

CINEMA AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN LATIN AMERICA .

Conversations with Filmmakers

**Edited by
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University of Texas Press, Austin

Chapter 5

Patricio Guzmán
(Chile)

Politics and the Documentary in People's Chile



Plate 6. Patricio Guzmán during the Parisian release of *The Battle of Chile Part II: The Struggle of a People without Arms*. Photo courtesy Patricio Guzmán.

Patricio Guzmán, founder of the Equipo Tercer Año, the team that made the monumental three-part documentary *La batalla de Chile* (*The Battle of Chile*, 1975-1979), studied filmmaking in Spain before returning to his native Chile with the electoral victory of the Popular Unity coalition in 1970. He directed two other documentaries, *El primer año* (*The First Year*, 1971) and *La respuesta de octubre* (*October's Answer*, 1972) before undertaking *The Battle of Chile*. Since the Chilean coup, he has lived in France, Cuba, and Spain.

Julianne Burton interviewed Patricio Guzmán in Havana in January 1977. The editor is grateful to Equipo Tercer Año member Federico Elton for comments and

Q: How would you describe *The Battle of Chile* to audiences who have not seen the film?

A: The film is an attempt to convey in as much detail as possible the nature and consequences of political events in Chile during the last year of the Allende government. What was happening was of great interest outside as well as inside of Chile, not just for other Latin Americans, but for the workers' movement on an international scale. What Chile represented, after all, was a sort of twentieth-century Paris Commune.

What was going on was of such intense interest that we realized that our camera should encompass as much as possible. We needed to use a wide-angle lens and to situate ourselves at as great a distance as possible from events while still being able to record them. We needed to make sure that the entire process was contained in the film—and not from a narrowly partisan point of view. We realized that it would be a mistake to analyze events from a single perspective, because the interesting thing was to represent *all* points of view within the Left. The same ideological battle then going on in Chile could occur in France or in Italy, for example, in a very similar way. And it will also occur in Mexico or in Venezuela when things enter a more critical phase. The far-reaching relevance of the political model then being tried in Chile was one of the factors that motivated us to make the film.

Q: How do the three parts of the film differ?

A: Part I, *The Insurrection of the Bourgeoisie*, tries to shed light on a fundamental aspect of the problem in Chile: the mass uprising of the middle and upper sectors of the population, in collaboration with foreign interests, and the actions taken by the government and by the Left as a whole to curb this right-wing insurrectionary escalation.

The primary contradiction in the first film is thus between fascism/imperialism/bourgeoisie on the one hand and the working masses on the other. The masses are only present in Part I as a point of reference, since the major focus of this segment is to demonstrate how the Right, through its use of the mass media, and financed by imperialist interests, succeeded in mobilizing the middle class "masses," thus preparing the way for the coup d'état. This is, of course, the most unique aspect of the Chilean coup: the right succeeded in arousing massive resistance among all sectors of the bourgeoisie and in the armed forces, as well as among one sector of the proletariat, the copper miners of El Teniente mine.

Part II, *The Coup d'état*, centers around the same contradiction. It continues to show the mass agitation of the bourgeoisie in opposition to the

clarifications provided in Santa Cruz, California, in March of the same year. The interview first appeared in *Socialist Revolution* (now *Socialist Review*) (Oakland, Ca.), no. 35 (September-October 1977) and was subsequently reprinted in pamphlet form by the New England Free Press, Somerville, Massachusetts.

democratic popular forces, but it adds a third dimension: the diverse and competing strategies that existed within the various groups on the left. This is why the second film is much more difficult than the first. Our decision to maintain the same dialectical style of narration (the voice-over narrator provides only the most essential background information; the bulk of the analysis is given directly by those who participated in the events the film records) means that the viewers have to grasp this triple contradiction for themselves.

Part III, *Popular Power*, is the simplest of the three. It is a very affectionate evocation of the mass organizations during the Popular Unity government, and in particular during 1973. These were very practical organizations that answered concrete needs like how to get food and supplies to the population, how to get a greater yield from a plot of land, how to organize a peoples' supply store [*almacén popular*], how to set up a production committee in the factory.

There were many times during the struggle in Chile that the popular forces would distance themselves temporarily from the action to discuss the nature of the socialist state that was then in the early stages of construction. This was a very calm and measured process, very touching at times. This theoretical development of the workers and peasants—always based on their practical experience—was extremely impressive. The footage we have of these occasions is the most convincing proof of the enormous level of awareness among the Chilean people. Yet if we had inserted these sequences along with the rest of the footage, such discussions would have appeared unreal in the midst of pre-civil war conditions. So, as we edited the first and second parts of the film, we set aside all these sequences that depicted the incipient stages of people's power in Chile for a third segment, which would complement but be different from the first two.

Q: How many people set out to make the film, and how did you decide to go about it?

A: The film was made by a team of five people. We began filming in February of 1973. But before starting the actual shooting, we had frequent meetings to decide on the approach we would use.

From the very beginning, our idea was to make an analytical film, not an agitational one. Naturally, we thought our audience would be Chilean. Three possible roads seemed open to our country at that time: a fascist coup d'état like the one that actually occurred, or a civil war that offered two alternatives—the victory or the defeat of the popular forces. None of us believed at that juncture that the existing situation could sustain itself for long.

We all thought that, in the event of a civil war, the popular forces would eventually win. We expected there to be a split in the armed forces, which

never actually occurred, given that the soldiers and sailors who were loyal to Allende were identified and purged before the September 11 military coup.

If the civil war were to result in a victory for the popular forces, we reasoned, our footage would be of great use to the workers, the peasantry, and the Chilean Left as a whole because in the first stage of constructing a new socialist state, it is very important to analyze what has gone before. If there were to be a coup d'état, we knew that we had all the more reason to do what we were doing, since our footage would be a sort of commemoration and tribute to all that the Chilean people had accomplished in those years of democratic peoples' government. And so the coup, though it certainly succeeded in preventing the screening of the film in Chile (for the time being at least) did not really alter either our purpose or our approach. These have been invariable.

The members of the group got together in December of 1972 and agreed that the most important thing to do in Chile at that particular moment was to make a film about what was going on in the country from day to day. Any fictional screenplay, any film structured around a plot—no matter how good—seemed to us to be completely upstaged by contemporary events.

There was another consideration as well. Since the organization of the state was still holding together, it was actually possible to film the events of the class struggle with relative calm. You could record what was going on as easily as you could film a landscape. It was possible to capture the different sectors involved in the class struggle as if in cross-section. It's true that a certain daring was required, since we infiltrated the Right sometimes at great physical risk, but certain guarantees still existed, and we took advantage of them. We also devised our own safeguards, carrying multiple sets of press credentials at all times. One day we claimed to be filming for Chilean television, the next day for French or Swiss TV.

Q: Were there particular films or filmmakers to whom you looked for models in the project you were about to undertake?

A: When we started to debate the methods we would use to make the film, we didn't have any instruction manual to indicate how to go about documenting our own reality. There are very few documentary theorists anywhere on whom we could rely. We had access to all of Cuban documentary cinema, and it was through repeated viewings of these films that we extracted what were for us the essential elements. Julio García Espinosa's *Tercer mundo, tercera guerra mundial* [*Third World, Third World War*, Cuba, 1970] seemed to us to offer a particularly important model.

The Cuban film magazine *Cine cubano* carried translations of the writings of the Russian revolutionary filmmaker Dziga Vertov. Julio García Espinosa's essay "For an Imperfect Cinema" was also an important theoretical source. We also read some unpublished pieces by the

contemporary French documentarist Chris Marker,¹ who began to correspond with us, and several articles by other French filmmakers, including Louis Malle on the filming of *Calcutta* [1969].

Next we put together a sort of manifesto listing various approaches that we might follow—what to do, how to do it, when to do it, and why. We tried to develop a system of classification for all the kinds of documentary with which we were familiar: simple exposition, like the film I mentioned by Louis Malle, for example; the agitational documentary, like almost all the films that were being made in Chile at that time, and like the majority of the Cuban documentaries; and the analytical documentary, which didn't really exist in Chile, although many Chilean films had some analytical sequences. The closest thing to what we had in mind was Julio García Espinosa's *Third World, Third World War*. We were not familiar with Pastor Vega's *¡Viva la república!* [*Long Live the Republic!* Cuba, 1972] or with other films that were made later on.

Q: What about the influence of other Latin American films? For example, those that had been shown at the Viña del Mar Festivals in Chile in 1967 and 1969?

A: According to the criteria we developed, *La hora de los hornos* [*The Hour of the Furnaces*, Argentina, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, 1968] might be classified as an analytical film. But it never had the same grip on us as *Third World, Third World War*, for example. *Vidas secas* [*Barren Lives*, Brazil, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 1963] although it is a fiction film, uses a kind of expository documentary style. There were a few documentaries by the Brazilian filmmaker Leon Hirszman that we liked a lot. Of the Uruguayan films, we were only familiar with one, Mario Handler's *I Like Students*, but it seemed to be pure agitprop. We also considered all the documentaries that had been made under the Popular Unity government in Chile, by the Left as a whole and in particular by those who worked in experimental filmmaking with Pedro Chaskel. But we perceived all of these as being either denunciations of particular problems, or examples of agitprop or of partisan filmmaking, without any real analysis of what was about to happen.

Our next step was to write out various work methods. The first one we analyzed was the chronological one, that is, the attempt to film what is going on around you day by day or week by week, in sequence. We discovered that, although this might be very interesting, many events occur only as the result of a long process—a process that, in the last analysis, often seems invisible. What you are able to film is the culmination of the process, the final, visible event: the workers taking over a factory, for example. But to film this culminating point is to leave out a whole series of important considerations: Why did they take over the factory? What does the government think of the occupation? Who are the leaders of the takeover?

How do the workers perceive their interests in this situation? What solutions to their problems do they seek via this route? All this occurs *before* the takeover. So we concluded that a chronological structuration was too incomplete and superficial. We had already used a similar approach in an earlier film, *The First Year*, and had no desire to repeat it.

Later we realized that if, for example, you are going to film a factory takeover the moment that it occurs, you must initiate a whole series of inquiries to find out why, when, where, how, who, and for whom. You begin to realize that by delving deep enough into a single problem you touch on many different aspects of the larger situation. It is like the expanding waves, which keep growing outward after you throw a stone into a pool. We called this approach "the nucleus method" because it involves locating a nucleus of conflict within the panorama of the class struggle. In the process of filming a single event, you begin to touch on other related ones.

We then looked at another approach, that of analyzing reality chapter by chapter, section by section. For example: education, the social sector of the economy, the conflict between Allende and the bourgeois Parliament, the mass insurrection that the forces of imperialism were instituting in Chile with the help of the bourgeoisie. Each of these is a sample chapter. If you take one, then another, and then another, with five or six you will have the key segments. But then you realize that the chapters have no firm boundaries to separate one from the other. They are all interrelated, and you are not able, for example, to isolate the conflict between Allende and the Parliament because it is in some way connected to all the other issues. This is the reason why we abandoned this approach.

But the other approach, the nucleus method, also involves substantial risks, because sometimes you can confuse a single problem, especially one at the base level (part of the workers' movement), so that you begin to think that the entire revolutionary process is tied to this one phenomenon. This is not really the case, since there is always a dialectical relationship between the superstructure and the base—between the political parties and the masses, for example. There is a tendency to get off the track a bit and to conclude that the revolution is equivalent to the creation of a peoples' supply store or the government's institution of the Food and Price Control Boards. So you conclude that the revolution is purely a workers' phenomenon in which the workers and the peasantry are the center and the heart. Naturally, this is a sector of key importance, absolutely essential, but it is not itself the complete picture. This nucleus-by-nucleus approach leads you to over-emphasize particular sectors. You confuse small representative and symbolic elements, when what one is attempting to do is to encompass the entire picture.

Q: It sounds like there was no ready-made approach sufficient to your analytical needs. How were you able to get around this impasse?

A: After carrying out a sustained critique of other approaches, we came to the conclusion that what we were after was the dialectical sum of all of them. We also concluded that the important thing is not so much to settle on a single fixed methodology as to single out theoretically the key points at which the Chilean class struggle intersects. Which are the key points through which the proletariat and the peasantry must pass in the conquest of state power? And which are the key points through which the bourgeoisie and its imperialist allies must pass to reappropriate that power? If you locate these fifteen or twenty battlegrounds within the larger conflict and you pin them down one by one, you're going to have a dialectical vision of what is going on. This was the approach we finally agreed to use.

The theoretical outline we developed divided Chilean reality into three major areas: ideological, political, and economic. Our point of departure was a Marxist analysis of reality, which we then applied in small chapters that accounted for the seventy-odd divisions in the outline. All the members of the group took part in the process of developing this outline, with the help of the editorial team from the magazine *Chile Hoy* and in particular Marta Harnecker.

The "screenplay" thus took on the form of a map that we hung on the wall. On one side of the room, we listed the key points of the revolutionary struggle as we saw them. On the other side, we would list what we had already filmed. For example, if the problem of education appeared on one wall, on the other we noted what schools or universities we had gone to and what specific sequences corresponded to the theoretical section. So, we had the theoretical outline on one side and the practical outline of what we had actually filmed on the other.

Q: In addition to the complex theoretical and methodological decisions you describe, did you face practical obstacles as well?

A: Definitely, since at the time we began to film there was no raw film stock in Chile. It was one of the many commodities kept out by the economic blockade imposed by the United States. (The blockade also produced a shortage of American and European theatrical films.)

To try to import raw film stock through official channels could have taken a year or more. So I wrote a letter to Chris Marker explaining our projected film and our desperate need for film stock. Within two weeks, we got a package containing the film we needed.

Of course, the major practical obstacle was the nature of the project itself. What we were setting out to do was extremely ambitious, overwhelmingly so. As Chris wrote in his letters, "What you are trying to do is insane, it's impossible, it's just too big." And I would write back saying, "You may be right, but it doesn't matter. We're going to make the effort, no matter what." All the members of the group started out from the same shared realization: that what we were about to attempt was impossible, but that we

were determined to undertake it anyway.

We began to film almost every day, on an average of twenty to twenty-five days per month. Our equipment was very limited: one Eclair camera, one Nagra sound recorder, two vehicles. We worked without ever giving any public notice of what we were doing. We didn't grant a single interview or press conference. We didn't tell anyone except the absolutely indispensable people what we were about. These precautions enabled us to engage in a kind of semiclandestine filmmaking, allowing us to infiltrate the Right with a good deal of confidence and, at the same time, to film our own forces without the cumbersome and disruptive presence of a huge team of filmmakers.

Since the workers knew and trusted us, and since we always tried to be as unobtrusive as possible, we could work among them very much at ease. We would arrive at a given meeting hall and immediately set up the key light, but we would try not to distract people with a lot of cables and loud conversations. We almost never spoke among ourselves in anything but a whisper. We came to be so in tune with one another that, in the final months of the filming, the process was almost automatic and communication between us on the shoot was reduced to an exchange of glances.

We went out to film almost every day. We had a clearly defined work plan. We usually ate in the same factories where we were filming. Often we would sleep in the truck. There was a great sense of fraternity generated by this process, not just because we were all very fond of one another but also because we knew that what we were doing together was of crucial importance. We were all convinced of the relevance of the project, and that was extremely important in binding us together and in helping us to develop a smooth work process.

The film was a collective undertaking, but within the collective a certain division of labor was always preserved. That's why the film has a director. In other words, we did not confuse our idea of a collective with the kind of idealist notion of a group in which everyone is responsible for everything and for nothing. Instead, each of us was responsible for a particular aspect.

Federico Elton was in charge of fund raising and production. Jorge Muller was the cameraman and director of photography. Bernardo Menz was the sound technician. José Pino was the assistant director and handled the lighting. Marta Harnecker collaborated in the developing of the shooting script, and occasionally joined us on the shoots.

There was no contradiction between my role as director and the rest of the collective, and there isn't to this day. That would be absurd. The director's role is to give direction to the collective, taking advantage of all the opportunities that arise for a dialectical analysis of the existing situation. As a group, we had many heavy ideological debates because our members were from different political parties. But I would continually warn the group against getting mired down in partisan disputes, because that's where we

would have to trade in our wide-angle lens for a narrow point of view. That was the main role I played as director within the collective.

Since the film project was semiclandestine, as I said before, and we had specific divisions of labor, none of us, except me and my *compañera*, knew where the film was stored. After each shooting session, I would collect the cans of film. I'd store the magnetic sound tape in one place and the film footage in another. Only the two of us knew where this material was kept because in critical situations, the less known the better.

Q: Could you describe how the group worked together during the actual shooting process?

A: Our method was not to disperse the crew, but always to stay close together. I would stand next to Jorge Muller, the cameraman, surveying the action and trying to anticipate what was to come. Whenever what was being filmed reached a climax—as soon as I'd see, for example, that the workers and the fascist groups had hit a high point in their street battle—I would say to Jorge, “Now you need to climb up on this box here, but don't look at it. Keep on filming. I'll steady you while you climb up. Now you have the best possible angle on the whole thing. Stay there until I tell you, because to the left a troop of police whom you can't see yet are about to come into view. As soon as they come into range, close in on them.”

This kind of interaction accounts for the *mise en scène* of the film. Since I tried to anticipate for him what was about to happen, I could tell him to pan, to lower the camera, to raise it, instructing him to make certain movements that are much more readily identified with fictional than with documentary filmmaking. But why shouldn't they be used in documentary films if they enrich the medium?

We had hand signals that we used to communicate with one another. That is how I would give instructions to Bernardo Menz, the soundman. The assistant director was in charge of turning on the lights. Sometimes I would be whispering directions to the cameraman when the assistant director, at some distance from us, would flash the lights. That was a signal to be on the alert, that something important was about to happen.

Q: What prior training did you have as a filmmaker?

A: I studied film in Spain, at the Escuela de Cine in Madrid, in the late sixties. My major interest then was fictional filmmaking, not documentaries.

I returned to Chile in 1970, with the triumph of the Popular Unity coalition in the national elections. I was all set to make fiction films. I had various screenplays in hand, and even some possibilities for financial backing. But I soon realized that my ideas were completely outstripped by reality. When you see a workers' demonstration pass by your window, and you listen to the rhymed slogans they are shouting, it is much more appealing simply to follow that demonstration. They go to the government palace and call for Allende; Allende comes out and speaks to them; meanwhile, the right

wing is organizing on the other side of the square with the intention of provoking an incident; a street fight ensues. What is going on is amazing because the class struggle is so visible and so compelling.

A whole people waking up after having been dormant for several decades—peasants organizing land takeovers, workers occupying factories, the government nationalizing industry, and the Right withdrawing, closing in on itself for the time being. At last the possibility of a real revolution exists. To bear witness to this is so absorbing and so marvelous that I began to feel that to make a film with actors, makeup, costumes, and dialogue written by someone else didn't make any sense at all. It was completely outstripped by what we were all living through.

And so, in 1971 I got very wrapped up in making *The First Year*. It is a very sensuous film, full of affection but without analysis, a kind of commemoration of what was going on at the time. The film was very well received in Chile and abroad. Many said that it was precisely the kind of filmmaking that we should be developing at that time. Chris Marker was very taken with it. He took a print back to France with him and had it dubbed into French. Many leading French actors and actresses—Françoise Arnoul, Yves Montand, Simone Signoret—participated in the dubbing, and they produced an excellent version.

In 1972 I began work on a fiction film called *Manuel Rodríguez*, based on the life of a guerrilla hero of the Chilean war for independence. He was the one who prepared the way for San Martín to come and free Chile from the Spanish. The film has a lot in common with Manuel Octavio Gómez's *The First Charge of the Machete* [Cuba, 1969], since it is a kind of post-facto historical documentary, which exposes and attempts to take apart the means through which it is told. We hadn't seen *The First Charge*, nor had we met Manuel Octavio, but the projects were extremely similar, as I realized later when I came to Cuba. We only managed to film two or three sequences. We had to stop work because of the truck owners' work stoppage of October 1972. The film was suddenly left without funding, and we had to abandon the project.

The truckers' "strike" was the first coordinated offensive by the middle class as a whole against the forces of the Left. The result was an incredible shortage of goods and resources. Although the country continued to move forward, because of extraordinary efforts on the part of the workers and the peasants along with other allied segments of the Popular Unity coalition, we suffered an incredible drain of funds. Our balance of payments was thrown completely off: all imported goods stopped coming in; there were no bank credits; stockpiles of spare parts were used up and could not be replaced.

Raw film stock was one of the very last priorities. Chile Films, the national film production company under whose auspices we were making *Manuel Rodríguez*, ceased being a production company in the broad sense

and was only able to produce newsreels. We realized that through Chile Films we weren't going to obtain anything, so we left the organization and began trying to figure out solutions on our own.

We made a film called *October's Answer*, which is about sixty minutes long. It simply attests to how the working class, particularly the *cordones industriales* [industrial belts made up of factories that have been taken over by their workers] in Santiago, managed to keep production going in spite of the boycott organized by the Right. The factories continued to function even though the engineers and technicians refused to come to work, because the workers realized that with one engineer "borrowed" from somewhere else, they could coordinate production and keep the factory going. They began to get together with the workers of neighboring factories, thus developing territorial concentrations of factories under workers' control. Theoretically, these *cordones industriales* also had a higher level of organization, called the *comando comunal*, which also included students, housewives, and middle-level professionals. But this level of organization was only implemented among the workers of Barrancas, and in a rather embryonic stage at that. As soon as we finished shooting, we gave the film over for agitational use. Shot in 16mm, it was destined exclusively for use in the mobile circuits organized by Chile Films to bring relevant cinema into factories, schools, and neighborhoods.

It was at this point that we definitively decided that all fictional options were completely overruled and that what was necessary was a great analytical film. We decided to dedicate all our energies to this end and wrote to Chris Marker requesting film stock. We organized the collective, got hold of an Eclair and a Nagra, and threw ourselves into the filming, which lasted a year.

Q: How many members of the collective had prior filmmaking experience?

A: It is interesting that the collective was almost completely made up of people without prior experience. It was the soundman's first film. The production chief, an architect by training, was also without previous film experience. The assistant director was a sociologist and an economist; it was the first time he had worked on a film. Marta Harnecker, one of Chile's leading political theorists, had worked on *The First Year*. (We had been friends for several years. I met her when she was studying Marxism in Paris with Althusser in 1967. She returned to Chile at the same time I did, when Allende came into power.) Jorge Muller virtually shot his first film with *The Battle of Chile*, since the work which he'd done prior to this film—with Raúl Ruiz, for example—failed to reveal his extraordinary talent. You can see that the potential is there, but it was in our group that he began to realize his creative capacity fully.

The Battle of Chile was also a completely new experience for me, since the blueprint for making such a film does not exist. I'm the member of the

group with the most formal training, but in such circumstances, though preparation is important, the most crucial thing is a clear political vision. And this was where we all coincided.

Q: You have alluded more than once to Chile Films. Could you elaborate on the organization and function of this state film enterprise during the Allende years?

A: I spent two years as part of Chile Films. During the first year I worked under Miguel Littin as head of the Documentary Film Studios division. There were five divisions in all: fictional film, documentary, animation, childrens' films, and educational films. Miguel was head of the entire concern, though he only remained about a year, until the end of 1971. When he resigned, we all resigned en masse along with him.

Q: Can you specify what motivated all of you to leave Chile Films?

A: Well, the first thing to keep in mind is that the issue of film in Chile is not a separate question, but is tied to the issue of the means of communication in general. Film was not prey to a unique set of problems; its problems were shared by the other mass media as well. It's just that the crisis was more apparent and more pronounced in the film industry.

What happened is that the ideological struggle going on within the Left played itself out in microcosm within Chile Films. There were always two blocs within the Popular Unity coalition: one sector favored following the "peaceful road to socialism" to its final consequences; the other sector, supported from outside the party by the MIR [Movement of the Revolutionary Left], argued that the potential for progress within the existing state apparatus was limited, since that apparatus could be expected to break down as soon as the class struggle reached a critical point.

Both these factions wanted to control Chile Films, so the struggle that developed within the organization was a political and, in the final analysis, an ideological one: What kind of cinema did we want? How was it to be made? To whom was it to be directed? What forms would it adopt? The two factions were in head-on conflict over these questions because the former favored an agitational, analytical cinema with the goal of maintaining the existing organization of the state and never giving the right wing any indication that we had any intention of abandoning the law; the latter faction, likewise in favor of an agitational and analytical kind of filmmaking, saw the cinema as a vehicle for preparing the masses for a more or less imminent civil war.

These are roughly the outlines of the struggle waged within Chile Films. Both Miguel and I were part of the group that foresaw the breakdown of the state apparatus. Chile Films found itself without film stock at a particular juncture because the Popular Unity government decided that there was such internal chaos within the organization as to make it functionally inoperative. They would only supply the necessary raw film stock after some sort of

political accord had been reached. Miguel finally said, "OK, I'm no longer going to take responsibility for this. I prefer to leave, to make my own films independently and to keep working for film and for the revolution on other fronts but not as an administrator or a bureaucratic functionary."

That was more or less how we all saw things at the time. Our goal was to take action, to make films—no matter how—because there is always going to be an ongoing ideological struggle. Since the historical period was so intense, almost everyone left Chile Films to form small working collectives. The avalanche of events was so overpowering that no one could remain behind closed doors saying, "Well, as long as the ideological struggle isn't resolved, I'm not going to do anything." Instead, people continued to make films despite the ideological debates, reasoning more or less as follows: "If Chile Films is shut down or its activities curtailed, it really doesn't matter. Let the people involved solve the problem. We'll just go on making films." That's what we did, and so did Miguel Littín, Sergio and Patricio Castilla, Pedro Chaskel with his Experimental Film group, and others, making films from their particular work base.

In 1972, the second year of the Popular Unity government, there was an institutional reorganization of Chile Films with the goal of giving a certain degree of economic coherence to its film production, something that we had not done. We had tried to spark a kind of broad and nonsectarian creative drive. The subsequent stage was certainly, from an administrative point of view, the most coherent period for that state film enterprise. But it was sterile in creative terms. Even though what Chile Films was about had at last been defined in political terms, the majority of the filmmakers were no longer part of the organization, having already decided to work outside it. And they were not about to return, because Chile Films really had nothing to offer them except the rental of cameras, lighting equipment, and so on.

Q: How would you go about placing the conflict within Chile Films in the context of the intense ideological battle being waged in other sectors of the communications media at the time?

A: The process that occurred in Chile Films was similar to what was happening in television, newspapers, and radio stations. The difference is that the radio stations, for example, were in private hands. If you own a radio station, then you determine the ideological slant that characterizes that particular station. If the station is controlled by a particular party, it carries that particular line, and there is no internal conflict. Likewise with the press: different publications express different points of view according to the interests that control them. The ideological struggle between different sectors of the Left, for example, is resolved at the level of the individual reader, who might read several different newspapers corresponding to various leftist groups and then develop a personal synthesis of the issues.

The struggle in the sphere of television was also a tense one, since all

political lines had to coexist on a single channel. But at least the image of the enemy was clearer in this medium. There were no right-wing filmmakers in Chile; the people who formed part of Chile Films were all on the left, so we struggled among ourselves. More than half of the television sector, on the other hand, was controlled by technicians and directors who belonged to the right wing or to the Christian Democrats. Therefore the ideological struggle related to TV always had an attenuating factor: "We can debate all we want among ourselves, but we can't forget that the enemy is right here in our midst." The issues became clearer at an earlier stage.

Generally speaking, the Right consistently won the ideological battle because it had greater means at its disposal, including 70 percent of the radio stations and 80 percent of the press. Consequently, we were always at a disadvantage. But the problem was intensified by the fact that we on the Left were always divided by at least two or three competing strategies. One sector, for example, felt that television should be calm, cautious, and objective, because the majority of those who own TV sets belong to the petite bourgeoisie and the majority of the petite bourgeoisie support the Christian Democrats. Therefore, they argued, if you were to produce a militant, combative kind of programming with the aim of mobilizing people, you would offend those sectors of the population who would then object vociferously, claiming that the government was trying to manipulate people, to persuade them by force, and you would have yet another conflict on your hands. Another sector argued that no matter how cautious, calm, and persuasive you are in your programming, the petite bourgeoisie is still going to accuse you of being biased and manipulative. Since you'll always be at a disadvantage, they reasoned, it is better to make no concessions and instead to dedicate all one's energy to developing a militant, combative kind of programming, consistently on the offensive, aimed at mobilizing the workers and peasants.

This debate about what was to be done in the communications sector is simply another version of the debate about what was to be done in the Chilean revolutionary process as a whole, since the media are not independent or isolated but are part of the larger struggle for political power. The two poles—peoples' power, and the strategy of the antifascist front—were fighting and debating among themselves up until the very day of the coup.

Although it is true that imperialist interests, international reaction, and the national bourgeoisie are responsible for the coup, the defeat is also due to the lack of a unified political direction among the forces of the Left, to a permanent vacillation between two conflicting strategies, and to a Byzantine ideological debate about what needed to be done.

Q: Did all work on *The Battle of Chile* come to an immediate halt when the coup of 11 September 1973 occurred?

A: Actually, we continued to film in the aftermath of the coup, as long as our raw film stock lasted—but in the relative safety of our living rooms, from the television set. No one in the world except us thought to film the first televised communiqué of the junta, for example, on the very evening of the coup. We have other footage as well—the swearing in of the junta, the bombing of the national palace from the army's point of view. It seems unbelievable now that they actually televised such things. It shows their lack of judgment, their ignorance of the media.

Q: Did the coup place members of the collective in imminent danger? How many of you left the country?

A: All the members of the production team—with one crucial exception—left Chile after the coup. We managed to escape in an orderly and staggered fashion, without having to take asylum in any of the embassies, because we decided that there were many others who were more important. We camouflaged ourselves so that no one there would discover that we were filmmakers, and we were allowed to leave the country. The assistant director was the first to leave. He was a Spaniard who, like all foreigners, was in great danger because of the xenophobia of the military junta. I was the next to leave, followed by the producer, and, after him, the soundman.

It was decided that Jorge Muller, our cameraman, should be last. He managed to find work as a technician in advertising, but in November of 1974, more than a year after the coup, he and his *compañera*, Carmen Bueno, were arrested and imprisoned. It was a totally unexpected move. There was no evidence against them, and no charges were ever made. They were simply made to disappear. The families were never notified. Carmen was almost certainly murdered by the junta, but to date we have not received any confirmation of Jorge's death. The Swedish and French governments made high-level appeals for Jorge's release and an international campaign was mounted, but Pinochet's government continues to deny that he was ever arrested.

I was arrested shortly after the coup, and spent two weeks in the National Stadium. One of my neighbors denounced me. My house was searched five times. They learned that I was a technician, a teacher of communications, but nothing else; they never found out that I was a filmmaker.

While I was under arrest, the other members of the group got together and prepared themselves for the contingency of being arrested as a group. They assumed that, since I had already been taken, all the military would have to do is pull the thread, and they would all be arrested. They had to decide whether to begin to get the material out, or to hide it even more. They met with my *compañera* and decided to get the footage out of the country, formulating a plan for doing this. At this stage, it was not just the group's problem, but a concern of the entire Chilean resistance movement. Everyone carried out his or her part. No one broke down at any moment.

They managed to stay calm. Little by little, the footage began to leave the country. Amazingly enough, not a single meter of the twenty hours of footage was lost, not even a fragment of the magnetic sound track, but it took us six months to recover it all.

Of the five of us, four spent time in jail after the coup. Federico Elton, the chief of production, had his house searched and sacked twice; they took him to the Escuela Militar. While Bernardo Menz, the soundman, had the footage in his possession, the building he lived in was searched from top to bottom—except for his apartment. This was pure chance, a reflection of the chaos and total arbitrariness that existed at that time. Under those circumstances, with a little luck, you could pass undetected in a whole range of situations. That period of arbitrary repression lasted about six months. In the subsequent period—once the DINA [Chilean secret police] was organized and all intelligence agencies centralized—the repression became more selective and it became much harder to leave.

Q: Did you attempt to find support for finishing the film in Europe before deciding to come to Cuba?

A: Yes, we asked Chris Marker for financial help, since he had been very involved throughout. Chris spoke with Simone Signoret, Yves Montand, Frédéric Rossif, and others. But I began to realize that the film was enormous, that it was not one film but several, and that it was necessary to have the security to edit the footage calmly. It was not to be subjected to a standard production schedule—three months for the editing, three months for the sound mixing, and so on. It would be impossible to do it that way.

And so I began to tell Chris that we really needed a great deal of money, because we had to support the members of the group and their families, we had to contract new people to work on assembling the film, and above all, it had to be done at a leisurely pace. Other films would be coming out for the purpose of agitation and solidarity, but this film was a treatise, and had to be made at its own pace. A year, two years—it didn't matter, because ten years from now the film will still be relevant. Chris understood this reasoning, but we were unable to raise sufficient funds. Time was going by, and we kept meeting with various people, but getting nowhere.

That was when we met in Paris with Alfredo Guevara and Saúl Yelín of the Cuban Film Institute. "We would like to invite you to come to Havana to ~~finish the film,~~" Saúl and Alfredo said to us. "You'll have access to all that you need. It's up to you as a group to decide." We talked it over, and we agreed. We all came to Cuba. And here we had the good fortune to be reunited with Marta Harnecker, who got here two months before we did.

We also got back together with our editor, Pedro Chaskel, here in Cuba. He had not taken part in the filming nor had he been directly associated with the group in Chile, though we were certainly close friends. When I left Chile, I asked my *compañera* to tell Pedro that he was the person I wanted to edit

the film, if he were willing to do it. He agreed, and it was for that reason that he decided to leave Chile, because he had a concrete task to do. Had that not been the case, he would have stayed.

Q: How would you characterize the editing style used in the film?

A: Pedro is an extraordinary editor because he respects the integrity of the material. He uses a “low-profile” style of montage so that the editing is barely noticeable. This was *very* important. I don’t think that the job could have been done with another editor.

Once in Cuba, we entered into a marvelous sustained dialogue with Julio García Espinosa, who served as the Cuban Film Institute’s adviser on the film. We already felt a great affinity with him, because of our debts to “For an Imperfect Cinema” and *Third World, Third World War*. We all grew in many ways—politically, ideologically, cinematographically—through our work with him. Julio helped us distance ourselves from the experience we had so recently and so intensely lived through. We were still traumatized when we arrived in Cuba, asking ourselves, “How did this happen? How is it possible?” It was Julio who helped us situate ourselves theoretically with regard to what had happened in Chile and to adopt a historical perspective, which was essential in enabling us to deal with the material calmly.

Julio’s role was to facilitate the contributions of others. When no one had anything to contribute, when the group was going through a crisis, that was when Julio came in to make concrete suggestions. But when we knew exactly where we were going, the role he played was to stimulate our own creative process, questioning every aspect of what we proposed to do. This challenged us to be very clear about what we were doing and why, to examine every decision continually. Julio also made an important contribution on the ideological level, promoting unity rather than exclusivity while the footage was being edited. He realized the historical importance of the material and urged us to keep the film as broad as possible, but within the margins that seemed tolerable to us, and without ever dictating to us the political perspective that the material should adopt.

Finally, Julio never put the film on a fixed production schedule. On the contrary, we were the ones to promise that we would be finished in a given span of time. But every time we said six months would do it, it turned out to be eight, then ten, then a year. Each part of the film has taken us a year to edit.

Q: What is there about this particular film that makes the process so time-consuming?

A: It’s not just the editing that’s involved, but the underlying analysis on which the editing is based. For instance, we put together a chronological chart of the events in Chile that is probably one of the most exact chronologies of the period to be assembled anywhere.

Q: Were you surprised at the international acclaim the film received on release?

A: Yes, it was a total surprise. I thought that the film was a brick—a heavy and difficult movie that makes no concessions to the spectator. But in spite of this, the film began to be invited to all the European film festivals, and judging from the response, its importance for Latin America and the world at large continues to grow. In certain European countries where there are particular political parallels with what was attempted in Chile—France and Italy, for example, or Spain and Portugal—it has had a great impact.

Q: How would you evaluate the film's overall impact?

A: It is not a film whose primary motive is the quest for international solidarity or an agitational work whose value depends on a certain set of historical circumstances. It is not a sentimental appeal for people to give money to the Chilean cause. Instead, the film nakedly reveals our lack of direction, the massive offensive organized by the Right, the internal disagreements on the Left, but without mystifying the situation. It removes the veils and shows things as they were.

In this sense, I think it is an optimistic film—because it shows what happened. And to the extent that it does this, people will learn from it, draw lessons from it, and continue to fight. The film neither mystifies particular historical figures nor ceases to recognize what they represented, as is the case with Allende, for example.

The criteria we used to make the film were not apartisan or “objective” in the traditional sense. This is not a film made by journalists or reporters who go to Chile, make their movie, and go away again. Instead, each one of us, as Chileans, had a personal commitment to what we were filming. Our objectivity was based on a militant position *within* the struggle. This is the essence of the film, and it was something we anticipated before we even began to shoot.

The film was an incomparably intense experience for all involved, not just in its historical dimension or for whatever virtues it may have as film, or because of the fact that we managed to rescue it from the chaos and devastation which followed the coup. Through the lived experience of the film, we all came to understand what it means to live through a revolutionary process—what ideological struggle really means, what fascism looks and feels like, what it means for the enraged middle class to rise up against the workers, how invisible imperialism can be. The experience of making the film marked us for the rest of our lives. Everything else is merely a figure of speech.



Plate 7. From the final sequence of *The Battle of Chile, Part I*: An Argentine cameraman films his own execution. Photo courtesy the filmmaker.

Note

1. Chris Marker is a leading French documentarist, best known in this country for *Sunday in Peking* (1955), *Letter from Siberia* (1958), *La Jetée* (1963), and *The Battle of the Ten Million* (Cuba, 1970).