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★★★ THE BATTLE OF CHILE:
THE STRUGGLE OF AN UN-
ARMED PEOPLE

Directed by Patricio Guzman.

By David Moberg

Early on the morning of June 29, 1973, tanks begin to roll through the streets of downtown Santiago, the capital of Chile. It is slightly more than two months before the military coup that will bring down the socialist government of Salvador Allende.

A crew of filmmakers who have been recording for several months the growth of support for the Allende government among workers and peasants, and the growth of opposition to it among businessmen, professionals, generals, and the CIA, are also in the streets this morning. They are documenting in black and white this sudden, but not totally unexpected, attempt by the army to overthrow the government.

Crowds of people rush with fear, excitement, and anger away from the oncoming tanks. Elsewhere the sidewalks are deserted, but in a way that conveys fear, not peace. An armored personnel carrier pulls into an intersection. A couple of soldiers get off, led by the apparent commander, who holds a pistol in his hand. After surveying the scene and checking out the directions in which his soldiers are firing, he turns toward the camera. It is a considerable distance away but zooming in on him. He raises his right arm.

Then there is a whitish blur for a few seconds. That's all. The cameraman has just filmed his own death.

He has also filmed a preview of what many Chileans and a few foreigners, including Chicagoan Frank Terrugi, would face in the first couple of months of the new junta, when 20,000 to 30,000 political opponents—or suspected opponents of any stripe—were killed.

Not all of *The Battle of Chile* is so dramatic. Some people have likened it to *The Battle of Algiers*, the gripping re-creation of early streetfighting days in the Algerian war of independence.

THE COMPLEX REALITY OF REVOLUTION

However, despite the inclusion of tense scenes of combat and confrontation, *The Battle of Chile* is much different.

It is less theatrical, more analytic, somewhat more demanding, and more rough and prickly with the rawness, complexity, and urgency of real events. That may not make it better as a film. It certainly makes it less entertaining. But then some people feel squeamish at the idea of political horror stories being entertainment—a common complaint about the popular fictional account of Greek fascism, *Z*.

The Battle of Chile's eschewal of theatrical staging shows up especially in the street scenes. What comes across so often in these portrayals of workers defending factories, leftists fighting rightists, incipient coups, and other military-like maneuvers is a sense of confusion and fragility, not steady development of a plot toward a climax. Nobody is very sure of what's happening, or where or when. Lots of people run about in desperation. Rocks are thrown, tear gas lobbed. But what's really going on?

Anyone who's been in the midst of similar scenes, as observer or participant, can testify to that feeling of scattered and supercharged intensity. The documentary filmmaker in the midst of the action reflects that in his own shooting: the camera pans abruptly, only fragments of scenes are caught, there is a frequently discontinuous jumble.

There also seems to be so much hanging on so little. A few thousand

workers line the roofs of a row of factories, heaving rocks at police, for example. A flimsy barricade of burning tires only symbolically blocks the street. Police, acting without orders from the government, are trying to disperse the workers. It is an important showdown, a clash eventually resolved when the mayor, a member of Allende's Popular Unity coalition, walks up to the police and—quite politely—orders them to retreat.

But what if one of them had shot him then? What chain of events might have been set in motion? Despite our knowledge of the eventual outcome—the murder of President Allende as the air force, equipped and encouraged by the U.S. government, bombs the Moneda palace, sending clouds of smoke and flames into the sky—there is a continual suspense throughout the film.

Especially in the second part, entitled "The Coup," we watch the mounting division between left and right in the country, despite the determination of Allende to maintain all constitutional forms. Fascist parties and terrorist groups, CIA-financed truck owners' associations, the military and middle-class groupings of housewives, students, and professors all work in different ways to bring down the government.

The parties of the right and, supposedly, the center stymie every move in congress to implement Allende's program or give him power to resist the growing, obvious movement toward a coup d'etat.

With the government increasingly

blinded and threatened, militant workers of various political parties on the left clamor for strengthening the workers' councils, neighborhood price boards, and other "popular power" institutions that had flourished in the first three years of the Popular Unity government. They want arms to defend themselves.

By this time the "dialectical" editing of the film, as the producers describe it, has laid out the difficult choices and the complex balance of political actors starkly and comprehensively, by shifting from congress to neighborhood, from television to street, from workplace to political meeting.

At a union gathering, one leader argues against seizing certain factories. The Swiss investors who own them will retaliate by making it impossible to renegotiate the huge, inherited foreign debt, he says. But tough veterans of the factories say the workers won't understand such contortions of international relations. The problem is that Allende won't trust the "organizations of popular power," one says. It takes more than organization to match the army, comes the response, it takes "weight."

The filmmakers seem to sympathize with the leftist figures who chant "people, awareness, guns" as they march. But they respect Allende's decisions to count on the "constitutional" generals and to reach out to his liberal opponents in an effort to wean them from the right wing.

Although strongly partisan, the film does not shy away from the difficulties of the revolutionary movement—the disruptive strike by one group of copper workers, the divisions within the left, the apathy of some people even in such a highly charged political atmosphere.

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At times, though, there seems to be more raw material than the film needs. The active camera, often moving in close and roaming over the faces surrounding the action as well as those in the thick of it, suggests how comprehensive the film tries to be in gathering its images.

Another problem is that the subtleties often conveyed in the filming are violated in the episodes when the narrator's voice comes in with a graceless, pedantic, preachy message that undermines much of the film's effectiveness.

However, the narrator does convey some necessary information. There are scenes in which young, long-haired students battle the police in the streets, for example. Where would your sympathies lie if you just watched the footage without being told that the students were fascists and the police represented a democratically elected socialist government? So much for the simple glorification of the heroic "street fighting man."

It would be hard for a film to convey more vividly than *The Battle of Chile* the immediacy, convolution, anxiety, and hope of such a time. However, it goes beyond extensive documentary recording of events. It reveals the very complicated links of passing moments—from press conference to union meeting, strike vote to election rally, CIA subversion to international financial dealings, grocery store opening to mine shutdown—that really make up a concept that otherwise seems so simple, so abstract, so theoretical, so remote, and so easy to bandy about casually—"class struggle."

CHICAGO READER

Film Ratings

- = Masterpiece
- = A must-see
- = Worth seeing
- = Has redeeming facet
- = Worthless