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Friday February 24th 2017

The Pearl Button (Cert 12a)

dir: **Patricio Guzmán**

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Synopsis: A documentary in which the Chilean filmmaker Patricio Guzmán voices a narrative linking the disappeared indigenous peoples of his country's coastal areas with the disappeared of Augusto Pinochet's 1973-90 dictatorship. The film journeys from the Atacama Desert to the glaciers of Patagonia, exploring the lives of the 5 groups who lived there, and the devastating impact on them of the arrival of European settlers, using water as an image to link both past and present

The Atacama Desert, protagonist for Patricio Guzmán's dazzling *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010), also features as a supporting player in his new film, *The Pearl Button*: this time, the place renowned as the driest on Earth is linked to Chile's expansive, 2,670-mile oceanic coastline. Images of the vast antennae of the Atacama observatory's uber-telescope, looking out to the heavens like giant robotic sunflowers, are presented alongside shots of glaciers, rivers and seas, as Guzmán explores water's role as a flowing intermediary force between the stars and human life. As with *Nostalgia for the Light*, the film is contemplative poetry, in which these images meld with Guzmán's lyrical commentary to provide both a personal and political journey across his nation's history and psyche.

Guzmán constantly links the skies to the seas. Overhead shots of Chile's coastline position the film as one where the director looks down with a sense of perspective and depth - he describes the view of a huge labyrinth of intersecting waterways as an "archipelago of rain". There are shots, too, of comets and stars, thrillingly captured from below - flashes of colour in the night sky. Also at ground level, the camera constantly observes water flowing; the sound of water running, dripping, falling - functions (echoing the words of anthropologist Claudio Mercado) as a "source of music", a soothing soundtrack to the action. The sound of the slowly crumbling glaciers of Patagonia - imposing crystalline structures shimmering in the light - serves too as a reminder of the ecological challenges of global warming.

This is, however, no simple nature documentary. Guzmán's cutting links these striking shots of glaciers and other natural formations to the stones carved by the indigenous peoples who populated Chile's coastal area until the arrival of European colonists in the 19th century. Black and white photographs and grainy footage point to a now eradicated way of life, in which the Kawésqar, Selk'nam, Aoniken, Harusch and Yamana navigated the country's coasts and



waterways. The dots and stripes painted on the bodies of the Selk'nam people are captured in frozen images that hark back to comets and stars. Theirs was a culture that believed in life after death; humans transformed into stars in a cosmology binding the stars and the seas. The Kawésqar water people, according to 19th century records, were once a population of 8,000, with 300 canoes, but now only 20 direct descendants remain. Interviews with 3 of them, Cristina, Gabriela and Martín testify to a life in which "we are barely allowed in the sea." Martín poignantly demonstrates how to canoe, in a craft that is now kept on land; the irony is not lost on the viewer.

The Pearl Button is thus crucially a film about memory. Cristina, Gabriela and Martín, prompted to recall a few Kawésqar words, reveal that 'police' and 'God' don't exist in that language. Ultimately, Guzmán links the search to make sense of our past with a need to understand the Universe. Art becomes a mode of commenting on the past - this happens not merely through Guzmán's own discourse but also in artist Emma Malig's map of the country, laid out like a giant, never-ending beanstalk on crisp sky-blue paper, and Paz Errázuriz's portraits of coastal communities. Guzmán's film is framed as one of a series of interconnecting stories addressing the invisibility of this dwindling population.

These maritime tribes were largely eradicated within 50 years of the arrival of European settlers. Gruesome photographs show them being pursued as prey - body parts securing financial gain for the hunters. In the early 1970s, Salvador Allende's social revolution generated a move to return land to these native populations, but Pinochet's coup-d'état obliterated any progressive initiatives. In his three-part epic *The Battle of Chile* (1975-79), Guzmán argued for the need to remember events erased by Pinochet's ideological agenda. *The Pearl Button* follows this cinematic journey, inscribing the tales of the disappeared into its very fabric. The tale of Jemmy Button is a case in point. Exchanged in 1983 for a mother-of-pearl button - hence the name he was given - the indigenous teen was one of four Fuegians taken to England by Captain Robert FitzRoy to be 'civilised'. Guzmán reframes this as a tale of barbarism, with the returning Button made into an exile in his own land.

At the film's end, another pearl button appears, this one found on the remains of a body dumped at sea during the Pinochet era, linking Jemmy and others like him to the disappeared. The seas are shown to be cemeteries of the dead. Just as the Atacama Desert in *Nostalgia for the Light* fossilized the bodies of the disappeared, so the sea similarly and eerily preserved the agonised face of Marta Ugarte, whose washed-up body was one of an estimated 1,200 - 1,400 thought to have been tossed into the ocean by Pinochet's forces.

During the Pinochet regime, 800 secret detention centres policed by 3,500 civil servants oversaw a culture of extermination and silence, Dawson Island, the missionary base where hundreds of indigenous peoples died in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, became the site of one of the most notorious concentration camps, where 700 Allende prisoners were imprisoned and tortured. A black-and-white photograph from the 1970s is recreated in colour as a moving image, as a mode of allowing those who were imprisoned there the opportunity to narrate their stories. Writer and journalist Javier Rebolledo forensically recreates the process of disposing of the bodies of the disappeared. Chile's culture of impunity is thus mapped across contexts that habitually remain all too conveniently separated.

If, as the poet Raul Zurita testifies, the process of returning the dead is about allowing the living to grieve, *The Pearl Button* is ultimately about cinema's unique way of retelling the past, about a visual language that links Pinochet's victims to the Yámana peoples through the image of a button. Water is ultimately the conduit that Guzmán uses to bind the different memories into a bold, poetic narrative of humanity and indeed of cinema's responsibilities to the wider world.

Credits

Director	Patricio Guzmán
Screenplay	Patricio Guzmán
Cinematography	Katell Djian
Editing	Emmanuelle Jolie
Original Music	Miranda & Tobar
Chile/France 2015. 82 mins	

Another view

Another probing examination into Chile's harrowing past, *The Pearl Button* (2015) makes for a fitting diptych to Patricio Guzmán's previous documentary, *Nostalgia for the Light* (2012). Whilst the focus may have shifted, Guzmán continues to gaze at the stars in search of answers, yet uses water as his motif for his latest inquiry into the cruelty of mankind. Running from the arid Atacama Desert to the glacial southern point of Drake Passage, Chile's lengthiest border is the Pacific Ocean. It's home to over a thousand individual islands and some of Chile's most picturesque scenery. It's also plagued by the lost voices of the Kawésqar, the indigenous water nomads of Western Patagonia.

The Kawésqar were savagely hunted by European colonials and later pushed to near-extinction during General Pinochet's violent persecution of political dissidents. It's said that mankind knows more about the cosmos that it does about the sea - a notion that goes some way to understand why Pinochet's government would believe the Pacific Ocean would become a safe-house for its most repugnant of secrets. However, it's not the appalling news that Pinochet dumped somewhere between 12,000 and 14,000 bodies to a watery grave that led Guzmán to the connection between his country's traumatic past and the sea, but rather the beliefs of the Kawésqar who formally populated the archipelagos of Patagonia.

They believed the water was a living entity and that in death they would live amongst the stars.

*By combining insightful interviews with poetic photography and metaphysical contemplation, Guzmán's exploration of memory endeavours to tear open the sarcophagus of national guilt and lay out the putrid evidence of this overlooked period of mass genocide. Inhabiting the space between fact and fiction, where repressed memories often seek refuge, *The Pearl Button* weaves a fascinating, yet traumatic route through Chile's recent history. An existential meditation on the inherent horrors of mankind, Guzmán successfully finds parity between the autonomous force of the sea and the more immediate tragedy caused by human violence. The film's greatest achievement is the cohesive and profoundly engaging manner in which it presents its theorem, fashioning a fascinating dialectic between nature and humanity that separates us from the cold, unimaginable facts and allows us to experience the horror from a disturbingly intimate perspective. At one point, Guzmán even recreates the process performed on the bodies of political dissidents before they were dumped in the sea.*

*The clinical nature of this reconstruction does little to temper the horror it evokes. The intensity of the scrutiny in Guzmán's approach teaches us how to traverse the blinkers of the history books and be merciless toward the past in what surmounts as an attempt to remain humane in the face of the most awful truths about our species' capacity for evil. It doesn't always coalesce and some of Guzmán's spiritual diversions feel a little strained. Though a stronger emphasis on the details of this relatively undocumented period of history would surely leave audiences more informed rather than bored, this is a film that justly evokes a righteous sense of indignation. Whilst the water may not recollect the travesties it has washed away and eroded, *The Pearl Button* certainly stands to resurrect those voices ripped from the world by the cruel hand of humanity.*

Our next screening: Friday March 3rd, 7.30pm Maggie's Plan (USA 2015. Cert 15)

Maggie wants to have a baby and raise it alone; but when she gets romantically involved with John, a married man, things get complicated and her hopes and dreams are threatened with collapse.

Directed by Rebecca Miller (daughter of Arthur Miller) and starring Greta Gerwig, Ethan Hawke and Julianne Moore (who all but steals the film), *Maggie's Plan* is an offbeat comedy drama that gives the rom-com a fresh and welcome subversive twist.