

# Ad Astra per Aspera

## An Interview with Patricio Guzmán

by Haden Guest and Eduardo Ledesma



**T**he pioneering Chilean documentarian Patricio Guzmán (b. 1941) is well known to readers of *Cineaste*, which has closely followed his remarkable career since the debut of his celebrated epic trilogy, *The Battle of Chile* (1975-79), the film for which he is still best known today. A searing and intense chronicle of the events leading up to the tragic 1973 overthrow of Salvador Allende, the world's first democratically elected socialist leader, *The Battle of Chile* inspired a bold revitalization of politically-engaged documentary filmmaking in Latin America. The *Battle of Chile's* powerful *cinéma-vérité*-style testimony to Allende's Chile has partially obscured the boldly modernist design of its three-chapter structure, which returns in three different ways to the tragically foreshortened last year of Allende's rule. The poetically structured repetition of *The Battle of Chile*, with its interweaving of at times overlapping and contradicting voices, offered an important signal of the major direction Guzmán would pursue over the next forty years by returning obsessively to the subject of Allende in subsequent films, each time exploring different perspectives and ideas about the past and the complexities of its relationship to the present—a theme that unites such distinct works as *Savador Allende* (2004), *Chile, Obstinate Memory* (1997), and his most recent film, *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010).

In truth, *Nostalgia for the Light* unites two major tendencies of Guzmán's cinema, bringing together the vitally urgent confrontation with history-in-the-making of *The Battle of Chile* and *The Pinochet Case* on the one hand, and, on the other, the meditative and poetically associative logic of *Chile, Obstinate Memory* and his lesser-known essay films *The Southern Cross*, *Madrid*, and *A Village Fading Away*. While *Nostalgia for the Light* trembles with the still shocking trauma and pain of the Pinochet dictatorship—embodied in the figures of the brave widows wandering the Atacama Desert—it also steps far back to find a certain philosophical distance, turning to the remote past of the stars and the desert sand to give a cosmic and poetic perspective on the stubbornly lingering, yet elusive, past of Allende's Chile. In February 2011 the Harvard Film Archive welcomed Patricio Guzmán on the occasion of the first comprehensive U.S. retrospective of his documentaries, providing a rare opportunity to study his courageous and innovative films and to learn more about his extraordinary career. On a blustery winter afternoon, Patricio spoke with HFA Director and curator of the retrospective, Haden Guest, and Harvard Ph.D. candidate Eduardo Ledesma about *Nostalgia for the Light* and about history, memory, and the stars.—Haden Guest

**Cineaste:** Your documentaries share certain literary and poetic qualities that find full expression in your latest and arguably most lyrical film, *Nostalgia for the Light*. Keeping in mind your first vocation as a writer, I wanted to ask you about your early writings and literary aspirations. Do you think your formative years as a writer influenced your subsequent career as a film director?

### Exploring the mysteries of the Chilean desert opens up another line of inquiry for the renowned documentary chronicler of his country's troubled political history.

**Patricio Guzmán:** Yes, I think there was definitely an influence. I began to write at a very early age, and once you learn to express yourself through writing it is easy to transform yourself into a playwright or a journalist, or a filmmaker. When I was seventeen I published a book with a friend, which included a science-fiction short story of mine. Back then I was quite passionate about science fiction and would devour the latest sci-fi magazines and novels as soon as they appeared in Chile. At that time there was an extraordinary Argentine magazine called *Mas Allá* (*Far Beyond*),

which reprinted the classics of modern science fiction, the work of Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, all of which I read with great excitement. My passion for science fiction stems from that period, and these magazines were an

important part of my adolescent world. Later I wrote a short novel titled *Juegos de Verdad* (*Real Games*), and then a short story of mine was published in an anthology of the University of Chile, titled *Cansancio en la Tierra* (*Fatigue on Earth*). After some time I realized that writing was not my ultimate calling and that what I created in the short stories and in the short novels were actually *images*. At that point I started making 8mm movies with three other friends and my literary interests began to wane. But, yes, there is a definite literary base to my cinema.

**Cineaste:** With *Nostalgia for the Light* you have returned, in a sense, to science fiction.

**Guzmán:** Absolutely.

**Cineaste:** Was that part of the original concept of the film?

**Guzmán:** No, it was a subconscious process. The voice-over in *Nostalgia* is very simple and pared down, spoken in the same direct language of my first short stories. And then there is also, of course, astronomy, which has always and to this day still fascinates me. In France there are five magazines about astronomy and I buy them all, and every time I travel I have some with me. There are a dozen upstairs in my hotel room right now. Astronomy entertains me endlessly and, for me, thinking about galaxies, black holes, missions to Mars, offers a way to escape reality and stress. In *Nostalgia*, all of my little vocations—writing, science fiction, astronomy—are merged.

**Cineaste:** I am curious to know more about your scriptwriting process and, more specifically, how you achieved such a highly poetic and intensely lyrical work as *Nostalgia*. Your script appears to be pared down to only the most essential elements and yet perhaps this apparent simplicity hides something more complex.

**Guzmán:** The truth is that I set out first of all to write a short story rather than a script. I always try to outline a story—at times a weak, fragile story—but a story all the same. The script itself gradually emerges during the filming process. But when the film is done and I compare the script with the final version, I find points in common. It is rather strange, like preparing the structure of a house, forgetting

**This is a partial preview of the article.**

**To read the entire article see “Ad Astra per Aspera: An Interview with Patricio Guzmán.” *Cineaste* 36.6 (2011): 20--5. (Guest and Ledesma).**

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