



**[The Pearl Button](#) shown at [HOME](#)
Reviewed by [John Hutchinson](#) March 2016**

What does the country Chile conjure up for you in the mind? I am not referring here to its political associations directly although for most of us we might summon up the names of Pinochet and Allende, and the CIA provoked coup of the 1970s. Can you define Chilean identity and the country's national characteristics? If you can't then you need to watch **The Pearl Button** and also if you get the chance, its predecessor, the even more remarkable ***Nostalgia de la Luz*** (Nostalgia of the Light, literally translated) part of a planned trilogy of which the Pearl Button is the middle film.

Chile is a vast, thin, elongated country with some 5,000 kilometres of coastline yet only 60 or 70 kilometres in much of its breadth and 350 at its widest point, cut off by the sea on one side and the Andes on the other. It boasts the desiccation and aridity of the Altacama desert, some of the finest astronomical observatories in the world and tapers off into the icy regions of the South Pole. These features are the very fibre of Guzman's work on a scale which is human, individual, cosmic and metaphysical at the same time. The country has run its own course distinct from the

rest of South America, a continent within a continent where history lies buried in its epic geography.

Guzman has rescued a very small piece of that history - a pearl button - which belonged to one of the bodies of Pinochet's victims and was found on a piece of a rail recovered from the sea. Thousands of Indians, along with Allende dissidents, were exiled to a concentration camp in the south of the country. The dead bodies were later dumped in the sea from helicopters to erase any trace of their existence.

Here we have an object which becomes a symbol and a point of contemplation for Guzman's work. The director came across the button in a museum in Santiago and it fuses with another story uncovered in a trip to the southernmost parts of Chile -the curious tale of Jimmy Button an Indian who was discovered by the British in the eighteenth century, taken across to be educated for a year to England, feted by royalty and upper society and then sent back to his native country where he promptly died. Many such examples are, of course, recorded in Western imperial history.

This double-button so to speak proved the creative pivot of the film. Guzman presents this panorama of the South of Chile with spectacular scenes of ice and glaciers, galaxies and constellations familiar from *La Nostalgia de la Luz*, native Indians with bizarre adornments and dresses and interviews with the few remaining speakers of a tribe whose language, at least in its spoken form, is about to die out. He raises disturbing questions about our humanity, about science, about the elements of nature, about identity and memory, and the disappearance of sections of society without trace through which social rifts are left unhealed.

This is the South American tradition of film-making at a slow contemplative rhythm in which we must experience the movie viscerally not through thrills but sensory absorption. We cannot resort to fight or flight mode as we have to face its messages. The narrative has a poetic simplicity and by extension complexity. It speaks through the juxtaposition of an uncomplicated, lyrical prose and the stunning poetic images.

The films of Guzman are a long time in the making. Chilean cinema is dominated by North America and only 20 or so cinemas show Chilean films of this ilk. There is no art-house tradition as we have in the West and *La Nostalgia de la Luz* the predecessor of ***The Pearl Button*** was seen by only some 13,000 Chileans out of a population of 15+ million. Far more viewed this film in the West in the first months of its release.

What, however, are we to make of this genre of documentary to which ***The Pearl Button*** belongs, which has become very popular in recent years? The Manchester Salon is keen to provoke discussions on what is considered to be good art and encourage discrimination and judgment to be exercised even if this leads to vehement disagreement.

The realistic documentary concentrates on presenting facts and scenes from which a conventional story line is missing. We are supposed to be eavesdropping or observing an event as it happens, or as in the case of ***The Pearl Button***, the audience is confronted with the physicality of the Chilean landscape and scenery, and tragic aspects of its history.

A corollary would be the award winning *Amy* which strings together a number of recordings and clips from the short and also tragic life of the late jazz singer Amy Winehouse. That tells us all about the talent or otherwise of the singer-composer and her obsessions, hang-ups and passions. She perhaps becomes more real when dead than alive.

In *The Pearl Button*, which also won an award for its script in Berlin last year, there is an artistic eye at work in the poetic manipulation of images. Water we are told may have had its origin from outer space and have landed by accident on the earth. Guzman also speculates if, on other planets in the immensity of the universe, there are also stronger races of beings that dominate others and inflict the same suffering and oblivion on them as he documents here.



Water - a philosophical undercurrent of the film - may actually be capable of holding memories according to the director, citing a British scientist. We are in the realm of half-truths not facts at this point, although nature is always much more powerful than human beings.

Guzman's earlier work is overtly political. It deals with those members of Chilean society that its turbulent history has attempted to erase from the past - the "desaparecidos" after the Pinochet coup d'etat, the indigenous tribes or any marginalised community.

Memory may claim to be the main tide of the documentary based on the director's conviction that Chile cannot face its future with solidarity, resolve and optimism unless it comes to terms with its past. This is a universal South American theme as the sub-continent of Chile re-joins the main continent. The stable, advanced nations of the West are held up as examples of countries which have reintegrated their pasts. West Germany has absorbed East Germany and the holocaust. Spain finally appears to be absorbing its civil war some three generations later.

Yet, of course, the European project seems to be falling apart. It is not the banishing of undesirables to remote parts that threatens the E.U. but the migration of millions of refugees from the trouble spots of the world overwhelming its resources. Memory in the sense of cultural values, political stability, intellectual traditions, and democracy itself is also under assault in the West. That is where South America and Europe, left and right are inadvertently united.

Can we call this documentary artistic or is it faction, that peculiar blend of fact and fiction which seems characteristic of much current artistic output?

Denis Joe, in a recent [opinion piece](#) for The Manchester Salon wrote: “Discrimination arises from contemplation. When we are confronted by a work of art, it should spur us on to find a meaning. It should create a dialogue between our being and our soul. We may find things that unsettle us. We may find an overwhelming love for a work. Whatever! We become richer for having engaged.”

Based on those criteria, **The Pearl Button** can be judged deeply artistic. It is unsettling, spurs us on to find meaning and opens up a dialogue between our being and our soul. Whether you love or hate the documentary you can only find out by viewing the film which has just started a run at Home from the 18th March.