Guzmán entwines conventional feelings of awe engendered by landscape into a perception of “human being” closer to Lawrence Buell’s much-cited dictum that in true environmental representation “the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” (7). *Nostalgia*

does this. By visually dissolving the nonhuman into the human – with apparent landscapes of soil and animal skins becoming revealed as human corpses, one with an arm still raised – Guzmán compounds the political critique of humans’ slow violence to the land. This is then underlined, at the narrative level, as he delves into both archaeology – taking us back to the Earth – and astronomy, which tells us that “the earth’s matter [is] the same throughout the cosmos and that the bones of the human body contain calcium “made shortly after the Big Bang” – placing human history in its full cosmological dimension.

Kaitlin M. Murphy has argued, in an analysis of *Memoria Obstinada*, that Guzmán materialises memory through old photographs, documentary footage, and physical re-enactments. This functions as a means of stimulating communal memories and, therefore, to forge a “collective consciousness” of the past that can “refute official historical narratives” (Murphy 161, 168, 154). For Murphy, Guzmán “loosens the ties that separate the past and present and works to give body and voice to a past that no longer physically exists” (165). In *Nostalgia*, however, this materialisation of memory is crucially extended via an environmental dimension. This works in two ways. Firstly, Guzmán focuses on remnants – buildings, and shards or fragments of bone – that do still physically exist, material evidence that literally reconstitutes the past. Secondly, he focuses on archaeology in the film. While the work of archaeologists does further “un-earth” the evidence of a slow violent tradition of social-environmental injustice, it also draws our attention to earlier human modes of living in the Atacama that indicate a more respectful, graceful, and sustainable human presence on the land. Indeed, comic drawings inscribed into the rocks offer a droll recognition of Joseph Meeker’s contention that a truly environmentalist philosophy articulates human existence in a “comic mode”. The fundamental “biological circumstances of [human] life” resign us to our basic “absurdity”, ignorance and powerlessness even while, nevertheless, we seek to affirm our “capacity for survival and to celebrate the continuity of life itself” in the face of “metaphysical despair” (Meeker 23-4). The narrative extended from these comic figures is, then, of the earlier settlement and trade of the pre-Columbian travellers that entailed less exploitation of the land

and more peaceable societies to which, it is implied, we could return, a narrative explored further in *The Pearl Button* with its focus on the indigenous peoples of Chile's south-western archipelago.

A parallel future perspective is invoked by Guzmán through astronomy. In his defence of “radical nostalgia”, Fisher holds up the 1970s as offering values counter to the “capitalist realism” that has dominated global politics, increasingly, since then. Guzmán, of course, likewise turns to that decade noting the coincidence that the astronomical properties within the Atacama were discovered concurrently with the political upheaval of Chilean society. Accordingly, just as he keeps returning to the 1970s, re-invoking the Allende coalition as an alternative to “capitalist realism”, so too he explores the lessons we can learn from cosmology, from our shared material being with the stars, and from the ethical imperatives that that shared being brings.

Guzmán records that prisoners of the Pinochet regime imprisoned, in slavery-like conditions, in the old Chacabuco mining works (“all the military had to do was add barbed wire”) accessed “a feeling of great freedom through their stargazing using improvised equipment”. Also studying the past – working for “the leading astronomy organisation in Chile” – Valentina Rodríguez, the daughter of disappeared parents, finds a means through her astronomy to process her history and mitigate some of the suffering it entails. She says, “I tell myself it's all part of a cycle which didn't begin and won't end with my parents or with my children. I tell myself, we are all part of a current, of an energy, of a recyclable matter. Like the stars which must die so that other stars can be born, other planets, a new life”.

While Valentina's narrative might have amounted to a diminution of human endeavour (in the face of the wider processes of cosmic history), the recognition that we are a part of the long cosmic sweep co-exists, in the film, with that of the archaeologist digging up alternate histories. Both tell us that the proper human role is to keep building – nurturing our own place as the faintest contribution to the flow of deep environmental and high cosmological histories – and to remain mindful that our every action enshrines vastly different, and endlessly possible, historical trajectories. Citing Guzmán, Ana Ros argues that for a generation she calls “Pinochet's children”

(which more or less exactly means Valentina), film, and in particular documentary making, has played a considerable role – for that generation and the generation of its parents (which includes Guzmán) – in the attempt to “unbury the past”, to reconnect with “the dreams and political struggles of the recent past”, and, indeed, to interrogate present framings of unity and reconciliation (120-1). Films such as these convert “mourning”, Ros writes, into “active forms of transmission” (121).

Demetrios Matheou, in a review of the recent Colombian film *Embrace of the Serpent* (2015), argues that Latin American cinema has the ability to tell stories that are “politically and culturally specific, yet with such flair that they will resonate anywhere” (75). Ros’ notion of transmission can be applied to the prisoners of Chacabuco who, inspired by their own stargazing, keep alive the memories, political critique, and political visions of the 70s; it can be applied to Valentina whose parenting is itself an act of moving forward and, simultaneously, a reaffirmation of humanity. And, of course, it can be applied to Guzmán whose “flair”, on this occasion, lies in his beautiful, affecting images of the Atacama Desert. These images inspire us towards a vision of the future that does not forget the past – the long, slow violence of a global modernity in which we are all implicated but which we might just all re-make so as to realise the promise of an eco-cosmopolitan imagination.

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