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## Collecting Stardust: Matter, Memory, and Trauma in Patricio Guzman's Nostalgia for the Light

Nora Szegvari  
*University of South Florida, nora6@mail.usf.edu*

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Collecting Stardust:  
Matter, Memory, and Trauma in Patricio Guzmán's *Nostalgia for the Light*

by

Nora Szegvari

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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Major Professor: Scott Ferguson, Ph.D.  
Maria Cizmic, Ph.D.  
Rachel May, Ph.D.

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this never-ending process of a thesis to Mom who has always been there to listen to me. Thank you for your incessant and unconditional belief in whatever I have decided to do, and for listening and listening and accepting and approving and just loving.

And to the person who shares his life with me. Thank you, Intzi for your incredible patience during these trying times and for encouraging me when I was inclined to give it up. Thank you for joining me in this painful and pleasant journey—here and anywhere we are thrown. Thank you for teaching me and learning from me.

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## Abstract

This work situates Patricio Guzmán's *Nostalgia for the Light* in the broader field of essay documentary film and unveils it as a locus of discursive resistance and the generative crux of diverse conventionally isolated academic dialogues. In doing so, it addresses the challenging and controversial questions of historical meaning-making, remembrance and oblivion, melancholia and mourning. My thesis also endeavors to detect the dynamic and anxiety-inducing threshold between singularity and collectivity, and the human and the cosmic. I lay the historically unprecedented common ground for trauma theory and the essayistic comportment and argue that bearing the clash of time planes, paradoxicality, ambiguity, and aporias at its heart, the essayistic endeavor simulates the ontology of trauma itself. In my theorization, both operate via the originary metaphorical overleaping of matter between physical and metaphysical spheres, conscious and unconscious themes. These figurative transferences creatively transgress registers, genres, sharply-contoured discourses, and translate between the multiple surfaces of human existence and experience. I propose that the essayistic meandering of moving along residues and fissures opens up a more ethical approach to trauma. Such a disposition diverges from the positivist certitude of polarizing, moralizing, and sublimating narratives which inevitably lead to foreclosure. Filtering my arguments through the film's aestheticization of absence, I offer an ethical and responsible stance toward trauma and reveal its affective force as the substrate of our intricate relations to the other and our organic and non-organic environment.

## Introduction

### Wide Angles

Patricio Guzmán's 2010 essay documentary film, *Nostalgia for the Light* (*Nostalgia de la Luz*; hereafter *Nostalgia*), reframes our understanding of history, trauma, and justice. The documentary juxtaposes ostensibly polarized scientific tenets and conventionally dichotomous notions, such as matter and non-matter or the human and the cosmic. In doing so, it challenges the tradition of Chilean documentary cinema addressing the representation of historical witnessing and the melancholic cathexis to trauma in the post-Pinochet era. Film scholars, nonetheless, tend to overlook the significance and most of them the sheer existence of essay documentary films in Guzmán's oeuvre; they consequently fail to recognize *Nostalgia* as one. In this thesis, I argue that the essayistic endeavor generates a *mode* of understanding that can effectually mediate between, even disperse, discursively separated dichotomies. Furthermore, by creating its own self-reflexive and self-relative reality and locus of resistance, the essay transfers the object of inquiry to a creative dimension of potential, and ethical, meaning-making.

Forged at the intersection of the deeply personal and the pressingly social, *Nostalgia* embodies a highly self-reflexive and self-relative essay-meditation on the transmission of memories and historical oblivion. Guzmán's cosmic, geological, and personal layering of the film's major enigma, time, is framed by a sinuous and contemplative narrative strategy and bedazzled by meditative and startling shots of the windswept desert landscape and the immense and immersing outer space. The

filmmaker's presence through the slow-paced, rapt, pondering voice-over induces *Nostalgia's* gentle rhythm. The multiple interrelated themes it provocatively explores are deposited as sedimented layers in Chile's Atacama Desert: a site of unique atmospheric conditions which enable discoveries about the origin of the universe; a place with the driest climate on earth and Mars-like, sterile ground. It was also in this no-man's-land that the Pinochet government dumped the remains of countless political prisoners.

*Nostalgia* knits together the narratives of three groups of people all engaged in a quest in this preternatural site. Astronomers search for the origins of life and detect the energy of the Big Bang, while archaeologists track the routes of pre-Colombian humans and discover petroglyphs and mummies. A small group of women seeks the skeletal fragments of relatives whose bodies were disappeared and dumped by the military *Junta*. In terms of the direction and the legitimacy of their quests, women are apparently polarized to the elevated, hill-top observatories of the astronomers: as amateur forensic archaeologists, women compulsively dig the desert and fight their solitary and unrecognized battle for physical bodies and, finally, justice. The common axis these three quests revolve around is a recovery of the past. While they are initially linked by virtue of geography, the film ultimately suggests that they are part of the same process, history. Science, similarly to history, is not a collection of truths but a constant search, as the film proposes. So is justice. The superimposed temporal and spatial layers render the desert a real science-fiction time machine. Not that the terms "science," history as "fiction," and present and past "time" ever consolidate in the film; they remain as vaporized and opaque as the cosmos it explores. *Nostalgia's* most effective power lies in its hyper-dynamism, its all-transforming metaphorism, and its translucency. And in the uncanny sense that somehow everything is connected.



If search is the film's dominant structural motif, light is its overarching, all-permeating metaphor: it frames and shapes the cosmic and poetic explorations and leads us to the brain-teasing fact that "the present doesn't exist," as one of the astronomers explains. All light takes an interval of time to reach our eyes: all we perceive pertains to the past and we are left with the elusive and malleable memory of that past in every present perception. The seemingly separate realms of the distant past the deep-space astronomers seek and the heavy and oppressive weight of the immediate past of Pinochet's military regime have proven to originate from the same impulse: the gravitational pull of memory. Memory, not unlike light, is a mirage; it belongs to the past and constantly penetrates the present tense of our perception with its forceful illusions. As we see in a powerful close-up, human bones visually echo the surfaces, textures, and curvatures of celestial bodies: stars and human beings are materially, chemically and temporally, connected. The multiple physical and metaphysical, individual and universal themes ultimately find themselves dependent upon the transforming force of memory and matter—matter as memory; light and memory as matters of time.

What lies at the heart of my reading of *Nostalgia* is the notion I call the *sufficient image*. Drawing on Réda Bensmaïa's analysis of the "sufficient word" in Montaignian essays, I hypothesize an originary metaphor in *Nostalgia*. This metaphorical image serves as the nucleus of creation and the overarching thematic-conceptual-aesthetic figure of the movie—and my work as well. The *sufficient image* is a concise and paradoxical conception. It "enables the essay to function as a totality and gives it its unity," writes Bensmaïa. "A word that *complicates* stories, *envelops*

signification.”<sup>1</sup> It mashes the borderline between the metaphorical and the literal, collapses worlds, resonates with the conundrums raised instead of urging closure. The image of stardust in *Nostalgia*, I suggest, is the matter that conjoins the diverse seemingly and conventionally polarized realms of reality, such as human and non-human, spatial and temporal kernels of experience, the scientific and the spiritual, matter and non-matter. Stardust, the *sufficient image*, is indeed universal but not for a single moment universalizing. These sparkling motes substantiate the coextension and reciprocity between the microcosms where the archaeologist, the astronomers, and the women pursue their relentless quests and the macrocosm of history, and celestial and human environments. By calling the transgression of the human and the cosmic, matter and non-matter into being, a tie between aesthetic form and socio-political essence is created: *Nostalgia*'s immediate social imperatives are absorbed in the metaphorical transformation of the essay genre. Looking through the transformative lens the film provides, I want to revisit the ethical forms of claiming justice and calling for the acknowledgement of collective trauma.

My conceptualization of the metaphorical *sufficient image* finds support in Friedrich Nietzsche's radical understanding of the metaphor as expressed in his early essay, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" (2000).<sup>2</sup> A metaphor, as Nietzsche suggests, implies the complete and creative transgression of spheres, of human perception and sensual processes. The superimposition of these planes of perceptual, cognitive, human and non-human realities serves as the super-abundant aesthetic source for metaphoric transference in *Nostalgia*. The particles of stardust, riding the light beams and disseminating throughout space, overleap the realms of visual, aural,

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<sup>1</sup> Réda Bensmaïa. *The Barthes Effect: The Essay as Reflective Text*. (Trans. Pat Fedkiew. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1987.), 11. (Italics in the original.)

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense." Trans. Daniel Breazeale. in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*. ed. Clive Cazeaux. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

and tactile perception and sensation. And translation from one realm of experience to another is, as we shall see, unthinkable without figurative translation.

Along one horizon, my thesis mobilizes the scholarly approaches associated with historical, social justice, and trauma discourses. Even though the boundaries between these clusters of texts are not always acute, we can affirm that historical writings about the military dictatorship or its aftermath fare primarily preoccupied with the dilemma of historical witnessing and collective trauma, and are repeatedly tempted into the reconstruction of the past. The social scientific tenet in general predominantly focuses on restorative justice—problematically polarizing the victim and the victimizer, justice and injustice with non-dubitable transparency and oftentimes over-dramatization. I show how *Nostalgia* engages in oblique and metaphorical representations of the past and its memory that complicate the conventional social justice and historicizing narratives that have attached themselves to the Pinochet era.

The study of trauma as a discrete discourse emerged with the institutionalized acknowledgement of post-traumatic stress disorder: the American Psychiatric Association added PTSD to the third edition of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) in 1980. Trauma theory has undoubtedly encompassed extensive and undeniable inventions and interventions that have reframed our understanding of history. It is crucial to note that the fundamental operative dynamic behind trauma, the Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*,<sup>3</sup> connotes the temporal delay with which the repressed traumatic material recurs. The forceful flashbacks and nightmares return belatedly to the original traumatic event: the event, as Freud emphasized it, becomes traumatic only retrospectively. The original traumatic event and the symptomatic visual returns of PTSD have collapsed into one another and have both

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<sup>3</sup> The “afterwardness,” or, as usually translated, the “latency” or, “belatedness” of trauma.

been referred to as trauma per se by scholarly literature since Freud. The haunting memories denote the duplicity of past and present generating the non-linearity of traumatic memory. Thus, the traumatic event becomes elusive and cannot be fully integrated into the narrative of the self.

Theories about individual trauma, predominantly originating from Freud's conceptualization, have then been reinterpreted and rethought in terms of the private and the public: how personal trauma can and should be represented in the aesthetic and legal public spheres has been at stake. This cross-discursively examined question ultimately leads to detecting the boundaries between historical fact and fiction (the "imaginative" factor of testimonies) and to illuminating the limits of history and collective trauma. Even though it does not render history less problematic, the non-linearity and temporal duality of trauma may dilate and generate a more anachronistic historical understanding—especially in contrast to the teleological understanding of historicism which conceives the past as a series of events lined up in progressive time. What may spring forth is a more just view of historical time-space open to a dialectic of remembrance and forgetting in lieu of the reconstitution of the past with the utmost desire to fill up its lacunae. Trauma theory's novel conceptualization of the past has led to the constructive questioning of the possibility of historical witnessing and to the problematization of such a priori apparently axiomatic fundamentals as memory, melancholia, cathexis, internality and externality, or matter and non-matter.

Trauma defies systematic articulation and resists a mastery of facts and full theoretical analysis and understanding. I regard the paradoxicality, ambiguity, the temporal duplicity of trauma, and the denial of its own understanding the potentialities of trauma theory and practice. Scholarly writings congealed around trauma theory may also reflect, even mimic the shattering nature of trauma. Whence

emerges the niche for a self-critical discursive tone which is capable of bearing aporias and paradoxes. Trauma studies have also cracked up a potential rift for metaphorical expression to leak through.

Even though Theodor Adorno has been a crucial thinker for both trauma scholars and essay theorists, the connection between trauma and the essayistic has escaped attention and has thus been historically unprecedented. Along these lines, I lay the common ground between theories about trauma and the essayistic endeavor—building my conceptualization on the limitless theoretical and stylistic potentials of trauma theory as a generative foundation. The essay film in general and *Nostalgia* in particular find their essence in the above attributes of undecidability, thus may represent traumatic processes in a more ethical, and playful, way. Instead of the unambiguous, smooth, and homogenous time of progressive historicism, *Nostalgia* is rooted in heterogeneous time, shards of experience, temporal ruins, and a vacillation between multiple temporal registers.

I specifically examine a widely discussed dilemma of trauma studies: the (non-)representability of the traumatic material.<sup>4</sup> The past and the present are enigmatically linked by the workings of *Nachträglichkeit* as well as by the reflective processes of representing the traumatic event belonging to the past in the present. The turbulent circles of trauma studies generate a great amount of academic debate over the interrelated problematic of the representable and literal nature of trauma.

Testimonies, the discursive practice to re-present trauma, are inherently paradoxical:

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<sup>4</sup> The traumatic material as not-to-be-represented mostly appears in the scientific and positivist interpretations of trauma epitomized by neurobiological theories, like Bessel A. van der Kolk's. Such accounts also dichotomize the subject and the external trauma—which I shall debate. Some trauma theorists, including Cathy Caruth, partly build their concepts on these neurobiological foundations. See Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, Lars Weisaeth eds. *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1996); and Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996).

self-narrative linguistic representations are considered to be the venue for therapy, working through, and recovery; whereas language necessarily “fails in the face of trauma.”<sup>5</sup> Any theorization of the traumatic material as not-to-be-represented, I will show, inevitably leads to unethical praxes. One of such is the sublimation of the traumatic material: its (non-)representation as the untouchable and the unspeakable. Alternatively, the traumatic matter may undergo authoritative totalization which leads to didactic and populist practices suggesting that trauma can be owned and mastered by another person or group directly not involved in it. Since both ways constitute unethical loopholes, they ultimately compel pseudo-ethical foreclosures.

Through the abundant intersecting fissures and absences of Guzmán’s essay film, a new and inventive path may be opened toward the representability of trauma. The physically fragmented human bodies ditched in the Atacama and the aporetic testimonial narratives we hear are embedded in the non-totalizing speculations of the film’s aesthetic and conceptual apparatus. And more, rather than directly urge remembrance, it emphasizes individual and collective amnesia and the absence of mourning. These components render the film a generative nexus of two things: the essay documentary’s aesthetic form and the representable, non-literal, and mediated nature of the traumatic material.

Mediation is crucial to the inflections and refractions of light as well as to the transferences of another matter, trauma: the entrance of trauma is mediated through the creature’s posture, physical and psychic strata; it is inevitable for verbal, and otherwise, representations of the traumatic material; it is also necessary for individual trauma to filter into the public sphere. In this thesis, not only do I treat mediation as

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<sup>5</sup> Leigh Gilmore. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001.), 6.

the concept most crucial to trauma itself and trauma theory but I posit it as a foundation for all human and non-human experience and interaction—via the synesthetic mediations of *Nostalgia*; a cinematic, i.e. mediated, form itself. I (re-)introduce it as an ethics of interference and transference: this lies behind what I call *allegorical translatability*. This process succinctly expresses the inventive metaphorization I see at the root of the transmissions tackled in my thesis. The translation of diverse interrelated spheres into one another is palpable in *Nostalgia* through its leading metaphor, stardust, and the countless dynamic metaphors it mobilizes. The film also reframes our approach to melancholic cathexis and traumatic memory in a manner that epitomizes pervasive allegorization. Allegory, literally “speaking in assembly differently,” is not conceived as a predominantly linguistic operation here. I claim that allegorical translation is not a linguistic elusion<sup>6</sup> but rather an ontological transgression in the Nietzschean sense from one realm to another regarding the processes of perception, cognition, sensation, and ultimately human experience. The force of *allegorical translatability* becomes particularly explosive and inescapable with the performative verbalization of traumatic testimonies and with the melding of individual traumas into the assemblage, the collective sphere. And beyond, it potentially renders trauma re-presentable, accessible to the self and others—in a non-authoritative, non-possessive but ethical praxis.

Metaphorical operation is also palpable in my own essayistic exposition of the film. The multidimensional metaphors of the film provide a plethora of transitions from matter to non-matter, memory to history, individual to collective trauma. I argue that the essayistic mode in general and Guzmán’s *Nostalgia* in particular perform analogously to trauma: they originate from acknowledged fissures, epistemological

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<sup>6</sup> I am referring to the most colloquial sense of allegory as a decorative addendum to language and a “hiding place” to escape straightforward, including politically consequential, language use.

and ontological enigmas, self-reflexivity and self-relativity. Moreover, it is the translucency of the metaphorical that liberates form from under the authoritative preeminence of content and allows for lateral movements in lieu of seemingly literal paths toward history, memory, and trauma. Along the line of the figurative, I am supportive of a textual form, an aesthetic practice and affective comportment, acceptive and constitutive of fissures and ellipses. It is a stylistic fashion which filters matter through a form accordant with it: as quasi-shattering, incalculable, and opaque as stardust. In brief, metaphorical transference serves as the umbilical cord for the diverse notions this thesis tackles and the principal substratum for fragmentation to emerge. Paradoxically enough, it evokes the empirical and epistemological approximation, and at points ostensive collapse, of the same shards.

*Nostalgia for the Light* conceives all human understanding as rooted in the metaphorical. Not only do figurative metamorphoses lie at the core of all human perceptive, sensory-motor, and cognitive transferences, they are the necessary mediators of traumatic allegorical, verbal and non-verbal, translatability. The metaphor, such as the essay, is self-relative: it creates its own absoluteness and dimensionality in which it wants to exist. The exterior universe is echoed in *Nostalgia's* visual and non-visual metaphor-universe: as though stars were extensions of human perception; as if the realms of the human and the celestial were one and the same. It is more than a poetic imagery though. In fact, this is the universal particularity of the film's aesthetics.

### **Texts in Close-up**

My reading of *Nostalgia* intervenes in the scholarly discussions in three major ways. I disclose the gaps of academic literature concentrated around the film, the



works of Patricio Guzmán, and Chilean social documentary cinema. I also engage in a critical discussion with a body of diverse historicizing and social justice texts that address the dictatorship and its aftermath. Finally, and most significantly, I rely on the published scholarship underlying or complicating my conceptions on the metaphorized mode of translation the essayistic mode of meaning-making is rooted in. To this latter end, I look into the major achievements and debates of trauma theory and the theory of the essay.

Whole segments of filmic scholarly publications subsume considerable absences—either due to a complete lack of publications or the failings and oversights of the research available. By this, I am primarily invoking the following articulations: the discourse around *Nostalgia* and essay documentary films; Guzmán’s other documentaries and their supposed evolution; his oeuvre in the light of post-dictatorship Chilean documentaries and of exilic filmmaking; and, last but not at all least, the lacuna of the gendered disposition of individual and collective trauma in the literature of trauma theory.

It is significant, albeit understandable, that the cluster of scholarly publications on *Nostalgia* is exiguous (owing to the 2011 international release date) and predominantly constituted by non-academic film reviews. What the accessible, more critical enquiries share is a very austere and modest acknowledgment, more an acceptance than celebration, of the intricate spatiotemporal superimpositions of abstract and concrete realities in the film. The majority of these authors briefly applauds Guzmán for his metaphorical transferences and recognizes him as a director poetically forging illuminations of ostensibly dichotomous taxonomies.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless,

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<sup>7</sup> Most prominently, see the following articles: Alison Abbott. “Answers from the Atacama.” (*Nature* 470.7332 (2011): 333); Nicolas Rapold. “Heaven and Earth: Searching the Stars and Sand in Patricio Guzmán’s *Nostalgia for the Light*.” (*Film Comment* 27.2 (2011): 48-49); Tony Rayns. “Nostalgia for the Light.” (*Sight and Sound* 22.8 (2012):

the overarching significance and the creative and translative force of his synesthetic, multidimensional, and far-reaching metaphorization within *Nostalgia* and without remain under-developed.

Most scholarly and critical accounts, additionally, fail to conceive *Nostalgia* as an essay film and subsume it under the category of documentary practice. This latter deficiency may be attributed to the indeterminacy and obscurity prevalent in the narrow assemblage of discussions around the essay documentary as a genre. Withal, Guzmán's films are mostly conceded as rigorously belonging to two affiliations. One is the *cinéma-vérité* documentary style either taking as their subjects the social groups and movements of the Unidad Popular-years of Chilean history (Salvador Allende's socialist-communist coalition from 1970 to 1973) or accentuating the cataclysmic effects of the 1973 Pinochet coup d'état. Authors normally conceive these works as dwelling in restorative nostalgia.<sup>8</sup> Apparently, *The Battle of Chile* trilogy received criticism as an unafaceted, minimally dialectical, observational, history-in-the-making documentary striving for weighty objectivity.<sup>9</sup> I contest this well-established view by revealing that which scholars conceive as showing is in fact seeing—it renders the trilogy a wholly distinct and new reception. Perceived as a definite and linear progression from this representational mode (of restorative nostalgia), authors affirm

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64-66); Steven S. Volk. "Chile and the Traps of Memory." (*NACLA Report on the Americas* 44.3 (2011): 39-41).

<sup>8</sup> Svetlana Boym, in her *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001.), differentiates between two basic types of nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia aims to rebuild the lost home and characterizes national/istic myth-making via the promotion of a single plot of reading memorial signs; it is not self-reflective and self-critical but preoccupied with the single truth. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, dwells in longing and loss, and allows for cracks, lacunae, paradoxes, and multiple plots.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example: Stuart Klawans's "A Whole World Disappeared." *The Nation* 28 Sept. 1998: 34-35; Steve J. Stern's "Filming the Fractured Soul of Chile: Guzmán's Epic and Elegy of Revolution." (*NACLA Report on the Americas* 43.2 (2010): 40-44). Ana M. Lopez makes the same criticism (as I do) in terms of the North American and European mass media reception of *The Battle of Chile*. See her chapter "The Battle of Chile: Documentary, Political Process, and Representation." in Julianne Burton's (ed.) *The Social Documentary in Latin America*. (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1990).

the intimate-interview, reflectively nostalgic, increasingly contemplative-meditative tone of, most noticeably, *Chile, Obstinate Memory, The Pinochet Case, and Salvador Allende* as the other division of his works (less “significant” films do not even receive perceptible scholarly attention). I disapprove of the above contradistinction by arguing that metaphorical operation and figurative representation have been the crux of Guzmán’s empirical-ontological understanding independent of the segment of reality represented. Although I accept a certain notion of evolution with regard to his aesthetic impetus, that should be the course of a gradual extension of metaphorization.

The figurative metamorphosis already prevalent in perception and cognition crucial to mnemonic processes is the foundational operative dynamic of the essay as well as the sole practice of working through the traumatic material. It is *allegorical translatability* that allows for a “different speech,” that is, *any* speech or verbal/visual representation. It allows for a non-linear, non-teleological view of traumatic processes: I do not conceive mourning as a “destination” where melancholic cathexis dissolves. Rather, there is allegorical overleaping between the interwoven spheres of melancholia and mourning. With regard to the metaphorical nature of traumatic processes, I partly draw on Idelber Avelar’s incisive thoughts: he conceives a resistance to metaphorical operation the “locus where mourning becomes an affirmative practice.”<sup>10</sup> In this essay and in his book *The Untimely Present*,<sup>11</sup> Avelar explores metaphoric traumatic expressions in relation to post-dictatorial mourning in the Southern Cone, and this practice of narrative fiction, for him, manifests in the semiotic practice of allegory. Allegorization and the essayistic mode of experimentation and perception are entwined and interdependent. The recognition and

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<sup>10</sup> Idelber Avelar, “Restitution and Mourning in Latin American Postdictatorship” (*boundary 2* 26.3 (1999): 201-224.), 203.

<sup>11</sup> Idelber Avelar, *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999.

acknowledgment of the essay documentary genre is exigent for filling the gap in the film-scholarly research concentrated around *Nostalgia*, Guzmán's oeuvre, and post-dictatorship Chilean social documentary filmmaking.

Yet another shortcoming of the literature on Guzmán is the uneven approximation of his artistic production overemphasizing his exilic positionality.<sup>12</sup> The exilic condition of his forced cultural displacement (to France right after the coup) seen as a predestining factor in filmic representation presupposes certain criteria. Such existence ought to be palpable in either anxious belonging-differentiating dynamics, in hybrid self-representations, or in the restorative practice of a bitter-naive longing for an absent home. Since none of the above is apparent in Guzmán's repertoire, I question the priority of this lens which is constantly turned on his works. Instead of accentuating and working toward the argument of exilic position in his oeuvre, I offer a different ontological-creative condition as a predetermining factor in his thematic and aesthetic commitments, that of metaphorism.

Traumatic grief work as an inevitably gendered social construction appears to be overlooked altogether in the agora of either social justice or trauma theory studies. Whereas clinical psychologists, such as Judith Herman,<sup>13</sup> differentiate between male and female working through of the traumatic material, they do so only in terms of therapeutic differentiations. Herman's handbook, an overly scientific and didactic-pragmatic text, presents clear-cut categories of the clinical practice of trauma: her studies showcase dichotomizing practices, e.g., the radical polarization of victim and perpetrator or case studies ignoring the transformative potential of pre- and post-traumatic memories. Herman also embraces a "gender-sensitive" treatment of post-

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<sup>12</sup> See references in Julianne Burton's (ed.) *The Social Documentary in Latin America*. (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1990) and Zuzana M. Pick's *The New Latin American Cinema: A Continental Project*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Judith Lewis Herman. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

trauma therapies in which women and men are essentialized as victims of sexual abuse or combative trauma respectively—and exclusively.

Juliana Schiesari's distinction between the historical-cultural exceptionality of male melancholia and the consequent devaluation of female mourning<sup>14</sup> constitutes a novel insight. However, she falls short of complicating the argument toward a more constructive and dynamic disposition and maintains this biting dichotomy. *Nostalgia*, nonetheless, can lead us to an articulation to fill this void. There is an apparent chasm between male bodily fragmentation and relative non-existence and, per contra, the absolute deprivation of female mourning. In addition, women's fixation to the lack generated by the physical absence of male bodies and the denial of burial are manifested in their repetition compulsion: seeking fragments of male bodies they haunt the desert as ghosts. Thus, the apparent, and traditional, dichotomy of male spirituality versus female bodily existence, as conveyed by the male astronomers and the earthbound women, is upset and can lead to a number of complications. Lack, fragments, affection, and women's unfinished melancholia are the substrata of *Nostalgia's* comportment toward trauma, which, as I will show, disturb the gender split of the discourses of trauma theory and social justice. Along this argument, I hypothesize that justice can only be claimed from fissures and through fractures, from absence, rejecting a finalist narrative, and via "speaking differently."

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<sup>14</sup> Juliana Schiesari offers a gendered exegesis of the Freudian concepts of melancholia and mourning in *The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolics of Loss in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992). In her conception, melancholia has historically been the sign of male exceptionality, moral superiority, and the inspired genius, which, at the same time, devalues the traditionally female ritual function, mourning (in the West). Those who have been culturally identified with melancholia have the most privileged access to the display of loss, and women's cultural expressions of loss are not given the same representational value.

I look at clusters of texts that identify themselves with the historical or social justice discourse, but mostly and essentially I research the arsenal of the heterogeneous and dissonant inquiries of trauma studies. These circles of research very often overlap, with those of film studies as well, and one may find it hard to categorize specific sources under any of the above labels. Empirical-analytic historicizing explications normally apply institutional facticity and a positivist approach; thereafter, they offer a retrospectively created sense of the past—as we can see it in Mark R. Amstutz’s *The Healing of Nations*.<sup>15</sup> Amstutz gives an unambiguous account of the post-dictatorship processes of political forgiveness, accountability, and reconciliation, including Patricio Aylwin’s “truth and reparations” strategy of 1990. He implies that these political processes, either “successful” or not, have been teleologically progressing toward the betterment and, ultimately, the healing of Latin American nations. In a similar manner, such sources give account of the pre-, while- and post-coup Chilean events as an extrapolation of the past from a single viewpoint, as though almost confabulating a single plot of the past rather than recognizing the multiple possibilities of the tissue of events.

Social justice accounts seek and find resolution rather than embrace complication, multiple plots, and transgression. The social scientific tenet takes advantage of extreme polarization, strict categorization, over-dramatization, and employ authoritative reasoning for their argumentations. For instance, Kristin Sorensen’s article on Chilean documentary cinema<sup>16</sup> showcases victim- and audience-dramatization and presents the sharp-edged categories of truth, justice, and forensic mistakes. Likewise, Antonio Traverso’s “Dictatorship Memories” offers a rather

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<sup>15</sup> Mark R. Amstutz. *The Healing of Nations: The Promise and Limits of Political Forgiveness*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Kristin Sorensen. “Truth and Justice: Transience and Doubt in Chilean Documentary.” *Journal of Human Rights* 7.4 (2008): 341-352.

closure-seeking insight into the post-dictatorship Chilean documentary filmmaking as a practice that releases the society from the “cycles of transmissions of cultural trauma.”<sup>17</sup> I suggest that such positivist-progressivist, didactic, foreclosing mod̄i operandi, also blatantly explicit in their stylistic form, must inevitably and necessarily fall through.<sup>18</sup> Their ostensibly direct and literal manner ultimately construes them as misrepresentational, oppressive, and unjust.

Trauma studies have offered an unorthodox approach to the historical past, novel theorizations of memory, and the non-mastery of facts. It is necessary to note that the diversity of the approximations to trauma is incredibly rich, including trauma theory, neurobiology, literary criticism, clinical psychology, and historical, anthropological and social scientific angles. Thus, the discourse congealed around trauma theory and practice comprises a great number of diverse approaches and theorizations and is diffused with conundrums. I specifically examine two interconnected notions of trauma theory: mediation with regard to trauma and trauma’s (acclaimed) refusal to representation.

With a structural semblance to the Atacama’s geological and cosmic strata of human and non-human space-time, trauma is mediated along the person’s posture, somatic, psychic strata, and the fissures of mnemonic remnants. The belated

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<sup>17</sup> Antonio Traverso. “Dictatorship Memories: Working Through Trauma in Chilean Post-Dictatorship Documentary.” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 24.1 (2010): 179-191, 188.

<sup>18</sup> Other significant sources dealing with historical accountability, political forgiveness, and the restorative and retributive justice strategies applied in post-dictatorship Chile include: Arie Nadler, Thomas E. Malloy, Jeffrey D. Fisher’s *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Reconciliation*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Center for Civil and Human Rights. *Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation*. (Trans. Phillip E. Berryman. Notre Dame. 1993) commonly known as the Rettig Report; Elizabeth Jelin’s *State Repression and the Labors of Memory*. (Trans. Judy Rein, Marcial Godoy-Anativia. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Elizabeth Jelin and Eric Hershberg’s *Constructing Democracy: Human Rights, Citizenship, and Society in Latin America*. (Oxford: Westview Press. 1996); Peter Kornbluh’s *The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability*. (New York: New Press, 2004); and Elizabeth Lira’s “Violence, Fear and Impunity: Reflections on Subjective and Political Obstacles for Peace.” (*Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 7.2 (2001): 109-118). I do not mean to imply that this is a homogeneous group.

flashbacks are similarly mediated in their relentless visual recurrences as well as the trauma of the individual is sieved into the realm of culturally represented collective trauma. Both trauma theorists and clinical psychiatrists equate representation with language exclusively, which is, in itself, rather restrictive. Language is necessarily paradoxical in terms of trauma: in their narratives, linguistic representation breaks down in the face of trauma; contradictorily, talk therapy is the acclaimed ultimate cure.<sup>19</sup> Neurobiologists postulate the dilemma of testimony as an unbridgeable gap between traumatic memory and narratability.<sup>20</sup> Mobilizing *Nostalgia*, I challenge this theory as one which presumes the complete dissociation of mnemonic functions from verbal, and non-verbal, representation. Along this line, I build on Nietzsche's notion of the "second metaphor" from the mental image to sound, that is, verbalization.<sup>21</sup> The translation of mental visual images into verbal and otherwise representations is per se a transference and is always already mediated by metaphorical metamorphoses. The all-disseminating twinkling stardust of *Nostalgia*, this primary and originary matter of memory, embodies the translation and allegorization between spheres crucial to all human processes. In addition, allegorization, a different speech, is the sole vehicle for traumatic working through and for the transference of individual to collective trauma. Mediation is hence central to a constructive and dynamic theory and practice of trauma. And not only trauma. Film, technology, art, nostalgia, light, memory, history—all the investigative arrays of this thesis find themselves contingent upon a shared generative source: mediation.

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<sup>19</sup> See Leigh Gilmore's works for the articulation of this paradox. The most significant scholars dealing with the dilemma of verbal testimonies include Cathy Caruth, , Shoshana Felman, Judith Herman, Dori Laub, and Dominick LaCapra. They, in some form, acknowledge the paradoxical nature of verbal representation, however, most of them encourage self-narration by means of psychotherapy.

<sup>20</sup> See Kolk, McFarlane, Weisaeth's *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*.

<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche, 55. Nietzsche conceives the transference of the nerve stimulus into an image as the first metaphor of perception; the image-to-sound relation is his second metaphor.



### **Deep Focus: Beyond Dichotomies**

The ultimate metamorphosing force of *Nostalgia*, the essayistic epistemic mode, and this thesis is the metaphorical. It is the locus where the impetuses of my inquiry meet and, simultaneously, that of a potential discursive resistance.

Translucency and ambiguity are so profoundly at the heart of the allegorical that it is begotten around these nuclei.<sup>22</sup>

Nietzsche's penetrating and unsettling essay on the metaphor is the firmest pillar I formulate my theorization of metaphoric transference around. He turns the conventional view of metaphors on its head by asserting it is "metaphor formation with which every sensation begins in us"<sup>23</sup> emanating a whole new sight on tropes. By the synesthetic juxtapositions of sounds, visuals, and tactility permeating the fabric of the text, he creates the multidimensional space of perceptive, cognitive, and sensual metamorphoses from the nerve stimulus to the concept. He does so, moreover, in a manner that the tissue of the text itself generates its conceptual apparatus; shortly, form and content are not only inseparable in Nietzsche but the latter is dissolved into its corpuscles by the former. With this, Nietzsche lays the groundwork for an extra-moral conceptualization of truth and lie, in which lie is a duty in accordance with fixed conventions, whereas truthfulness means to employ the usual, illusory metaphors. The desire to create an extra-moral allegorization, that is, place it outside the conventional judgmental ethics of the petrified poles of good and evil (as seen in social scientific sources), is palpable in Nietzsche's moral dynamics as well as it is

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<sup>22</sup> I do not use "allegory" and "metaphor" in the sense of figures of speech for the ornate expression of analogous relations. In this regard, they definitely do not appear here as linguistic vehicles for comparison or resemblance; metaphor is not a complex or elliptical simile; allegory is not an extended metaphor. I use the two interchangeably with reference to perceptual, cognitive, conceptual transferences. However, they are differentiated at points when I discuss the verbal allegorical transference of testimony—from mental image to representation. This is what I mean by allegorical translatability.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

intentional in my thesis. Let us turn to the essay as form with this fresh look on metaphors.

Allegorization is the substrate of the essayistic experimentation. The essay must turn away from the scorched surface of the substantial object of inquiry and carry the signifiers over, transfer them to a creative dimension of potential meaning-making through originaive mediatory metaphors. In this quest, I draw on a number of sources for my approximation of the essayistic. Aside from Bensmaïa's indispensable views on the essay and its "sufficient word," I primarily rely on Theodor Adorno's "The Essay as Form," a paragon-essay on the essay, and Georg Lukács's insightful notions as expressed in his *Soul and Form*. The essay, in Adorno's account, "thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity by moving through the fissures."<sup>24</sup> The essay is a form in which concepts are already concretized through language and, reciprocally, the essay as language itself furthers meanings toward the concepts.<sup>25</sup> This ever dynamic, contradictory composite defies definition and, analogously to metaphors, eludes categorization. It evolves from a finite number of heterogeneous elements—to grow into, without a final arrival, an open text with infinite potentials. These fissures, heterogeneity, and resistance, I insist, help disperse ineffectual, and unethical, discursive praxes.

Cardinal to distilling the essence of the essayistic is the palpable tension between content and form. In this inquiry, I am turning to Lukács's theorization of the essay.<sup>26</sup> Content visually manifests as data and its underlying determinants are value-laden dichotomies, Lukács warns; whereas it is form through which any claim to knowledge can be filtered through and reach out to us. This malleable, re-formable

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<sup>24</sup> T. W. Adorno, Bob Hullot-Kentor, Frederic Will. "The Essay as Form." (*New German Critique* 32 (1984): 151-171.), 164.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>26</sup> Georg Lukács. "On the Nature and Form of the Essay." in *Soul and Form*. (Trans. Anna Bostock. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1974), 1-18.

fabric, text, reality therefore allows for multiple points-of-view and the dominance of questions without the necessity to answering them. It is the site, according to Lukács, of the claim requiring form back insisting on it so much that it is construed on and born from this claim itself. The essay is not held accountable to reality as far as its degree of truthfulness is concerned—as it is reflected in Nietzsche’s conceptualization of truth as ossified, illusory metaphors we aim to move beyond in our ethics. Nor is the essay subject to an otherwise non-existent ultimate external criterion of existence. The blurry distinction between fiction and non-fiction is, henceforth, fundamentally shaken and ultimately crushed. Briefly put, the essay, both historically and ontologically, is a potential locus of resistance to discursive hegemony, to paradigmatic exigency, to heavy literality, to grave dichotomization.

The cinematic category of the essay film, however, is still under-theorized; its definition has proven to be problematic; its transgressive nature renders it too erratic to clearly establish the boundaries of the genre—or, as some would claim, non-genre. Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil* (1983) is considered to mark the beginning of the emergence of this “post-structuralist cinematographic practice.”<sup>27</sup> Drawing on Laura Rascaroli’s insightful article on the essay film, this hybrid form between fiction and nonfiction cinema relies on a three-pole frame of reference: the personal, the factual, and the abstract-universal.<sup>28</sup> The objective is not contradictory to the subjective in the essay film; rather the historical real is “filtered through the flux of subjectivity.”<sup>29</sup> It is a politically charged mode of convergence, innovation, and experimentation which eludes mastery, closure, control, linearity, and a universal stance. The essayistic documentary operates through a “horizontal montage,” in which an image does not

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<sup>27</sup> Ursula Biemann, ed. “Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age.” (Springer Vienna Architecture, 2003.), 8.

<sup>28</sup> Laura Rascaroli. “The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments.” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 49.2 (2008): 24-47, 26.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

refer to the one preceding or following it; rather it refers laterally to what is said.<sup>30</sup> I see this lateral, non-linear montage as one that strongly resembles recollection, thus corroborating the structural analogies between the essayistic operation and the workings of memory.<sup>31</sup>

Undoubtedly an essay documentary film, *Nostalgia* hinges upon the hybrid, the transgressive, and the playful, even ironic. It is also deeply seated in the political and generated from the social. In its multidimensionality, *Nostalgia* operates on an aggregate of flexible axes. Its temporally non-linear, montage-like aesthetic organization of literal (strolling the desert with the camera) and metaphorical “moving through the fissures” affect a lateral dimension. I figure its metaphorical operation as vertical motions between diverse spheres of experience represented in the geological and cosmic strata of reality. The thematic choices of archaeology and astronomy, social justice, and a cosmic ashes-to-ashes belonging perform as generative cruces of these pivots.

How similar, again, this dimensional structure sounds to the operation of trauma with its non-linear temporality, fragmentation, and metaphorical mediation. I expand the intersection of trauma and the essayistic operation with yet another parallel. I see definite operative analogies between the traumatic *Nachträglichkeit* and metaphorical transference. In contrast with the scholarly prescription, I do not understand this belatedness of trauma as a solely temporal delay but a more complex spatiotemporal-dimensional difference and displacement. Similarly to light, traumatic memory connotes the duplicity of past and present—represented by stardust, this matter of time and memory, in *Nostalgia*. Regarding the transference the belatedness

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>31</sup> Ursula Biemann makes the same point about the parallel between the non-linear montage and the structures of memory in the essay I have referenced.

of trauma designates and the difference it generates, this notion, on the one hand, connects us back to what I referred to as *allegorical translatability*. On the other, such a view on the traumatic deferral may partially challenge the scientific predilection for spatializing time. As opposed to the restorative desire to rigidly anchor time, it may open new doors for a more dynamic and self-reflective temporalization acknowledging fragments and shards of memories—even delving in them.

The essayistic aesthetic of *Nostalgia* also frames and reframes the spatiotemporal-trans-dimensional *Nachträglichkeit* with a plethora of transgressions. The film's insistence on absence, that of physical bodies, mourning, recollection, the cultural representation of collective trauma, is symptomatic of the inevitably aporetic workings of memory itself as well as the ambiguous gap in the consciousness trauma generates. Light, memory, trauma, nostalgia: the fundamental ontological-aesthetic sources of the film are all contingent upon the duplicity of past and present, the here and there, the internal and external space. So crucially, the aesthetic of the film—αίσθηση as sensation, perception, feeling—returns us to the Nietzschean conceptualization of metaphorical transference as the basis for all perception. Aside from denoting that the aesthetic is deeply rooted in the metaphorical through human perception and sensation, it corroborates the primacy of the self-relative and self-sufficient form as the originary site of meaning to emerge. As a result, *Nostalgia's* whole universe springs from an affective potential already operative in its aesthetic form, and reciprocally.

### **Summary of Chapters**

The organization of my thesis intends to be in accord with the stylistic-aesthetic essences of its primary object, Guzmán's *Nostalgia for the Light*. It is, in this

sense, woven with a lateral logic moving between particularities and theoretical surfaces. This textual fabric permits the proximation of seemingly distant realms which are non-transgressible in the traditionally isolated circles of our scientific discursive practices—such as the essay film and human rights or spirituality and astronomy, among a myriad.

The translucent rain of dust and stardust in one of the opening scenes foreshadows *Nostalgia*'s opaque and hyper-dense texture. Via the amalgamation of the earthly ash and cosmic matter riding the light beams and disseminating throughout the dark space, Guzmán's visual poetry underscores the major enigma of the film. Startlingly, both stars and human bones contain the very same calcium, which was produced soon after the Big Bang: celestial and human bodies are immutably interconnected. The creativity of the film lies precisely in its form, which opens up to rethinking the social, political, historical, and cosmic matter it aggregates. The chapters of my work reflect similar dynamics activating the aesthetic matter to unfold, reach out and touch upon the corpora of theories.

*Nostalgia*'s stardust, these promiscuous motes digressing time, enable the physical and conceptual juxtaposition of the diverse realms the film addresses: human and cosmic, matter and non-matter, spatial and temporal. They are bones to the universe, particles of the past, matter and time simultaneously. Chapter One of my work, "The Vicissitudes of Stardust," begins by dwelling in the enigma of the Atacama Desert, this spatiotemporal repository of memories, a geological sedimentation of human experience. The physical layers of the dust of Chile's heavy and oppressive recent past and the strata of stardust into our remote past open up a gateway to time. Analogously, the essayistic through its formal modality and stylistic comportment creates its zigzag paths transgressing our conventional dimensional,

spatial, and temporal constraints. In other words, the endeavoring and journeying, that is, the essaying of space gives way to the essaying of time.

The powerful juxtaposing montage which intercuts close shots on shards of porous matter reveals how human bones visually echo the surfaces and textures of celestial bodies. *Nostalgia*'s aesthetics links matter and time; the historical past and its memory in the present. Its interconnected stance on human and cosmic history, as well as its diffuse structural and conceptual fragmentation, encourages the mobilization of Walter Benjamin's anti-historicist criticism. Benjamin's concepts on the heterogeneous, posthumously reconstructed past and the allegorical as conceived in the ruin and the fragment<sup>32</sup> frame my lines of thought on fissures, absences, and unfinished melancholia. The objective and the subjective reciprocally open up one another in the essayistic in order to bring a dynamic flux into play: the universality of the particular and the particularity of the universal. In terms of the transgressive nature of this cosmic-human, universal-personal interrelation, the chapter further clarifies the significance of metaphorization rediscovering its roots in Nietzsche's metaphor-universe. Along the same line, my discussion of memory and matter, as represented by *Nostalgia*'s figures of amnesia and memory, congeals around Henri Bergson's theorization of memory as matter<sup>33</sup> to round up the arguments of the second chapter.

The second chapter of my work, "Amateur Science," is devoted to the extension of my concepts on metaphorical transferences and the aestheticization of lack as a creative force in *Nostalgia* and in terms of traumatic processes as well.

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<sup>32</sup> For the former concept, see Benjamin's essay "On the Concept of History" (1950. Trans. Dennis Redmond. in *Gesammelten Schriften I:2*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag. 1974); the latter theory can be found in his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1963. Trans. John Osborne. London: Verso, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> Henri Bergson. *Matter and Memory*. 1896. Trans. Nancy Margaret Paul, W. Scott Palmer. New York: Zone Books, 1988.

Originating from non-linear time, the overleaping of memory and oblivion, conscious and unconscious themes, and physical and metaphysical spheres, both the essay and trauma operate through metaphorical metamorphoses. I will show that the theorization of the traumatic material as physical matter transferred by metaphorical overleaping can counteract its closure, mastering by others, and its sublimation as the unspeakable and the untouchable. Metaphorical transferences and, especially in verbal traumatic testimonies, *allegorical translatability* render trauma representable for the self and others. My figuration of the *Nachträglichkeit* as a pervasive spatial, temporal, and dimensional deferral and displacement of the traumatic matter allows for a more creative approach to trauma which moves beyond polarizing and moralizing narratives. The essayistic stance, originating from paradoxicality and built on gaps and residues, opens new paths toward a more ethical approach to trauma.

*Nostalgia* brings forth a reconfiguration of lack on a multiplicity of aesthetic and conceptual surfaces. Women's search for bodily fragments, the absence of burial, their endless melancholia, and, for instance, the aporetic meandering of the film's own narrative are indicative of its re-aestheticization of absence. The apparent gender binary is utterly complicated by women's amateur science, in which the source of their scientific engagement is affectivity. I will also propose that metaphorical mediation of physical matter is crucial to traumatic processes as well as in the multiple media the film uses. While blending photography and the digital video, *Nostalgia* raises questions about material contingency. I look into the problematic of indexicality in case of both media and suggest that they find the only non-physicality in veiling and absence.

My conclusion primarily draws together the threads of the previous chapters. I offer my stance on the aesthetic and social stakes of the thesis by restating previous



affirmations and critiques, and I point toward possible tracks for further research. The arguments developed in my work may prove valuable for a distinct and constructive approach to Guzmán's oeuvre and Chilean social documentary cinema, as well as to the sensitive nexus of metaphorization, the essayistic comportment, and trauma.

**Chapter One:**  
**The Vicissitudes of Stardust**

“I imagine that man will soon walk on Mars. This ground beneath my feet bears the strongest resemblance to that far away world.” These are Guzmán’s words accompanying his stroll on the extraordinarily dry surface of Chile’s Atacama Desert in one of the opening scenes of his 2010 essay documentary film, *Nostalgia for the Light* (hereafter *Nostalgia*). Via the camera aimed at the sterile, parched, desolate ground and his contemplative voiceover, Guzmán establishes the slow-paced, musing ambiance of the scene. Not only are the medium close-ups on this echoing vastness of earth framed by his pondering voice, the spectator can also hear the harsh, cracking sound of his feet digging into the porous ground. The shot, through the amalgamation of these visual and aural cues, stages the cracks themselves as the sole focus of attention—the abundant fissures fracturing the land crack up the continuum of smooth-surfaced space to new configurations.

“There is nothing. No insects, no animals, no birds. And yet, it is full of history,” we learn while the camera pans upward into a long shot of the desert and the crystal sky to transfigure its micro perspective into a more and more macro one. It moves along the horizon to playfully switch back into shots of the salty, fissured surface. Alternating long shots of rocks of diverse texture and extreme close-ups on the rough surfaces of them follow. “It’s a condemned land, permeated with salt, where human remains are mummified and objects are frozen in time.” Indeed, the superimposed geological layers of the ground render the Atacama a real science-

fiction time machine: the attentive seeker can travel to the historical past of pre-Colombian tribes and find its physical remnants. These layers freeze and spatialize time: corporeal remainders of archaeological pasts dwell embedded in the dust. Moreover, it is this no-man's-land where Augusto Pinochet's military government "disappeared" and dumped the corpses of countless political prisoners. The disappeared were the victims of still clandestine kidnappings, torture, and execution taking place in the first months, most intensely in the first days, after the coup of September 11 in 1973. This super-richness and thickness of the geological layers of the land connect the spatial and the temporal: what appears as solely tangible and physical, as matter, always already belongs to the temporal plane of a past—be it the more remote past of pre-Colombians or the weighty, oppressive recent past of Chile with its political imperative. In other words, the layering of space is per se the layering of time.

Matter, that is, physical substance to be measured, enumerated and weighted, conventionally pertains to the spatial, rather than the temporal, plane of our perception. According to Henri Bergson's conceptualization in *Matter and Memory* (1896), however, perception is already full of memories: perception and recollection always interpenetrate each other.<sup>34</sup> Bergson makes a grand distinction between an object, i.e. the objective reality of matter, and what is perceived in it; in other words, the pictorial dimension of the object exists only by virtue of our perception. Perception, traditionally conceived as the "master of space," is saturated with "memory-images" and embodies itself in memory, he asserts. The whole problematic of matter, in this regard, ought to be extracted from its absolute embeddedness in space, the false abstraction inherent in human perception; instead, it should be

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<sup>34</sup> Bergson, 67.

understood in terms of time. The perception of matter so infused with memories transvalues matter itself: “physical” matter dynamically shifts dimensions and emerges as kaleidoscopically variable, unstable, grounded in time and imbued with cracks and fissures. Through memory, the perception of matter and matter itself share a common ground in time.

Following the Bergsonian hypothesis, I propose that the spatiotemporal sedimentation of land *Nostalgia* presents is rooted in this conceptualization of memory-laden space and time. Space gives time materiality: the spatialization of time crystallized in the layers of the Atacama’s history-weighted earth is simultaneously the temporalization of space via memory. The reinstatement of memory in the realm of materiality provokes a notion of matter always already subject to the workings of memory. Materiality, thus, must necessarily produce oblivion: matter must be conceived on the foundations of fragmentation and absence instead of the illusory ground of space. *Nostalgia*’s figuration of time-saturated, fissured matter impels the film’s essayistic approach to memory, including historical memory. It does so, moreover, in a manner that favors layering, multiplicity, and opacity rather than urging closure: the oblivion (i.e. fragments, cracks, absence) already inherent in materiality, and therefore space, does not allow matter to become closure. The Atacama’s cracks shatter the illusion of the unwrinkled continuity, of soothingly smooth space and time in order to advance the bountiful detours of non-transparent, playful essaying.

The scene starring the cracks of the Atacama does not only establish the interrelatedness of the spatial and the temporal, it also juxtaposes the particular and the universal. To suggest the analogy between micro and macro structures and open up the infinite paths for the essayistic to wind, *Nostalgia*’s texture is soaked with such

moments of associative metaphorization—via images and sounds. Its aesthetics brings together the minute particles of the historical ground as we see them in close-ups and the faraway land of Mars with which it is paralleled by the voiceover. At another instance, the alternation of the long shots on rocks and the extreme close ups in which we can scrutinize the color, surface, and texture of them also shows the strong correlation between the small and the large. Such correspondences serve a twofold purpose: they show us the stunning proximity of conventionally remote worlds postulating a harmonious analogy between micro- and the macro-textures, the minuscule and the universal. They also open up the film's own visual perspective toward more large-scale landscapes and times: the subsequent long-shot images of mountains, which close this scene, finally lead us to the assumption that “the air, transparent, thin, allows us to read this vast open book of memory page after page.” Along the operations of the universal and the particular and the land's spatiotemporal layering, the sedimented downward layers of the Atacama's dust echo the skyward strata of space dust suggesting that the layers of space open up a gateway to human and cosmic past.

Deciphering the signs of the past page by page, layer by layer is exactly what *Nostalgia's* own search is centered around. The film knits together the narratives of three groups of people all engaged in a quest in this preternatural site. The Atacama has the driest climate on earth as well as unique atmospheric conditions with its transparent, crystal sky which enable discoveries about the origins of humans, the earth, our galaxy, the whole universe. Astronomers accumulate celestial data, search for the origins of life, and detect the energy of the Big Bang. Their skyward inquiry parallels the archaeologists' downward excavation into a different past as they track the routes of pre-Colombian humans and discover petroglyphs and mummies. Finally,

a small group of women seeks the skeletal fragments of relatives whose bodies were disappeared and dumped by the military. It is also this latter group who discovered that Pinochet's *junta* later dug up the earthed bodies and fragmented them so that it would be impossible to identify to whom the shards of bones belonged. Women thus keep memories alive, the memories of a suppressed past, by their repetitive, compulsive digging of the soil, which they have been cathecting for 39 years now. These ostensibly disparate groups are engaged in their own committed and affective search. The common axis these three quests revolve around is a recovery of the past. While they are initially linked by virtue of geography, the film ultimately proposes that they are part of the same process: history. As suggested, history is not a collection of truths but a constant search prone to recovery and contingent on oblivion. *Nostalgia's* spatiotemporal exploration gives way to the coexistence and interconnectedness of the material and the immaterial, the particular and the universal—in order to reconceptualize memory and history.

As archaeologist Lautaro Núñez shares with us, the astronomers study one past and they, archaeologists, study another. The astronomers “are in the present recording a past which they have to reconstruct. They have only minute clues. They are archaeologists like us.” The reconstructed and therefore necessarily retroactive nature of our stories makes the substratum of the film's approach to human and cosmic past. Instead of the unproblematic, smooth, and homogenous time of progressive historicism, which surfaces in conventional historicizing accounts on the dictatorship, *Nostalgia* is rooted in rough surfaces, heterogeneous time, temporal residues, and the ambiguity of temporal registers. Its essayistic meandering draws together the seemingly disparate dimensions of space and time, cosmic and minute, as well as it is the very form that allows for rethinking our distant and recent histories.

Guzmán's essaying cracks up the polished surface of unambiguous historicizing to advance the film's sociopolitical claims in its winding ethical, that is, non-foreclosing, paths.

This multi-scaled, interconnected stance on history, which emphasizes the superimposition of temporal plains and the reconstruction of the past, dovetails with Walter Benjamin's anti-historicist criticism as expressed in his essay "On the Concept of History" (1950). Benjamin's concepts on the heterogeneous, posthumously reconstructed past stand in stark opposition with the positivist conceptualization of history, i.e., historicism. The latter considers history a construction whose place is formed in "homogenous and empty time" which should retrospectively be filled with facts. Such a mechanism eliminates all forms of dialectic thinking; instead, it believes in an eternal picture of the past and universal history.<sup>35</sup> In his collection of unfinished reflections, *The Arcades Project* (1982), Benjamin contemplates the essence of the dialogism between past and present: it is the image, "the dialectics at a standstill," in which past and present come together in a flash to form a constellation. The relation of the past to the present emerges in this image; it is not an image of progression but that of dialecticism.<sup>36</sup> Along this track, the time-saturated matter buried in the Atacama crystallizes as such a genuine, Benjaminian, image. This massive and diverse body of substances does not illuminate the past to show us the arch of linear progression to the now; rather, it is a configuration, a constellation of memory.

In this respect, *Nostalgia* complicates the conventional historicizing narratives that have attached themselves to the Pinochet era and its aftermath. Historicizing explications normally apply institutional facticity and a positivist approach—as we

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<sup>35</sup> See these notions on history in Benjamin's "On the Concept of History."

<sup>36</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. (1982. Trans. Howard Eiland, Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.), 462.

can see it in, for instance, Mark R. Amstutz's *The Healing of Nations* (2005). Amstutz gives an account of the post-dictatorship Chilean social, political, and judicial processes including Patricio Aylwin's "truth and reparations" strategy of 1990. The latter involved the recollection of the existing information about the violations and atrocities of the military regime, the retributive processes of holding offenders accountable, and a restorative practice bringing about the recognition of the injustice suffered. Aylwin's truth telling, a transitional justice strategy, helped restore democracy, consolidate the rule of law and foster social and political reconciliation, as Amstutz puts it. Aylwin held that political healing and national reconciliation could occur only if the nature and scope of the human rights abuses were first identified and disclosed; he was therefore committed to the public disclosure of truth. To this end, a truth commission was established, which issued the 1991 Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation.<sup>37</sup> The document, the sole official report on truth and reconciliation until 2006, provides hard evidence in support of widely held suspicions about the extent and brutality of human rights violations during the dictatorship.<sup>38</sup> Although Amstutz concludes that "Chilean society has experienced little political or individual forgiveness or national reconciliation"<sup>39</sup> primarily owing to the discrepancies of Aylwin's truth telling strategy,<sup>40</sup> he implies

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<sup>37</sup> The roughly 900-page document is commonly known as the Rettig Report named after the head of the eight-member Chilean truth commission, the lawyer Raúl Rettig. The document is the official report on Chilean truth and reconciliation providing hard evidence in support of widely held suspicions about the extent and brutality of human rights violations during the dictatorship. The report constitutes the only source of accepted and official data (up until 2006, the Second National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation): out of the 2,920 cases (2,279 of whom are identified as victims) 1,068 people were killed and 957 disappeared (pp. 889, 900). It refers only to the deaths and the disappearances, there is no mention of other human rights violations—in a document so central to and indispensable for reparation and truth telling.

<sup>38</sup> Amstutz, 140-151.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>40</sup> The main shortcomings of Aylwin's truth telling strategy include: (i) although the families of the victims received legal and financial assistance, his strategy expressed in the Rettig Report shows ignorance toward human rights violations *not* resulting in death (e.g., torture, terror); (ii) it shows no empathy and collective vulnerability—one of the reasons for the lack of forgiveness and reconciliation;



that these political processes, whether “successful” or not, have been teleologically progressing toward the betterment and, ultimately, the healing of Chilean society. In a similar manner, other historicizing sources<sup>41</sup> give account of the pre-, contemporary and post-coup Chilean events as the extrapolation of the past from a single viewpoint, as though almost confabulating a single plot of the past rather than recognizing the multiple possibilities of the tissue of events.

*Nostalgia* finds pleasure in cracks and ambiguity in contrast to positivist historicizing representations. The latter’s myth-making and its favoring of a single plot of events versus multiple potentials resonates with Svetlana Boym’s distinction between the two basic types of nostalgia: restorative and reflective nostalgia. The former aims to rebuild the lost home and characterizes national/istic myth-making via the promotion of a single plot of reading memorial signs. It is not self-reflective and self-critical but preoccupied with the single truth—such as the totalizing and universalizing historicism in Benjamin’s theory. Reflective nostalgia, however, dwells in longing and loss, and allows for lacunae, paradoxes, and multiple plots.<sup>42</sup> Nostalgia itself, as a side effect to memory, also finds its essence in clashing time frames, in

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(iii) the unwillingness of the military to acknowledge using unjust and immoral tactics and the 1978 self-amnesty law have also greatly hindered forgiveness; (iv) his truth telling was relatively short-term and secret, it was never really an overt and conscious progress or made a major priority in Chilean society; (v) failed to emphasize the importance of collective forgiveness. See Amstutz, 151-163. In terms of statistics, only 6.2 percent of the Chilean population believed that “the report resolved human rights problems; 60.1 percent considered it to be a step toward resolution; and 29.6 percent said that it did not resolve the problem.” (Jelin and Hershberg, 50.) For these data and more on the reception of the Rettig Report and its efficiency in the struggle for human rights, see Jelin and Hershberg editors’ *Constructing Democracy: Human Rights, Citizenship, and Society in Latin America*.

<sup>41</sup> Other significant sources providing an historical or social justice account of events or dealing with historical accountability, and political forgiveness in post-dictatorship Chile include: Nadler, Malloy, Fisher, *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Reconciliation*; Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability*, for instance, from historical accounts; Jelin, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory*; Jelin and Hershberg, *Constructing Democracy: Human Rights, Citizenship, and Society in Latin America*; Lira, “Violence, Fear and Impunity: Reflections on Subjective and Political Obstacles for Peace”; Sorensen, “Truth and Justice: Transience and Doubt in Chilean Documentary” from the social justice approach; and Traverso, “Dictatorship Memories: Working Through Trauma in Chilean Post-Dictatorship Documentary” as an example from film scholarly literature. This evidently slender collection of sources is by no means representative; nor do I mean to imply that they convey a homogeneous set of arguments.

<sup>42</sup> For these two types of nostalgia, see Boym’s *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001.)

dual temporality: it is the very moment the past penetrates into the present. How similar it is to the non-linear temporality and duplicity of memory, light, and trauma—interrelated notions whose originary operations converge and coincide with the zigzag proceedings of the essayistic. As opposed to the restorative, positivist desire to rigidly spatialize and anchor time, the film’s essayistic, and therefore necessarily reflectively nostalgic, disposition may open new doors for a more dynamic and self-reflective temporalization acknowledging fragments and shards of memories—even taking pleasure in them. It is exactly this pleasure discovered in ambiguity and absence, that is, in fissures, cracks, lack, and oblivion, which profoundly transforms the moralizing, polarizing truth-or-lie register employed in conventional social justice narratives into an extra-moral sphere in which more just contingencies may come forth.<sup>43</sup>

In a powerful scene, we can closely observe the brownish-yellowish, faded pictures of the disappeared placed in close proximity to one another on a mural as if they were pixels of a screen. The low-angle position of the camera renders a larger-than-life, overwhelming presence to the monument. Because of the passage of time, these photographic images are extremely faded, some of them completely illegible. Silence envelops the scene, which is only broken by the sound of the breeze blowing the leaves which cast their dancing shadow on the mural. One may call it a memorial wall; nevertheless, as Guzmán refers to it in an interview, “something went wrong, and this monument to memory has become a monument to amnesia.”<sup>44</sup> It embodies what Chile may have become: an ignored, tragic, and ambiguous past calling for the

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<sup>43</sup> I will discuss the ethical problematic of truth and lie and the necessity for an extra-moral ethics more elaborately in relation to Friedrich Nietzsche’s essay “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense” later in my thesis. For the most important sources which align themselves with post-dictatorship Chilean social justice motives and human rights movements see footnote #41.

<sup>44</sup> Eduardo Haden Guest, Eduardo Ledesma. “Ad Astra per Aspera: An Interview with Patricio Guzmán.” (*Cineaste* 36.3 (2011): 20-25.), 22.

film's socio-political imperative of rethinking the sensitive and not at all straightforward relation between remembering and forgetting. *Nostalgia*'s universal stance on a memory absorbed in matter is open to the dialectic of remembrance and oblivion, suggesting the non-contrasting, overlapping nature of the two entities. The memory-images of the film immediately emerge as images of oblivion: the discontinuity, loose fragments and absence inherent in matter are symptomatic of the workings of our memory and the traversal mechanism between remembering and forgetting. In other words, amnesia is not antithetical but internal to and constitutive of remembrance. This dialogical relation manifests in the visual images of legibility and illegibility as well. The "wall of amnesia" is one out of a plethora of instances in which Guzmán plays with the tension between image and word, the tension between legibility and illegibility; here, between the patches of legible and entirely illegible names and faces. These words and images are inscriptions to decipher in this palimpsest of memories, as much as the signs of macro-scale history are.

The Atacama, a spatial and temporal palimpsest of buried historical matters and pasts, constitutes a repository of memories full of footprints and traces. The absorbed memories of mummies, petroglyphs, rocks, even the desert dust—from as early as the pre-Colombians, through the 19<sup>th</sup> century past of the marginalized Indians, to the recent past of the dictatorship—are emitted and emerge through the cracks of the surface. It is a place which absorbs the past in order to deliver it later as memories: sites that Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire*. In Nora's account, they are the material, symbolic, and functional remains, manifestations of memory; ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness, which history transforms, penetrates and

petrifies.<sup>45</sup> *Lieux de mémoire* are simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, concrete and abstract.<sup>46</sup> Such paradoxical objects and sites where memory and history playfully interact incessantly reappear in *Nostalgia*—from the German telescope Guzmán looked through as a child to the marbles of his childhood. But most essentially, the vastness of the Atacama is the place where memory crystallizes. It is a site saturated with matter distilled into constellations of memories and open to the countless possible significations of reconstructive history.

The film offers a dialectical, non-totalizing, non-authoritative approach to historical memory, which challenges the very notion of memory, in order to escape the well-trodden routes of retroactive history-writing. *Nostalgia* is rooted in the duplicity of past and present, the ambiguity of memory and history: it believes more in the cracks, lacunae, and the paradoxes of memory, even in amnesia, than it does in memory as a positive, unambiguous, and unproblematic contingent. Miguel, a former architect who memorized the dimensions of the Chacabuco concentration camp by footsteps, explains “I memorized it all easily, and, when I was in exile in Denmark, I drew these places again as if I’d known them all my life.” He is the emblem of an individual memory filtered into historical remembrance through the signifying process of drawing which his testimony involved. Miguel may, at first sight, embody the striving for a retrospective construction of history. Guzmán, however, chooses not to open the short-cut path of historicizing: the weight of the scientific certainty the interview surfaces does not foreclose the scene. Rather, he entirely destabilizes this

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<sup>45</sup> Pierre Nora. “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*.” (*Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24.), 12, 19. Nora, similarly to, for instance, Walter Benjamin or Dominick LaCapra, sharply criticizes historiography, the “history of history.” He attributes the emergence of a historiographical consciousness, the reconstitution of a past without lacunae, to the split between memory and history. That is, history has become a social science; memory a purely private phenomenon. For Nora, memory is absolute and attaches itself to sites; whereas history is relative, always suspicious of memory and intends to destroy it, and attaches itself to events.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

seeming transparency by introducing his wife, Anita. “Miguel and his wife are for me a metaphor of Chile,” his voiceover concludes. “He is remembering, whilst Anita is forgetting as she has Alzheimer’s disease.” The coexistence and overlapping of remembrance and oblivion, proposing they are not at all antithetical but interdependent, offer the substratum of the scene’s as well as the film’s conceptualization of memory.

*Nostalgia*’s complex relation to history and historical memory corresponds to the history of essay film. The non-linear logic essential to historical dialecticism is keystone to the essay film as form; the fragmentation of our memory coincides with the shards the essay originates from. In *Sans Soleil* (1983),<sup>47</sup> the alleged first essay film, Chris Marker meditates on the nature of human memory: remembering is not the opposite of forgetting, as the female narrator asserts. By enmeshing these conventionally polarized processes of the human brain—conventional both in our colloquial thinking and in neurobiological conceptualizations—Marker implies the reciprocity, overleaping, and overlapping of the two mechanisms. Since we are unable to recall all the contexts and nuances of our memories, we are bound to moving along the fragments and retroactively fill up the hiatuses of the past in the reconstruction of our own individual stories. Expanding it to the notion of collective memory, that is, the negotiated meaning of different groups writing history, historical amnesia predominantly stems in the same aporetic fiber and fragmentation. “We do not remember. We rewrite memory, much as history is rewritten,”<sup>48</sup> Marker reminds us. The interrelation and interdependence of micro- and macro-history, so palpable in *Nostalgia*, is always caught up in our inability to accurately recall memories, which ultimately affects the perception of personal and global histories.

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<sup>47</sup> *Sans Soleil*. Dir. Chris Marker. Argos Films, 1983.

<sup>48</sup> Nora M. Alter. *Chris Marker*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006.), 108.

Not unlike the manner Guzmán treads the cracked surface of the Atacama does the essayistic endeavor build on fractures and fragments. The essay, according to Theodor Adorno's "The Essay as Form" (1958), a paragon essay on the essay, "thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity by moving through the fissures."<sup>49</sup> This ever dynamic, contradictory composite defies definition and eludes categorization. It evolves from a finite number of heterogeneous elements to grow into, without a final arrival, an open text with infinite potentials. Always remaining committed to its object of study, it does not present itself as creation, Adorno warns; rather, it resists totality. It is a form in which concepts are already concretized through language and, reciprocally, the essay as language itself furthers meanings toward the concepts—as one can see it in the instance of *Nostalgia*'s above-mentioned "wall of amnesia." The tragic past of the military regime is subject to a myriad of readings of its signs leading to a number of recovering historical fabulations. The mural offers one such set of inscriptions to decipher; it is a surface of opaque signifiers. The formal choice of legible and illegible words and images reveals the film's ambiguous, non-transparent, and detouring, essaying approach to this historical past: its socio-political imperative is already ingrained in the language of faded photographs. The essay, in short, privileges form over content. It is also this form of legible and illegible photos through which the genuine images, the Benjaminian "dialectics at a standstill," reach out to us: rather than casting light on and leading to the truths of the past, they offer the visual language of that constellation of memory.

The essayistic, as an aesthetic practice, is acceptive and constitutive of fissures and ellipses. It is a stylistic fashion which filters matter through a form accordant with it: shattering, incalculable, and opaque. In Georg Lukács's account, the palpable

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<sup>49</sup> Adorno, Hullot-Kentor, Will, 164.

tension between content and form is central to distilling the essence of the essayistic. The underlying determinants of content are value-laden dichotomies, he claims; whereas it is form through which any claim to knowledge can be filtered through and reach out to us.<sup>50</sup> *Nostalgia* abounds in seeming binary oppositions—such as that of matter and non-matter, male and female, wholeness and fragmentation, et cetera—which are all approximated and complicated when absorbed in the form. The reformable fabric, reality of the essay, to follow Lukács's thoughts, allows for multiple points-of-view and the dominance of questions without the necessity to answer them. Guzmán creates this malleable texture through the arrangement of a plethora of heterogeneous elements into multiple constellations, in order to open up diverse pathways for the ethico-political matter to zigzag along and, do so, without closure. By creating its own absoluteness, the essay is no longer held accountable to an external reality as far as its degree of truthfulness is concerned. Nor is the essay subject to an otherwise non-existent ultimate external criterion of existence. The blurry distinction between fiction and non-fiction is, henceforth, fundamentally shaken and ultimately crushed, Lukács asserts. I see the essayistic as the antidote for the discursive paradigms of historicism and radical dichotomization.

The bountiful cracks of the Atacama, visually mimicking the structures of our recollection, open up a gateway to human and cosmic past and memory. Thus the diverse superimposed spatial, temporal, and cosmic-dimensional planes, physically present in the layers of the ground, split our conventional perception of time and space, past and present, here and there. It is one immense flashing image of the now and the then of multiple pasts, of human history and the cosmic origins encoded in the meteorites buried underneath. Not only do these fissures give way to the past to leak

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<sup>50</sup> See it in his *Soul and Form*.

through but allow for the essayistic to emerge. The essay operates analogously to memory via its “clashing time frames”<sup>51</sup> and “moving through the fissures,” transgressing spatial, temporal, and dimensional constraints. The endeavoring and journeying, that is, the essaying of space gives way to the essaying of time.

A startling scene starring shards of bones and moon rocks adds to the poetic imagery of *Nostalgia* with a powerful visual metaphor. The sequence intercuts extreme close-ups on the light-colored, porous surfaces of alternating matters and contemplates the stunning correspondence the two entities show. Human bones visually echo the surfaces, textures, and curvatures of celestial bodies. This visual poetry underpins the revelation we get from astronomer George Preston in the previous scene: both stars and human bones contain the very same calcium, which was produced soon after the Big Bang. We are literally composed of solar calcium travelling in the space for billions of years. Thus, stars and human beings are materially, chemically and temporally, connected. The scene is grounded in the transgression of the essayistic: it brings together what we normally perceive as past and present, a cosmic there and a human here; it is a clash of dimensions. Indeed, the essay does not follow a strict chronology. The generative apparatus of the essay splits our habitual perception of time in order to egress the straightforward path of utmost transparency and monological meaning historicism offers with the gleam of growth and progress.

Instead of statically and rigorously framing the film with its own self-sufficient macro-historical analysis, *Nostalgia* delves into conflicting time planes to propose a dynamic layering of time: in addition to the geological and cosmic strata, it poses the layer of the personal. The intimate interviews are formally framed as

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<sup>51</sup> Paul Arthur. “Essay Questions: From Alain Resnais to Michael Moore: Paul Arthur Gives A Crash Course in Nonfiction Cinema’s Most Rapidly Evolving Genre.” *Film Comment* 39.1 (2003): 58-62., 59.



medium close-ups focusing on the women's faces whilst they share their personal narratives of suffering and survival. The emotional immediacy of these interviews alternates in a gentle rhythm with the long shots of the windswept desert and the immersing, expanding galaxies. By this fashion, *Nostalgia's* superimposition of layered human and cosmic space-time and experience allows for the non-contradiction, the convergence of the subjective-personal and the universal. Or, as Paul Arthur claims, the essay film amalgamates abstract ideas with concrete realities.<sup>52</sup> Undoubtedly an essayistic film, *Nostalgia* hinges upon the sensitive nexus of these seemingly dichotomous poles of reference. Laura Rascaroli attributes the extreme variability of the essay to its dynamism among the three-poled referential system of the personal-autobiographical, the objective-factual, and the abstract-universal.<sup>53</sup> In the essay, there is no real contradiction between the personal and the objective; rather, the "historical real is consciously filtered through the flux of subjectivity," as Rascaroli puts it.<sup>54</sup> The essay must emerge from a "particular framework of consciousness" and be the creative and innovative intellectual struggle of the self, "a rhetorical journey."<sup>55</sup> Thus, the particular and the universal become non-contradictory, even reciprocal to one another. The particularity of the personal memories of suffering and the cosmic history of galaxies, the subjectivity of Guzmán's own voice and the socio-historical claim it speaks to are no longer separated by literal or paradigmatic distance; rather, they are reciprocated. Likewise, the formal correspondence between the textures of human bones and solar bodies, as we see it in that dazzling scene, shows the interconnectedness and identicalness of matter.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>53</sup> Rascaroli, 26.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>55</sup> Arthur, 60.

The translucent rain of stardust, the memories of our cosmic origin, diffuses *Nostalgia's* texture. As we learn from the above-cited scene, we are literally composed of solar matter travelling in the space for billions of years. This trope permeates a couple of scenes in the form of flickering, glimmering stardust, which we may as well imagine as particles of cosmic calcium riding the light beams and disseminating through space. They are the universe's bones, particles of the past; they are time to which space gives weight and materiality. Space dust is a figure of spatialized time as the embodiment of cosmic past as well as temporalized space through the memory inherent in it. These sparkling motes diffuse the movie's aesthetics and connect the diverse ostensibly disparate taxonomies, realms, and notions. One of the opening scenes presenting Guzmán's fictitious childhood home with a naïve peace and tranquility melds into the next scene of complete darkness with stardust permeating the frame. The ultimate blackness of the scene is assuaged by glimmering space dust and the director's voiceover revealing "science fell in love with the Chilean sky." A group of astronomers discovered they could touch celestial bodies in the Atacama Desert—enveloped in space dust, in the same manner the scene is blanketed in it. The scientific zeal creating huge telescopes was overpowered by the military coup—we hear as the camera slowly focuses on age-old astronomical apparatuses covered in earth dust. This dust-diffused scene is generated from the juxtaposition and interdependence of seemingly distant spheres of experience: the particularity of recent human history and the universality of cosmic past, socio-politics and science, earth dust and space dust. Stardust underscores the film's major enigma, time: it superimposes the past and the present, the physical and the metaphysical, the concrete and the abstract. And beyond, they interconnect matter and non-matter: they are time and tangible, physical matter at the same time.

Stardust is a concise and paradoxical element, both a literal, material entity and a metaphorical figure of time. It diffuses into the hiatuses of the film's texture without urging a totalizing answer to emerge. Réda Bensmaïa identifies a "sufficient word" in Montaigne's essays,<sup>56</sup> which enables the essay to function as a totality and gives its unity as the heterogeneous stories and thoughts are brought together in the essayistic montage. It is a word that *complicates* stories, *envelops* signification.<sup>57</sup> In this regard, it allows for infinite potentials and resonates with the conundrums raised instead of urging closure. Drawing on this notion, I propose the *sufficient image* of *Nostalgia*: stardust. It overleaps registers and, by doing so, interconnects diverse realms and mashes the borderlines between the literal and the metaphorical, matter and non-matter, the particular and the universal. What may otherwise appear as a disorganized wandering along the fractures of stories, fantasies in an arbitrary manner,<sup>58</sup> gains unity through the *sufficient image* of space dust; a guiding thread to the heterogeneous fragments piled up. It is the matter that ultimately conjoins the diverse seemingly and conventionally polarized realms of reality, such as the human and non-human, spatial and temporal kernels of experience, or the scientific and the spiritual. Stardust is universal but not for a single moment universalizing. It substantiates the coextension and reciprocity between the microcosms where the film's seekers—the archaeologist, the astronomers, and the women—pursue their unrelenting quests and the macrocosm of celestial and human history. This metaphorical image, therefore, serves as the nucleus of creation and the diffuse thematic-conceptual-aesthetic figure of *Nostalgia*.

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<sup>56</sup> For his analysis of Montaigne's essays and the sufficient word, see *The Barthes Effect: The Essay as Reflective Text*. (Trans. Pat Fedkiew. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.)

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. (Italics in the original.)

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

“The present doesn’t exist. That’s the *trampa*,” as one of the astronomers explains the brain-teasing fact. All light takes an interval of time to reach our eyes: all we perceive pertains to the past and we are left with the elusive and malleable memory of that past in every present perception. Light, just like stardust, embodies matter and time simultaneously. It is comprised of particles, yet, it is contingent on time. Furthermore, it is time itself. Light, not unlike memory, is a mirage: it belongs to the past and constantly penetrates the present tense of our perception with its forceful illusions. The visual metaphor of celestial and human bodies demonstrates the interrelation between the two spatial spheres, human and cosmic, as well as the time encoded in matter: their porous texture is permeated with memories of the past. Not only are we made up of the past through solar calcium, we literally live in the past. The clashing time planes of the present and the gravitational past, as conveyed by light, memory, and history, are ultimately blended—so much that the linear, teleological progression of time, as we illusorily perceive it, is crushed. Non-linear and non-progressive time, with its temporal duplicity, loops and aporias, cannot operate in linear and literal pathways but only by virtue of lateral, overleaping metaphorical transgressions.

The figurative imagery of the all-permeating stardust transgressing registers highlights the metaphorical operation of *Nostalgia*. Friedrich Nietzsche, in his already referred, unsettling essay on the metaphor, turns the conventional view of metaphors on its head. Opening the essay with a cosmological metaphor, he later asserts it is metaphor formation with which every human sensation begins, emanating a whole new sight on tropes. Nietzsche differentiates between two metaphorical transformations which completely overleap spheres: the transference of the nerve stimulus into a mental image is the first metaphor of perception; the image-to-sound

relation is his second metaphor. A metaphor implies the complete and creative transgression of spheres, of human perception and sensual processes. Beyond the illumination of metaphorical metamorphoses, he weaves a text whose tissue generates its own conceptual apparatus: in his critique of the man seeking an anthropomorphic truth from a single, his own, viewpoint, Nietzsche argues that this man conceives “the entire universe as the infinitely fractured echo of one original sound—man.”<sup>59</sup> Such multi-sensorial metaphors, synesthetic juxtapositions of sounds, visuals, and tactility permeating the fabric of the essay are indeed metaphoric transferences themselves—the very matter under the essay’s scrutiny. Form and content, thus, are not only inseparable in Nietzsche. As a metaphor, the word is self-relative: it evades categorization and restrictions; it creates its own absoluteness and dimensionality in which it wants to exist.

How similar it sounds to the operation of the essay which dwells in its self-created world not being held accountable to any external set of criteria. It dwells in heterogeneity, complication, digression, and dispersion. The essay denies closure, continuity, mastery, and control<sup>60</sup>; it is aggregated as a set of diverse fragments. It transgresses genres and conventional realms of experience—similarly to the metaphor. These attributes render it hard to classify the essay as a genre. Some, including Nora Alter, go as far as saying it is a non-genre, since it “strives to be beyond formal, conceptual, and social constraints.”<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the essay challenges the very notion of textuality and has historically been a locus of resistance. Precisely through these characteristics, the essay film sheds light both on historical gaps and on the socio-political grey spots other documentary genres overlook.

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<sup>59</sup> Nietzsche, 57.

<sup>60</sup> Arthur, 59.

<sup>61</sup> Alter, 171.

The final shot of the sequence showing the reciprocity of human bones and solar matter first appears to be the view of a distant celestial body. Then the camera slowly travels down the smooth brown surface into the close-up of a human skull upon which time has left a rich patina. The scene ends with the frozen image of the skull's orbits staring at us. The immediate social imperatives of *Nostalgia*—the rethinking of remembrance and forgetting, the unearthing of a buried past, the questions of political forgiveness and accountability, restorative and retributive justice, the re-membering of the female relatives of the disappeared—are all filtered through its subjective essayistic form of fissures and fragments and, as we can see in the image of the skull, gaps and cavities. The meaning of these political concepts have already been carved out, they have already been concretized in the essay form; a form which then furthers the meaning of these imperatives. To put it differently, the aesthetic of the film absorbs its socio-political essence. It does so, through the lateral, transgressive paths of the essayistic journey rooted in originary metaphors.

In a multi-layered and multi-sensory scene the frame shows the belongings of men, miners and Indians, who died working in the Atacama. Their clothes, boots and other personal belongings lie in the open air as the *lieux de mémoire* of another forgotten past. “Like geological layers, layers of miners and of Indians are swept by the relentless wind. Their belongings, their memories are nearby,” the voiceover explains. The scene's visual perspective gradually narrows and the camera moves into close-up shots of worn-out, tattered leather boots. Then it switches into the shots of dust-covered bottles, ragged coats hanging from the ceiling of a derelict cabin, and a number of patinaed spoons suspended by strings and lined up. Wind sweeps, and the spoons, clashing with one another, begin their more and more raucous melody. By the visuals of long-forgotten matters, the sounds of the wind whistling and the spoons

clashing, the tactility of different materials in their textural diversity, and the smell of dust on timeworn objects render the scene a dynamic and powerful synesthetic juxtaposition.

The notion of such multi-sensory metaphorism resonates with Nietzsche's conceptualization of metaphors as the source of all human perception, and a complete transgression between spheres of human perception and sensual processes. By the synesthetic superimpositions of sounds, visuals, and tactility permeating *Nostalgia's* fabric, Guzmán creates the multidimensional space of perceptive, cognitive, and sensual metamorphoses from the nerve stimulus to the concept. Since we tend to forget that perceptual metaphors are metaphors<sup>62</sup>—that is, the overleaping movements resulting in perception are already metaphorical transferences—we believe them to be the things themselves belonging to objective reality. As a result, the borderline between fact and fiction is smashed, especially that the essay is not dependent on any external criterion of reality. Nietzsche's essay, through the transgressing metamorphoses of metaphors, lays the groundwork for an extra-moral conceptualization of truth and lie, in which lie is a duty in accordance with fixed conventions; whereas truthfulness means to employ the usual, illusory metaphors. The desire to create an extra-moral metaphORIZATION, that is, place it outside the conventional judgmental morality of the petrified poles of good and evil, is palpable in *Nostalgia's* ethical dynamics too—specifically through the preeminence of the essayistic form. Finding the affective form for its imperative concepts in the skull's orbits staring at us accusingly, diffused with fissures and ellipses, and rooted in metaphorical transgression, *Nostalgia* opens up the zigzag path toward a more ethical approach to historical remembrance and oblivion.

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<sup>62</sup> Nietzsche, 57.

A close-up of a lace curtain, of the texture of a thick, white napkin on a plate, a warm armchair, a pile of soft pillows: these shots provide insight into a friendly, somehow familiar-looking, old-fashioned kitchen with its personal belongings. The camera allows us to see the partial momentums of the provincial life these objects offer; while Guzmán shares his childhood memories of the old German telescope in Santiago, with which his love for science-fiction stories and his passion for astronomy emerged. He would love lunar eclipses and watch the sun through a piece of smoky glass. These personal objects come from a past when Santiago was a haven of peace detached from the rest of the world. It was a tranquil life. “Nothing ever happened.” The spectator believes to see Guzmán’s time-saturated belongings to which he must have attached vivid and bitter-sweet childhood memories. These heart-warming moments induce a nostalgic disposition, that of restorative nostalgia. The shots seem to rebuild the lost home of childhood, a long-forgotten space and time, pointing toward the easy path of nationalistic, and personal, myth-production. They establish a single plot of a single historical truth. Or, rather, they could. The weighty nostalgia of the whole scene is gushed by the wind of the lightweight, playful irony his voiceover then conveys: “These objects, which could have come from my childhood home, remind me of that far off moment when one thinks one has left childhood behind.” They could have. The ultimate irony of these two words does not only uproot us from our firm belief in the peaceful home of a naïve childhood and especially the particularity of it, but it also annihilates the oppression of history-making and the retroactive construction of a space and time which never existed. Irony is Guzmán’s ethical response to the positivism of single-plot history-making and to the moralizing dimension of a naïve confabulation which presupposes the space-time of the absolute good and tranquility swept away by the ultimately evil. He simultaneously blows



away the illusion of a self founded on unity, integrity, full identity, and harmony—by annulling his own supposed self he first appears to portray. By means of such a twist, Guzmán advances an essayistic self constituted upon paradoxes and irony.

The essayistic comportment affirmative of fissures, paradoxes, and hyper-amnesia, is also the antidote to an ideological status-quo—not only in the historical sense but also in the realm of genres. The essay originates in paradoxicality and fragmentariness as much as the essayistic self does, and both are acceptive of the metaphorical overleaping of spheres in their conscious and unconscious operations. The essay documentary, as a specific form of cinematic representation, may reconfigure and disrupt the “general understanding of the sociohistorical dynamics”<sup>63</sup> of the Chilean transition period. Rather than exposing the problems of the military dictatorship or Chilean identity-reconstruction<sup>64</sup> after 1990 and imparting knowledge, it counteracts historical forgetting in a politically committed and ethical way. The figurative representation of historical events with all its inherent tensions has, I argue, always been the crux of Guzmán’s cinematic language.

Even though *Nostalgia* is his first and so far only (internationally) recognized essay film,<sup>65</sup> Guzmán has always presented his travels from and to pasts as a dialectical, poetic, and heterogeneous endeavor filled with ambiguity. Film scholars

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<sup>63</sup> Patrick Blaine. “Reconstructing Resistant Memory in the Chilean Social Documentary: Guzmán and Ruiz.” (Morningside College. Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Toronto, Canada. 2010. Conference Presentation.), 17.

<sup>64</sup> The best, and most poetic, introduction to the problematic of the Chilean transitory identity and its multiple social representations are NellyRichard’s *Cultural Residues: Chile in Transition*. (Trans. Alan West-Durán, Theodore Quester. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2004.) and her *The Insubordination of Signs: Political Change, Cultural Transformation, and Poetics of the Crisis*. (Trans. Alice A. Nelson, Silvia R. Tandeciarz. Durham: Duke University Press. 2004.) Richard basically conceives the “residual” as the powerful inscription of memories capable of pointing to unstable formations of symbolic and cultural sedimentations, centered visions, general perspectives. For her, Chile’s democratic transition process rests in the redistribution of cultural signs and the re-accentuation of genres and genders.

<sup>65</sup> Eduardo Haden Guest and Eduardo Ledesma in their already referred article categorize *Nostalgia* as an essay film and mention three lesser-known essay films of Guzmán’s: *The Southern Cross* (1992), *Madrid* (2002), and *A Village Fading Away* (1995). Based on my research, these minor essayistic films have not received scholarly attention at all, probably due to the lack of their international release.

normally conceive his documentaries as either cinéma-vérité style or belonging to a more and more subjective and meditative mood of documentary filmmaking. His cinéma-vérité, or direct cinema, mode is most apparent in *The Battle of Chile* trilogy (1975-79). As an amalgamation of expository and observational documentary modes, it is a restoratively nostalgic, chronicle-like, history-in-the-making documentary film.<sup>66</sup> With *Chile, Obstinate Memory* (1998), Guzmán's voice is perceived to change into a more meditative, contemplative, intimate-interview tone. While the trilogy takes its subjects from the social groups and movements cardinal to the revolutionary Unidad Popular years<sup>67</sup> (1970-73) of Chilean history, *Chile, Obstinate Memory*<sup>68</sup> focuses on individuals and their subjective experiences.<sup>69</sup> The definite shift from the concentration on social classes and collectivity to individuals gradually matures from *Chile, Obstinate Memory* to *Nostalgia*. As a "transition," *The Pinochet Case* (2002) and *Salvador Allende* (2006)<sup>70</sup> convey an increasingly reflectively nostalgic mood in terms of their relation to historical meaning-making. The trajectory of these five documentaries, the films which have received any scholarly attention, clearly shows Guzmán's more definite focus on a first-person aesthetic which gradually replaces the

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<sup>66</sup> For more on the trilogy and its reception, see the interview with Guzmán in Part I., Chapter 5 of *Cinema and Social Change in Latin America: Conversations with Filmmakers* edited by Julianne Burton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986). Other significant sources on *The Battle of Chile* include the Part II., Chapter 5 written by Zuzana M. Pick in Burton's *The Social Documentary in Latin America*; Klawans's "A Whole World Disappeared."; Stern's "Filming the Fractured Soul of Chile: Guzmán's Epic and Elegy of Revolution"; and Camillo D. Truper's "Social Violence, Political Conflict, and Latin American Film: The Politics of Place in the 'Cinema of Allende.'" (*Radical History Review* 106 (2010): 109-136). These sources consider the film an expository and observational history-in-the-making documentary.

<sup>67</sup> The "Popular Unity" was a coalition of left-wing political parties that stood behind the successful candidacy of Salvador Allende for the 1970 presidential elections. By the Unidad Popular years of Chilean history, I refer to the 1970-73 period of Allende's Marxist government.

<sup>68</sup> More on this film can be found in Klubock's, Stern's, and Truper's article. An additional source is Dennis West's "Chile, Obstinate Memory." (*Cineaste* 24.4 (1999): 44).

<sup>69</sup> Klubock's and Stern's article deal with this shift in Guzmán's focus seen in the two films.

<sup>70</sup> Find more about the tension between political facts and artistic representation in *The Pinochet Case* in Patricia Aufderheide's interview with Guzmán in "The Importance of Historical Memory: An Interview with Patricio Guzmán." (*Cineaste* (2002): 22-25). The best place to read about the tensions between restorative and reflective nostalgia and the paradox inherent in the testimonial narratives in *Salvador Allende* is Michael J. Lazzara's "Guzmán's Allende." (*Chasqui* 38.2 (2009): 47-62).

objectivity of the off-camera narrator—as the scholarly literature mostly conceives a shift in his oeuvre starting with the objectivity of the trilogy. I, of course, do not question a more and more subjective representation in the course of his works; however, I do debate the view which sees the trilogy as an expository-observational documentary seeking objective distance. I also argue that the creative power behind Guzmán’s aesthetics has, from the beginning, been the poetic, metaphorical comportment we see in *Nostalgia*.

Figurative representation and a tension between historical facticity and subjective particularity have always been cardinal in his cinematic mediation. As Ana M. Lopez asserts, *The Battle of Chile*, which is mostly conceived as dealing with facts, history, and testimony, textually operates through fictive strategies. In order to represent what we necessarily recognize as important documentary footage of the crucial historical events of the Unidad Popular years and the cataclysm of the coup d’état, he follows the logic of fictive discourses. This device, at the same time, prevents simple identification with the characters. Fictionality, as Lopez sees it, mostly unfolds in the dialectical, non-objective, analysis the film offers as well as in its use of sequence-shots and its structuration as an extensive flashback from the spectator’s present state of knowledge, since we know what the outcome will be from the very beginning.<sup>71</sup>

Not only are there certain movements in the film which can be identified with fictional filmmaking but its dialectical narration also contributes to the heterogeneous texture of *The Battle of Chile*. “The voice-over narrator provides only the most essential background information; the bulk of the analysis is given directly by those

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<sup>71</sup> Ana M. Lopez in Part III., Chapter 14 of *The Social Documentary in Latin America*, 275-282.

who participated in the event,” Guzmán shares.<sup>72</sup> In addition to the aggregation of subjective voices which provide the narrative, a multi-focus flow of the events further adds to the heterogeneity of the text: the representation of any one political momentum recorded attracts a whole ensemble of “secondary” events in its instantaneity. Instead of framing the events themselves, Guzmán adopts a dialectical stance on the immediacy of them in order to weave a malleable text. And, most importantly, he does so in a not-fully-conscious manner: the multiplicity of immediate events bears in itself a sense of latency regarding the lapse between the moment of recording and watching the footage. (From the point of view of belatedness, it is not even necessary to differentiate between the filmmakers’ and the viewer’s becoming conscious about the recorded matter.) At the time of shooting, in other words, no one person could be fully aware of “what was going on.” The result is a multifaceted, unstable structure which emphasizes the various possibilities the specific historical moment offers and sees a limitless potential in the constellation of events.

I will also add that what is normally seen as the exhibition and explanation of historical facts in *The Battle of Chile* is, in fact, representation through not only fictional, as Lopez suggests, but also poetic-figurative tensions. Guzmán has no intention to show a record of facts, of “how things happened” in the unproblematic unity of the given space and chronology of time, but wants to see them through the particularity of his, obviously Marxist, analytical eyes. One of the beautiful moments of ambiguity and figurative representation is the slow-motion shot of a huge, and probably heavy, carriage drawn smoothly and effortlessly by a male character. The conflict between ephemerality and the oppressing weight of the historical emergency of the coup d’état renders the scene highly ambiguous. It drags on for long seconds

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<sup>72</sup> Burton, *Cinema and Social Change*, 51.

and counteracts any strife for objectivity and irrational faithfulness to historical facts. The poetic aesthetic of such figurative scenes speckled sporadically in the texture of the narrative unveils the major tension of the film between the supposed objective representation of historical facts and the subjectivity of the witnessing eye. Even though it has reached its full-fledged state of being in *Nostalgia*, metaphorical mediation has been the nexus of Guzmán's aesthetics from the outset.

In this chapter, I argued that metaphorical overleaping between physical and non-physical surfaces is pivotal to both human perception and the essayistic operation. The painful questions of historical remembrance and oblivion are enfolded in *Nostalgia*'s texture diffused with fissures and ellipses. On top of the heterogeneous and opaque fabric in which its socio-political matter is embedded, the film's playful irony allows it to counteract the positivism of historicizing. The zigzag path of essaying the spatial and temporal layers of human and cosmic experience opens up for a non-foreclosing, extra-moral, ethical stance on historical meaning-making and, ultimately, social justice.

In Chapter Two, I will extend this conceptualization to the notions of trauma and cinematic, including photographic, mediation. Mobilizing trauma theory, I will argue that melancholia is not a linear and literal pathway to the decathexis of mourning, but operates with lateral movements and through metaphorical overleaping. The traumatic "working through" originates from fissures, fragments, aporias—as much as the essay does. The belatedness of trauma connotes the duplicity of the present and the past and causes time planes to clash. I will also suggest that it does not constitute a solely temporal latency but a complex metaphorical overleaping. In brief, the essay's temporal and spatial enfoldment, the metaphorical traversal between spatial and temporal, conscious and the unconscious realms, its

paradoxicality and undecidability resonate with the fundamental operational apparatus of trauma. Mediation is central not only to trauma and the metaphorism of the essay but also to film as a medium itself. I will show that the analog and digital technologies *Nostalgia* embraces emerge from the same interconnectedness of oblivious substance as the essay and trauma—and I do so in order to emphasize our interdependence in the immediate and distant environs we share. The ephemeral, oblivious matter of stardust overleaping between surfaces of human and non-human experience illuminates this intricate entanglement in the human and cosmic worlds we are thrown into.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **Amateur Science**

Each particle of space dust substantiates physical matter and memory in its glittering body of time. Their translucent rain enigmatically connects our human present with the cosmic past of our origins by overleaping between spatial and temporal surfaces. The temporal duplicity they embody and the metaphorical translation by which they operate echo the workings of not only our memory and the essay but those of trauma too. The essay as form, as the aggregation of diverse textures, shapes, viewpoints, and temporalities, mediates *Nostalgia*'s socio-political substance in its meandering paths without closure. It is not only a stylistic but an ethical comportment toward trauma.

The close-ups of the parched surface of the Atacama are framed by Guzmán's voice-over: the sedimented layers of the desert bury the remnants of our remote past, apparent as meteoritic substance, and the human fragments of more recent pasts. "I have always believed that our origins could be found in the ground, buried beneath the soil or at the bottom of the sea," he shares while the spectator can hear the brisk, sharp sound of his footsteps and see another sequence of extreme close-ups of the fragmented, arid earth crust. "But now, I think that our roots are up above, beyond the light," the camera moves into the long shot of distant observatories on top of a solid, silent hill, under the crystal-clear sky. The thick tissue of these couple of shots weaves together proximity and distance, porosity and solidness: Guzmán entwines the human present with the cosmic past and, at the same time, superimposes

fragmentation and wholeness. The trauma buried in the spatiotemporal layers under the cracked surface, also bears ambiguity, fragments and gaps, as well as the duplicity of present and past at its core.

*Nostalgia* incessantly returns to such visual and conceptual fissures, cracks, fragments, and the clash of temporal planes. The attributes of undecidability and paradoxicality, and a strong faith in aporia resonate with the theoretical apparatus of not only the essay film but also trauma studies. The fundamental notion of trauma, Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*, constitutes a relationship between the original trauma-inducing event and its belated recurrences in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, and bodily inscriptions. The original event is not traumatic in itself, in Freud's thinking, since it generates a gap in the conscious, a black-out in the neurons, which renders it impossible to be fully experienced at the time. After a latency period of repression inherent in trauma, however, the event begins to haunt the subject with forceful and oblique returns. For Freud, trauma connotes a dialectical relation between the two events and a temporal delay, deferral, or latency; only the belated act of interpretation renders trauma available. Freud rejects the straightforward analysis of trauma in which the traumatic event enters the subject from the outside, and, therefore, in which the inside and the outside are clearly separable.<sup>73</sup> Based on the above, the traumatic *Nachträglichkeit* questions all binary oppositions: e.g., inside versus outside, reality versus fiction (fantasy, imagination in terms of reconstructing the narrative of the event), present versus past, memory versus oblivion. Similarly, *Nostalgia* introduces

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<sup>73</sup> For this understanding of Freud's notions of the entrance of trauma see Ruth Leys's *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.), 20. This concept is debated in trauma studies—mostly due to the aporetic and ambiguous nature of Freud's writings. For instance, Cathy Caruth claims that the "outside has gone inside without any mediation," which seems to disagree with Leys's understanding. For this, see Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 59. Later, she rephrases this sentence in a footnote: "there is an incomprehensible outside of the self that has already gone inside without the self's mediation," and she does so in the light of Freud's inside/outside model of the psyche implied in his theory of the pleasure principle. (Ibid., 132.)



the seeming binaries of the fissured land and the fragmentation of the physical remains of the disappeared versus the wholeness of scientific certainty astronomers search for and that of the body women wish to find. The central tension between female and male essences slowly emerges in the course of the film, through mediation, as a result of winding, essaying detours.

The close-up shot of a woman kneeling and digging up a piece of the Atacama's crust with her tiny shovel features the porous land. No voice-over disrupts the harsh, cracking sound of the fragment of earth ripped from the rough surface of the desert. The spectator can scrutinize each portion of the frame: the texture of her worn tracksuit, the tiny shreds of earth dropping back on the ground, the simplicity of her tool, the faraway mountains and the transparent sky stretching in the background, and the revelation that all she finds under the fraction of the earth lifted is just another layer of the sedimented soil of the desert. She is presented as earthbound, being cathected to the humble daily activity of digging and sifting through dust. Her compulsive engagement, also registered in her childlike, crouching, bent bodily posture, renders her seemingly inferior, even animal-like, mechanically repeating the same exercise obsessively.

Trauma is inscribed in the mnemonic fissures of the mind as well as on the body. It returns in diverse shapes and forms: in the, mostly, visual images of flashbacks and nightmares, and also in physical postures.<sup>74</sup> The traumatic experience constantly forces itself on the subject who becomes "fixated" to the trauma, Freud asserts. By compulsive repetitions, they "*repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary

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<sup>74</sup> This posture is what Eric Santner calls the "cringe" of creaturely life: a locus of a signifying stress, excitation, at the impossible threshold of the inside and the outside, where meaning emerges. The cringed posture is the biological and political intensity of the creature. For more on this, entwined with his compelling critical reading of Rilke, Benjamin, and Sebald, see Eric L. Santner's *On Creaturely Life*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006).

experience” in order to try to master the situation.<sup>75</sup> The circuits of traumatic reenactments force them into melancholic feedback loops,<sup>76</sup> which are the manifestations of the pathological condition of melancholia. Working through the traumatic material denotes the process of decathexis. In mourning it is the world which becomes “poor and empty”; whereas in the unconscious process of melancholia, induced by an object-loss, it is the ego itself. The ego identifies with the lost object and is therefore cathected to the loss. When the ego can free its libido from the unconscious, repressed, and, as Freud emphasizes, constitutively ambivalent object-cathexis, the work of melancholia has been accomplished.<sup>77</sup> Women’s unfinished melancholic transition in *Nostalgia*, in which they are denied the decathexis of mourning, is symptomatic of their non-hegemonic position in the meaning-making processes of trauma on a social level.

Guzmán withholds the subjective stance on female experience until the second half of the film. His essayistic meandering in the Atacama winds to pre-Colombian archaeological sites and allows insight into the observatories of the most state-of-the-art technology. He engages in interviews with Gaspar Galaz astronomer and Lautaro Nuñez archaeologist; Miguel Lawner, a former architect who prepared the memorized drawings of the Chacabuco concentration camp, the biggest concentration camp in Pinochet’s Chile; Luís Henríquez, a quasi-astronomer in the same camp; and Víctor

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<sup>75</sup> Sigmund Freud. “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.” (1920. in *The Freud Reader*. Ed. Peter Gay. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989.), 598, 601, 602. (Italics in the original.)

<sup>76</sup> Dominick LaCapra differentiates between the feedback loops of melancholic “acting out” and the “working through” of mourning. He stresses that the two are non-binary terms but interacting processes. See especially his *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001.) I use “working through” in quotation marks in my thesis, since, even though LaCapra articulates that the two forces are not dichotomous, I wish to emphasize I see melancholia as interminable, in which one can never get “through” the traumatic material completely.

<sup>77</sup> Sigmund Freud. “Mourning and Melancholia.” (1917. in *On Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia.”* Eds. Leticia Glocer Fiorini, Thierry Bokanowski, Sergio Lewkowicz. London: The International Psychoanalytical Association, 2007.), 19-34. Even though Freud asserts here that melancholia can be finished and substituted by non-pathological mourning, his argumentation is more opaque and ambiguous than claim this with certainty; he himself is dubious about accomplished melancholia and the healing of mourning.

González, an engineer working at the radio telescope ALMA,<sup>78</sup> the son of a tortured<sup>79</sup> woman. Guzmán thus essays human and cosmic history and ponders on the interrelations of present and past and the interference of space and time. Women's own particular traumatic histories, nonetheless, are not unveiled in the first half of the film, only in a mediated form, filtered through the scientific knowledge of, most significantly, Galaz's and Nuñez's viewpoints. The mediation of women's particular tragedies and this lengthy delay suggest that justice cannot be claimed from oppressing and possessing totality. Instead, *Nostalgia* favors essaying and mediation, and cracks, fissures, and absences as the only ethical path toward social justice.

The remains of the disappeared of the military dictatorship that have not yet been identified rest in plain boxes stacked on one another as the camera shows us in a scene jumping toward the end of the film. The low-angle shots render an overwhelming presence to this ghostly monument of oblivion. These bones are made up of the same calcium as solar bodies; still, as opposed to stars, they have no names—Guzmán's voice-over discloses. "I wonder how long they will lie in these boxes. Will they be placed in a monument one day? Will they be given a burial one day?" The undetected skeletal fragments of the disappeared buried underneath the soil of the desert are the figures of women's individual trauma. *Nostalgia*'s metaphors for historical oblivion, such as the "wall of amnesia" from the previous chapter or the above monument of oblivion formulated by the casketed bone shards, signify the lack of political accountability and the practices of restorative and retributive justice as

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<sup>78</sup> Isn't it beautiful to name a radio telescope which listens to "bodies whose light doesn't reach the earth" "soul"?

<sup>79</sup> "According to one official commission, 30.000 people were tortured in Chile. But it is estimated that another 30.000 did not come forward," the voice-over shares. Indeed, tortures were not included in the Rettig Report (elaborated in Chapter One of my thesis) either; no real and efficient political accountability has taken place in terms of human rights violations not ending in death. My research finds roughly the same number for the tortured: with slight anomalies, the sources I looked at report around 30.000 for the total number of tortured people in Pinochet's Chile. What is more significant here, is that none of these books discusses, at least, the possibility that a lot did not come forward.

well as the absence of women's recognitory and enunciatory positions in the social tissue of historical trauma.

Guzmán's long-awaited-for interview with Violeta Berríos, one of the now only six women searching the desert to unearth bones, reveals the unacknowledged nature of their quest. Sitting on the rough surface of the desert, she tells us that she must carry on searching for the fragments of her lost one. "Sometimes I feel like an idiot because I never stop asking questions and nobody gives me the answers I want," she says adding that they are considered to be the leprosy of Chile, the lowest of the low. "Some people must wonder why we want bones. I want them so much! When they found one of Mario's jaw-bones, I said I don't want it. I want him whole." She is engaged in an endless quest for the whole to reconstruct the past of the lost person, to recover the missing past, and to "work through" her own trauma. The collective memory she seeks, which is caused by the cultural trauma of severe human rights violations, is, as Eyerman puts it, "always the negotiated and selective recollections of a specific group."<sup>80</sup> In this regard, it is caught up in the dynamism of nationalistic mythmaking which supports the ideology of hegemonic groups in the negotiating process. Women looking for the remnants of their relatives obviously do not fit into a privileged position acknowledging their trauma, by which they may be re-membered into society. Long shots of the silent mountains intercut her intimate interview, allowing her perspective to open up toward a broader relation: "I wish the telescopes didn't just look into the sky, but could also see through the earth so that we could find them," Violeta continues. Telescopes dig into the past and detect energy and solar calcium, the very same calcium we are made up of. Their sophisticated technology

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<sup>80</sup> Ron Eyerman. *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.), 7. Another useful source for the social constructedness of trauma is Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.)

could be used for looking into a more recent and clandestine past—by looking downwards.

The initial ostensible dichotomies *Nostalgia* erects are, however, slowly revealed to be non-binaries: the astronomers' celebrated, scientific, skyward investigation does not remain opposed to the women's mundane, unrecognized, downward search for fragments and ultimately justice. Neither does the archaeologists' inquiry mirror the astronomers' but rather invert it; nor is, by the same token, women's quest opposed to hard science: the three are, in fact, intricately bound up in one another. Archaeologist Lautaro Núñez imparts that women, whilst searching the desert, discovered something curious: tiny pieces of human bones. As it was confirmed by an expert, these indeed were human bones; "fragments of skulls, of feet, shards of long bones." The black-and-white photographs of the excavation of Núñez's team are followed and furthered by a female voice: Vicky Saavedra, with whom Violeta sifts the earth dust of the desert day by day, shows us how to differentiate between shards of human bones. The extreme close-up on her hands holding tiny fractures of bones allows us to meticulously analyze the various colors, porosity, and thickness of them. Since they have learnt to identify the minute differences between shards of human bones, women have become amateur forensic archaeologists themselves. As "amators" they embody the lovers of knowledge. This juxtaposition of two forms of knowledge-pursuit prefigures the women's contribution to science as an alternative mode of knowledge production. All three groups, as portrayed, are engaged in a committed, devoted, passionate search: what thus becomes the substrate of scientific engagement is affectivity. The emergence of a potential knowledge is entangled with the affective dimensions of both female and male activity—both stemming from the recovery of the past. Women's affective engagement is primarily

fuelled by the reenactments of their obsessive cathexis to the lost object, to absence itself.

Recurrently in *Nostalgia*, Guzmán is strolling the surface of the Atacama with his camera aimed at the sterile, parched, desolate ground. In one of these scenes, fitted between the two women's subjective stories, the camera stops to show the close-up of a black and white photograph of Jose Saavedra Gonzales, Vicky's disappeared brother. The smooth surface, the whiteness, and the sharpness of the image stand in stark opposition with the vastness of the dark, rocky, fissured ground underneath it. The power of this shot is found in the tension between the whole and the fragment: the photographic image is indicative of the wished-for but never-to-be-gained wholeness of the physical body; still, the fissured surface pushes its referents toward endless fragmentation and aporia. The unresolved conflict between the textures of the two surfaces implies the generative tension between the wished-for, healing wholeness of mourning and the interminable nature of their melancholia which resists resolution. *Nostalgia's* firm belief in lacunae and endless melancholia is, in short, indicative of women's unfinished melancholic transition, in which they are denied the decathexis of mourning. Suggesting that melancholia is not a linear pathway to mourning, the film's form is diffused with diverse shards, cracks, fissures and aporias.

I, too, believe that the recurring manifestations and the temporal loops of melancholia are endless both in apparitions and in time: they can potentially take an indefinite number of mnemonic, visual, physical forms, and, also, melancholia is an unfinished, interminable praxis. Mourning and melancholia are interrelated counterforces, rather than either-or categories or consecutive phases: it is not to say that after the trying work of melancholia, mourning delivers the complete decathexis and freedom of the ego as if asserting the wound is healed. Instead, the two

formations coexist as the continuous and puzzling conflict of complementary impetuses with a major difference between the two: “melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradiction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious.”<sup>81</sup> To put it differently, I do not understand traumatic processes as a teleological progression, a shortcut, linear avenue, from melancholia to the absolute decathexis of mourning. I argue, instead, that the two are simultaneous, even overlapping, impulses. Rather than progressing, they move laterally between constantly shifting, overleaping surfaces—including those of conscious and unconscious themes.

Trauma’s capacity for expansion, unfolding, is a force operating both spatially and temporally. Trauma traverses the assumed boundaries of human perception and cognition and latently transgresses the domains of metaphysical and physical surfaces, e.g. from the psychic to the somatic. In addition, it endures infinitely and takes various eidolons with the lapse of time. These transgressions, which extend the excessive substance in all dimensions, are purely metaphorical in the Nietzschean sense. They imply the complete metamorphosis of the substance and the creative transgression of spheres, of human perception and sensual processes. In this sense, decathexis is not a simple object-substitution; instead, it denotes the creative transgression between spheres of traumatic processes. Not only are the mediated entrance and recurrences of trauma in the body traverses metaphorically among physical and non-physical layers, but the processes of the psychic work of melancholy are also constituted of metaphorical metamorphoses.<sup>82</sup> The predominantly visual

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<sup>81</sup> Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 21.

<sup>82</sup> This conceptualization, at the same time, means a counterforce to the spatialized, almost pinned down, notion of trauma “stored” in the memory associated with different segments of the brain, as we can see in neurobiological accounts. For instance, the hippocampus is thought to “record in memory the spatial and temporal dimensions of experience” (Kolk, McFarlane, Weisaeth, 231) Such unproblematic,

material of flashbacks and nightmares and the physical code of postures require figurative translation in order to become a testimony: another metaphorical transference, now into the verbalization of the traumatic matter.

One of Guzmán's intimate interviews with the women reveals Vicky Saavedra's personal story. She has found her disappeared brother's foot still in his shoe, teeth, part of his forehead, and the left side of his skull. The close-up on her face with the cracked surface of the desert in the background underscores her narrative: the fragmentation of the physical body she is seeking and the fissured surface of the desert frame the reluctant words of her aporetic testimony. The verbalization of the traumatic matter is considered highly paradoxical in trauma theory. Testimonies are the venue for recovery; nevertheless, language fails when it comes to traumatic representations. Talk cures offer the promise of a full ego identity by projecting the ideas of a self finally integrating the traumatic material; whereas it is the unspeakable they are supposed to speak about. I argue that the self-narrative linguistic representation of the traumatic material is yet another metaphorical translation in the myriad transferences of trauma. Trauma's entrance into the body is mediated through the subject's physical and psychic strata—the posture of the body and mnemonic fissures—by metaphorical transferences; the processes by which it becomes conscious is also a figurative overleaping between conscious and unconscious surfaces. The verbalization of the material, again, is a translation from the realm of visual images to sounds. This last step is what I call *allegorical translatability*, by which I refer to the similar metaphorical transference that mediates trauma but here in the realm of linguistic representation. What is traditionally conceived to be the unspeakable (and untouchable) is, by this force, becomes yet another figurative translation, transference

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transfixed theorizations of memory may be complemented and complicated by the dynamic, dialectical, always changing and mobile mechanism of metaphorical transferences.



of the traumatic matter. This comportment opens up for a non-sublimating theorization toward traumatic testimonies.

The allegorical, in the sense I use it, is to be conceived in the fragments of *Nostalgia*, in discontinuity and ruptures, in the ruin. These notions echo Benjamin's theorization of the human body and history as expressed in his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1963).<sup>83</sup> He contests the conventional concept of allegory as a linguistic decoration, as an extended metaphor by understanding the allegorical as constitutive of fragments and originating from fractures, ruins, untidiness, and disorder. The allegory must constantly unfold in diverse new ways, and its basic characteristics are its ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning. The allegory and the metaphor, I will add, are self-relative: they evade totalization and categorization; they create their own referential system in which they are not subjected to any set of external value and criteria. They find their essence in the overleaping of spheres, overlapping of realms, transgression, and digression. The film's representation and aestheticization of lack and fragments thus exceeds our conventional judgmental moralizing of good and evil; rather, it offers a non-totalizing, non-possessive ethics to trauma in which it can be approached, touched upon, and spoken about.

*Nostalgia* bears the same transgression of discursive borderlines and conventional genres at its heart. Its essayistic heterogeneity emerges in diverse shapes: its fabric blends, for instance, close-ups of micro-textures with long shots of the land where macro-history is sedimented; Guzmán's voiceover with intimate interviews; the particularities of a historical moment with the universality of human and cosmic pasts. Moreover, it transmits these forms to the spectator through multiple

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<sup>83</sup> For Benjamin's notions on the allegorical, see the third chapter of his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.

media. Metaphorical mediation is pivotal to the essay and trauma as well as it is in the systems of media the film uses.

*Nostalgia* weaves together the medium of the digital video with that of still photography, black-and-white surfaces with colored ones. It does so, in order to raise acute questions about its own use of different media, to show the tensions and ambiguities immanent in them, and thus offer a complex understanding of overlapping surfaces. Sets of black-and-white photographs—of, e.g., the 19<sup>th</sup> century marginalized Indians of Chile, the Chacabuco concentration camp, Nuñez’s excavations, and the female relatives of the disappeared—are interjected into the narrative of the film. At one instance, Nuñez explains that women found tiny shards of bones buried in the desert and this is how they learnt that Pinochet’s *junta* had dug up the remains of the disappeared and fragmented them. The scene intercuts between the interview with the archaeologist and two black-and-white photographs: “When they took us there, [1] we, as archeologists, [2] noticed that the soil had been turned over.” The photographic image inserted at [1] shows Nuñez and his team, apparently at the outset of the excavation, with most of them turning their backs at the camera standing around a shallow, human-sized pit in the sand. The team is then stooping and crouching in, probably, the same space in image [2], still with their backs on the viewer, covered in a thick cloud of dust. They are in the zeal of excavating—fragments of a human corpse, supposedly. The images, both by themselves and together as a mini-sequence, bear the basic tensions inherent in photography. The sequence does not move on to a third image unveiling what we are so anxious to see; hopefully a skeletal fragment or, at best, a corpse maybe. Nor does either photograph unveil “the thing”; all we are allowed to look at is a team of archaeologist, and mostly their backs; moreover, our sight is further obscured by the all-permeating dust. These photos, in short, do not

reveal what the viewer's curiosity is aimed at: the actual skeletal bones promised by the narrative. We expect the images to unveil—in order to sooth our anxiety of not-seeing and suddenly explode this accumulated tension in the pleasure and horror of the spasm of seeing. Instead of unveiling, these images further build the anxiety of knowing/not knowing, seeing/not seeing by generating a tension between presence and absence. They also cast doubt on photography's ability to represent an outside, objective, reality.

Photography is “an hallucination that is also a fact,” film critic and theorist André Bazin asserts in “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1962).<sup>84</sup> In his conceptualization, photography and cinema show our obsession with realism, which is symptomatic of the struggle between aesthetic (the expression of a spiritual reality) and psychological (the duplication of outside reality) qualities. As opposed to paintings, photographs are essentially objective, since the image of the outside world is formed mechanically, automatically, without our creative intervention. “By virtue of the very process of its becoming,”<sup>85</sup> the photographic image is the reproduction of objective reality. Nonetheless, it affects our psychological dimension by its inherent quality of credibility: we are led to accept the image as real; it is re-presented for us.<sup>86</sup> Along the line of Bazin's argumentation, photography transfers reality from the object to the image with the power of credibility that forces us to believe in the facticity of the image. This credibility, or true-to-reality factor, is also referred to as the indexical nature of photography. One can trace the physical path of the index, the sign produced

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<sup>84</sup> André Bazin. “The Ontology of the Photographic Image.” in *What Is Cinema?* (1958-62. Trans. Hugh Gray. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2005.), 16.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>86</sup> Bazin, in fact, emphasizes that the major power of photography is found in its encounter with the viewer. This secondary transmission of reality, which is now rooted in the subjectivity of the viewer, is more important for him than the first one from the camera to the image.

by material contiguity, in case of analog systems, such as photography.<sup>87</sup> The image retains an indexical relationship to the object in these forms of transmission of the incoming light waves, due to the chemical, material, communication between surfaces.

Even though photography is considered to be highly indexical, its true-to-reality factor, in fact, betrays it at different stages. The hide-or-see game holds for the production of the image, as we experience it facing either excavation photo; it may do so on the receptor's side by simply not noticing a detail. Such a play with presence and absence is also apparent in the selection of the images; what is visible is as significant as what is either obscured or completely left out. In brief, there is as much subjectivity, creativity, and chance in any single photographic image as there is objectivity coded in the chemical path from the outside reality to the representation. "Photography," in Roland Barthes's words in his *Camera Lucida* (1981), "is pure contingency and can be nothing else."<sup>88</sup> The physical touching of materials of a specific chemical structure renders photography possible and, at the same time, allows for accidents, chance. Guzmán plays with contingency: contingency as the momentary touching of surfaces, as chance, and as material connectedness between the original event and the image finally incorporated in the narrative in an anxiety-inducing way. From the incoming photon to the viewer's perception of the photograph, matter is transmitted through overleaping spheres—and, here, via essayistic detours.

Only after fifteen long minutes does the director soothe our anxiety generated by the two photographs: a short black-and-white video shows the 1990 excavation of the Pisagua mass grave. We see archaeologists in the midst of revealing a huge grave

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<sup>87</sup> Laura U. Marks. *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press. 2002.), 162.

<sup>88</sup> Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. (Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang. 1981.), 28.

with several corpses. The camera gives us a closer shot of one such body: the team thoroughly examines its (his or her?) tattered clothes, and then, as we get an even closer look, they lift one of the withered, parched-skinned hands. What follows is the extreme close-up on its face, which provides us with the horror of seeing the thing we have been waiting for. The archaeologist's soft brush and rubber-gloved hand gently touch the crispy head; we can carefully scrutinize its teeth, dark hair, and missing nose. The excavation video is embedded in an interview with Nuñez, sometimes with his voice overlapping with the visuals: "We cannot forget our dead. The courts of Justice must do their work, human rights organizations too, everyone involved must take a stand. But we absolutely cannot forget a tragedy like this. We must continue the search," he addresses us. The delayed visual revelation, of what exactly the excavations in search for the bodies of the disappeared have disclosed, is thus entwined with the questions of justice Nuñez, and *Nostalgia*, raise. Or, differently put, the moment when the archaeologist articulates his claims demanding justice and historical remembrance arrives after the zigzag detour of the photographic referents from the two images to the video. Additionally, the ultimate terror of death is no sooner represented than we hear fragments of Vicky's and Violeta's testimonies. The camera ends on the close-up of the corpse's face just to switch back into another fraction of Violeta's interview. She is, again, seated on the rough, dry surface of the rocks surrounded by the lifeless, silent desert: the film's aesthetic finds its winding way toward social justice in such narrative loops of verbal testimonies, partial representations, fragmented shots, and tense, ambiguous cuts. Similarly to the deferral in women's particular stories, the visual revelation of death reaches us in the meandering way of Guzmán's, playful though serious, essayistic detours.

Built on the deferral of signifiers and a temporal delay, on absence and the partial, and mediated by metaphorical transferences, the photographic image is deeply rooted in the traumatic. In this regard, trauma lies in the nexus of Barthes's conceptualization of photography. Barthes transfers the notions of trauma into the heterogeneous and open territory of photographic, that is, chemical-material, contingency. He differentiates between the "studium" and the "punctum" of the photograph: The studium of discourses derives from an "average affect," a "general, enthusiastic commitment."<sup>89</sup> He understands the punctum of the photograph as trauma itself: it disturbs the homogeneity of the studium; it is a pierced wound in constant co-presence with the tepid studium. It is trauma itself, fixed to the detail, the partial, a specific fragment of the photographic image. The coded system of the studium allows for a certain cultural participation by reading its visual and social signs and promotes the universal, and thus necessarily reductive, corpus of discourses. The coexistence of the studium and the punctum epitomizes the constant reciprocity, interdependence, and counterpoise of all binaries: the universal and the particular, the whole and the fragment, the locatable and the unlocatable, and so forth.

I hypothesize that the "average affect" of rigidly bound discourses gives way to *pathos*, a non-particular feeling of sorrow and pity, a universalizing affect and interest. The punctum, however, encourages *empathia* in the sense that it provokes a "passion or feeling in" the object of interest. Pathos connotes a more harmonizing and smooth relation with the intention of educating, frightening, disgusting and with the promise of totality and full ego identity. It may provoke the transcendence of the trauma into the sublime, its transfiguration into the sacred area of unrepresentability, unspeakability, and untouchability. This ultimately prompts irresponsible, moralizing

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 26.

narratives and unethical foreclosures. It is a false disturbance which can only undulate but cannot prick. Pathos befalls me and loosely relates me to the other (if so); it is non-differentiated; whereas with empathy I invest in the specificity of the other. Empathy<sup>90</sup> penetrates and upsets the narrative and allows for a tense interplay between the surfaces of its subject and object. It is “feeling in” but not taking the position of the other. Its sensibility is a counterforce to identification, dichotomization, and victimization; it disturbs and excites. It is not a general grief, which may be directed toward a specific object, but it respects the singularity of one’s own suffering in the other’s. Subject and object, present and past, pleasure and pain are inextricably bound up in the transferential relations of empathy.

As much as the sensitivity of empathy and the meandering of the essay are the entwinement of realms, the disruption of boundaries and the touching of diverse surfaces, trauma, similarly, is a complex overleaping transference. The accidental happenings, touching, of trauma are the contingent surfaces of psychical and physical realms, conscious and unconscious themes, pain and pleasure, the living and the dead happen to touch, as if by chance. The latency inherent in photography—the time lapse between the light reflected by the object through the light emanating from the photograph to the visual mental image—is not necessarily an exclusively temporal delay but a more complex transference of matter. In a similar manner, I do not see the belatedness of trauma, Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit*, as a solely temporal delay in the manifestation of the traumatic matter—as the scholarly literature expresses or implies it. Rather, I believe, it is a spatial, temporal and dimensional displacement, deferral; an unregulated transference. It denotes the duplicity of tenses, positions the subject in

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<sup>90</sup> LaCapra sees what he calls “empathic unsettlement” the antidote for the objectifying nature of trauma. For him, it is a mode of representation which necessarily involves critical analysis against the empirical methods of historiography, and a stylistic comportment which upsets harmonizing narratives. Find more on “empathic unsettlement” in any of his books listed in the Bibliography.

the milieu of the trauma, and transgresses the supposed boundaries of the psychic and the physical. By pure contingency, it allows for physical and metaphysical surfaces, conscious and unconscious themes, pain and pleasure, the living and the dead meet, as if by chance. It cracks up the rigidity of bounded categories, the stability of discourses, disrupts genres—ultimately leading to the heterogeneity of the essay form, which feels comfortable wavering on the threshold of the physical and the metaphysical.

Resulting in even more heterogeneity, the black-and-white images are woven into the colored, and digital, texture of the film. In case of digital recording, a virtual connection is assumed between the object represented and the image instead of the material relation of analog recording. The translation into binary information, which digitization inevitably involves, kills, as some argue, the physical bond between the object and the image: digital imagery is not indexical any longer; the true-to-reality factor of the medium is lost. I will further look at the inherent problematic of indexicality, which is conceived as the debate over the physical-versus-virtual qualities of image-production, presenting them as either-or categories. Guzmán's committed and affective use of the two media counteracts the simplistic either-or ideology of indexicality.

“The lines you see on the screen form a spectrum”: the camera switches into the close-up shot of a monitor with line graphs. “This is the digital imprint of a star,” we hear Gaspar Galaz and the background roars of the observatory. “These are the calcium lines of the star,” he continues before George Preston explains the identicalness of the calcium found in celestial and human bodies. The sounds of science and, especially, the line graph representation of scientific data show us *Nostalgia*'s passionate belief in modern technology. *Nostalgia* is not at all afraid of



cutting-edge technology, nor does it blame its devices while exculpating itself from the guilty usage of the same technologies. On the contrary, it embraces technology, as it is apparent in this scene and in the sporadic close-ups of a huge telescope during its harsh, creaky movement. It represents technology in a not only lovable but intensely metaphorized way by, e.g., the opening eyes of the observatory windows, the “ears” of the radio telescope listening to the signs of the universe, and the telescopes themselves as the elongations of human vision. And, above all, the film delves in its own form as a digital video.

What seems to be at stake with digitization is what usually gets referred to as the crisis of the index: the index dies with digital media—due to the translation of physical particles into binary information. Contrary to analog, and therefore allegedly indexical, systems, in digital media the physical path of the particles is not traceable, since the process involves an additional step: the image is converted into data, a string of 0s and 1s, breaking the bond between the image and the physical referent. Digitization, in other words, breaks the indexical relation between the object and image—rendered as abstract information. In *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (2002), Laura Marks argues that digital media only appears to be symbolic, immaterial, and virtual but in fact it is just as symptomatic of the irreducible materiality of particles, the electrons, as the analog system. Electrons “remember,” she proposes; they can decide when to behave as particles or a wave, and this pattern determines analog or digital coding.<sup>91</sup> Following Marks’s concepts which I share, there is nothing purely physical or purely virtual about either the photographic image or its digital counterpart. The only “virtuality” or abstraction they

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<sup>91</sup> For more on analog and digital media and the particle versus wave-like nature of electrons, see the “Introduction” and “How Electrons Remember” chapters of Marks’s *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*.

can claim is to be found in veiling, in absence, what is not seen. The ambiguous presence/absence, veiling/unveiling dynamics of the excavation photographs and the partiality, fragmentation, and narrative loops of the film as a digital video expose all that is abstracted about these media.

I would add that the historical conceptualization of the index as originating from purely physical, material contiguity has therefore been a false one. Despite material contingency, the index, to a certain extent, has always been abstracted from the object represented—even in photography, a medium that is considered to bear the highest degree of indexicality. As we see in the two excavation images of *Nostalgia*, either taking them in themselves or in the specific manner they are enfolded into the digital context is indicative of the veiling/unveiling ambiguity inherent in photography.

Photographic images are already abstractions of reality thanks to this presence/absence game as well as the metaphorical overleaping between the surfaces the process involves. From the moment the photon touches the photoreceptive film, to the light emanating from the image, and then to the mental conception in the viewer, matter travels by overleaping spheres—with metaphorical transgressions.

Veiling and unveiling, knowing and not knowing, however, are not necessarily antithetical to one another. Luís Henríquez, in a scene shot in the former Chacabuco concentration camp, points to a rough surface where he and other political prisoners carved their names into the porous wall. The list is more than incomplete: the vast majority of the letters in the names are utterly missing. Henríquez, however, reads them out, also leading his index finger above the mostly missing letters, as if they were complete and visible. The puzzling conflict between visibility and invisibility, the memory engraved in his mind and the obvious lack in its physical, indexical, representation, and the verbal smoothness of his testimony and the absence of

signifiers is also that of an exciting non-binary, even harmony between presence and absence, the familiar and the uncanny.

The essayistic self, built upon aporias and ambiguities can bear the paradoxical synchronism of presence and absence, knowing and not knowing. As an ontological and stylistic disposition, it is constructed through the rejection of the phantasm of totality and full ego identity, on the one hand, and the embracement of the uncanny, lack, multiplicity, residues, and endless melancholia, on the other. It does not believe in healing, completeness and a full identity, only in instability, ambiguity, and the constant simultaneity of memory and oblivion, pleasure and pain, life and death. It originates from the all-enmeshing physical interconnectedness of matter and, at the same time, the uncanny. I understand the *Unheimliche* as the abstractedness of not seeing and not knowing, the non-traceable, non-indexical, non-physical dimension of our world. This abstraction is not a general, “average affection” but the acknowledgement and embracement of sovereign, particular momentums of lack, of trauma, of death. Borne from the rejection of the total, the universalizing, and accomplished melancholia, the essayistic self is a site of radical ambiguity, contingency and silent singularity. This is the very locus where an ethical and responsible comportment toward trauma emerges. One that is neither mastering or possessing, nor sublimating. Built on ruins and fragments, its ethical practice mimics the ontology of trauma rather than fight with positivistic certitude and wholeness.

The sovereignty of each and every traumatic history *Nostalgia* shares reflects the particularity of suffering and an ultimate silence of singularity. These momentums, which Barthes calls the pricking “micro-version[s] of death,”<sup>92</sup> are the minute specks on the thread of trauma pertaining to interminable melancholia.

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<sup>92</sup> Barthes, 24.

Momentary contingencies of spheres interfuse the motionless cosmic, oceanic, womblike silence of existence toward what Heidegger calls our “being-towards-death.” Rather than being pushed by the overwhelming forces of the past, we are pulled by an anterior future, that is, death. “We constantly project our lives onto the horizon of our death”<sup>93</sup> and this lies at the core of “being-towards-death.” Or, as the alleged first essayist Michel de Montaigne phrased, “to philosophize is to learn how to die.”<sup>94</sup> Indeed, love and death, pleasure and pain, are intricately caught up in one another in the fabric of *Nostalgia*’s aesthetics and our existence and lived experience.

Valentina Rodríguez is the daughter of detained and disappeared parents and was brought up by her grandparents who had to overcome their own pain so that she could have a healthy childhood. She works for the leading astronomy organization in Chile. “Astronomy helped me to give another dimension to the pain, to the absence, to the loss,” she reveals. “I tell myself it’s all part of a cycle which didn’t begin and won’t end with me,” she says while the frame shows the stars of the night sky in their slow trajectory over the desert mountains. “We are all part of a current, of an energy, a recyclable matter,” she says holding her baby in her arms. In this context, the tragedy of her grandparents and parents take on another, a cosmic dimension in which the interconnectedness of all matter and her embeddedness in her immediate environs provides the solace for absence.

However alone she is, we are, with pain, however solitary the sovereign singularity of (Valentina’s) trauma is, we are, as Guzmán advocates, thrown into the social, political, historical texture of our environment. Our “thrownness,” in Heidegger’s theorization, is the sensibility that we are always cast into a world we

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<sup>93</sup> Simon Critchley on Martin Heidegger’s “Being and Time” *guardian.co.uk*. 8 June 2009. Web. 11 Nov. 2011.

<sup>94</sup> Title of an essay found in Michel de Montaigne’s *The Essays of Montaigne*. (1580. Trans. E. J. Trechmann. New York: Random House, 1946. )

share with others and entangled in a certain social fiber; shortly, we are a “being-there” (*Dasein*).<sup>95</sup> The *Dasein* is not an isolated subject cut off from the realm of objects; we are beings who are always already in the world from which we cannot distinguish ourselves. To put it differently, I am not a wandering subject in the world constantly bumping into and stumbling upon objects from which I can separate myself. Rather, objects are caught up in the tissue of my existence and experience as much as I am entangled in the world of objects. It is a state of openness toward organic and inorganic entities in the environment in which I am inevitably absorbed. Each constitutive fragment of *Nostalgia*—be it immediately human with social imperatives or ultimately human with cosmic relatedness—shows us this experience of openness towards objects, including technology, and other humans. We are enveloped in a world of transferential relations with one another. The essay opens up the ethical way to commune around radical singularity in our specific “thrownness” into the environs for which we are responsible. It does so, through the metaphorical transferences between the shifting, locatable and unlocatable, physical and metaphysical surfaces that parcel our existence.

In one of the film’s closing scenes, we see Vicky and Violeta enter the observatory to meet Gaspar for the first time. The scene is imbued with the tension emerging from the clash of the diverse surfaces which have momentarily touched upon one another in the course of the film and are now aggregated in an immediate, physical encounter. Yet, it is overwhelming human humbleness and ultimate love toward objects, technology, the other that astonish us the most powerfully in these shots taken in the observatory. The film does not smooth the rough surfaces or soothe us with the gleaming promise of totality, wholeness, fully integrated identity, and

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<sup>95</sup> See it in the Critchley source on Heidegger.

resolution. *Nostalgia* remains in its painful and pleasurable state of dis-integrity, partiality, and radical openness; the fragments remain as such: fragments.

The moment Vicky looks into the telescope, opaque rain of flickering stardust begins to disperse the scene. These solar particles of cosmic dust are the elongations of our perception and senses, and connect us with our origins. They are matter that leaves the stars and condenses into refractory grains of cosmic dust: they are resistant, non-sublimable, obstinate memory. The cosmic particles have endlessly been travelling the light waves and illuminate our celestial origins; we can see our past and touch upon our trauma in them. They remind us of our envelopment in the earthly and solar nebulae and reveal the ultimate entanglement of souls in responsible relations.

Meanwhile, the radio telescope ALMA keeps its sixty ears open to listen to bodies whose light does not reach the earth.

## Epilogue

Patricio Guzmán's *Nostalgia for the Light* brings together diverse seemingly unrelated themes and realms, and artificially detached discourses. Not only does it reframe our understanding of the tragedies of Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship in Chile but it also provides us with a distinct look on individual and historical memory and trauma. By its essayistic comportment, it also challenges the conventional documentary representations which address historical witnessing and the melancholic cathexis to trauma. While creating its own self-reflexive and self-relative reality and locus of resistance, *Nostalgia* transfers the signifiers of historical meaning-making into the creative dimension of metaphorical overleapings which, ultimately, lead to an ethical praxis of trauma. Instead of fighting a total war with positivist certitude and moralizing, polarizing narratives against the injustices suffered, its essaying aesthetic allows for a disposition toward trauma which is built on residues, lacunae, and fragments.

As I proposed, the history-laden layers of the Atacama's space open up a gateway to human and cosmic past. The matter of distant and recent human histories sedimented in the desert temporalizes space via the memories absorbed in it. *Nostalgia*'s figuration of time-saturated, fissured, fragmented matter shatters the illusion of smooth continuity, progressive historicism, and unproblematic, spatialized memory. Via its own metaphorical representations, the film allows for the clash of time frames, of micro- and macro-histories, of the universal and the particular.

Bearing the duplicity of time, aporias, and ambiguity at its core, the essayistic endeavor simulates the ontology of trauma itself. By moving through the fissures of *Nostalgia's* aesthetic, I have laid the historically unprecedented common ground for trauma and the essay as form. Stemming from non-linear time, the overlapping of remembrance and oblivion, and the overleaping of conscious and unconscious themes and physical and metaphysical spheres, both the essay and trauma operate through originary metaphorical metamorphoses. Figurative transferences creatively transgress registers, genres, rigid discourses, and translate between surfaces of human existence and experience.

By such a conceptualization, new and inventive paths may be opened toward a more ethical approach to trauma. My hypothesis of the traumatic material as physical matter transferred by metaphorical overleaping is, I believe, the antidote for its foreclosure, possession, mastering by others, and sublimation into the realm of untouchability and unspeakability. It renders trauma re-presentable for the self and others. The figuration of the *Nachträglichkeit* as a pervasive spatial, temporal, and dimensional deferral and displacement of the traumatic matter allows for a more creative access to trauma in which memory and oblivion, conventionally-conceived literality and figurativeness, reality and fiction, conscious and unconscious, inside and outside, psychic and physical are no longer antithetical to one another. I introduced an ethical stance of metaphorical transferences by the term *allegorical translatability*. It potentially transforms the traumatic matter and translates it into the realm of verbal representation, thus rendering the material speakable. It may also foster the translocation of individual trauma to the realm of the social by the performative act of traumatic testimonies.



I speculated that metaphorical mediation is crucial to not only traumatic processes but the material form of the very media of the film too. Affectionately embracing both photography and the digital video and using them in an ambiguous way, *Nostalgia* poses questions about its own use of media as well as it addresses the problematic of material contingency, indexicality. I argued that what is considered to be purely indexical (photography) has, in fact, always been abstracted from the outside reality; whereas what is claimed to be lost, the physical path of the index, with digitization is not loss but the movement of physical matter overleaping surfaces via metaphorical transferences. The only “virtuality” digital media can demand is to be found in veiling, absence.

*Nostalgia* finds its zigzag way to social justice by delving in absences and ambiguity. It envelops and slowly illuminates the fragments of its political imperatives through the formal representations of fissures, cracks, aporias, and partiality. Guzmán addresses the long-ignored questions of unearthing a silent past, historical remembrance and forgetting, accountability and restorative justice, historical witnessing, and women’s re-membering into the society filtered through a subjective form generating from particularities. It also opens a fresh eye on trauma as the substratum of our relations to the other person and our environment. Only by the embracement of our ultimate absorption in this world and interconnectedness with the objects and other humans in it can we step on the narrow and meandering path toward a responsible ethics.

I chose to write about *Nostalgia* out of pure affection for the film, and realized the great potentials of this project and the unforeseen discursive correspondences and divergences along the way. In this work, I established a common foundation for the ontology of trauma, the essay film, and metaphorism. Along this argumentation, I

debated the unproblematic, homogeneous, progressing time of historicism which adopts a restorative, totalizing and positivist stance on history. I found a long-looked-for, all-embracing ethical disposition in *Nostalgia*, which avoids resolutions and foreclosures, polarizing and moralizing narratives, and mastering self-authentication. I also offered a diverse approach to Guzmán's reception as a filmmaker of expository, observational, history-in-the-making documentaries, by shedding light on the gradually more pervasive metaphorism in his oeuvre.

I see multiple possibilities for the further extension of my project. Or, I would rather say, an embryo of a project since so many diverse paths can lead from here, along which far-reaching quests can journey. With my approach of an essayistic comportment toward historical trauma, further Chilean essay documentaries may be analyzed; I especially have Raúl Ruiz's *Chilean Rhapsody (Confralandes, rapsodia chilena, 2002)* and Silvio Caiozzi's *Fernando Returns (Fernando ha vuelto, 1998)* in mind. Another possible route would visit the works of other exilic Chilean social documentary filmmakers, such as Miguel Littín or Marilú Mallet. Although the scholarly literature on Guzmán overemphasizes his exilic position, which I see as a shortcoming, I can imagine an exciting project folding the documentaries of exilic filmmakers together. Since the problematic of dictatorship memories and the witnessing of historical trauma are not specific to the Chilean context, the project may be expanded toward the farther horizons of other Latin American countries with a like historical past of dictatorship and human rights violations.

I would like to suggest that another possible, and desirable, way to go from here is the expansion of the shared ground I laid for the essayistic form and trauma theory. Any endeavor aiming at the further study of essay films in view of traumatic deferrals, transgressions and transferences could flesh out the stakes of my work even

more. Also, my theorization of trauma as originating from metaphorical transferences can be effective in the investigation of any literature or filmic text bearing trauma at its core. Toward verbal testimonies, *allegorical translatability* may open new dimensions in the study of the verbalization of the traumatic material and in the various theories by which such memories may be sieved into the social fabric.

It is said that if you are not utterly bored and tired by your own project by the time you have compiled your thesis, you have made an excellent choice with the object of study. I add one thing to this: if you are lucky, as I am, you find more than you have ever expected. Only through my own pain and pleasure, ephemeral momentums of death and love, could I connect my trauma to the other's—by hopefully more than less responsible referential relations both in my immediate environment and, with an imagined elongated empathy, to *Nostalgia's* affective beings. I sincerely hope that anyone who watches the film will discover similar pleasures and pains, and an essayistic self in her, through which she can find her own zigzagging, meandering way toward more responsible relations—and love.

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