Chapter 4

The Machuca Phenomenon

When an image coincides with traumatic events of historical rupture, it plays a central role in the construction of national meaning.

—Marita Sturken, Tangled Memories

No Chilean filmic images have become more indelible than those of the bombing of La Moneda, the Presidential Palace, on September 11, 1973, at the start of the military coup that led to General Augusto Pinochet’s seventeen-year dictatorship. Patricio Guzmán and his Battle of Chile (1975–79) film crew captured the live images from their television set on that decisive morning, and these pictures became the opening sequence to their epic documentary film. Guzmán featured the footage again at the start of his 1997 documentary, Chile: Obstinate Memory. In both instances, Guzmán used those moments of the Chilean Air Force bombings as a historical anchor point, capturing the audience’s attention with these dramatic minutes frozen in time.

In Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia, Andreas Huyssen discusses the role that museums can play in the preservation and erosion of selective historical memories: “Fundamentally dialectical, the museum serves both as burial chamber of the past—with all that entails in terms of decay, erosion, forgetting—and as site of possible resurrections, however mediated and contaminated, in the eyes of the beholder. No matter how much the museum, consciously or unconsciously, produces and affirms the symbolic order, there is always a surplus of meaning that exceeds set ideological boundaries, opening spaces for reflection and counter-hegemonic memory” (15).
Huyssen’s words ring true for other elements of a national culture, including the media and larger public sphere. There are egregious absences in media discourses about recent Chilean history that circulate, for example, through television, but audiences can fill in the blanks and draw their own conclusions based on their own experiences. Many of the visible absences of Chilean television are very explicitly confronted in Chilean cinema; however, the Chilean public often needs to look in unauthorized spaces to find them. Completing a tour of the national history museum in Santiago will only give you a partial education. The museum, which glorifies the accomplishments of the conquistadors and wealthy elite and ends history on September 11, 1973, does do an excellent job of teaching the visitor what parts of Chile’s history have been favored by the ruling class and what recent eras are too volatile for representation (namely, everything since September 11, 1973). President Salvador Allende’s smashed glasses (a result of his death on this date of the coup) are enclosed in glass in the final small room of the museum’s permanent exhibits. Purchasing and then viewing a pirated copy of The Battle of Chile from just outside the building (until recently, the only easy way to obtain a copy of this film inside Chile was on the black market) offers Chilean citizens a much more comprehensive and unintended (by the museum’s designers) interpretation to their nation’s history.

Our memories are a mix of personal experiences combined with collective experiences that we have as groups, nations, and cultures in specific historical contexts. These collective memories often get recirculated through representations in media texts, affecting and potentially changing our understanding of events. Visual media in particular play a crucial role in this circulation. As Sturken argues, “Images have the capacity to create, interfere with, and trouble the memories we hold as individuals and as a nation. They can lend shape to histories and personal stories, often providing the material evidence on which claims of truth are based, yet they also possess the capacity to capture the unattainable” (20). Sturken describes the historical authority as well as the potential for historical distortion of filmic images: “Camera images, whether photographs, films, or television footage, whether documentary, docudrama, or fiction, are central to the interpretation of the past. Photographs