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# Chile: Cinema in Exile

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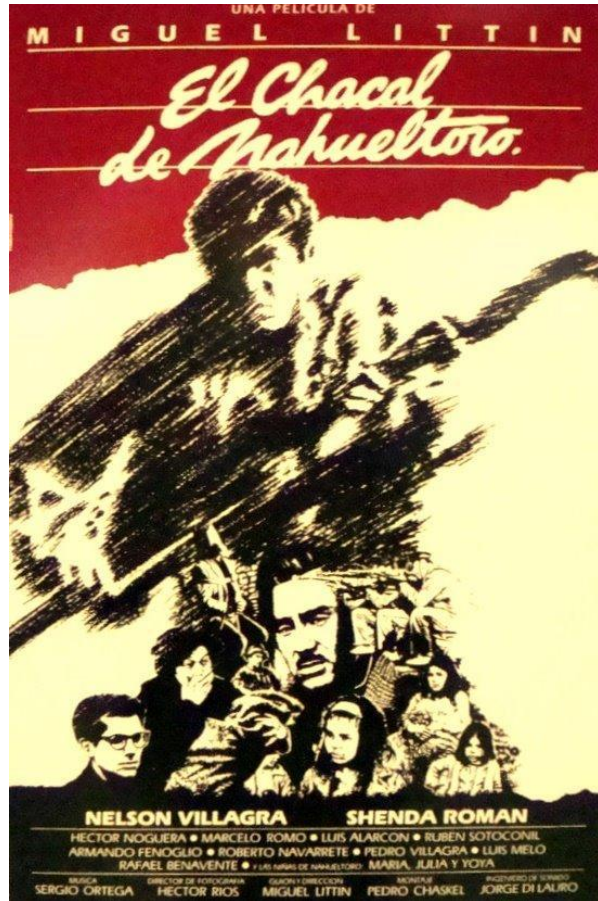
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## Chile: Cinema in Exile

Executions, disappearances, and exile are not the first words that come to mind when picturing the long, versatile landscape of Chile. Nonetheless, Chile was under the harsh control of Augusto Pinochet from 1974 until 1990 and experienced a high level of political oppression during that time. Though Chile had only a short film history before the rule of Pinochet, cinema remained relevant despite the exile and hardships experienced by several prominent Chilean filmmakers. Ironically, under the hostile dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, Chile developed a stronger national cinema, producing politically and historically motivated films made by the exiled filmmakers, who persevered through renewed struggle to create a strong sense of solidarity while opening Chilean cinema to a much wider audience.

Chile had a slow start in developing an independent film industry. Up to and through the 1940's the Chilean film industry was dependent on foreign cinemas. Raymond Del Castillo, in his 1946 article "The Cinema in Chile," discusses the fierce competition that Chile faced from Hollywood in its struggle to establish a national cinema. In Chile's fight to distinguish itself cinematographically, it remained dependent on foreign cinemas, especially that of Argentina, while the industry worked to harvest talent within the country, encouraging those with cinematic skills to stay in the country. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell discuss the political roots of Chilean cinema, especially in the 1960's, when Chile experienced growth in both the film industry and the culture of film. This growth was due to several factors including the organization of a national film archive by the University of Chile, and a film festival founded in Viña del Mar in 1962. (505) In 1967 the government began

to lend more help to the film industry. It is at this time that we see the rise of several prominent filmmakers, such as Miguel Littín, Raúl Ruiz, and Aldo Francia, who experimented with various styles of filmmaking and expanded on the ideals of Chile's national identity (Thompson and Bordwell 505.) In films such as *El Chacal de Nahueltoro* (*The Jackal of Nahueltoro*), Littín tells the true story



of the perpetrator of one of the most brutal and senseless murders in Chile's history. This film and its morally ambiguous main character made its way into the halls of the new, socialist government of the 1970's, setting new standards for Chilean film and gaining Littín fame along the way.

Through films such as *The Jackal of Nahueltoro*, and Ruiz's *Tres Tristes Tigres*, and with a little help from the government, Chile was well on its way to being a fully operational and independent national cinema. Around this time, the U.S. government, as well as some of the people of Chile, became unhappy with the socialist government. In 1973, the Chilean military seized power, killing the current president in a violent takeover. At that time, General Augusto Pinochet took power, ordering his military to destroy film schools and arrest workers at Chile Films. The young filmmakers of Chile fled and were exiled, banned from reentering the country.

However dramatic and intense this experience was, it did not deter the filmmakers from not only continuing to work in the film industries of various other countries, but in some cases, finishing the films they had started in Chile before the military coup (Thompson and Bordwell 506). In her book *Cinematic Homecomings: Exile and Return in Transitional Cinema*, Rebecca Prime defines the cinematic exile as more than just the films themselves, but the “multifarious networks” formed by filmmakers in the various countries they occupied that allowed for this period of transition in Chilean film (147). The period of exile stands as one of the most progressive, cinematically speaking, producing more than 200 types of films by Chilean filmmakers around the globe. Prime stresses that it was not just the filmmakers but also the communities of exiles and various networks that came together to produce these works. The success of this period must be credited to more than just the filmmakers but to all who helped them, and created the conditions for the films to be produced. Pick stresses that the exile of Chilean filmmakers was never a “movement,” and Prime agrees, proposing that it acts as a transition period that was “born out of global networks of solidarity.” (150) It is important to remember this point through the following discussions of specific films and filmmakers of this period.

Filmmakers such as Miguel Littín, Raul Ruiz, and Patricio Guzmán moved forward with their film careers in exile throughout Pinochet’s violent and controversial reign. Pick argues that the exile of these filmmakers was beneficial for the development of Chilean cinema. From Cuba, Miguel Littín finished up his film *La Tierra Prometida*, which had begun production before the take over of Pinochet. The

film represents actual events that occurred during the 1930's and follows a group of peasants as they move across Chile's landscape to find a new place to settle, finally choosing uninhabited land owned by the government. After attempting to deal with problems with the government on their own, the group finds themselves surrounded by the army of their enemies, and they decide to stand firm and fight. *The Promised Land (La Tierra Prometida)* was never screened in Chile before Pinochet's take over, and after the coup in 1973 many who worked on the film, including the female lead, were arrested and several other cast and crew members were killed by the military (Burton 58). Burton compares the events that took place in the film to the state of the Popular Unity government of Chile prior to Pinochet. Burton also points out that in the film itself we see images of Chile's identity portrayed through the representation of Chilean flags as well as through appearances of Chile's patron saint, the Virgin del Carmen, to people of all classes (59-60). "Littín was able to portray some key political ideas, such as the need for collective struggle and internal and transnational unity." (Rist 368). Finished in Cuba, *The Promised Land* was not Littín's last Chile-based work made abroad.

Another film by Littín that focused on events in Chile's history is *Actas de Marusia*, produced in Mexico. This film is set in the early 20th century and recounts the events of a strike in a mining town. The military is called in and perpetrates a town-wide massacre. A review in *The New York Times* by Walter Goodman brings up the parallels between the events in this film and the events of September 1973 when Pinochet took power in Chile. Goodman brings us back to a common theme of Littín's films, that of the ongoing class struggle in Chile. *Letters from Marusia*

emphasizes this theme by purposefully portraying a lack in individuality in the characters, which even after brief victories over the invasive military, are continually beat down (Goodman). Littín stated “Each of my movies corresponds to a moment in Chilean political life” (*Daily News*). It is not only through subject matter that Littín spreads Chilean ideals through Latin America, but in the ways he makes his films. He brings to light the class struggle and resistance against the oppressive military.

In addition to historical fiction films, the struggles of Chile were also represented in documentary. Guzmán is best known for his documentary films. Juan Carlos Rodríguez writes, Guzmán’s “postdictatorial documentaries combine the testimonial address with images of ruin.” (“Postdictatorial”) Guzmán’s film *La Batalla de Chile*, or *The Battle of Chile* is a three-part documentary that began production in Chile before Augusto Pinochet overthrew President Salvador Allende, and finished production in Spain after Guzmán’s exile. The first film of the series,



*The Insurrection of the Bourgeoisie*, opens with Chilean citizens talking about how they plan to vote in the upcoming elections, oblivious to the hostility they will face in a few short months. The film continues documenting Allende's fight to stay in power through re-election and the support for his democratic socialist party through to the coup on September 11, after which Guzmán and his team of filmmakers were arrested. Most of the filmmakers were able to leave the country, successfully smuggling their footage from the past several months into Cuba, where they continued working on the film for several years (Rist 303).

Guzmán eventually settled in Spain, where he ventured into a new kind of filmmaking. Zuzana Pick writes, "Patricio Guzmán has now entered a new phase in his career. He has made an experimental and poetic fresco about the survival of Latin American cultural identity, which has faced attack by foreign forces ever since the Spanish conquest." ("Exile") Guzmán's *La Rosa de los Vientos* (1983) is a fictional narrative film much different from his documentarian past, which still conveys the durability and drive of Latin American culture ("Exile"). Several years later, in 1997, Guzmán released another documentary titled *Chili, la Mémoire Obstinée* or *Chile, Obstinate Memory*, in which Guzmán returned to Chile to show his previous documentaries which were never seen under Pinochet's rule. In *Chile, Obstinate Memory*, Guzmán discusses the old days of filmmaking in Chile with his former colleagues, remembering those lost during the period of exile (Rist 303.)

Raúl Ruiz is still regarded as one of the world's most prolific filmmakers. Ruiz's first film, *Tres Tristes Tigres*, or *Three Sad Tigers*, was a class critique, made one year before Littín's first work was released. Ruiz produced his first film in exile

in France in 1974, taking a documentary style approach to address the issue of living in exile. This film, *Diálogo de Exiliados*, or *Dialogue of Exiles*, showing Chileans living in Paris, was not well received (Rista 498). In an interview with Ruiz conducted by Don



Ranvaud for *Framework* in 1979, Ruiz responds to the criticisms of his film. Ruiz states that he was attempting to make “a political film in the most elementary sense of the word. Subsequent criticism led me to question the significance of visual representation, how this type of symbolic representation should be seen” (Ranvaud 17). Recognizing these criticisms, Ruiz produced several films that examine parts of his own being “where he is torn between his cultural origins and the empty cosmopolitan of forced exile” (Ranvaud 18). Through works of both documentary and fiction, Ruiz commented on the political structures of his country of residence while making class and social critiques. Ruiz is perhaps the perfect example of a Chilean filmmaker who regards film as more than an art, but also a tool to open a dialogue on the social and political states in which we live.

Pick emphasizes that these directors, as well as some less seasoned directors who also worked in exile, helped to shape a “new” Latin American cinema. It is in their dedication to their motherland that we watch these films with such a strong sense of culture. Films produced in exile were offered a slightly wider distribution than may have been available in Chile alone, allowing more viewers to experience Latin American, and specifically Chilean, culture and bringing more attention to



Chilean cinema than had been experienced in the past. During the years of exile in Chile, none of the films made abroad by these Chilean directors were seen by what may be considered their “true,” or as Pick puts it “natural,” audience. However, there were some films produced under Pinochet, with the first notable film hitting the box office in 1979. The film was titled *Julio Comienza en Julio*, or *July Starts in July*, and it gained attention not only for itself, but also for what still remained of the film industry in Chile, at European film festivals. Pick writes that from 1977-1983, over twenty films were produced and focuses on the important effort of the filmmakers still in Chile to keep Chilean culture alive, despite the efforts of the military government at the time (“Exile”).

The drive and determination of these filmmakers did not waver in the sixteen-year exile that they experienced during Pinochet’s rule. Many had been led to believe that the occupation of the military in Chile would be relatively brief, but as the state became militarized, as Mark Ensalaco explains in his book *Chile Under Pinochet: Recovering the Truth*, it soon became clear that the military planned a long rule, taking up political roles and declaring states of siege. Sympathizers of the Popular Unity and Leftist governments were exiled or executed, and citizens were killed simply for violating curfew (Ensalaco 50-51). At this time the new power in Chile was attempting to squash Chilean culture, and the filmmakers in exile fought to keep it alive, reminding Chilean citizens of the historical events that they had overcome before, and of their strong national identity even though they now lived in exile. It is important to address one final idea, proposed by Rebecca Prime, which is the idea of homecoming. A significant element in exile films is the recurring theme

of homecoming, often depicted through historical events, but also shown through the attitudes of the films, and the pride in representing their homeland. Though the spread of culture was often accomplished through historical and political perspectives, it was also spread, maybe on a more subtle note, through the familiar feeling and images filmmakers presented, and as Prime puts it, “the obsession with returns: to houses, streets, bars, libraries. The specificity of the place is not important; what is relevant is the act of return itself, through which exiles express the desire to close the gap between who they are now and who they once were” (Prime 152-153).

Keeping Chilean culture alive during Pinochet’s rule can in large part be credited to the exile of these influential filmmakers. Their success in Chile followed them to their new homes and stayed with them throughout their careers, both during and after Pinochet’s regime. The criticisms of class and politics, the representation of historical and political events, and the reminder of the unity they share as Chileans and their desire to return home, helped to maintain a sense of culture through the end of Pinochet’s rule in 1999.

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