

## Interview with Patricio Guzmán interview

by Center for Social Media Director Pat Aufderheide

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*El Caso Pinochet*, Chilean documentary director Patricio Guzmán's latest film, is a modern classic among documentaries, and at 60 Guzmán has become a leading international figure—not only a filmmaker but a steadying moral voice on Latin American politics. It has been a long, arduous trajectory.

His career began with journalism in Chile, where he led a film team that chronicled the rise—and ultimately the tragic fall—of elected president Salvador Allende. Allende's death in the presidential palace was the beginning of a brutal military dictatorship led by the ruthless General (later Senator-for-life) Augusto Pinochet. Fleeing into exile, he later assembled the footage that had been smuggled out of the country with his relatives' help. The three-part *The Battle of Chile*, post-produced in Chile's national film organization ICAIC and released between 1975 and 1979, was the result. The trilogy had the power of Greek tragedy, and the hard-edged political analysis was seamless. It was widely awarded, and has become part of the international canon of social documentary.

Working in Cuba, Guzmán went on in 1982 to make an experimental fiction on the mythic themes of Latin American history, *La Rosa de los Vientos* (Compass Rose); the film baffled audiences, however. He returned to documentary in 1986 with *En Nombre de Dios* (In the Name of God), which celebrated the sturdiness of cultures of dignity at the grassroots, nourished by liberal elements of the Catholic church. The film won festival prizes and was shown on European television. In 1992, after the return of democracy in Chile, he released *La Cruz del Sur* (The Southern Cross), on liberation theology throughout Latin America; it, too, won awards and audiences. Resident in Paris but returning regularly to Chile, where he launched a small documentary film festival, he made *Chile, Memoria Ostinada* (Chile, Obstinate Memory, 1997). In this haunting film, in which a measured pace and reflective tone of the film's elders contrasts with the sudden and anguished awakening of the young, he records a journey home to show to student audiences—for the first time in Chile—the epic of Chile's suppressed history, *The Battle of Chile*.

And now, 22 years after the third episode of *The Battle of Chile* was released, 28 years after the death of Allende, he has made a film about the bringing to judgment of Augusto Pinochet himself. The film was chosen for the Critics' Week at Cannes, 2001, and was awarded the Grand Prize in the Marseille International Documentary Festival 2001. In North America, it premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival, one of the most prestigious in the world. It debuted in Europe in October 2001.

The film has a magisterial tone, in which outrage has been tempered and translated into two strands: one of enormous respect and love for the victims and witnesses, the other of implacable moral judgment for the dictator and his allies. In a conversation with his friend and fellow social documentarian Fred Wiseman, Guzmán noted some film titles that he thinks carry the same spirit: Richard Dindo's *L'affaire Gruninger*, Thierry Michel's *Mobutu, King of Zaire*, and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*. One might also think of the best work of Marcel Ophüls and of course, of Fred Wiseman himself. But the aesthetic and moral choices of Guzmán are distinctive, creating an epic of justice, memory and even forgiveness that bookends the epic of outrage that he made as a young

man.

The tone of this film is distinctive not only to the filmmaker but to this moment in the trajectory of Chilean politics, which is also the trajectory of Guzmán's career. This was the moment when decades of unending protest, unending vigilance, unendingly meticulous guarding of records and documents and memories bore fruit. Pinochet was brought to public and legal judgment. As a human rights lawyer exiled by the coup says at the outset of the film, "All our work was not in vain. Justice exists!" And as one of the victims says at the end, "Our children will be proud of us, and yours will be ashamed." The strand of enormous love for the witnesses and others who endured is developed in several ways. Near the opening and close of the film, we are introduced to the group of witnesses in Pinochet's Spanish trial, some of them relatives and some victims of the regime. The camera silently and soberly watches them file in, then searches out and gazes upon the faces and bodies of these people. They patiently wait for the recording camera, their aide memoire, as they stand in two neat lines; their presence alone, they know, is an indictment, one they are all too familiar with making.

Throughout the film, individuals from this group tell their stories in a quiet, casual, intimate style. Sorrow so permeates their telling that it need not be articulated, and they carry into their stories the wisdom of endurance. You hear hard-won knowledge: "People tell us it's better to forget, but you can only forgive someone who has asked you for forgiveness." You see not only faces in reflection, but precious objects that speak to absence—a son's suitcase, an identity photo, a wedding picture. You also hear about silence, in the long years in which a daughter never asked her mother about her experience under torture, because "I didn't want to know." And you hear silence, as the filmmaker returns the moment to the viewer, for introspection.

The strand of judgment is developed in complementary ways. Pinochet's chummy business acquaintance in England cheerily pronounces from his comfy couch, "He eliminated communism with minimal human suffering." Banned from filming while the House of Lords was in session, Guzmán repeatedly uses footage of a cleaning lady stumping around the hall afterwards, busily vacuuming and dusting; the imagery resonates with the efforts of Parliament to clean up the mess without dealing with it. As the legal case moves forward, a chessboard registers the legal back-and-forth. As events precipitate, we see rocks tumbling down a mountainside.

And every once in a while, a documentarian has lucky timing. Toward the end of the film, Guzmán shows us the reactions of Chileans in the streets as the first public statue of Allende is finally carried to its home before the seat of government. Some are surprised, some are amazed, many look afraid that their reactions will be noticed. Memory is returning to Chile, but the price for suppressing it is still being paid.

Guzmán arrived at the Toronto Film Festival on a sunny day in early September 2001, flush with the pleasure of meeting old friends and celebrating his latest achievement. We carved out time for the following interview, conducted in two stages between his many press obligations. *El Caso Pinochet* showed to an audience of Chileans, other Latin Americans, Canadians who had worked in solidarity with Chilean exiles, and international viewers for whom the Pinochet case was a victory in a drama that had threaded through their adult lives. The audience was mesmerized, and spontaneous heartfelt applause broke out at the end. When one hardy viewer bucked the emotional

trend, and argued that the film was biased for not pointing out the good things Pinochet had done, the audience rumbled its contempt. Guzmán himself was more patient: “You can certainly say that he did good things, but it was at the cost of destroying an entire country,” he said mildly.

The festival was ruptured with the attacks of September 11. In the days following, attendees looked in vain for international transportation. When I left Guzmán, he was standing in the press room with other Latin directors, having decided to abandon the search for a flight. He and his friends were looking for a spare video camera, so that they could begin a documentary about life after September 11. They found their ways home before they found a camera, but Guzmán had demonstrated once again a documentarian’s response to the challenge of horror and injustice, and reasserted his argument in *El Caso Pinochet*: Memory matters.

*Is the Toronto International Film Festival an important one for you as a documentarian?*

Yes. This is the fourth time I’ve been to the Toronto International Film Festival. In 1986, I came for the first time with *En Nombre de Dios*. In 1992 I came with *La Cruz del Sur*. In 1997 I showed *Chile, Memoria Ostinada*, and now with this. Toronto has always been an important window to the U.S., and to other festivals, as well as for distribution. I believe that this film will get U.S. distribution--my other films are carried by Jonathan Miller of First Run Icarus—so the main thing for me here in Toronto is contacts.

*Your subject matter is so topical and controversial that it must often take precedence over form in any discussion of your films.*

Yes, in fact, one of the things that most irritates me is that people never talk to me about language of my films--about the construction of character, about the narrative, about the narrative agents. It’s as if political facts just happened. I feel a tremendous responsibility to construct a discussion, to create an emotionally rich involvement, to bring people into the issue. I don’t want this to be seen as a “political” work. I want it to be seen as a work of art.

A documentary is a story that has or is occurring in real life. Documentary has a vocation for reality, a connection with reality. To maintain interest of the spectator, you have to use artifice, you have to bring imagination to the project. You lure in, you even entrap the spectator with your art.

This is a film that challenges fascism with aesthetics. It is a metaphor against evil. This aesthetic attack on tyranny is entirely appropriate to the challenge that tyranny poses, because tyranny is intrinsically anti-aesthetic

*What were the storytelling challenges you faced in El Caso Pinochet?*

The problem of the narrative in this case was threefold. First, the lawyers don’t use a normal language. They’re very strange people. They never talk. They argue; they defend; they respond. They never become intimate. They never give themselves over, or away. Second, the judges: they are not permitted to be filmed inside their chambers. Third, you can’t enter the courts when they’re in session. So I worked through secondary characters,

and I created devices—for instance, the recurring image of the cleaning woman vacuuming in the English House of Lords.

*What about the challenge of interviewing the witnesses? These are people whose stories have been told many times, but when we meet them in the film, they are extraordinarily immediate and moving.*

I had to help the victims to express themselves. I had absolute confidence in the women. I had seen many interviews with these exact people. I had watched those interviews, and I knew I could do it better. I knew I could get them to do a really intimate confession, to drop their public face and really speak to the camera.

For me this was the most interesting part of the filmmaking. The film comes alive when an interview becomes a living moment of experience, a scene that stands on its own. The intimacy leads toward a confessional mode, and the camera captures that intimacy as a piece of life itself. It is distinctive, intense, alive. This was the greatest aesthetic experience for me of the film, and it was the overarching strategy of the film as well. I wanted to put the extended interviews at the center, at the very heart of my film.

*But how do you deal with the problem of confronting viewers with horrifying stories? How do you overcome a viewer's rejection of watching the miserable and awful?*

That is the challenge. This film is all about suffering and pain. I thought when I began, how will people bear it? In part I think it's by giving them that living, intimate moment with the person. If the person who tells you terrible things thinks that you'll give them the time to really talk, and if you establish a true dialogue, and if your film team doesn't bother them, the people choose their words well. And it's less terrible to listen to.

*You had the advantage of having something like a happy ending, because Pinochet is accused and tried.*

Yes, although there are also qualifications and complexities. There are many stories that aren't here, of course. In England, there were so many little legal twists and turns, so many specialized legal maneuvers. But they didn't change the main point. I wanted a clean, naked line: the inexorable sentencing of Pinochet, who was once a great despot. I wanted the film to have a quiet, clear, calm tone.

For this reason, I also employed the use of silence. I wanted the spectator to listen to silence. The camera searches, at the beginning and the end of the film, the faces of the those who testified in absolute silence. It is an informationally rich moment; when people don't talk, that's when the most is said. I also chose an editing style that is very unobtrusive, never flashy, never showing off.

*There are moments of humor. The scene in which Margaret Thatcher visits Pinochet under house arrest has a grotesque humor to it. How did you get the footage?*

That's an interesting story. In general, we did not get cooperation from Pinochet's Chilean lawyers, and Chilean officials refused to be interviewed for the film. But in that instance, I got the footage by the simple technique of purchasing it from a commercial stock footage company. Thatcher visited Pinochet as a political strategy, and invited the

press. But no broadcasters thought it was newsworthy, so no one showed up. When she found out it wouldn't be filmed, she brought her own crew, filmed it, and then archived it with a commercial firm. So I never had to ask her permission at all.

*The soundtrack is very spare.*

I didn't want to use music. What I wanted to use was the voices of the people themselves singing. In prison, people would sing, for instance the songs of Victor Jara or songs of the Spanish Civil War. I did collect the songs, and wanted to put them all in. But that was something that proved not to be possible in the time frame and budget of the film. So I gave them to my daughter Camila, who is also a producer, and she's making a package of twelve hours of these songs and distributing them. The French cable channel Histoire will show them.

*Your life's work has been focused on the subject of the Chilean struggle for democracy and freedom. But the works are very different in tone and style from each other. How do you see your style evolving?*

The life of an artist gets richer over time. You get clearer, more concrete, more essential, more integrated. You aren't as worried about formal questions—Am I abandoning a style? Am I capitulating to one? You find your own language and trust it. I came into this style in Chile, *Memoria Ostinada*, but that was a short. Now, I think I've opened a door. This is a more tranquil, serene approach. It goes against all the clichés about the MTV generation's need for a fast pace and rhythm. I think that rather documentary should reflect the actual pace of life. The pace at which we see and, more importantly, understand is actually slow. TV rushes images and information at us at the pace of advertising, and it's a violation.

Documentary has to impose its way of seeing the world. This is the great value of documentaries, the great treasure of the form. This is what really attracts people to it. You saw the audience response. They sat, barely breathing, they couldn't move; they were riveted to the screen.

*Are you able to work now within Chile? Is the political atmosphere improving?*

I hope so, but I am not sure. There are many sectors of the society that are still living with their backs to reality. That is why the obstinate persistence of the families of victims is so impressive. They have never let up on the pressure, they have never stopped demanding accountability from their torturers, not in 20 years.

*Is The Battle of Chile available in Chile?*

Battle has never been shown in theaters, not yet. We're looking for the funds to make copies in Paris. But the videos of *The Battle of Chile* and *Chile, Obstinate Memory* are sold together as a package, in video and music stores. Blockbuster in Chile originally refused to carry Battle, because it was "too political." But after six months of great sales in other stores, they finally decided to offer it.

And the film has opened a door, but it's a small door to a big subject. There is much to be done. For instance, school textbooks barely even touch on the whole period. There are



perhaps 10 lines on the Union Popular in standard textbooks. It's immoral. The official Chilean government channel, Canal 7, made a series on contemporary history, the last 50 years. The section on Union Popular is a blip, and that is full of lies.

You still can't show *The Battle of Chile* on Chilean TV. There isn't any official censorship, but there is censorship within the heads of the media people. It was shown on satellite TV, on the Sky Channel, to 10,000 people—nothing, less than the total for a weekend of screenings at a theater.

*What is your next project?*

I'm working on a documentary about Allende. I'm getting a new understanding of him as I begin research. At the time I was with the journalistic crowd, I never had a personal encounter with him. So this is my first personal encounter with Allende, after the fact. I am working on a script. Yes, a script for a documentary. I always write an imaginary script for my documentaries, spelling out how I think it will be. Then of course things change. Documentaries are like jazz. You have an idea but you don't know where it's going. It works out as you planned for some things, and in others you don't know what will happen.

*How did you get the resources to make your documentaries?*

El Caso Pinochet took three years to make. It's hard. But it's possible; there is a window. It was funded with money from Soros Documentary Fund [now the Sundance Documentary Fund], and by presales to European TV channels. There was some French government post-production money in it—but not much. I think they came in at the end just to salve their consciences.

Making documentary anywhere is hard. But it is better in Europe. I think I would, in rank order, say the France, Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany and then England are better places to work as a documentarian than the U.S. There are perhaps 250 independent documentary producers working in Europe, many of them left over from the glory days before the 1990s. We don't get rich, but we can maintain ourselves modestly, partly because of royalties.

What most surprises me is that there is no connection at all between Europe and the U.S., although England follows the U.S. model. There is a great gap, a complete miscommunication. I ask myself, in an age of instant communication, how can there be such immense differences in production approaches? In the U.S., the producer tells the director how to make his film. In Europe, there's an equilibrium. The director has some say.

There, the documentarian is like a literary essayist or a journalist. It's an intelligent voice within media. It fights stupidity; it fights against factory media. That's an important voice for a society to have, but almost no one here has the opportunity to raise that voice.

*What did you ultimately want to say in El Caso Pinochet?*

Memory matters. The historical memory of a nation shapes its expectations. It may be terribly painful to speak of terrors and tragedies of the past. But the truth inspires hope,