



Nostalgia for the light



Director: Patricio Guzmán
Country: Chile
Date: 2010

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A review by Peter Bradshaw for *The Guardian*:



begin in the vast lunar landscape of the Atacama desert whose high altitude and dry climate made it the ideal site for a huge new observatory in 1977 and promised to open up the country as a scientific Mecca.

It isn't simply that Patricio Guzmán's Chilean documentary *Nostalgia for the Light* is moving: it has a tragic grandeur that really is very remarkable. It is deeply intelligent, intensely and painfully political, and yet attempts, and succeeds, somehow to transcend politics and perhaps even history itself. The film found its starting point in the title of a 1987 book by the French scientist Michel Cassé: *Nostalgia for the Light: Mountains and Wonders of Astrophysics*. It reflects on how a golden age for Chilean astronomy was due to

But in the same era Chile was destined to be a closed society, and Atacama became known as the site for the Chacabuco Mine prisons: the concentration camps instituted by General Pinochet for political opponents. Later, bodies were buried in secret mass graves in the desert. Some were uncovered – the resulting TV pictures have echoes of Cambodia, the former Yugoslavia and wartime Germany – but not all. Now, in 2012, the grim and bitter business of searching goes on. The wives and sisters of the disappeared, now old women, continue their daunting task in the colossal desert, and will do so until death overtakes them. Guzmán interviews one, Violeta Barrios, and it is a stunning and heart-rending piece of cinema.

The astronomy itself continues: the study in which many of the film's interviewees hope to find a distraction or redemption. There is something Kubrickian in the way Guzmán evokes the desert's massive alienness, and the images border on the hallucinatory. It is as if Atacama is the distant planet, being watched by another astronomer on the moon. One interviewee says Chile needs an observatory that can look at its own landscape, find the missing bodies, uncover and root out all its unresolved agony. One young astronomer, whose parents were taken away during the Pinochet years, says: "Astronomy has helped me give another dimension to the pain and loss." Her candour and courage are deeply moving. For Guzmán, the science of astronomy is not simply an ingenious metaphor for political issues, or a way of anaesthetising the pain by claiming that it is all tiny, relative to the reaches of space. Astronomy is a mental discipline, a way of thinking, feeling and clarifying, and a way of insisting on humanity in the face of barbarism. This is one of the films of the year.



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