

**SCREENING VIOLENCE: MEDIATIONS ON PERCEPTION IN RECENT  
ARGENTINE LITERATURE AND FILM OF THE POST-DICTATORSHIP**

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In contemporary Argentina, the way that recent history has been publicly remembered and commemorated has been an important public issue with distinct cultural and political dimensions. This dissertation examines a selection of works of contemporary Argentine literature and cinema that reflect the continued impact of this historical period on contemporary cultural politics: the novel *Dos veces junio* (*Two Times June*, 2002) by Martín Kohan, the film *Los rubios* (*The Blonds*, 2003) by director Albertina Carri, the film *La mujer sin cabeza* (*The Headless Woman*, 2008) by director Lucrecia Martel, and the novel *El colectivo* (*The Bus*, 2007) by Eugenia Almeida. These two novels and two films revisit the dictatorship during two moments when intense critical discussions about how to represent this historical trauma and the period of militant activism that preceded it were reactivated in the public sphere. I center my analysis of these works around the treatment of violence as it relates to the problems of memory, experience, and representation. By showing how these novels and films foreground the tensions between competing modes of representation that structure the cultural politics of memory in post-dictatorship cultural productions, I illustrate the mutually influential relationship between literature, cinema, and other forms of media in shaping critical and artistic perspectives toward these debates.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine a selection of works of contemporary Argentine literature and cinema that address the legacy of the most recent military dictatorship (1976-1983) with regard to problems that have been foregrounded in recent critical debates about the way that recent history is publicly remembered and commemorated. I will develop an analysis of the treatment of violence with regard to problems of memory, experience, and representation in four texts, including two novels and two films published or released between 2002 and 2009 that reflect the continued impact of this historical period on contemporary cultural politics. The works that comprise the corpus of this study—*Dos veces junio* (*Two Times June*, 2002) by Martín Kohan, *Los rubios* (*The Blonds*, 2003) by director Albertina Carri, *El colectivo* (*The Bus*, 2007) by Eugenia Almeida, and *La mujer sin cabeza* (*The Headless Woman*, 2008) by director Lucrecia Martel—visit the dictatorship during two moments when intense critical discussions about how to represent this historical trauma and the period of militant activism that preceded it were reactivated in the public sphere.

Following the formal dissolution of the dictatorship, memory becomes a privileged means to contest the representations of the recent past disseminated by the military regime with the cooperation of several organisms of the mass media. More recently, a number of cultural critics have begun to argue that memory, insofar as it is anchored in subjective experience,

imposes limits on the interpretation of history.<sup>1</sup> For these critics, the continued predominance of narrative forms structured around memory, such as testimonial texts and documentary films, in cultural productions and political discourse signals a crisis in critical thought. According to this argument, the unquestionable authority that experience accords to these narratives by way of the moral/ethical pact between narrator and reader or speaker and audience precludes the establishment of a critical distance between the two that would allow for a more productive engagement with recent history. The novels and films I analyze in this project are situated in a period during which these debates are revisited in response to the initiatives of Human Rights organizations to designate former detention camps such as the ESMA, Club Atlético, and La Perla as “sites of memory” and the motions to overturn the impunity laws *Punto Final* (*Final Stop*, 1986) and *Obediencia Debida* (*Due Obedience*, 1987) by the Kirchner administration.

I organize the analysis of these texts around a series of questions regarding representation, violence, cultural politics, and the relationship between memory and historical experience. More specifically, I will consider the following questions: What are the ethical and political implications in the representation of violence and history? What role does trauma play in establishing the criteria for “appropriate” ways of representing political violence? To what extent do individual and collective experience determine the parameters of the debates around aesthetics and politics in contemporary Argentine culture? How do these works establish a dialogue with pre-established determinants of discursive authority and/or legitimacy? What

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Emilio Crenzel, *La historia política del Nunca Más* (2008); Martín Kohan, “Las heridas abiertas de la memoria,” “Los ojos de la infancia,” and “Sobre el olvido,” and; Hugo Vezzetti, *Pasado y presente* (2002). A number of these critics define this position against what they call, borrowing a term from Tzvetan Todorov, “abuses of memory,” referring to the use of memory to further an agenda that caters exclusively to the interests of a particular community organized around an experience of extreme violence or repression. Rather than opening such an experience to analogy and generalization that would conceive of the past as “a principle of action for the present,” he warns, this use of memory may result in a culture of victimization (31, translation mine).

possibilities of imagining forms of social intervention, if any, do literature and film suppose through the representation of the past? How do these works configure their aesthetic strategies in relation to the traumatic past?

I argue that the two novels and two films under examination here realize a significant intervention in the recent debates about the representation of the dictatorship and the armed struggle. By staging a constellation of social, cultural and political forces, and symbolic resources that determine the processes of signification of the past, these works expand the interpretive parameters that regulate the debates around memory and history in relation to contemporary cultural and political conjunctures. These literary and cinematic texts frame the tensions between competing modes of representation that structure the debates about memory and politics: the image/text, visual/literary, testimony/fiction, and reality/imagination.

A critical strategy in this intervention is the indirect staging of historical violence in each of these works. In this sense, “screening violence” in the title of this project is meant as a reflection of a number of different issues that I address in my analysis of these works. On the surface, my use of the term “screening violence” denotes an attention to cinematic representations of violence in contemporary films of the post-dictatorship period. At the same time, it alludes to the formation of violent images as a process of mediation that complicates the relationship between the image and representation. In this sense, screening denotes an interest in the formation of images of violence through suggestion. In contrast to these definitions of the term that denote the exposure or disclosure of an image, as it is used in cinema and printing, *screen* also specifies the action of concealing from observation or recognition as a means of protection from hostility or danger. Insofar as these variations highlight the tensions between disclosure and concealment, the visible and the unseen, and presence and absence as mutually

constitutive aspects of perception, they foreground the processes of mediation as inexorable components of both visual and textual representations of subjective and historical experience.

Scholars in the fields of psychology and critical theory have generated significant insights into the term as an analytical concept that allows an appreciation of the relation between issues of memory, history, traumatic experience, and visual media. In a formulation somewhat related to the Freudian notion of screen memory—a “concealing memory,” or the memory of one emotionally insignificant event that screens from consciousness some significant emotional event—Lacan refers to the “screen” as a device of mediation between the gaze of the world and the subject that protects against a traumatic experience, or the traumatic encounter with the real, that triggers the process of identity formation (*Four Fundamental*). Insofar as it functions as a mediator, the screen helps the subject relate to a hostile world and its “gaze” by negotiating its appearance through the creation of relatable images and discourses. These formulations of the screen as a category of analysis provide a point of entry to the examination of these works and to a consideration of the tendency among cultural critics to evaluate a given work according to criteria of value for a particular political project.

The phrase “mediations on perception” in the title of this dissertation reflects several aspects of the works that comprise my corpus. On the most basic level, “mediated perception” refers to the relationship between perception and different forms of media, including literary forms like the novel. I also use this phrase to characterize the novels and films themselves according a set of aesthetic strategies through which they interrogate and intervene in the conditions that determine the contours of the contemporary cultural landscape. In a related sense, “mediated perception,” describes the complex relationship between author/filmmaker, novel/film, and reader/spectator.

The impact of the media, the audiovisual media in particular, in shaping emotional and intellectual perception of reality is a recurring topic of interest in debates about cultural politics in Argentina and in Latin America more generally. With the increased availability and prominence of the communications media following the dictatorship, the Argentine intellectual is faced with the problem of how to reformulate a position within the shifting cultural and social landscape from which the possibility of intervention is still feasible.

As Jessica Stites Mor points out in *Transition Cinema*, the predominance of audiovisual media in representations of memory and recent history in post-dictatorship Argentina is anything but coincidental. Part and parcel of post-dictatorship cultural politics is the struggle for control over the symbolic field:

Mediated knowledge of Argentine history, dealing in representations and captive impressions, generates a variable set of image constructs that substitute for absent proofs and missing data. . . . In Argentina transition politics discursively naturalized the interpretive lens of film and the vitality of the audiovisual, tying them to the political imaginary as a means of “seeing” of knowing and responding to signals and representations of the past. (165-66)

In other words, the centrality of vision in the circuits of knowledge production and response patterns has delimited the frames of interpretation through which new representations are processed and assimilated into predetermined meanings. Following Stites Mor’s suggestion that the naturalization of our interpretive lens by the primary focus on the visual regime has resulted in the under-appreciation of the audiovisual dimension of the filmic medium, I pay particular attention to the use or evocation of both visual and non-visual sensory elements of the composition and the aesthetic strategies of representation in these texts. I consider how these

novels and films give account of the limits of the visual register as they reflect on the processes of signification that inform individual and cultural perceptions of the violent past in relation to the present.

The predominance of film and other audiovisual media coupled with the continuous development and increasing availability of new digital technologies, has been attributed to the consolidation of neoliberal “consumer culture.” According to these arguments, the displacement of literature and other forms of print media entails the privileged status of literature as an agent of symbolic production. The lines of this debate are numerous, of course, but the general idea is that under the commercialization of culture, the communications media contribute to the colonization of perception. According to this process, the consolidation of a culture of distraction signals the certain demise of traditional spaces of authority and influence previously reserved for the cultural critic. The perceived outcomes for this shift include the impoverishment of critical thought and the erosion of communitarian bases of cultural identity, and a superficial homogenization of class and power differences.

The reformulation of the intellectual projects following the formal dissolution of the military regime takes place around the social function of literature, film, and other visual media. In the immediate aftermath of the dictatorship, testimonial accounts serve to propel the legal proceedings against the perpetrators of State violence that continue to take place to this day more than three decades later. Faced with the lack of material evidence with which to substantiate the prosecution of the military junta, personal accounts of violence and other forms of repression were granted absolute validation within the juridical framework during the Trial of the Juntas. Insofar as these accounts provided an alternative to the representations of recent history disseminated by the State apparatus during the dictatorship, and provide a potential avenue

toward the reformulation of the modes of social intervention that had been obliterated during the Proceso, they become a key component of the intellectual projects after the return to democratic rule.

More recently, however, the proliferation of testimonial accounts and fictionalized representations of the past in popular media and other forms of mass communications has generated concerns about the critical function of representations of the dictatorship period among a number of critics. The aesthetic renderings of violence in fictional accounts of recent history and the spectacularization of personal experiences of repression in audiovisual media subsume personal and collective memories of the dictatorship under the logic of consumer culture. The aestheticization of scenes of violence and the horrors of State repression in fictional forms such as melodramas and the recurrence of testimonial narratives in popular forms of television drama trivialize this aspect of social memory and occlude the process of assigning meaning to the recent past.

Of particular interest in this dissertation is the way that each of these works gives an account of the complex and often conflictive relationship between image and text in representations of the recent past in Argentina. Recognizing the power of language to govern popular perceptions of reality, the military junta employs a rhetorical strategy through which it hoped to achieve “the profound transformation of consciousness,” one of the fundamental objectives of the Proceso.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most notorious example of this strategy is the figure of

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<sup>2</sup> There are a number of studies that address the rhetorical and discursive dimensions of the military regime’s repressive strategies. David William Foster, for example, refers to the disorienting effect of the the junta’s discursive system on the generation of children who grew up during the dictatorship period as “the dyslexia of individuals unable to make sense out of the sign system confronting them: its discontinuities, its aporias, its fragmentariness, and, quite simply, its semiotic inadequacy that leads to the confusion and alienation that are the dysfunctional byproducts of the regime’s process of meaning” (52). Diana Taylor coins the term “percepticide,” or blinding, to describe

the disappeared. While the forced disappearance of thousands of Argentine citizens carried out by military and paramilitary forces is carried out in view of the public eye, often in broad daylight, the junta officially relies on the absence of visual evidence to support the denial of its role in the disappearances and refuses to publicly acknowledge the material and, by extension, political existence of the disappeared. In December of 1977, the Madres of Plaza de Mayo begin to occupy the public square armed with photographic images of their missing sons and daughters and demands for the “aparición con vida” of the disappeared. The Madres use the photos as evidence of their children’s existence in order to counter the lack of visual evidence that would implicate the junta in their disappearance.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the Madres’ demands for the “aparición con vida” [“appearance with life”] of their missing sons and daughters can be read as a rhetorical inversion of the discursive strategy through which the junta relegated the victims of State terror to the status of non-existence in official public declarations. In effect, the construction of these individuals as disappeared, non-entities, left them without recourse to human rights.

To a significant degree, the oppositional strategies that the Madres enacted during the early stages of the dictatorship laid the groundwork for the tensions between image and text that frame the reconstruction of historical memory, especially in the visual arts, during the post-

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the regime’s deliberate project to transform perception through the spectacularization of power: “The military’s visual self-referentiality ‘disappeared’ its audience by making it invisible and denying its status as legitimate spectator. . . . The population was not allowed to acknowledge the violence taking place around it. People had to deny the reality they saw with their own eyes and participate in self-blinding” (72). For a more in-depth study of the junta’s “encoded discourses” from a communications standpoint, see Marguerite Feitlowitz’s book *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture*.

<sup>3</sup> Two notable exceptions to this are a series of photographs depicting detainees who were later disappeared that Víctor Bastera, a surviving detainee, managed to smuggle out of the Escuela Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA) under his clothing, and the now iconic photograph of the two French nuns that provided the cause of action for charges that the French government levied against the commanding officers of the junta.



dictatorship period.<sup>4</sup> Although the modes of opposition inaugurated by the Madres constitute an invaluable intervention in the political, social, and cultural spheres, some critics have noted that the intransigence of these tactics has imposed limitations on the process of signification at the collective level. As Elizabeth Jelin points out, “razones ideológicas, políticas o éticas no parecen tener el mismo poder justificatorio a la hora de actuar en la esfera pública, excepto ‘acompañando’ las demandas de los ‘afectados directos’” (“Subjetividad” 563) [“ideological, political or ethical reasons do not seem to have the same justificatory power when it comes to acting in the public sphere except when ‘accompanying’ the demands of the ‘directly affected’”]. The right to seek legal retribution for the human rights violations committed during the Proceso is founded on biological ties to the disappeared, as is the cultural authority to speak on their behalf in the present. The emphasis on blood ties as the grounds for legitimacy, in other words, restricts collective deliberation on the issues involved in political and cultural debates about historical memory.

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<sup>4</sup> A few notable examples of this trend include the following: The silhouettazo, which includes textual inscriptions on the silhouettes of bodies affixed to the wrought-iron fence surrounding the ESMA; an installation titled “Nuestra memoria” in one of the hallways of the ESMA that consists of a series of portraits of the disappeared suspended from the ceiling and a series of black and white photos of the Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo reunited with children who were appropriated by military families during the dictatorship lining the walls of the hallway. Above the photos there are quotes from texts that were prohibited as subversive materials by the junta; “Buena memoria,” a series of photographs by Marcelo Brodsky that show the inscriptions on the group photo of a class that includes several *desaparecidos* in order to register changes in the way that people view and interact with images of absent figures; and a series of collages by León Ferrari that illustrate the edition of *Nunca más* published in serial form by *Página /12*. For a critical discussion of the silhouettazo, refer to Diana Taylor’s *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s “Dirty War.”*

## 1.1 BACKGROUND TO A DEBATE

In contemporary Argentina, the ways of commemorating or remembering the events that transpired during the dictatorship have been an important public issue. Following the formal dissolution of the military regime, the reconfiguration of the public sphere and the symbolic reconstruction of social memory acquire a distinctly political dimension. The critical debates surrounding the representation of the dictatorship and the period preceding it in literary, cinematic, and other cultural productions are often organized around the politics of memory, silence, and, more recently, postmemory at the institutional level, and the analysis of figures of melancholy, mourning, and defeat. Though the body of criticism that examines cultural productions of the post-dictatorship period is extensive and cannot be fully accounted for here, two broad tendencies stand out. The critical work that takes shape during the earlier stages of the post-dictatorship period tends to focus on the discursive strategies of the military regime as a point of departure in order to identify transgressive strategies by which the cultures of opposition organize forms of resistance to authoritarian rule.<sup>5</sup> More recent criticism tends to emphasize the impact of neoliberal economic restructuring on the cultural transformations of the post-dictatorship period through an allegorical reading of figures of mourning, melancholy and defeat.<sup>6</sup> In order to establish the context for my reading of the four texts under examination in this dissertation, I organize this review of relevant criticism about post-dictatorship literature and cinema in particular around several key developments in the critical discussions about how to

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<sup>5</sup> See for example the collections of essays *Ficción y política* (Balderston et al.) and *Represión y reconstrucción de una cultura* (Sosnowski et al.); Fernando Reati's *Nombrar lo innombrable*; and José Maristany's *Narraciones peligrosas*.

<sup>6</sup> Avelar, *The Untimely Present*; Francine Masiello, *The Art of Transition*; Alberto Moreiras, "Postdictadura y reforma del pensamiento."

represent the recent past more generally. The necessary emphasis on some institutional proceedings and historical developments at the expense of others that this broad periodization entails is not meant to indicate either a break or continuity from one historical moment to another. Rather, in discussing these divisions, I intend to account for a constellation of political, economic, social, and cultural forces through which a series of significant transformations in the politics of representation are made legible.

The radical transformations of cultural politics resulting from the militarization process present the intellectual community with a series of challenges during the period immediately following the dissolution of the military regime. The institutionalization of democratic governance in 1983 sparked a number of debates concerning how to come to terms with the legacy of the dictatorship and how to redefine the place and function of the intellectual relative to the state. Organized under the rubric of historical memory and the politics of representation, the primary objective of these debates was to generate a critical practice through the mobilization of certain symbolic resources in order to reveal the strategies of repression encoded in social memory. The articulation of social and subjective experiences excluded from social and political representation during the Proceso is carried out primarily in reference to the fictional texts published by writers and intellectuals in exile, on the one hand, and to the testimonial accounts of the families of the disappeared and the survivors of the detention camps on the other. One of the most notable outcomes of this project is the definition and determination of adequate or acceptable modes of representation for the interrogation of recent history. The role of the intellectual community in the establishment of ethical and political parameters around the representations of the recent past in official politics, exemplified by the inclusion of prominent members of the intellectual community in the truth commission convened by Alfonsín, is

extended to the critical treatment of literature, cinema, and other cultural productions throughout the post-dictatorship period.

Following the reinstallation of the constitutional government toward the end of 1983, the problem of how to narrate the horror of recent history in literary criticism and academic culture turns to an interrogation of the links between Argentine literature and historical experience. The fragmentary and oblique modes of representation characteristic of narrative fictions produced during the dictatorship are interpreted as refractions of the experience of State terror. The regulation of intellectual production under the conditions of censorship and repression, in both physical and cultural manifestations, leads to the reactivation of the experimental poetics and nascent forms of antirealism from the 60s and 70s, such as the apprehension and re-signification of other texts, and the incorporation of non-textual figures of signification—absence, silence, fragmentation of representation and of meaning—in the fictional narratives from the dictatorship. Literary texts from this period that exemplify these strategies of representation include Juan José Saer's novel *Nadie nada nunca* (1980) and Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial* (1980), perhaps the two most often cited texts of Argentine literature produced during this period, and Luisa Valenzuela's *Cambio de armas* (1982). The modes of representation that characterize the literature produced during the dictatorship are also identifiable in a number of fictional cinematic productions produced during the years of the dictatorship. Among the most notable examples of these are *El poder de las tinieblas* (1979) by director Mario Sábato, Adolfo Aristarain's films *Tiempo de revancha* (1981) and *Últimos días de la víctima* (1982), and Manuel Antín's *La invitación* (1982). These films, many of which enlist the narrative conventions of the detective genre, develop the personal stories of their protagonists under the conditions of what Gustavo Aprea refers to as “una realidad monstruosa que, en principio, permanece oculta para el conjunto

de la sociedad” (92) [“a monstrous reality that, in principle, remains hidden for society as a whole”]. Due primarily to the restrictions of censorship, the majority of documentary films from this period are produced by Argentines living in exile during the dictatorship. A few notable examples of these include Humberto Ríos’s film *Esta voz entre muchas* (1978), which gathers the opinions and denunciations of Argentines exiled in Mexico; Jorge Giannoni’s documentary *Las vacas sagradas* (1977), which gives an account of State violence and elaborates a socio-political analysis of the military coups perpetrated in Argentina between 1955 and 1976; and Jorge Cedrón’s film *Resistir* (1978), which features the testimony of Mario Firmenich, one of the commanding leaders of the Montoneros, accompanied by a text in off by Juan Gelman, who attempts to explain the failure of the Montonero project as the combined result of conflicts among Argentine militant organizations and between the militancy and Perón.

Responding to the demands of human rights organizations around which he had centered his campaign, Raúl Alfonsín, the first democratically elected president of the post-dictatorship, initiated his term in office by calling for the arrest and prosecution of the commanding officers of the military junta. On December 15, 1983, less than one week after his inauguration, Alfonsín convenes the CONADEP (La Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas) to investigate and document the allegations of human rights violations perpetrated by military and paramilitary forces, particularly the forced disappearance and systematic torture of Argentine citizens. The CONADEP compiled the testimonies of hundreds of survivors and family members of the disappeared in an official report that would be edited and published in 1984 under the title *Nunca Más*. The report quickly rose to the status of bestseller and garnered widespread public attention for the Trial of the Juntas, which would be televised live on national broadcasting stations the following year.

The valorization of testimonial narratives at the institutional level during this initial stage of the re-democratization process contributed to the canonization of testimonial narratives in the cultural sphere. Insofar as these accounts represented popular subjects that had been silenced during the regime, they provided an alternative to the representations of recent history disseminated by the State apparatus during the dictatorship. They also constitute a key component of the intellectual project that takes shape in response to the atomization of social ties and public culture under the conditions of extreme repression that characterize the dictatorship. provided a vehicle for the mourning process to recover from the traumatic impact of State repression, they constitute a key component of the intellectual project that takes shape in response to the atomization of social and cultural ties under the conditions of extreme repression. Based on personal experience of the defeated and marginalized, testimonial accounts became a privileged means through which to interrogate official versions of history and, as such, form the basis for the reconstruction of historical memory and the reformulation of the means of social intervention that had been obliterated during the Proceso.

The social function of testimonial narratives also informs the ethical model for literature and cinema of this period, which tends to foreground the recuperation of the truth and the denunciation of the abuses and systematic repression that took place during the Proceso. Miguel Bonasso's testimonial novel *Recuerdo de la muerte* (1984), which is presented as evidence of the Junta's methods of abduction, torture and disappearance of persons in the Trial of the Juntas, exemplifies the blurring of generic boundaries carried over from the juridical model during this period. Even in what can be considered fictional literature and cinema, the truth about what transpired under the military regime gains emblematic status through the thematization of the

horrors of the Proceso, the clandestine operations of the military junta, and the impact of State terror on the social body.

Films such as Carlos Echevarría's *Juan, como si nada hubiera sucedido* (1984/1987), and Susana Muñoz and Lourdes Portillo's co-production *Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (1985) exemplify the use of documentary as a means to expose the truth about the atrocities committed under the military regime. Emilio Alfaro and Raúl Filippelli's film *Hay unos tipos abajo* (1985), for example, reframes the nationalist fervor of the '78 World Cup by calling attention to the simultaneous sensations of exhilaration and terror that tempered the celebration of Argentina's victory. The disastrous events of the Malvinas conflict are highlighted in Bebe Kamin's 1988 film *Los chicos de la guerra* (1984), Alberto Fischerman's *Los días de junio* (1985), and Miguel Pereira's *La deuda interna* (1988). A number of films, such as Juan Carlos Desanzo's *En retirada* (1984) and Rafael Filippelli's *El ausente* (1987), deal more directly with the horrors of the Proceso, such as forced disappearances, torture, and the illegal appropriation of the children of detainees.

As the first account of state-sponsored violence and systematic repression to be legitimated by the state, the importance of the official CONADEP report, *Nunca Más*, should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, it has been highly criticized for the exposition of the "two demons theory" in the prologue of the report authored by Ernesto Sábato, which portrays society as an innocent victim of the terror generated in equal parts by the extreme right and the extreme left. To the extent that this position sustains the conciliatory gesture behind the attempts to restore a sense of collectivity under democratic governance, it avoids consideration of the political dimension of the conflict in order to absolve society at large from its role as facilitator in the atrocities committed during the Proceso. At the same time, the circumvention of any

critical consideration of militant violence tends to present the disappeared as victims of circumstance, devoid of political agency. As Pilar Calveiro affirms, “los desaparecidos eran, en su inmensa mayoría, militantes. Negar esto, negarles esa condición es otra de las formas de ejercicio de la amnesia, es una manera más de desaparecerlos, ahora en sentido político” (165) [the disappeared were, in their vast majority, militants. To deny this, to deny them this condition is yet another exercise of amnesia; it is yet another way of disappearing them”]. Luis Puenzo’s *La historia oficial* (1985) and Héctor Oliveira’s *La noche de los lápices* are often cited to illustrate the impact of the “two demons theory” on Argentine cinematic productions of the post-dictatorship.

The publication of the CONADEP’s official report and the subsequent rise of *Nunca más* to the status of bestseller marks a historical shift in the socio-political conjuncture through the legitimation and massive dissemination of an alternative memory of the Proceso on behalf of the State. Nevertheless, the positive impact of this change is neutralized with the ratification of the amnesty laws Punto Final (1986) and Obediencia Debida (1987) during the final years of the Alfonsín administration, along with the presidential pardons that Menem granted to a number of the military commanders who had been convicted during the Trial of the Juntas.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, “duty to remember,” now transferred to the human rights organizations, is overshadowed in the media and in the public sphere by the hyperinflation of 1989 the resulting economic crisis.

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<sup>7</sup> During the Alfonsín administration, different sectors of the armed forces, known collectively as the “Carapintadas,” made several attempts to overthrow the civilian government. In his attempt to assuage the mounting tensions between the civil administration and the Armed Forces, Alfonsín passed Punto Final (1986), imposing a statute of limitations of 60 days from the ratification of the law on complaints of human rights violations carried out during the Proceso, and Obediencia Debida (1987) protecting lower-ranking military officers from prosecution for their participation in acts of torture and disappearance. During the following administration, President Carlos Menem granted pardons to military commanders convicted of human rights violations during the Trial of the Juntas, proposed distributing monetary reparations to ex-detainees and family members of the disappeared, and suspended obligatory military service for males over 18 years of age.



The media contribute to the reconstruction of public culture in the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule in that it both informs and gauges public opinion, which has a mutually influential relationship with the political project of the Alfonsín administration. While the media maintain a similar function in modulating the relation between the state and the public during this stage, the privatization of communications media under *menemismo* marks a shift in the position of the political sphere relative to public culture. During what post-dictatorship criticism commonly refers to as a period of amnesia, the influence of the media in public culture forestalls the aspirations of intellectual discourse to assert itself as a means of intervention in the public sphere. The new information economy, guided by the logic of consumption, projects an image of a unified culture that obscures symbolic and material power differentials, thus dissolving opposition into an amalgamation of different voices that never enter into dialogue with one another.

For some critics, these circumstances present an obstacle to memory and function to erase the memory of the traumatic past.<sup>8</sup> The function of literature along these lines is set in opposition to other forms of media. This, in turn, reorients the task of the intellectual toward determining literary forms that adequately engage the past as a practice of historical memory. The mass media are summarily dismissed as a cultural form co-opted by the authoritarian regime as a means to reinforce the atomization of public culture. The neoliberal economic restructuring that takes effect with the formal transition to democracy and the overwhelming sensations of

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<sup>8</sup> Sarlo addresses this issue in a number of studies, including *Escenas de la vida posmoderna* (1994), *Tiempo Pasado*, and “Sujetos y tecnología.” See also Franco’s *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City* and Avelar’s *The Untimely Present*. Martín Kohan has also been actively involved in these debates as discussed later.

immediacy that characterize the logic of the neoliberal market result in the erasure of the past.<sup>9</sup> Underlying this argument is an implicit devaluation of the “realist” aesthetics of popular culture in favor of a modernist/vanguard aesthetics and a reaffirmation of cultural authority. Accordingly, the status of truth that testimonial discourse acquires through its role in the juridical context during the Alfonsín presidency begins to provoke a certain degree of skepticism for some critics.<sup>10</sup>

The decreased visibility of the demands for justice in the public sphere finds its correlative in a dramatic waning of themes related to the dictatorship in literature and cinema produced during this period. Nevertheless, literary texts such as Saer’s novel *Lo imborrable* (1992) and Matilde Sánchez’s *El dock* (1993) recuperate a sense of how the present is informed by the past through a consideration of the role of the media within two different timeframes. Rodolfo Fogwill’s novel *Los Pichiciegos* about the Malvinas war is also a noteworthy example: although this text was first published in 1983, it did not receive critical attention until it was republished in 1994. Notable cinematic productions that reflect or attempt to overcome the general ambience of indifference against which these critics warn include Alejandro Agresti’s 1988 film *El amor es una mujer gorda*, about a journalist who refuses to stop investigating his wife’s disappearance during the dictatorship and, as a result, is marginalized by the generalized indifference of society, and Lita Stantic’s 1993 film *Un muro de silencio*, which tells the story of

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<sup>9</sup> For a more optimistic account of the potential for social or political intervention under these circumstances in the context of Mexico, see Jesús Martín Barbero’s book *Al sur de la modernidad: comunicación, globalización y multiculturalidad* (2001).

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of the uses and debates around testimonial discourse in Latin America from a wide range of perspectives, see the collection of essays edited by Georg M. Gugelberger in *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*.

a British film director who travels to Argentina to film a movie about the disappeared but is confronted instead by a “wall of silence.”<sup>11</sup>

The foundation of H.I.J.O.S. (Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio), and the testimony in 1995 of former naval officer Adolfo Scilingo announcing his participation in the infamous “death flights,” in addition to the twentieth anniversary in 1996, of the military coup that initiated the dictatorship, reignite public interest in the legacy of the dictatorship. These circumstances spur an explosion of narratives of memory that the economic crisis of the Menem administration had overshadowed during the first half of the decade and a reactivation of the critical discussions about the leftist militancy project of the 1970s.

The highly publicized Scilingo confession, first published in *El vuelo* (1995) by Horacio Verbitsky and later retold by Scilingo himself on national and international television and in *¡Por siempre Nunca Más!* (1997), opens space in the media for alternative accounts of the dictatorship that assume the perspective of the perpetrators. In addition to confirming the statements of survivors about the death flights registered in *Nunca más*, the Scilingo confession exposes the fissures within the military apparatus itself, marking a turning point in the formation of collective memory. Although Scilingo was met with hostility and overt aggression from sectors of the armed forces and from Menem, other officers followed suit. Joint Chief of Staff Martín Balza, for example, accepted responsibility and issued a public apology for the military’s crimes on behalf of the Armed Forces as an institution. In response to these critical accounts, other texts such as Miguel Osvaldo Etchecolatz’s personal narrative *La otra campana del Nunca*

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<sup>11</sup> For a number of critics, Stantic’s film acts as a precursor for the cinema of the children of the disappeared. See, for example, David Blaustein’s essay “La mirada del cine,” Verena Berger’s “La búsqueda del pasado desde la ausencia,” and Ana Amado’s “Herencias. Generaciones y duelo en las políticas de la memoria.”

*Más* (1997) sought to vindicate the military's actions during the Proceso by reviving the heroic narratives of the authoritarian regime's war against the "subversive threat."<sup>12</sup>

The conflicts between different sectors of the armed forces begins to unfold, the Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo levy charges against military commanders for the appropriation of children born in the detention camps—one of the few offenses not protected under the Punto Final and Obediencia Debida laws—and initiate the Truth Trials in order to reinforce the public recognition of the military actions as criminal offenses in hopes of eventually reopening the cases against the military regime's commanding officers for other human rights violations. The public acknowledgement of the appropriation of babies born in the detention centers also contributed to the consolidation of an alliance between the Madres and the H.I.J.O.S. group and a shift in perspective toward the disappeared. Dissociating themselves from the depoliticized image of the disappeared as "innocent victim" according to the human rights narrative, the H.I.J.O.S. established a community and practice of social activism upon the identification with their parents' revolutionary ideals.

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<sup>12</sup> Etchecolatz served as Director of Investigations and Commissioner General of Police presiding over the Buenos Aires province from 1976-1977 and headed up to eight Clandestine Detention Centers, including the "Pozo Quilmes" where part of Kohan's novel takes place. Sentenced to 23 years for illegal detention and forced disappearances during the Trial of the Juntas, Etchecolatz was granted a presidential pardon following the ratification of Punto Final and Obediencia Debida. The publication of *La otra campana* is particularly noteworthy in the context of the present investigation for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the presentation of the book takes place on the popular television show "Hora Clave" that stages a confrontation between Etchecolatz and Alfredo Bravo, whom he had tortured during the Proceso, during which the former demands that the latter recount his testimony in hopes that he will be able to disprove its validity. According to Emilio Crenzel, *La otra campana* is significant because it frames the internal divisions of the military rather than expressing the position of the Armed Forces as an institution (132-33). "His book condenses a range of discourse strategies that included denying, justifying, and relativizing the crimes, and presents itself as a truth eclipsed by a huge conspiracy produced by a legitimized account [the *Nunca Más* report] that came to dominate culture and the media" (135). Finally, following the derogation of the impunity laws in 2003, Etchecolatz is the first to be tried and convicted for crimes against humanity, including the illegal appropriation of minors.

The H.I.J.O.S. group's espousal of the revolutionary ideals of their parents' generation represents their critical stance toward the "two demons theory," the human rights narratives, and the aims of reconciliation promoted by the Menem administration. Nevertheless, by appropriating the radicalized slogans of the leftist militancy of the 60s and 70s in order to articulate their political objectives for the present, they reestablish a heroic vision of their disappeared parents, leaving little room for a public discussion of their parents' political project or a critical evaluation of their ideals and of whether they are suited to the conditions of the present. At the same time, a number of leftist intellectuals, reflecting on the 20th anniversary of the military coup, propose a reevaluation of the project of leftist militancy and of the political experience of the new left during the dictatorship. In contrast to the celebratory tones that predominated in discussions of the revolutionary politics of the new left during the 80s, now reinvigorated by the H.I.J.O.S., these critics cite the urgency to establish a more self-critical perspective on the revolutionary politics of the new left.<sup>13</sup>

The literary and filmic currents of this period reflect a renewed interest in testimonial narratives and historical memory that recuperate figures and scenarios from the revolutionary project of the 1970s, on the one hand, and those that articulate a critique of "the two demons theory" (and its later permutation, what Pilar Calveiro terms "the theory of one sole demon") that had informed a significant portion of the social and cultural narratives of the post-dictatorship period since the publication of *Nunca Más* on the other. The revitalization of memory in the public sphere and in the cultural debates during this period, or the "memory boom" as a number of critics refer to the period between 1995 and 2003 (Jelin, Cerruti, Crenzel) is reflected in a

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<sup>13</sup> The inverse symmetry of these strategies is not coincidental. More than one of the resulting debates published in *Punto de Vista* beginning in 1997 reflect on leftist politics of the 60s and 70s as a point of departure for a consideration of the laudatory tone of the H.I.J.O.S.'s activism (See, for example, Vezzetti, De Ípola, and Terán).

proliferation of literary and cinematic texts structured around narratives of memory, including Juan Gelman and María La Madrid's film *Ni el flaco perdón de dios* (1997), which transcribes the testimonies of relatives of the disappeared, David Blaustein's documentary *Botin de guerra* (2000) about children of the disappeared who were appropriated by military families during the Proceso, and Marta Diana's *Mujeres guerrilleras* (1997), which chronicles the experiences of women who participated in leftist militant groups. Blaustein's documentary *Cazadores de utopías* (1996) presents a history of the Montoneros through interviews with some of the group's former members, while Marco Bechis's film *Garage Olimpo* (1999) about a young militant woman who is abducted and tortured by a young man who had previously boarded in her mother's house. These are examples of two distinct representational strategies of films that revisit the violence of the dictatorship during this period.

In addition to the formal organization of H.I.J.O.S., this period also witnesses the emergence of the post-dictatorship generation, a group of activists, artists, authors and filmmakers who were young children or adolescents during the military regime and whose works denote their position relative to the legacy of the dictatorship and the revolutionary project of the 1970s.<sup>14</sup> Alejandro Rozitchner's book *El despertar del joven que se perdió la revolución*, originally published in 1991 during the Menem presidency, is first published in Argentina in 1996. Director Andrés Habegger's documentary *(h)istorias cotidianas* (2001) about the lives of six children of the disappeared, is one of the earliest films directed by a child of the disappeared.

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<sup>14</sup> The most common definition of the "post-dictatorship generation" is often refers specifically to the children of the disappeared. However, my use this term designates a sense of generation based on experiences of the historical period, including authors, filmmakers and artists who are not relatives of the disappeared but whose work demonstrates a preoccupation with this period or attempts to re-interpret personal experiences as children or adolescents during the dictatorship as adults with insights into the historical conditions of repression that gave shape to their perception of reality.

According to critics such as Miguel Dalmaroni, María Teresa Gramuglio, and Laura Ruiz, the Scilingo confession and the international organization of H.I.J.O.S. are key events of this social conjuncture that give rise to what Dalmaroni calls the “nueva novelística de la dictadura,” which includes novels such as Liliana Heker’s *El fin de la historia* (1996), Luis Gusmán’s *Villa* (1995), and Carlos Gamerro’s *Las islas* (1998). In contrast to the novels of Piglia and Saer, for example, examined during the first years of the constitutional regime, these narratives insist on the problem of the different forms and degrees of continuity between the voices of the repressors and those of the “ordinary Argentines” who collaborated, consented, or remained silent and preferred to forget. As such, these novels dismantled the dichotomies that structure cultural and social perceptions of the figure of the criminal and that of the innocent victim consolidated in the “two demons theory.” By disrupting the binary oppositions between the normative and the pathological, normalcy and aberrance, these novels avoid the moral entrapments of narratives that deal with the horrors of recent history.

In 2003, the administration of President Néstor Kirchner lent its support to the initiatives to overturn the amnesty laws. The motions to reopen the prosecution of human rights violations under the dictatorship took effect two years later. During this same time, different human rights organizations and Commissions on Memory began to advocate for the transformation of former concentration camps, such as the ESMA, into memorial sites and museums. The appropriation of these places by the state presents a series of problems about how to think about the past and maintain the memory of political violence in such a way that does not turn it into a spectacle for consumption or a monolithic narrative. In 2008, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner introduced a series of interventionist economic reforms that ignited a conflict between the government and the agricultural sectors in the interior provinces. One of the most notable of these reforms is the

Program of Wealth Re-Distribution, an agrarian reform that raised taxes on soybean exportation. In response to the proposed scale of progressive taxation, the tensions between the government and the agro-business sector culminated in months-long demonstrations and strikes, including roadblocks and the organized destruction of crops. Kirchner eventually gave in to the demands of the rural conservative factions and rescinded the proposed tax increases. In response to these protests, the Kirchner administration appealed to the urban working class. In addition to criticizing the relative prosperity of the agricultural sector and emphasizing the potential and likely threat that their political influence posed to popular social programs, she insinuates a connection between the agricultural producers and the dictatorship, calling them *golpistas* (“coup plotters”) in public address.

In response to this conflict, a number of prominent members of the Argentine intellectual community sign and put into circulation a series of open letters that express their support of the government. These “*Cartas Abiertas*” emphasize the importance of historicization for understanding the social and economic antagonisms behind this conflict and redefining the role of the intellectual community relative to the social and political spheres. Although the texts included in this corpus are published and released either a number of years before or too soon after this incident to presume that they comment directly on it, the reformulation of the intellectual project outlined in the “*Cartas Abiertas*” provides a more concrete expression of the impact that the return of the left to political hegemony has had on the self-conception of the intellectual community. In their declaration of solidarity with the Kirchner administrations reformist politics, the “*Cartas Abiertas*” criticize the mass media’s role in consolidating an alliance between the “extreme right” and the popular classes by obscuring the historical



conditions that gave rise to and perpetuate the conflict between the State and the agricultural sectors.

The centrality of the recent past in the political discourse of the Kirchner administrations and in the intellectual sphere during this period prompts a return to the debates around the representation of history and the politics of memory in post-dictatorship cultural productions. The mistrust in the media for its role in over-simplifying or neutralizing the debates around historical memory expressed by the “Cartas Abiertas” group echoes the position of other intellectuals traditionally associated with the left.

## **1.2 CONTEMPORARY MEMORY DEBATES**

Following the transition from military to democratic rule in the Southern Cone, and often as an element of the cultural and personal dynamics of that transition, there has been a wide-ranging discussion of literary and cinematic representations of memory, “postmemory,” testimony, testimonial narratives, trauma and PTSD, mourning and melancholia, and other related themes. In the debates regarding how to redefine the position and role of the intellectual community under democracy, memory emerges as a way to counteract the effects of the systematic misinformation or distortion of reality deployed by the military governments in order to prevent defiance within the country and assuage the clamor of protests from the international community. The dynamics of these debates take on different hues and textures according to the specific circumstances of each country within the region, but the basic idea is that memory, in both the juridical and aesthetic realms, provides a storehouse of images and stories that reflect the

experiences and perspectives that are marginalized during the dictatorships. Initially, especially in Argentina, the memories of ex-detainees and family members of the disappeared are articulated as testimonies in the legal proceedings against the commanding officers of the military junta. Nevertheless, the consolidation of an institutional memory through the use of these testimonies within the juridical framework becomes problematic for the continued elaboration of meaning in different fields of the interpersonal, cultural, and political landscapes in the years that follow.

In the aftermath of military repression, which resulted in the disintegration of the leftist intellectual community, the question of how to represent the past in literature and cinema forms a cornerstone in the re-definition of the place and function of the intellectual in the context of democracy. A central facet of this endeavor is the evaluation of appropriate aesthetic models best suited to the ethical and political demands of cultural restructuring programs in the post-dictatorship period. The discussions about literary and cinematic representations of the recent past in the post-dictatorship period center around a number of issues including but not limited to the definition of appropriate modes of representation, the articulation of experience, and the possibility of establishing strategies of resistance or the means to expose the gaps in official versions of history through artistic and critical practices.

If the legal proceedings against the commanding officers of the dictatorship depended in no small part on the testimonial accounts by witnesses, ex-detainees and family members of the disappeared, the persistence of testimonial or first-person narratives outside of this context generates skepticism. Some critics, like Avelar and Sarlo, argue that testimonial narratives are ill equipped to inquire into the nature of the recent past and its continued legacy in the present. Alternatively, they call for the reestablishment of literary fiction as the privileged space from

which the intellectual can carry out a critical inquiry of recent history and reformulate the task of resistance.

In *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Fiction and the Task of Mourning* (1999), Idelber Avelar positions his analysis of post-dictatorship fiction within a consideration of cultural impact of neoliberal economic restructuring. He argues that the dissolution of dictatorial rule in the Southern Cone should be understood less as a transition from military to democratic rule than as a subsequent stage in an ongoing transition from State to Market: “as ushers of an epochal transition from State to Market,” he argues, “[the dictatorships] represented the crisis of a specific form of cultural politics proper to the boom of Latin American literature in the 1960s” (11). In the present of the post-dictatorship, he proposes, this crisis is made manifest in the inability to adequately communicate experience or organize the relationship between the past and the present in narrative form.

Avelar views the proliferation of testimonial narratives in post-dictatorship cultural productions as a symptom of this crisis. The idealization of testimonialism, he argues, encourages “specular, unreflective identification and precludes the possibility of asking questions about the nature of that experience” (65). Literature proper, by contrast, is capable of fulfilling the need to recuperate the memory of the dictatorship in such a way that negates the totalizing narratives of the post-dictatorship. “The task of the oppositional intellectual,” he asserts, “would be to point out the residue left by every substitution, thereby showing the past is never simply erased by the latest novelty” (2).

Avelar’s argument assumes a correlation between the juridical function of testimony as a means of reconciliation for the social body and its therapeutic function for the individual. Though testimonial discourse operates on a different level in each case—the collective and the

individual, respectively—they both serve the same purpose. In both cases, testimony serves as a means to “work through” trauma and carry the mourning process to fruition in order to achieve closure. For Avelar, the problem with testimonial discourse is the status of the testimony itself as an index of truth and the implied authority of the individual who bares witness to that truth. Insofar as testimonial narratives exceed those contextual frameworks, they present an obstacle to critical inquiry of experience. The inability to critique the principle of authority that consolidates the affective identification of the interlocutor or reader with the speaker or author sustains the singularity of the experience, sealing off the possibility of interpreting individual memory in relation to a collective experience of the past. In delinking individual and collective experience of the past, Avelar argues, testimonial narratives depoliticize the meaning of experience and hinder the recognition of collective agency.

Insofar as allegory is by nature “a trope that thrives on breaks and discontinuities,” it represents the impossibility of representing totality and, paradoxically, the constant attempts to defy this impossibility. Accordingly, he associates the allegorical mode with melancholy in order to define an ethical model for resistance to the cultural logic of the neoliberal market. As the above cited declaration suggests, Avelar’s prescriptive analysis of the texts in his corpus of allegory as the only means for the “oppositional intellectual” to intervene in public culture and forestall the erosion of historical memory. Literature—literary fiction, specifically—he proposes, is the cultural space best suited to identify and counter the residual traces of history that remain under the present conditions of neoliberalism. This formulation elides the relationship between act of writing and the act of interpretation, thus obviating the process by which the cultural critic’s interpretation of a given text, testimonial or not, interacts with a given text to negotiate meaning. In other words, Avelar’s argument regarding the lack of critical potential in testimonial

narratives fails to recognize the participation of the reader, viewer, or listener in the production of meaning beyond the moment of encounter between enunciation and interlocution.

In *State Repression and the Labors of Memory* (2003), Elizabeth Jelin examines the uses of memory in social and political debates and as an object of theoretical inquiry. Rather than conceive of contemporary memory debates in terms of a struggle between memory and oblivion, Jelin argues that memory should be recognized as a conflict between different social actors over competing versions of the past, a struggle for recognition motivated by personal, economic, or other institutional interests. The struggle to preserve individual memories, she argues, should be recognized as a struggle to reclaim political agency.

Jelin frames her discussion of memory, personal testimonies and testimonial narratives in the Southern Cone from a consideration of the critical debates about the relationship between memory, experience, and trauma that have emerged in response to the crisis of representation brought on by the Holocaust. Drawing on the work of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Jelin reads the proliferation of testimonial accounts as a cultural manifestation of the “crisis of witnessing” that emerges in response to experiences of trauma, and stresses the importance of recognizing testimony as a communicative act:

With this discursive foundation, and dependent on the narrative frameworks existent in a particular culture, the issue of testimony returns to an arena where the individual and the collective meet. Even individual memory, implying an interaction between the past and the present, is culturally and collectively framed. Memory is not an object that is simply there to be extracted; rather, it is produced by active subjects that share a culture and an *ethos*. (68, emphasis in original)

In contrast to Avelar’s devaluation of testimonial narratives in favor of allegory as the mode of

representation capable of arresting the erasure of memory, Jelin gives an account of testimony as a process of negotiation, stressing the potential uses of testimonial narratives as a way to suture the divide between individual and collective experiences of State terror in Argentina.

In his book *Chile in Transition*, Michael Lazzara's discussion of the cultural debates surrounding memory and representation in post-dictatorship Chile centers primarily on the issues of politics and aesthetics. Despite the wide array of materials he considers in this study—novels, poetry, testimonial narratives, film, memorial sites, and travel brochures, for example—he defines his primary objective as the examination of different modes of narrative through which traumatic memory is expressed. He bases his analysis on two primary types of narrative, open and closed, which he characterizes in terms of attempts to either make sense of the past or expose “in their very composition . . . the limits of narrative representation after trauma” (33). In an attempt to avoid evaluations based on strictly aesthetic criteria, Lazzara recognizes that the narration of “limit experiences” takes many forms and that “each strategy of representation necessarily implies political, aesthetic, and ethical decisions” (31). Though he is careful not to voice his preference as a full endorsement of one form over the other, his argument against the presumptions of authority that direct representation entails preemptively betrays his answer to the question of whether “those discourses and cultural practices that resist closure or the imposition of meaning are the ones that can best stand up to the epistemological challenges facing post-dictatorship societies” (157).

In her article “Sujetos y tecnología” (2006), for example, Beatriz Sarlo reflects on the social function of contemporary literature in terms of its treatment of the past. In this article and elsewhere in her work, Sarlo articulates her skepticism toward the critical potential of literature

as a consequence of the rapid dissemination of aestheticized images of violence in the mass media.

Beatriz Sarlo's argument in "Sujetos y tecnologías" regarding a turn to the present in contemporary Argentine fiction reflects a number of the issues at stake in the debates about memory and representations of the dictatorship in contemporary cultural productions. Bemoaning what she calls the "ethnographic impulse" and the thematization of the absurd in a number of recent literary publications, Sarlo announces the collapse of the critical function of literature under the "weight of the present" and the exhaustion of knowledge about the past:

Hoy esa empresa [reconstructiva] sólo puede sostenerse en la calidad de escritura, ya que un saber circula hasta en las formas más banales de los textos de memoria y el periodismo-ficción audiovisual. . . . Por lo tanto la ficción no llena un *vacío* sobre el que ahora se vuelcan otros discursos y ya no puede sentir el imperativo de ser la primera (la única) cuando los desaparecidos son tema de los *hits* de la telenovela, de la historia profesional, del periodismo o de decenas de exhibiciones de fotografías y objetos de memoria. (2, emphasis in original)

[Today that [reconstructive] endeavor can only sustain itself in the quality of the writing, since knowledge of the recent past circulates in even the most banal texts of memory and audiovisual fictionalized-journalism. . . . As a result, fiction no longer fills a *void* over which today other discourses spill out and it can no longer feel the imperative to be the first (the only), when the disappeared have become a topic in telenovela *hits*, professional historiography, journalism or dozens of exhibitions of photographs and objects of memory.]

Sarlo's argument links the cultural logic of consumer capitalism to the mimetic quality of literary representations of the present to illustrate what she regards as the colonization of perception. The implicit antithesis between mimetic representation and critical reflection that her argument establishes reflects Sarlo's disillusionment with the state of literary production, on the one hand, and her rejection of subjective narratives as a potential means of intervention in public politics, on the other. Her basic premise is that the trivialization of history as a product of consumption effectuates a transformation of perception that results in the assimilation of literary production into the logic of the neoliberal market. As a consequence, both the "ethnographic impulse" that she identifies in contemporary literature, together with the expansive dissemination of the "figure of the disappeared" as a topic of popular television series, news broadcasts, professional histories, and in "all genres possible," reflect what she sees as the depletion of critical reflections on reality in literature and the emergence of subjective narratives that cater to the demands of the market as a new cultural dominant.

Beatriz Sarlo takes issue with the increased prominence of postmemory and in what she calls the "memory culture" more generally as symptoms of a "subjective turn" in her book *Tiempo pasado. El giro subjetivo y la cultura de la memoria* (2005). A significant component of her criticism is centered on the concept of postmemory in the work of Marianne Hirsch and James Young. The establishment of postmemory as an autonomous category of analysis is superfluous, she claims, since memory is always already mediated. Sarlo echoes many of the points that Avelar makes in *The Untimely Present* when, for example, she sanctions testimonial accounts as a means of seeking justice in the legal proceedings against the military junta, but argues against what she perceives as the over-valuation of the *testimonio* and other personal narratives in what she refers to as the contemporary "memory culture." The basic premise of her



argument is that the subjective dimension of these accounts tends to elevate the testimonial subject to the status of moral authority on the basis of personal experience. The crystallization of the author as victim, she says, precludes a more productive critical engagement with history.

Sarlo illustrates her perspective on this matter in reference to Pilar Calveiro's *Poder y desaparición* and Emilio de Ípola's *La bamba*—both sociological studies about different aspects of the detention centers authored by ex-detainees—in the chapter titled “Experiencia y argumentación,” Sarlo praises the authors for their use of the argumentative mode and the subversion of the first-person voice, which ground their analyses in “principios explicativos más allá de la experiencia” (96) [“explanatory principles beyond experience”]. The second object of her criticism is the “theoretical inflation” (132) of postmemory in contemporary memory work of the post-dictatorship generation. She dismisses Marianne Hirsch's development of this concept in *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, for example, as a repository of “banalidades personales legitimadas por los nuevos derechos de la subjetividad” (134) [“personal banalities legitimated by the new rights of subjectivity”], concluding that “[n]o hay entonces una ‘posmemoria’, sino formas de la memoria que no pueden ser atribuidas directamente a una división sencilla entre memoria de quienes vivieron los hechos y memoria de quienes son sus hijos” (157) [“it is not so much a question of post memory, but rather types of memory that cannot be attributed directly to a simple division between the memories of those who witnessed events and the memory of their offspring”]. Sarlo's concern here is that the claims to legitimacy implied in first-person narratives emphasize individual experience at the cost of a consideration of a historical perspective that would allow for an objective account of a collective historical experience.

The responses to Sarlo's attack on the "subjective turn" in *Tiempo pasado* unfold around a variety of issues. John Beverley, for example, develops a critique of several aspects of Sarlo's position in *Tiempo pasado* and in several of her previously published texts. The crux of his argument is that Sarlo's disdain for first person narratives such as the testimonio and her call for more rigid disciplinary demarcations can be understood as part of what he calls the recent "neoconservative turn" in Latin American cultural criticism. Accordingly, Sarlo's call for a form of "skeptical lucidity represented by the institution of literature and literary criticism that does not succumb to the illusions of an . . . appeal to the authority of subaltern voice or experience" signals an underlying rejection of the emergent cultural forms and practices promoted as part of the Kirchner administrations' neo-populist political project (83, 84).

Alicia Partnoy also takes issue with the appeal to academic authority in Sarlo's critique of personal narratives. Partnoy's concern lies primarily with the implicit suggestion that "survivors are unfit for theoretical reflection unless they undergo traditional academic training and do not refer directly to their experience" (1665). Sarlo's approach, she contends, limits the critical function of first-person survivor narratives to the act of enunciation, thereby circumventing a consideration of the testimonial subject's engagement with the listener. More recently, in *Los umbrales del testimonio* (2012) Ana Forcinito shares Partnoy's concern with this oversight in Sarlo's study and points to another gap in this argument. The devaluation of testimonial narratives, she contends, gives a univocal account of the act of translating experience into the linguistic register fails to account for the tensions between the normative impulse of language and elements of traumatic experience that elude representation or resist the imposition of the logic of representation. Insofar as the testimonial act entails the articulation of experience, it is

inextricably bound up with the interpretation of the experience that the testimonial subject translates in the linguistic register.

Since the novels and films examined here circulated at a time of intense debate, during the Kirchner administrations, critics often engaged them in relation to the large and polarizing cultural debates in which public intellectuals associated with “*Cartas Abiertas*” (González, Forster, etc.) and non-kirchnerista intellectuals like Sarlo intervened. My focus here, however, will be on teasing out the implications behind the institutionalization of a particular narrative of historical memory in the four works to be analyzed here. Each of these texts unsettles previously dominant narrative strategies, thereby sharpening the questions of the political implications of art without providing clear narrative solutions to these problems.

### **1.3 THEORETICAL AND CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

I organize my reading of the novels and films of this corpus around a series of concerns relative to the intersections of narrative and audiovisual modes of representation in order to examine how these texts approach a number of recurrent issues in post-dictatorship literature, film, and criticism, including but not limited to the ethical and political implications around the representation of violence, the intersections of history, memory and experience, discursive claims to authority and legitimacy, and the body as a privileged site of mediation. This project, therefore, is informed by insights and developments from several overlapping fields of theory and critical inquiry, such as trauma studies, gender studies, and cultural studies.

At the center of the political and cultural debates about representations of the dictatorship in post-dictatorship literature and film are the issues of violence, the configurations and ethical

uses of such representations, the media through which they are put into circulation, and how different modes of transmission affect processes of perception and critical thought. A consideration of the interrelatedness between violence and representation that Teresa de Lauretis articulates in “The Violence of Rhetoric” provides a point of departure for an interpretation of the treatment of violence in the novels and films that comprise the corpus of this project. In her critique of their understanding of the relation between violence and the rhetorical structures that describe it, de Lauretis argues that Foucault and Derrida fail to account for the mutually constitutive relationship between material forms of violence and the power differentials inherent in the discursive systems that ascribe gender to the symbolic realm. “The (semiotic) relation of the social to the discursive,” she maintains, “is thus posed from the start. But once that relation is instated, once a connection is assumed between violence and rhetoric, the two terms begin to slide, and, soon enough, the connection will appear to be reversible” (32). De Lauretis calls for an analysis of empirical violence that also addresses the discursive formations of violence that inhere in social practices. In effect, an understanding of violence and representation as mutually imbricated components of social relations also mobilizes an interrogation of the way that representations of violence—in both language and image—reflect the sociocultural and political processes involved in struggles over representations of the past and, by extension, knowledge production.

Recent work in trauma studies attends to the role of visual media in shaping contemporary experience in relation to historical trauma through images of violence. In *Trauma and Cinema*, for example, E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang propose: “in [the visual media’s] courting and staging of violence they are themselves the breeding ground of trauma, as well as the matrix of understanding and experiencing a world out of joint. The visual media have

become a cultural institution in which the traumatic experience of modernity can be recognized, negotiated, and reconfigured” (17). Along similar lines, Allan Meek argues that theories of historical trauma should be understood as an endeavor to articulate the crisis of political agency that resonates in this convergence of history and trauma. “Mediated trauma,” he contends, “does not so much carry the traces of the traumatic past as dramatize and act out a crisis of subjective agency . . . Modern visual media constitute a crucial dimension of this crisis because they increasingly provide the images through which contemporary identity is negotiated” (14). In other words, the perception of images of violence through media technologies provides a means of collective identification that stands in for the subjective experience of history. In this sense, the experience of material violence becomes a guarantor of narrative authority and legitimacy that limits participation in processes of signification to a minority, for whom the status of victim becomes the primary determinate of social subjectivity.

In order to conceive of how these texts attempt to overcome the challenges that the complex relationship between violence, representation, and experience poses for the modern subject, I refer to what Gilles Deleuze calls the “violence of sensation”: “The violence of sensation is opposed to the violence of the represented (the sensational, the cliché). The former is inseparable from its direct action on the nervous system, the levels through which it passes, the domains it traverses: being itself a Figure, it must have nothing of the nature of the represented object” (*Francis Bacon* 39). In contrast to the “violence of representation,” which would limit the conditions of possibility for the process of signification within the boundaries of a closed narrative structure subject to pre-established frames of interpretation, such as historical knowledge, national myths, cultural symbols, and subjective experience, the violence of sensation evokes the impact or anticipation of the violence, the horror, by rendering visible a

constellation of forces that elude visual perception. The novels and films that I include in this corpus, likewise, call on the capabilities of the image and visual rhetoric to act as a catalyst for the perception of material reality that supersedes the limitations of the visual realm or the system of rationality that structures empirical knowledge.

The primacy that Deleuze assigns to the body as the locus of mediation or the conduit of sensation in the above formulation invites a reflection on the nature of affective encounters between characters within the narrative, and between the reader or spectator and the text, as well as the ways that divergent experiences of violence are registered in the material composition of the subject. Developments in gender studies allow for a consideration of the body as an ideological determinant for what or who is authorized to be seen and under what circumstances. The disfigured or diseased body is a material counter-sign of the social processes of “normalization,” meaning that it reflects both the regulation of bodies through medical and legal institutions, for example, by rendering visible that which exceeds the discursive boundaries of the institutional or ideological narrative codes. Equally significant for the interpretation of these works is the material absence of bodies and figures whose presence is registered through non-visual modes of representation, disrupting the pleasures of visual identification.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes delineates two qualities specific to the photographic image: the *studium* and the *punctum*. His general argument in regards to the photographic image is that, unlike the cinematic image, the photograph retains two antithetical characteristics. His definition of *studium* describes the non-subjective quality of the photograph relative to the viewer, contending that the meaning of the photograph is determined by the photographer only to the extent that he or she has control over the framing of the image; but other than that Barthes considers it an immediate representation of reality “as it was.” Despite his rigid insistence on the

indexicality of the photographic image, he does concede an exception to this quality in the *punctum*. The *punctum*, for Barthes, is that detail which pierces the direct representation of reality and takes hold of the affective sensibility of the viewer. This detail is entirely subjective since it cannot mean the same thing or have the same effect on any two individuals.

While Barthes is concerned with defining the irreducible singularity of the photographic image to capture a pure representation of the past as it was, his idea of the *punctum* as a dimension of absolute subjectivity brings to the surface attributes of the photographic image as an irresolvable duality between the absolute objectivity of the representation of the material dimension of the past and the absolute subjectivity of perception. He goes on to argue that “the subject that is photographed is rendered object, dispossessed of itself, thus becoming, ‘death in person’” (14). These reflections on the irreducible singularity of the photographic image provide an interesting counterpoint to the description of the photographic image within the specificities of the novel as a medium, and the significance of the photograph itself as an object of representation. Moreover, the objectification of the photographic subject in the above formulation also provides a point of departure for the interpretation of the absence or omission of certain subjects as a representational strategy in the narratives and films under consideration here.

The spatial configuration of memory as an object of critical inquiry is reflected in the interplay between movement and enclosure in the narrative structure of each of these novels and films. As Jens Andermann points out, the investigative journey or quest as a narrative form prevails as a “spatial figure of memory itself” in the majority of documentary films about the dictatorship (109). In these texts, however, the focus of the investigation that initiates the narrative shifts from the initial point of inquiry to the movement of the characters through

contemporary sites of mnemonic significance, thus foregrounding the body as the privileged site for the critical appraisal of the uses of memory that predominate in the earlier stages of the post-dictatorship period. The texts in this corpus are populated with deformed (Kohan), diseased (Martel), mentally ill (Martel and Almeida), and barren (Kohan and Almeida) characters, including children. By foregrounding the disabled body and infantile subjects, sometimes in the same character, these works comment on exclusionary practices that maintain certain social actors as extra- or pre-political objects of representation.

#### 1.4 CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS

In order to attend to the specificities of the individual works in this corpus, I will dedicate one chapter to each of them. Nevertheless, each chapter will consider a series of formal and thematic concerns identifiable throughout this body of texts. By establishing a dialogue among them, I aim to underscore a series of aesthetic and narrative strategies that establish a sense of coherence in what might otherwise be considered a disparate group of novels and films.

Chapters two and three of this dissertation develop the analyses of Martín Kohan's novel *Dos veces junio* (2002) and Albertina Carri's film *Los rubios* (2003), respectively. Both Kohan and Carri situate their works within a tradition of artistic and literary production, and cultural, social and political discourse. Despite their near simultaneous appearance in the Argentine cultural field as two works widely considered to initiate a shift in the discursive and aesthetic construction of memory in literature and cinema, these two works are rarely, if ever, considered in terms of a common political and aesthetic trajectory. In consideration of the overarching concern with the tensions between image and text in this dissertation, I suggest not only that a



reading of these two works together invites an interrogation of the factors that contribute to the idea of literature as somehow distinct from other forms of media. I will also take into account the other images, texts, and discourses present in these two works and suggest how the incorporation of these elements inform the production, dissemination, and reception of these two works.

Chapters four and five shift attention away from the federal capital to the interior provinces in Lucrecia Martel's film *La mujer sin cabeza* (2008) and Eugenia Almeida's novel *El colectivo* (2009). The circumstances surrounding the European publication of Almeida's novel in several languages and the international financing of Martel's film were conditioned by their international, not national, production. The limited circulation and critical reception of *El colectivo* and the international financing and production of *La mujer sin cabeza* underscore practices of exclusion and marginalization that are also foregrounded in the works themselves.

Despite the praise that *El colectivo* has garnered in literary competitions, few cultural critics in Argentina have given it serious consideration as an object of analysis. There are two notable exceptions to this tendency: First, "Pensar la dictadura: terrorismo de Estado en Argentina," a series published by the Argentine Ministry of Education, makes mention of *El colectivo* in a footnote that lists novels that "aceptaron el desafío de volver al pasado desde las condiciones del presente" (153) ["accepted the challenge of returning to the past from the conditions of the present"]. Second, Pampa Arán includes Almeida's novel (along with *Dos veces junio*) in her analysis of post-dictatorship novels in "El relato de la dictadura argentina. Series y variaciones," the second chapter of the collection of essays *Interpelaciones: Hacia una teoría crítica de las escrituras sobre la dictadura y memoria* (2010).

## 2.0 NARRATING MEMORIES OF THE DICTATORSHIP IN MARTÍN KOHAN'S *DOS VECES JUNIO*

Martín Kohan (1967- ) teaches literary theory at the University of Buenos Aires and actively contributes articles of literary and cultural criticism to weekly publications such as *Página /12* and *Clarín*, and to a number of scholarly journals, including (in the past) *Punto de Vista*, and *Confines* (and the online continuation of the same, *Rayando los Confines*). He is the author of three book-length essays, *Imágenes de vida, relatos de muerte. Eva Perón, cuerpo y política* (coauthored with Paula Rocca, 1998), *Zona urbana. Ensayo de lectura sobre Walter Benjamin* (2004), and *Narrar a San Martín* (2005); two collections of short stories, *Muero contento* (1994) and *Una pena extraordinaria* (1998); and, in addition to *Dos veces junio*, eight novels: *La pérdida de Laura* (1993), *El informe* (1997), *Los cautivos* (2000), *Segundos afuera* (2005), *Museo de la Revolución* (2006), *Ciencias morales* (2007), *Cuentas pendientes* (2010), and *Bahía Blanca* (2012). *Ciencias morales*, which also takes place during the dictatorship and the Malvinas conflict, was adapted into a screenplay for the film *La mirada invisible* (2010) directed by Diego Lerman.

*Dos veces junio* takes place during two decisive moments of the Proceso: the night of Argentina's defeat against Italy in the 1978 World Cup, which Argentina hosts and ultimately wins, and the day of the same match with the same outcome in the 1984 World Cup, which takes place at the height of the Malvinas conflict as Argentina's defeat becomes unquestionable and

support for the dictatorship is at an all time low. The first part of the novel, “Diez del seis,” is told from the perspective of an ex-conscript who served his obligatory military service as the driver and protégé of Dr. Mesiano, a consulting physician for a number of clandestine centers of detention and torture in the Buenos Aires province. This part centers around the narrator’s search for Dr. Mesiano, who is summoned to answer the enigmatic question scrawled in a notebook that initiates the novel: “¿A partir de qué edad se puede empesar [*sic*] a torturar a un niño?” (11) [“From what age can one begin to torture a child?”].<sup>15</sup> This question condenses a number of themes that run throughout the novel. Most directly, it alludes to the illegal appropriation of children born in captivity and given over to military families, and foreshadows this situation in the novel. In the context of the novel, this question refers to the child born to the female detainee in the Centro Quilmes. Once he reappears in the first half of the novel, Dr. Mesiano appropriates the child and gives him to his sister. It refers specifically to the recently born child of a detainee who refuses to render any information despite the extreme conditions of her interrogation. Dr. Mesiano appropriates the child and gives him to his sister. The narrator’s seeming indifference to the implications of this inquiry also alludes to the internalization of power structures. Rather than react to the nefarious content of the question, the narrator is preoccupied by the potential consequences of his uncontrollable impulse to correct the spelling error in the message transcribed in the notebook.

The second part of the novel, which establishes the present of enunciation for the narration of the first part, is structured as an epilogue. After reading the name of Dr. Mesano’s son Sergio on a list of fallen combatants published in the paper, the narrator, who has become a medical student after fulfilling his year of obligatory military service, decides to visit his former

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<sup>15</sup> This question is registered in the testimony of Adriana Calvo de Laborde, survivor of the “Pozo de Quilmes,” which is transcribed in the “Journal of the Juntas” published by the newspaper *Perfil*.

mentor to pay his respects for the loss of his son. After first searching for him at his home, he is redirected to the residence of Dr. Mesiano's sister where a family gathering is underway. It is here where the novel stages the reencounter between the narrator and the child of the detainee who had been appropriated and turned over to the sister at the conclusion of the first part of the novel.

*Dos veces junio* is often cited as a later representative of the new narrative style of post-dictatorship fiction inaugurated in the mid-1990s by novels such as Liliana Hecker's *El fin de la historia* (1996) by Liliana Hecker, *Las Islas* (1998) and *El secreto y las voces* (2002) by Carlos Gamerro, *Los planetas* (1999) by Sergio Chejfec, and *Villa* (1995) and *Ni muerto has perdido tu nombre* (2003) by Luis Gusmán, from whom Kohan derives the title and epigraph of this novel.<sup>16</sup> Miguel Dalmaroni and María Teresa Gramuglio, for example, argue that the more direct representation of “the horrors of the dictatorship” that characterizes the narrative style of these novels—what Gramuglio calls “un verosímil estricto para una historia inverosímil” (12) [“a strict realism for and unrealistic history”]—signals a shift away from the oblique figurations of reality common among novels written during the dictatorship. At the same time, *Dos veces junio* and the other novels included in this tendency, modify the realist aesthetics that structure the narratives of memory that emerge during the initial stages of the post dictatorship period.<sup>17</sup> For

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<sup>16</sup> The epigraph reads as follows: “En junio murió Gardel, en junio bombardearon la Plaza de Mayo. Juno es un mes trágico para los que vivimos en este país.” [“Gardel died in June, they bombed the Plaza de Mayo in June. June is a tragic month for those of us who live in this country.”] Though the quote itself most likely refers to Gusmán's novel *En el corazón de junio* (1983), Kohan has commented in interviews that he chose to include this quote as the epigraph in acknowledgement of a literary debt to Gusmán's novel *Villa*. Although a sustained analysis of the influence of these two novels in *Dos veces junio* is beyond the scope of this project, I will consider some relevant points of comparison in the section that follows.

<sup>17</sup> See also Sylvia Saïtta's essay “Lo que sobra y lo que falta en los últimos veinte años de la literatura argentina,” and Roland Spiller's chapter “Memorias en movimiento” in *Contratiempos de la*

Dalmaroni, certain formal characteristics of Kohan's novel, such as the perspective of the narrator, function to circumvent the aestheticization of violence and "la moral del realismo" ["the moral of realism"] while, at the same time, they reactivate the realist impulse that bares "un lazo tendencialmente seguro y cerrado entre sujeto y experiencia, narración y sentido" (159-60) ["a tendentially secure and hermetic link between subject and experience, narration and meaning"].

Another related line of criticism regarding this group of narratives identifies the incorporation of the first person participant as a means to reelaborate concepts of memory, responsibility and identity through the fictionalization of history. This wave of narratives is considered to have emerged in response to the historical conditions of the late 90s that gave rise to a diverse range of voices and perspectives on the recent past. The narrative strategies common to this group of texts are thus read as an attempt to overcome the dichotomies between literature and politics, or victim and aggressor.

In the sections that follow, I explore the implications of the novel's structure—the implication of the epilogue vis-à-vis the pact between the narrator and the reader, in particular—on its interpretation. The first section, therefore, explores the effect of defamiliarization that the intertextual reference in the epigraph and the aforementioned implication of the reader in the knowledge that a number of structural elements initiate. In the second section, I examine the gendered representations of violence through the lens of this structural call for a two-fold process of interpretation (i.e. reading and re-reading). The third and final section examines the implication of the child that appears in the epilogue on the narrator and how the centrality of this

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*memoria*. Saïtta cites Dalmaroni's periodization in her analysis of a return to realism in the "New Argentine Narrative." These novels, published between the early- to mid-1990s and the first years of the twentyfirst century: "abandonan el relato cifrado para apostar a la construcción de una trama y una vuelta a los procedimientos del realismo" (24) ["abandon the encrypted tale to support the construction of a plot and a return to the procedures of realism"].

figure in the final pages of the novel returns the reader to a consideration of the narrator's identity and establishes an extra-textual link with the political and social activism going on with the children of the disappeared that is taking place at the time of the novel's publication.

The narrator in *Dos veces junio* shares a similar perspective when his routine is interrupted by the momentary absence of Dr. Mesiano during the World Cup match in the first part of the novel. In this sense, the narrator (implicitly) characterizes himself as both reader and, as the denomination of the second part of the novel as epilogue (i.e. paratext) suggests, writer of the text. In this sense, the two parts of the novel present the irresolvable conflict in the narrator. The experience he relates in the first part shatters the illusions of ideological coherence and the moralist discourse of Dr. Mesiano. There is a disjuncture between what Mesiano says and what he does. By considering the possibility that the narrator may also be the "author" of the text, the addressee is also uncertain. This would eliminate the possibility of reading it as a type of testimonial account (given by a secondary witness—plus, he didn't see any of the things done to the detainee that he relates).

In *Dos veces junio*, the narrator reproduces a number of Dr. Mesiano's comments regarding medical history and warfare and includes seemingly trivial details about, for example, the history of the scale as an instrument of medical science that the narrator includes at key moments during the first part of the novel. The fragments recalling what the detainee tells the narrator of her experience in the torture center seem to disrupt the narrator's attempts to impose a linear order on his narration of what occurred the night of the soccer match. In effect, the rationalization expressed in the medical discourse and national history fragments under the weight of senseless violence that inheres in the reality that it attempts to justify or rationalize.

Another common argument that this characterization of *Dos veces junio* generates is that this novel undermines the ideological polarities established by the “two demons theory,” thus distancing the narrative perspective from the ideological polarities that sustained the perspectives of the victim or the perpetrator. In this sense, the voice of the narrator, who plays a subordinate role in the repressive apparatus but does not participate directly in the tortures and, as such, does not fully occupy the position of either victim or perpetrator, establishes a privileged perspective from which to identify forms of complicity in the social institutions underpinning authoritarian rule. Andrea Pagni, for example, argues that the novel “[pone] de manifiesto los mecanismos a través de los cuales la sociedad misma devino cómplice de la dictadura” (345) [“makes manifest the mechanisms through which society itself became accomplice to the dictatorship”]. The “Argentine Family” in particular plays a central role as a pillar of support for the military regime.

In the same process, the novel calls attention to the crisis of witnessing and searches out alternative modes of perception that would take into account the dynamic process of interpretation and the position of the narrator and of the interlocutor. According to Dalmaroni and Gramuglio, the novel avoids direct representation of the detainee in order to preserve the ethical position/moral integrity of the victim by re-telling her story. This seems to be a comment on the means by which we access the narratives that inform our apprehension of the past and what factors determine how or whether they enter into circulation. Read in the context of the ongoing legal battles against the impunity laws, this aspect of the novel presents a critique of the juridical framework and the human rights framework.

## 2.1 DEFAMILIARIZATION

The novel is divided in two parts: the first of these, “Diez del seis,” recounts in the first person the narrator’s search for Dr. Mesiano the night in which Argentina loses against Italy 0-1 in the 1978 World Cup. The second part, “Treinta del seis (epílogo),” takes place the day after Argentina loses to Italy, again by the same difference, in the following World Cup in 1982. Mesiano, who has abandoned his post to attend the match, is required to answer the question that opens the novel. The narrator sets out to find him so that he will avoid the potential repercussions of his momentary absence. After reading the name of Mesiano’s son, Sergio, in a list of fallen combatants of the Malvinas War, the narrator goes to pay his respects for the loss of his now former mentor. When he arrives at the doctor’s house, however, he is informed that he is not where the narrator had expected to find him, but at his sister’s house.

A defining formal characteristic of the novel, and a common point of interest among the novel’s critics, is the use of numbers in the titles. The title of each chapter corresponds, in most cases, to some detail in the text of that chapter. The chapter “Ciento veintiocho,” for example, refers to the model of Fiat belonging to the narrator’s father. Other titles refer to years, the outcome of the soccer matches, the maximum capacity of the new football stadium, and the number of a hotel room, just to name a few. These chapters are further divided into short subsections designated by roman numerals. Likewise, the titles of the two parts of the novel, “Diez del seis” and “Treinta del seis” respectively, indicate the dates during which the action of each part transpires. This systematic enumeration establishes the predominant tone of the narration, which is characterized by the instrumental rationalization and disciplined efficacy of military discourse.



Miguel Dalmaroni cites this structural peculiarity as a strategy through which the novel replicates the point of view of “un otro histórico que querríamos imposible y que...sigue a nuestro lado” (164) [“a historical other that we would like to believe impossible and that...remains at our side”]:

[D]el habla del que narra resulta la representación aterradora de una mentalidad histórica y presente, con una clase de efecto realista ante el cual únicamente esa mentalidad y solo ella podría mostrarse, como sucede en el relato, imperturbable . . . Hay entre nosotros, nos recuerda la novela por la forma de su voz, una mirada que pudo ver así los hechos, un sujeto capaz de narrarlos de ese modo, es decir de la mera moral de la eficacia del método, y que por eso los produjo. (163-64)

[From the language of he who narrates results the terrifying representation of a mentality that is both historical and present, with a type of realist effect before which this and only this mentality would be able to prove itself, such as it occurs in the story, imperturbable. . . . There is among us, the novel reminds us in the form of his voice, a gaze that could see the facts in this way, a subject capable of narrating them in this way, that is from the mere moral of the efficacy of the method and, for that reason, produced them.]

In a similar vein, María Teresa Gramuglio argues that the syntactic organization of the narrative, as a sign of the narrator’s impulse to calculate and quantify his experience, functions as an exercise of mental automatism that registers the occlusion of any possible moral judgement on the part of the narrator. This characteristic of the narrative voice finds its correlative in the form of the novel, which, according to Gramuglio, confirms the novel’s relevance among the novels of the dictatorship. This form “consiste en una serie de restricciones voluntarias . . . [que] miman en

el discurso los dispositivos de control que operan sobre el narrador para asegurar una adhesión a los métodos de terror estatal que va más allá de la obediencia debida” (13) [“consists in a series of voluntary restrictions . . . (that) mimic in discourse the mechanisms of control that operate upon the narrator in order to ensure an adhesion to the methods of State terror that goes beyond due obedience”]. For both Dalmaroni and Gramuglio, the hyper-rationalized tone of the narrator, along with the systematic ordering in numeric terms and other formal elements of the novel register the complex correlation between the informal mechanisms of control that operate through the narrator and his complicity with the extreme tactics of repression. The neutrality of the narrative voice that results from the internalization of these mechanisms at once crystalizes the horror of repression and consolidates the conditions of possibility for the narration of these horrors.

As both of these critics suggest, the relationship between military socialization and adhesion to the methods of repression, especially as an interrogation of forms of social complicity and the effects of State terror on the social body, contributes undeniably to the configuration of meaning in *Dos veces junio*. Within their arguments, however, lies a possible ambiguity that warrants further consideration. The systematic enumeration of the titles that both of these critics cite in their interpretation of the novel is not entirely consistent throughout the novel. While the titles of *most* chapters are explained in the text, there are a number of exceptions to this rule. In these cases the meaning of the title is implicit, the number is either partial or composite, or there is no number.<sup>18</sup> If the the tone of the narrator is made manifest in the structure of the novel, these inconsistencies complicate readings of the novel such as these that hinge on the “inconceivable neutrality” of an “imperturbable” narrator as a precondition for

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<sup>18</sup> I am referring specifically to the following chapters: “Veinticinco millones,” “S/N,” “Cuarenta y ocho,” and “Seiscientos treinta.” I will discuss these cases in further detail in the sections that follow.

the absolute submission to the mechanisms of State terror. While these characterizations of the narrator in *Dos veces junio* serve to distinguish the novel's approach to the experience of recent past from the narrative modes of either the survivors (as in the testimonies of the ex-desaparecidos registered in the *Nunca más*) or agents of repression, they seem to confer it an exceptional status. Dalmaroni calls the narrator a "historical other" whose existence disquiets the reader while Gramuglio claims that the narrator adheres "with conviction" to the repressive actions of the military only to emphasize the narrator's "inconceivable neutrality."

A closer examination of the specific context to which each of these titles applies will illustrate that the narrator is not entirely "imperturbable" and that his neutrality is not absolute. Moreover, I will show that the act of narration itself belies the notion that the narrator's adhesion to the methods of state terror is absolute as Gramuglio's formulation suggests. Dalmaroni's assertion that there is "una mirada que pudo verlos así" fails to take into account more subtle aspects of the text relating to the privileged status vision as a form of knowledge production. (*Not seeing is a recurring trope in the novel*).

The experience of the detainee related in the first half of the novel is transmitted through the material boundary of the wall that separates the two, by their different stations (hers is the voice of the militancy while his, at the moment of this encounter, is positioned on the side of the military regime), and by the temporal distance that separates the moment of the interaction (1978) and the narrative's present of enunciation (1982). Something that the criticism has failed to take into account is the implication behind this final aspect. In other words, although between the main part of the novel and the epilogue, or "final comment," of the novel, the narrator is the same, but his position relative to the military apparatus is not. At the present of enunciation, he is a civilian who, though no longer directly involved with the military and even less directly

involved in the torture of the detainee, maintains ties not to the military *per se*, but to the individual with whom he became affiliated during his service. The narrator says: “Yo no era más que un soldado, un soldado conscripto, y al cabo de un año ni eso sería. Pero alcanzaba, con todo, a darme cuenta, porque en eso me fijaba y reparé, de que el que llegaba un poco más lejos y se hacía nombre, más temprano que tarde generaba envidia y malestar” (75) [“I was nothing more than a soldier, a conscript, and at the end of one year I would not be that even. But I managed, despite it all, to realize, because I paid attention to that and I noticed these things, that he who advanced a little further and made a name for himself, sooner or later generated envy and discontent”].

The relationship between 1978 and 1982 is neither that of discontinuity nor simple continuity but constitutes a dialectical interplay in which lines of connection are established through shifts in the narrator’s perspective. As a paratextual device, the epilogue stands outside the narrative itself but maintains a close intratextual relationship with it. The epilogue’s ambiguous relationship with the first part of the novel is reinforced by the enclosing parenthesis in the title: “Treinta del seis (epílogo).” As a parenthetical annotation to the title of the second part, “epilogue” simultaneously establishes, reinforces and, paradoxically challenges a sense of closure for the first part of the novel. In his examination of the epilogue in its function as a paratextual device, Gerard Genette argues: “[T]he *epilogue* has as its canonic function the brief exposition of a (stable) situation subsequent to the denouement, from which it results: for example, the two heroes are reunited after several years, and they tenderly and peacefully gaze at their numerous offspring” (207-08). He later points out, however, “the impossibility of every epilogue . . . : you cannot ever visit the same island twice; . . . you are no longer you” (208).

The narrator and his former mentor are reunited after several years and a sense of nostalgia does, for the most part, establish the tone of their visit. As he decides on the most efficient route to follow for the trip, he remembers the night that he helped the doctor without circumspection. As the narrator comments after having resolved to pay Dr. Mesiano a visit at his home, “El viaje me despierta no pocos de mis recuerdos más queridos, de cuando el doctor precisaba mi ayuda y yo se la daba sin miramientos” (171) [“The trip awakens more than a few of my fondest memories, of when the doctor needed my help and I gave it to him without a second thought”]. Despite the sense of nostalgia that establishes the tone for the narrator’s reunion with Dr. Mesiano, there is an underlying irony to the scene. The narrator’s return to the residence of Mesiano’s sister in the epilogue where he had been at the conclusion of the night narrated in the first part of the novel that confronts him with what he had gone to such great lengths to ignore or suppress in his recollection of the events that transpired four years prior.

Above all, the parenthetical title of the second part of the novel, “Epígrafe,” calls for an inquiry into the narrator. The epigraph traditionally functions as a comment, or postscript, on the text by the author of the work. In this sense, the epigraph situates the narrator, rather than Kohan, as author of the preceding text. What Dalmaroni and Gramuglio refer to as the absolute systematization or systematic rationalization of the text becomes less absolute from this perspective. The titles of the two parts of the novel—“Diez del seis” and “Treinta del seis,” respectively—suggest that the text can or should be read as a chronicle, while the gaps in the narration regarding the conscript’s involvement remain implicit in the narration itself. He recollects, for example, a statement that Dr. Mesiano makes regarding the river but does not establish the context in which this statement is made: “Lo que se hunde ahí, dijo el doctor

Mesiano señalando hacia abajo, no se encuentra nunca más” (153) [“What sinks there, Dr. Mesiano said pointing toward the bottom, is never found again”].

In many ways, the use of the epilogue may also point to a connection with Dostoyevsky in that it mimics both the parable of the prodigal son and that of the adulterous woman. In *Crime and Punishment*, the protagonist’s claims of repentance for his crimes are questioned, such that the act of confession as a sign of repentance is denaturalized.<sup>19</sup> In suggesting the act of writing, the structure of the novel and the occasional interventions of the narrator from the present would provide the basis for a reading of the novel as a confessional. Nevertheless, the narrator’s interventions are often framed as explanatory asides that serve to justify the narrator’s inaction and, at times, circumvent or cover up any direct participation in these crimes that he confesses. Moreover, in the act of naming those around him –Sergeant Torres, Dr. Mesiano, Cabo Leiva, Dr. Padilla—the narrator implicates the guilt of others and differentiates himself from them by way of anonymity. He identifies himself as a number, stresses the interstitial position that situates him, in his role as a conscript, between the civilian and military spheres. Moreover, reading the novel this way frames the act of narration as a betrayal of the father (Dr. Mesiano—messiah—San Martín), which is mirrored at the beginning of the novel when he sees the figure of Christ with eyes gazing upward toward the sky asking the father why he had betrayed him). Finally, it is the narrator’s recognition of the adulterous women—Mesiano’s wife and his sister—and the child of the detainee with two names that prompts the confession.

The epilogue begins with the narrator describing his customary reading habits as he leafs through the newspaper, explaining the rationale behind his systematic approach, and detailing pieces of interest in each of the sections: “Leo el diario, como de costumbre, empezando por las

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<sup>19</sup> Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* is the object of extensive reflection for the protagonist of *Bahía blanca*, one of Kohan’s later novels.

páginas deportivas. Primero los titulares de la portada, . . . y después las páginas sobre deportes. En el mundo del deporte siempre pasa algo. Lo mismo ocurre con las páginas policiales... Por eso mis hábitos de lectura consisten en comenzar por las noticias de deportes y luego pasar a las noticias policiales” (158) [“I read the paper, customarily, beginning with the sports pages. First, the headlines of the front page, . . . and then the sports pages. In the world of sports there is always something happening. The same occurs with the police/crime section. . . . That is why my reading habits consist in starting with the sports news and then moving on to the police reports”]. A headline announcing a disturbing story causes the narrator to deviate from this routine. Rather than begin with the sports section, the narrator describes a report from the police blotter about the discovery of the mutilated body of a young adult male buried in the backyard of a recently purchased house. The body had been decapitated and the fingers had been burned with some type of caustic acid. “Dadas las circunstancias,” the narrator remarks, “la policía considera que será sumamente difícil establecer una identificación fehaciente del fallecido” (158) [“Given the circumstances, the police speculate that it will be extremely difficult to establish a reliable identification of the deceased”]. The absence of any identifying marks on the body conjures images of the tactics used to effectuate the disappearance of the victims of state terror, a correlation that the narrator sustains when, after reading the report, he turns to the sports section, where he notices that the formation of the national selection is nearly identical to that of the prior one, “como si los años no hubiesen pasado” (159) [“as if the years had not passed”]. The sudden change in the narrator’s customary reading habits described not two pages before the description of this image, suggests an involuntary association between the morose description of the decapitated body and the national selection from four years earlier. This association is further reinforced soon after when the narrator describes a photo of the national selection as a row of

lowered heads: “Las fotos turbias y grises muestran una hilera de cabezas gachas. La imagen se torna irremediabilmente sombría, a pesar del destello de la luz meridional de Cataluña” (160) [“The blurry grey photos show a row of heads bent down. The image becomes inescapably somber, despite the gleam of southern light of Catalonia”]. This implied connection, which causes a sudden change in the way he reads the paper, foreshadows a change in the way he reads or interprets the memory of his experience the night described in the first part of the novel.

As he proceeds through the comments, he takes notice of a list of fallen combatants published on behalf of the Ministry of the Interior, where he finds the name of Dr. Mesiano’s son, Sergio, whom he met the night Dr. Mesiano abandoned his post to attend the soccer match. It is only by chance that the narrator finds out about the death of his former mentor’s son; the list is situated just above an ad for a weight-loss medicine that calls his attention. After looking over the advertisement, the narrator skims through the list, with the same mechanical interest that he reads through the rest of the pages, the narrator emphasizes the distance from which he perceives the events of the outside world: “Reviso la lista *de manera casi automática*, no por verificar nada en particular, no como si fuese un preceptor que controla presentes y ausentes en el aula de un colegio, sino *con un reflejo automático* que me hace deslizar la vista por la columna de los nombres y los apellidos” (161, emphasis added) [“I look over the list in a nearly automatic way, not to verify anything in particular, not as if I were a teacher checking attendance in a secondary school classroom, but with *an automated reflection* that makes me run my eyes down the column of given and last names”]. Up to this point, the narrator’s distanced perspective on the events he reads in the papers reproduces the rationalized tone through which he attempts to relate his experience from four years earlier in the first part of the novel. Nevertheless, after seeing Sergio Mesiano’s name on the list of fallen combatants, he expresses a sense of shock that, like his



encounter with the detainee, destabilizes his attempts to apply a rationalized order to everything: “Estoy todavía extrañado, porque de la lectura de un diario, por mucho que pueda llegar a afectarnos o a perturbarnos con las cosas que pasan en el mundo, no se espera que nos involucre de manera personal. Cuando una noticia parece estar, en cierto modo, dirigida *a nosotros, a nosotros en especial*, algo se desacomoda en el orden de las cosas” (163, emphasis added) [“I am still in shock, because, for as much as reading a newspaper can end up affecting us or disturbing us with the things that happen in the world, you never expect that it will involve us on a personal level. When something in the news seems in some way addressed *to us, to us in particular*, something loses its place in the order of things”]. The implication here is that the narrator had found a way to put things in order by the end of the first part. The fact that this something is now out of order, however, complicates the notion of narrative closure that this “ordering” entails. It invites or challenges the reader to reread or reconsider the first part of the novel in light of the text that the narrator is about to present.

In addressing the reader “in particular” in the above passage, the narrator also evokes the reader’s “customary reading habits,” challenging him or her to reconsider how this has influenced the interpretation of the novel up to this point. The narrator’s use of direct address to an unknown reader stresses the importance of the reader’s role in both identifying and responding to the narrative strategies of the text. In this textual interpellation, the narrator seeks to position the reader as an ally by neutralizing his or her potential and likely opposition to his actions and, perhaps more significantly, his inaction in response to the pleas of the detainee. The imposition of a certain interpretation that such an engagement of the reader entails can be read as an attempt to persuade the reader to sympathize with his perspective.

This is the second time that the narrator includes the reader as a witness to what he is describing. The first instance occurs in the first part of the novel, in the chapter titled “Cinco” [“Five”] in which he describes a pornographic film that he sees in the brothel during his encounter with the prostitute who tells him her name is Shiela. The narrator describes in painstaking detail a gruesome scenario in which a young girl seeks assistance for a busted bicycle tire from a group of five soldiers who, instead of helping her, take turns raping her. The description of the film is given almost entirely in the third person omniscient voice except for a few moments when the narrator makes an aside to infer or explain something that is not made explicit by the action of the film or to offer an interpretation of the characters. In these instances, the narrator shifts to the first person plural (we/us): “*De alguna manera entendemos, sin precisar que ninguno lo explicita, que estos soldados tan jóvenes como vigorosos hace un largo tiempo que no ven a una mujer. A la vez se espera que creamos, por mucho que algo de su aspecto en el fondo lo desmienta, que la muchacha de la bicicleta en su corta vida aún no ha conocido varón*” (104, emphasis added) [“*Somehow we understand, without needing anyone to explicitly state it, that it has been a long time since these soldiers, as young as they are vigorous, have seen a woman. At the same time, it is expected that we believe, for as much as something about her appearance in essence belies it, that in her short life, the girl with the bicycle has yet to know a man*”]. In this case, the narrator is interpolating the reader as spectator of the film and in doing so he is opposing “us” to the agents of the intra-diegetic field of the film. By setting what “we” understand or are able to infer against what we are “expected to believe,” the narrator appeals to the reader’s ability to interpret the scene based on the visual representation that he describes. At the same time, this (deceptively) flattering appeal to the reader’s ability to *see* beyond the surface of the text to the underlying truth of the matter, belies the narrator’s attempt to obviate his own

role as the mediator of the text in question. In other words, the narrator's indication of what *we* know despite the intended meaning of the film in question, can be read as an attempt to distract the reader from the fact that what he or she knows is contingent upon the access to that knowledge that he provides.

This operation takes on another layer when the narrator challenges the reader to question the meaning of what he describes regarding the film:

Cada tanto volvemos a ver, tan en detalle como lo vemos todo, la cara de la muchacha. Tal vez todavía se queja, o tal vez ya no. Hay algo en ella de inexpresivo que *nos impide saber a ciencia cierta*<sup>20</sup> si en todo este asunto sigue padeciendo o si algo existe ya del sentimiento inverso. *Seguramente no es eso lo que más importa en la historia.* (106-07, emphasis added)

[Every now and then we see, in as much detail as we see everything, the girl's face again. Perhaps she is still groaning, or maybe she's not anymore. There is something inexpressive about her that *prevents us from knowing with any certainty*, whether in all of this matter she is still suffering or if there is something of the inverse sentiment already. *Surely that is not what matters most in the story.*]

In this instance, the narrator draws our attention to the indeterminacy of the actress's expression as an obstacle to empirical inference, signaling the limits of even the almost complete visual access that the film affords the spectator. His subsequent assertion that this "is not what matters in the story" lends itself to two possible interpretations: Given the narrator's demonstrated indolence, the most obvious interpretation would be that whether the girl continues to suffer is

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<sup>20</sup> The expression "a ciencia cierta" loses something in its English translation. A more literal translation would be "to an exact science." Although this is a common expression, it is suggestive in the context of the novel, especially considering the narrator's persistence in his attempt to quantify experience through memory.

not what matters most. Another possibility would be that knowing *a ciencia cierta* is not what matters. The lack of any clarification as to what, exactly, is not what matters most or what does matter most in the story accommodates either of these two seemingly antithetical interpretations and presents a challenge to the reader to extend this ambiguity to his or her interpretation of the narrator's story. It urges us to consider both the narrator's apparent indifference toward the experience of the detainee and the details that exceed this characterization as two mutually constitutive layers of meaning.

The ambiguity of the narrator's statement (i.e. either interpretation is possible and potentially valid) may also provide some insight to his position relative to the story that he is telling. The "algo inexpresivo" that he comments in his description of the actress/character of the film could also be an accurate characterization of how the narrator strives to present himself. In this light, the devaluation of either interpretation—that neither the lack of expression nor the ability to know to any degree of certainty—throws the narrator's overt depiction of himself (i.e. indolent, distanced, coldly rational) out of focus without entirely disavowing it as a layer of meaning. The remainder, then, is all that which exceeds or contradicts the narrator's intended self-portrayal and the symptoms of an internal conflict between what he knows and what he knows to suppress.

This conflict is reiterated throughout the narrative. In the first chapter, the narrator recalls several anecdotes that his father had told him from the days of his military service. A recurrent theme that emerges in the fathers nostalgic recollections is that "en el servicio militar, conviene no saber nunca nada. Me aconsejó que aprendiera esa lección elemental" (18) ["during (your) military service, it is prudent to not know anything ever. He advised me to learn this fundamental lesson"]. The narrator expects the reader to rely on his interpretation of the film; this sense of

authority is replicated from the part where he refuses to contest Sgt. Torres's interpretation of the photograph even though he does not agree. In the absence of visual access to the film he describes in the later scene, the reader is left to question the meaning or message not of the film itself, but of the narrative strategy through which we perceive it.

In *Dos veces junio*, the presentation of a photograph depicting a young boy in a military uniform is set in a disjunctive parenthesis that illustrates the formation of different meanings derived from the visual perception of the same image. The description of the photograph initiates the chapter with no introductory remarks that would serve to establish a referential context for the interpretation of the image:

Era una imagen en blanco y negro. Sólo si se prestaba atención al rostro se advertía que el de la foto era un chico que probablemente no pasaba de los diez años de edad. Y sólo si se prestaba atención a la boca se adivinaba el miedo. El resto de la imagen no correspondía a esa cara: el casco, las botas, el fusil que no pesaba, la prestancia erguida del soldado alemán. (31-32)

[It was an image in black and white. Only upon close inspection of the face was it apparent that the one in the photo was a child who was probably under ten years of age. And only by paying close attention to the child's mouth was his fear perceptible. The rest of the image did not correspond to that face: the helmet, the rifle that did not weigh much, the erect poise of the German soldier.]

The narrator's description of the image is followed with the superior officer's insistence that he observe the image carefully. After the narrator completes the request, the superior asks him what the image suggests and, following the narrator's dry, objective response—it suggests a photograph taken during World War II—the sergeant dictates the meaning he intended for the

photograph to convey. “Exactamente, soldado,” the superior officer affirms, adding: “Y nos enseña que también los niños participan de guerras” (32) [“Exactly, soldier. And it teaches us that children also participate in wars”].

While the significance of the conscript as a minor participant in the military in the first part of the novel cannot be ignored, there is a notable difference in the position of the narrator in the second part of the novel; namely, the narrator is a civilian. This implies that the narrator of the first part of the novel is not a conscript, but rather a civilian narrating an episode that he experienced as a conscript. The temporal distance between experience and narration is made explicit in the first part of the novel with a few asides by the narrator in the chapter “Cero uno,” which refers to the outcome of the soccer match. In the first case, the narrator says: “Yo no era más que un soldado, un soldado conscripto, y al cabo de un año ni eso sería” (75) [“I was nothing more than a soldier, a conscript, and at the end of one year I wouldn’t even be that”]. Later, he comments: “Eso pensaba y eso pienso, aunque no tengo todavía una profesión (voy a tenerla: estudio medicina)” (79) [“That is what I thought and that is what I still think, even though I don’t have a profession yet (I am going to have one: I study medicine)”] and again, “¿Qué es la medicina, finalmente? Yo estudio medicina” (82) [“What is medicine, after all? I study medicine”]. In each of these instances, the narrator downplays his own position as a means to either explain or authorize the insight or knowledge of a situation that he has or is about to impart. At the same time, the scientific basis of these explanatory asides to the narrative evinces an impulse to maintain a rational distance from the events in question. The distance between the narrator and the narrative of the first part is most clearly established by the temporal escision indicated in the titles of the two sections of the novel (which indicate a lapse of four years between the first and second parts of the novel).

The indeterminacy of the figure that appears to him in a dream at the close of the novel is emphasized by the absence of a face. Though the narrator claims to know that it is the prostitute with the nervous tic with whom he spent the night during the first part of the novel four years prior, the particular detail that remains clear for him—the nervous tic in the mouth—both grounds and undermines this declaration of certainty regarding this figure’s identity. On the one hand, the specificity of this detail leads the implied reader to interpret the erasure of the face as the effect of time on the narrator’s memory of the episode featured in the dream. The literal nature of the dream, implied as much in the narrator’s perception of time in the dream as synchronous with that of reality and in the near-consistent repetition of the dream over the course of the four years that bridge the narrator’s experience with the present of enunciation for the narration of the event in the epilogue.

## 2.2 VIOLENCE, BODY, DISCIPLINE

As a number of critics have pointed out, Kohan reworks several elements of Gusmán’s novel, *Villa*, in *Dos veces junio*.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, there is one theme of considerable import to Gusmán’s novel that has not been considered in regards to Kohan’s novel, namely, the issue of writing and revision. Rather than write a report with the intention of condemning his own actions or the systematized repression of the military apparatus, the story of the night in which the narrator goes in search of his mentor can be read as an attempt to justify or rationalize the narrator’s

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<sup>21</sup> The most commonly cited of these are the use of a first person narrator who acts as a secondary participant of the repression, the use of realist aesthetics and the direct narration of the “horrors of the dictatorship.” See, for example: Dalmaroni, “La moral de la historia” and *La palabra justa*; Gramuglio, “Políticas del decir y formas de la ficción,” and Saítta, “Lo que sobra y lo que falta.”

inaction by highlighting his subordinate position and mechanical function within the operational structure of the military apparatus and, at the same time, fulfill what could be interpreted as an ethical (rather than moral) imperative to voice or tell the story of the detainee whose request for help he denied at the time. As the structure of the narrative makes abundantly clear, however, these two objectives are at odds with one another. The dehumanizing experience to which the detainee is subjected interrupts or forestalls the narrator's ability to rationalize the application of the state's repressive tactics and minimize his agency as a "cog" in the repressive "machine" that, although minor, is required to act in synchronization to ensure the effective operation of the system. The fragments of text relating the experience of the detainee, which the narrator hears near the end of the night in question appears at first to fracture the linear order of the narrative. Nevertheless, the implied act of writing the story entails the translation of the narrator's own experience that gives an account of this encounter with the real. In this sense, the incorporation of these fragments in the narrative suggests the recognition of the detainee's experience as a constitutive element of the narrator's subjectivity.

The formation of an identity in the military context depends largely on the individual's role in the larger system. In "Truth and Power," Foucault elaborates this relationship by saying that "the State can only operate on the basis of other, already existing power relations. . . . This meta-power with its prohibitions can only take hold and secure its footing where it is rooted in a whole series of multiple and indefinite power relations that supply the necessary basis for the great negative forms of power" (122). In the case of a military system, these prohibitions stabilize the structures of power by establishing a balance between the abilities of the body and its limits. *Dos veces junio* represents the formation of such an identity within a system that



reproduces itself from one generation to the next and is perpetuated by the application of rules according to gender and the role of the individual within the social system.

Gender distinction is noted clearly at the beginning of the novel with the memory of an interaction between the father and mother of the conscript. The characteristics of the mother and father in this episode establish the basis for the other gendered relationships in the rest of the novel. After hearing the narrator's call to service during the draft lottery, he comments that his mother's reliance on the newspaper to verify her memory of the radio announcement: "Mi madre no había dejado de decir que el recitado de los números en la radio se había vuelto confuso y que no era seguro qué número venía después de cuál, ni qué número correspondía a qué número. Por eso compramos el diario al día siguiente. Mi madre dijo: 'Con el diario vamos a saber'" (14-15) ["My mother had not stopped saying that the recitation of the numbers on the radio had become confusing and that it was not certain which number followed which, nor which numbers corresponded to one another. So we bought the newspaper the next day. My mother said: 'With the paper we will know'"]. In other words, the information transmitted by radio depends on the memory of the mother, but she cannot trust herself without confirmation from the printed version. The mother does not allow herself to believe something if it is not presented through an "official" medium. She depends on the established and authorized sources to construct not only her understanding of the matter, but also her memory by extension. The subordination of the mother's memory as a source of knowledge provides the point of reference from which to interpret the other representations of gender in the novel. This submission is the basis not only of a feminine social identity but it also sets up a contrast that allows the formation of a social hierarchy that facilitates reproduction, both figurative and literal, of the repressive military apparatus.

Throughout the first part of the novel, scenes of violence are enacted against women of different social categories. These scenes, of unclear origin in the narration, consist of the rape of a young woman in what the reader may infer is a scene from a pornographic film in the hotel room where he engages in sexual congress with a prostitute; the feigned reproduction of the rape with the prostitute; and the perhaps imagined scene of sexual impropriety on behalf of an unnamed married woman prior to a beating by her husband and the friend after the husband catches her in the act. Only the violence committed against the female detainee in Quilmes is narrated without reference to an act of a sexual nature.

The description of the rape of the young girl who is accused of faking her displeasure takes on new meanings in light of the simulated rape/torture of the prostitute in the brothel after the match and the subsequent encounter between the narrator and the detainee. The pleasure that the soldiers derive from the torture and humiliation of the detainee is too close and too real to incite pleasure as it had in what seems to have been a pornographic film and a “make-believe” reenactment in the brothel.

In contrast to the narrator’s encounter with the detainee, his encounter with Dr. Mesiano’s wife and sister in the epilogue are marked by the narrator’s visual access to their bodies. The circulation of rumors about why Mesiano’s wife does not leave the house make it impossible to establish the truth about the circumstances, but they do point to a number of factors that contribute to the circumstances. The narrator explains that it is not certain whether she does not leave the house because she is unable to do so due to her “condition” or because Dr. Mesiano does not allow her to leave the house because he is embarrassed about her condition. Likewise, no one knows the cause of her condition.

The indeterminacy of her experience is further compounded by a scenario described as taking place in a domestic setting without any reference to the temporal or spatial coordinates in which it takes place. A woman and a friend of her husband who has come to visit are alone in the house waiting for the husband to return. The wife, in a gesture of automatism approaches the husband's friend and sits on his lap. When the husband arrives, "La traición es doble, pero el enojo no dura. De un modo bastante argentino, el marido resuelve que la culpa la tiene la mujer. . . Sin perder cierto aire ausente se agrega el marido a la escena, sellando de tal forma una amistad" (97) ["The betrayal is two-fold, but the anger subsides quickly. In a particularly Argentine manner, the husband determines that the woman is to blame. . . Without losing a certain air of absence, he incorporates himself in the scenario, sealing in this way a friendship]. The husband says "la muy puta no va a olvidarse de la lección que le hemos dado—dice el marido. Detrás la mujer se palpa dolorida. —Si alguna vez quiere olvidarla --dice el amigo--, el cuerpo se la va a recordar" (98) ["the whore will never forget the lesson we have taught her—the husband says. Behind him, the woman touches herself painfully. 'If she ever tries to forget it—the friend says—her body will remind her"]. It is not clear where this scene belongs in the discursive order of the novel. It could be a scene of something that he sees on television when he is at the brothel or it could be another one of the rumors about what happened to Mesiano's wife. The placement of the description in the action of the novel makes it difficult to tell exactly where that happens in the order of events, thus disallowing a clear explanation of its meaning according to the logic of cause and effect.

This fraternal bond that the soldiers experience crystallizes gender constructs. Masculine characteristics are defined and established as the unifying factor in this system, and through the

transmission of masculine/military ideals from one generation to the next, this system is transposed to and perpetuated in the civilian sectors.

The following reflection on behalf of the narrator seems significant if we take into account his ambiguous position in between the two extremes of professionalism:

Eso pensaba y eso pienso, aunque no tengo todavía una profesión (voy a tenerla: estudio medicina), porque me parece evidente que el orgullo profesional ayuda a que los deberes se cumplen con mayor eficacia. Claro que, cuando no se actúa exclusivamente a título personal, digamos por ejemplo en un consultorio privado al que acuden pacientes particulares, sino que se forma parte de un sistema conjunto, hay que entender que en una máquina cada engranaje funciona en relación con otros engranajes, y que en esa máquina, al igual que en cualquier motor, hay piezas más importantes y piezas menos importantes. (79)

[That is what I thought then and what I think now, although I still do not have a profession (I am going to have one soon: I study medicine), because it seems apparent that professional pride makes it more likely for orders to be carried out with greater efficiency. Of course, when one does not act exclusively in a personal capacity, as in, for example, a private practice that attends to particular patients, but rather as part of a whole system, you have to understand that in a machine, each cog functions in relation with other cogs, and that in that machine, just as in any motor, some parts are more important than others.]

He is not fully subject to either the professional pride of the individual or to the logic of the “sistema conjunto.” The narrator speaks from the position of the medical student: “Yo estudio medicina. La medicina es una ciencia del cuerpo humano. Es un saber sistematizado sobre el

cuerpo humano, que a veces se aplica sobre su medianía, sobre el nivel promedio de lo que se considera la normalidad, y otras veces se aplica sobre sus límites, sobre los niveles a los que un cuerpo puede ser llevado” (82) [“I study medicine. Medicine is a science of the human body. It is a systematized knowledge about the human body that, sometimes is applied under moderate circumstances, over the average level of what is considered normalcy, and, at other times, it is applied at its limits, over the levels to which a body can be pushed”]. Thus, he is accustomed to observing the human body or identifying signs of the body at the limit and at the median. That which escapes the control of the systematized knowledge disrupts the pre-established paradigm through which the narrator perceives the world around him and processes his experience through the translation of experience to memory and memory to text.

Conformity to the military system also entails the treatment of women as a reward for those who most embody masculine characteristics, which are defined by adherence to the “principle of authority.” There are several female figures throughout the novel that, despite their complicity with members of the military and the military regime are reduced to sexualized objects available to soldiers. The rite of taking sexual liberties or dominating female figures, not necessarily of a sufficient age to be called women, also functions as an element that solidifies the bonds of friendship, loyalty, and social complicity between soldiers. Even outside the context of warfare, these women are objectified as the spoils of war.

This social formation is rooted in the teachings of the father figure. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator makes several references to the stories of his father. Then this parental link is transferred to Dr. Mesiano as he mentors the conscript during his term of obligatory military service. The father tells a story about “una tradición, según la cual el chofer de un oficial terminaba acostándose con su mujer y hasta con algunas de sus hijas,” and he assures his son that

“esta regla contaba con pocas excepciones” (23) [“a tradition, according to which the driver of an officer ended up sleeping with his wife and even some of his daughters” and ensures that “this rule had few exceptions”]. Through this story, the father reinforces a misogynist perspective based on the association between a reward system that devalues women and a form of feminine identity that is based exclusively on providing bodily pleasure.

While this system assigns value to the male body, it also subjects it to humiliation and domination, causing an internal conflict in the narrator. This duality creates a system that perpetuates domination because the conscript wants to, in turn, subjugate, humiliate and dominate the other. Indeed, this internal struggle is compounded by the confrontation with the detainee who has just given birth in the Quilmes Center when she forces him to question his identity by asserting “vos no sos uno de ellos” (135, 136) [“you are not one of them”]. She begs him to evoke his conscience to realize/consider/open his eyes to what is happening, not only in the same room, but also on the national level. The narrator explains, “Me pidió que pensara en las cosas que estaban pasando. Ella me había contado las cosas que estaban pasando” (140) [“She asked me to think about the things that were happening. She had told me the things that were happening”]. The conscript says he does not want to hear more but still does not move “para no sentir” [“so as to not feel”] the influence of the woman. The insecurities in him that remained silenced before are amplified with the woman’s challenge. The woman is correct in her assertion that the conscript is not one of them; he is a subordinate. In an attempt to regain control of the principle of identity that the woman has threatened, he orchestrates a scenario that reproduces [but an inversion] this situation. In a scene that takes place in the civilian sphere [in a brothel], the conscript places himself in a position of power by victimizing a prostitute. In this

scene, the conscript simulates the authority denied to him in the military structure by playing out a scene of torture as a sexual act.

This meeting between the two unfolds in a violent episode when the conscript asks for the woman's name. His goal, he says, is to "really get it," but it is impossible for him to accept the name associated with the naked body stretched out before him. The narrator expresses his growing frustration and the scene culminates in the simulation of an "interrogation": "Todo en ese lugar era puro artificio, pero no el cuerpo accesible de la mujer desnuda. No el cuerpo desnudo que se extendía para quedar a disposición. Un cuerpo desnudo que se entregaba sin reservas ni reticencias. Y sin embargo, de ese cuerpo desnudo, de esa mujer desnuda, no había manera de obtener una verdad" (99) ["Everything in that place was pure artifice, but not the attainable body of the naked woman. Not the naked body that was stretched out so as to make itself available. Yet from that naked body, from that naked woman, there was no way to obtain a truth"]. By inserting these two scenes, a parallel between the wife who does not look like a wife and naked prostitute becomes apparent.

At another point, Dr. Mesiano insinuates an ideological alliance with "las pobres putas de Vietnam, que se infestaban a propósito para después contagiar a los soldados enemigos" ["the poor whores from Vietnam who intentionally infected themselves in order to later infect the enemy soldiers"], fulfilling, "a su modo, el juramento sagrado de dar la vida por la patria" (117-18) ["in their own way, the sacred oath to give their lives for the fatherland"].

¿Qué puta no sabe que su cuerpo no es suyo? . . . Una puta entiende que su propio cuerpo no le pertenece, o por lo menos, que no le pertenece del todo. Así razonaba el doctor Mesiano, y sostenía que al llegar a ese estado las personas

adquirían, paradójicamente, un poder muy particular. De alguna manera lograban una prodigiosa afinidad con lo que pasa en una guerra. (120)

[“What whore does not know that her body does not belong to her? . . . A whore understands that her own body does not belong to her, or at least, that it does not belong to her entirely. This is how Dr. Mesiano saw it, and he maintained that, arriving at that state, people acquire, paradoxically, a very particular kind of power. In some way they achieved a prodigious affinity with what happens in a war.]

The narrator’s inability to distinguish between truth and falsity echos Mesiano’s lesson about the body as the site onto which structures of power are inscribed and exposed to the threat of appropriation:

Yo hubiese querido entender que todo entonces era falso, que no había nada que dejara de serlo. Pero tampoco parecían ser así las cosas. En todo caso había una parte de verdad y una parte de falsedad en lo que pasaba, aunque más no fuera una pequeña parte de verdad y una gran parte de falsedad; y yo no acertaba a establecer cuáles eran esas partes, cuándo empezaba una cosa y cuándo empezaba una cosa y cuando cesaba la otra. No importaba cuán a mi alcance estuviera el cuerpo de esa mujer imprecisa: su verdad, si es que la tenía, se me escapaba. (101)

[I would have liked to understand that everything then was false, that there was nothing that quit being so. But things did not seem to be that way either. In all cases there was one part truth and one part falsity in what was happening, even if it were only a small part truth and a big part falsity; and I did not manage to establish which part was which, when one began and the other ended. It did not



matter how attainable the body of that imprecise woman was: her truth, if she indeed had one, escaped me.]

The indeterminacy of truth and falsity in this quote implies a contrast with the narrator's thoughts about the authenticity of the prostitute's claim that she had no reason to be inauthentic with him. "[E]l cuerpo de esa mujer imprecisa," could refer as much to the prostitute as to the detainee who speaks to him from behind the door in the Quilmes Center.

The appearance of another "mujer imprecisa" at the close of the first part of the novel and again in the final pages of the epilogue reinforces the conceptual link between the prostitute and the detainee, both of whom confront the narrator with the limitations of the "systematized knowledge" about the body. In the first instance, the dream is cast as a sexual fantasy that allows the narrator to sublimate the anxieties that the detainee had triggered in him. As she predicts, he does dream about what she had told him, except that the dream sequence transposes the real torture that she tells him about and the simulated torture of the prostitute that he had performed earlier that night. At the end of the epilogue, the narrator describes a recurrent dream in which a woman with an indistinguishable face appears to him. Like the prostitute, the woman has a tic and addresses him as "mi soldadito," just as the narrator's mother had called him at the beginning of the novel.

In the descriptions about the "exclusive rooms" in the brothel, for example, he emphasizes the inadequacy of vision as a means to access the truth. He describes the thematic decor of the three "special" rooms—the film set, the hunting setting, and the gym—as essentially artificial:

Las habitaciones exclusivas tenían, cada una, un decorado especial. Eran tres en total. La primera reproducía un estudio de cine: había focos como en un set,

cámaras de filmación y una silla de director. La segunda representaba una escena de caza, con mucha vegetación artificial, pieles de tigre y de leopardo colgadas aquí y allá, y una escopeta con mira telescópica (la escopeta era falsa, pero la mira no). La tercera era un gimnasio: por todas partes tenía pesas y aparatos de ejercicio, y además una bicicleta fija, y al lado una bolsa de arena de esos que usan los boxeadores para entrenarse. (92)

[The exclusive rooms had, each one, a special decor. There were three of them in all. The first one reproduced a movie studio: there were lights like those on a set, cameras, and a director's chair. The second one represented a hunting scene, with a lot of artificial vegetation, tiger and leopard skins here and there, and a shotgun with a telescopic sight (the shotgun was fake, but the sight was not). The third one was a gymnasium: there were weights and exercise machines all around, and a stationary bicycle, too, and one of those sand bags that boxers use for training.]

The focus on appearance in the description of these rooms is significant, especially regarding the director/actor positions implied in the director's chair and the lights/camera in the first one, the authenticity of the telescopic sight on the shotgun in the hunting scene and the "aparatos de ejercicio" in the gym room, which call attention to the body as the site of physical transformation that results from self-discipline.

### **2.3 MEDIATION, MOVEMENT, REPETITION**

The first part of *Dos veces junio* can also be read as the narrator's attempt to alleviate his conscience and distance himself from that particular experience and that the "epilogue"

destabilizes that attempt to find closure to what could be considered, clinically speaking, a traumatic experience. The narrator's attempt to recount the experience of the night in which, as he remembers it in the epilogue, Dr. Mesiano needed his help and he gave it to him without giving it a second thought is interrupted in the first chapters by brief fragments relating the experience of a detainee who gives birth that night. Near the end of the first part we learn that these fragments reproduce the account that the detainee transmits to the narrator through a door against which he is leaning as he waits for Dr. Mesiano to conclude the consultation regarding the question that opens the novel. The detainee tells him what had happened to her “[c]on lujo de detalles: cada cosa que le habían hecho, que le habían dicho, lo que había escuchado, lo que había sabido” (140) [“In great detail: each thing that they had done to her, that they had said to her, what she had heard”] and asks him to contact a lawyer to tell him where she was and to inform him about her newborn son. Though it is clear that the conscript does not call the lawyer as she had requested (we know from a comment in the following chapter, for example, that the narration takes place at least two years later), his encounter with the detainee destabilizes the narrator's attempts to categorize experience and systematize knowledge as a means to distance himself from the inconceivable reality with which she confronts him.

The fragmented nature of the novel and the act of narration itself—that is, the narrator's retelling of what the detainee had told him—, the narrator's mode of address and other aspects of the novel invite a consideration of the narrative as a type of confessional by which the narrator seeks closure to his traumatic encounter with the detainee by telling her story. Gramuglio cites the intercalation of the voice of the detainee with that of the conscript as a sign of the restoration of the chronological order of the text, the fictitious events derived from the testimonial accounts included in the *Diario de los Juicios*: “Esa otra voz intempestiva, que en los primeros capítulos

de la novela escande los discursos del narrador, va reponiendo en el orden temporal de la ficción los hechos más brutales del chupadero con singular sobriedad” (14) [“That other untimely voice, which marks the discourses of the narrator in the first chapters of the novel, replenishes the temporal order of the fiction of the most brutal occurrences of the *chupadero* with a singular sobriety”]. While Gramuglio’s formulation gives an account of how the conscript’s encounter with the detainee incites a function as a sign by which the reader is able to make sense of the seemingly disjointed fragments interspersed throughout the conscript’s story, it omits any consideration of how the narrator submits the experience that this voice relates to a process of mediation. What comes to pass as a restoration of the chronological order for the reader can be read as the imposition of order by the narrator, as well. Insofar as the narrator has restored the temporal order to his experience, rendered disjointed by the traumatic experience that the detainee relates to him, he achieves a sense of closure.

Part of this operation is contingent upon the presence of Dr. Mesiano, whose momentary absence signals a crisis for the narrator. First, because the absence itself is a transgression of the principle of authority upon which the military apparatus relies. Second, because the narrator does not have recourse to the interpretive lens that Mesiano’s lessons provide him.

These two chapters reflect the narrator’s realization that reality does not correspond to the systematized system of knowledge that formed the basis of his perspective or through which he had been able to make sense of it (or of “the Real”). The first of these two chapters is situated after the one in which the narrator describes his encounter with the detainee. It is in this chapter that the number corresponds to a gap in his memory (the comment about his keen ability to remember certain details in the country’s history, plus the recurrence of certain digits between the numbers in the chapter titles would suggest that the numbers function as a mnemonic device).

The title of this chapter, “cuarenta y ocho,” corresponds to the first two digits of the phone number of a lawyer that the detainee gives the narrator in the hopes that his conscience will compel him to call so that the lawyer will be able to help her and save her son. It is also significant that the number is for a lawyer and that he mentions the symbol for justice in the parts about the history and uses of the scale/balance. While the partial number indicates a gap in his memory, the wealth of details about the physical environment and his sensory response to particular stimuli during this part is indicative of a shift in the way that the narrator processes the knowledge and how it is retrieved (i.e. voluntarily or involuntarily) in response to something else later.

In the Centro Quilmes, the woman is visually inaccessible to him, but there is indirect physical contact between the two: she tugs at his sweater from beneath the door; he feels the vibrations of her voice through the door, etc. He says that he tries not to move so that he does not feel her pulling at his sweater and, even though he consciously/actively resists hearing or believing the things she tells him, he finds himself, without realizing what he is doing or why, speaking to her in a whisper or hushed tone, the same way she is speaking to him. While her story threatens the perspective through which he is able to delay or deny his apprehension of the clandestine military operations underway around him and justify the subordination of individual agency, the non-visual sensory information described in this scenario undermines his efforts to rationalize and filter out (or screen) that which does not fit into his concept of reality.

The description of this encounter marks a shift in tone that exposes the fissures in what Dalmaroni calls the “férrea moral” [“iron-clad morality”] that the narrator exemplifies in the novel. The description of the space foreshadows the unquantifiable nature of the encounter. After leaving the brothel, the conscript and Dr. Mesiano finally arrive at the Quilmes Center, where the

doctor's presence is required to answer the question registered in the notebook at the beginning of the novel. In contrast to the other chapters, which all carry numerical titles, the title of this chapter, "S/N," which means *sin número* ("without number"). The title refers to the street number of the main entrance to the Quilmes Center—"La puerta del acceso principal, por la calle Allison Bell, no tenía número" (110) ["The door to the main entrance, on Allison Bell, was unnumbered"]—where the narrator's encounter with the detainee takes place. In terms of the numeric system that structures the novel, the lack of any number foreshadows the narrator's reaction to the knowledge with which the detainee confronts him inside the detention center.

As the ideological representative of the military regime in the novel, Dr. Mesiano demonstrates the incoherence of the repressive system *de facto*. This is made evident in the extreme rationalism and moralist discourse that frame Mesiano's lessons on national history that the narrator reproduces in the text. In one instance, the narrator refers to one of Mesiano's teachings to explain the importance of "la vida rutinaria" ["routine life"] during his military service: "El doctor Mesiano cierta vez me había dicho: dos fuerzas chocaron en la formación de la Argentina: una caótica, irregular, desordenada, la de las montoneras; otra sistemática, regular, planificada, la del ejército" (37) ["Doctor Mesiano had once told me: two forces clashed in the formation of Argentina: one chaotic, irregular, disordered, that of the Montoneras; the other systematic, regular, planned, that of the army"]. This analogy between the forces of the Argentine civil wars of the nineteenth century and the forces at play in the "war against subversion" is reiterated and condensed later in the novel when the narrator recalls another of Mesiano's lessons to explain a historical reference he makes *en route* to the detention center in Quilmes, where the detainee is being held: "'En nuestro país,' decía siempre el doctor Mesiano, 'ganaron los unitarios, y no importa que digamos república federal.' Por eso ahora, camino al

sur, decía: ‘Quilmes es Quilmes, pero por encima de Quilmes está La Plata, y por encima de La Plata, está la Capital’” (108) [“‘In our country,’ doctor Mesiano always said, ‘the Unitarians won, and it does not matter that we call it a federal republic.’ That is why now, headed south, he was saying: ‘Quilmes is Quilmes, but above Quilmes is La Plata, and above La Plata, is the Capital’”]. As these comments demonstrate, Mesiano interprets the war against subversion as a continuation of the Argentine civil wars of the nineteenth century. This analogy, according to which the armed forces figure as the heirs of the Unitarian struggle to defend the nation against the savagery of rural Federalist warlords, resurrects the opposition between civilization and barbarism.<sup>22</sup> On the surface, Mesiano’s vision reproduces an ideological perspective of the military that predominates among the armed forces in the 60s and 70s. Nevertheless, as a text of memory, the narrator’s reordering of these teachings together with the fragments relating the experience of the detainee re-signifies this analogy. In effect, this reordering or fragmentation of the narrative illustrates the contradictions of Mesiano’s praise of order over chaos by evoking an inversion of the Sarmentine civilization/barbarism binary.

The incoherence of the repressive system that Mesiano evinces in his moralist discourse is further compounded on a personal level when he overrides “the list” of families waiting to receive a child born in captivity. “Primero está la lista. Primero está mi hermana.” After the argument with Padilla about the list: “En todo el trayecto el doctor Mesiano pronunció una sola frase. Esa frase era: ‘Vamos a ver quién talla más alto.’ No dijo otra cosa que eso, pero eso lo dijo más de una vez. Y ni siquiera quiso prender la radio del auto para escuchar un poco de

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<sup>22</sup> The association that Mesiano makes between the Unitarian/Federalist factions and the military/Peronist militancy is not arbitrary. In the 60s and 70s, a number of Peronist groups begin to recuperate federalist *caudillos* as representative figures. Most notably and most relevant to this context, considering Mesiano’s reference to the montoneras as the historical antagonists of the military, the Montoneros, one of the primary targets in the in the military’s struggle to “eradicate subversion.”

música” (143-44) [“The entire trip, Dr. Mesiano pronounced one single phrase. This phrase was: ‘We’ll see who the bigger man is.’ He didn’t say anything but that, but he said it more than once. And he didn’t even want to turn on the car radio to listen to a little music”].

The temporal excision suggested by the lapse of four years between the first and second parts of the novel is undermined by the almost circular quality of the narration. In fact, the epigraph mimics inversely the spatial organization of the first part of the novel. As in the first part of the novel, the narrator goes in search of Dr. Mesiano. Though locating the doctor presents much less of a challenge than it did the night of the World Cup match in ‘78, Mesiano is not where the narrator first expects to find him. Rather, he is redirected to the home of Mesiano’s sister, where the narrator had been near the end of the night four years prior. The first visit to this residence is only insinuated in the first part of the novel. Dr. Mesiano speaks to the conscript of his sister’s unsuccessful attempts to conceive following an argument with Dr. Padilla in which the latter protests Dr. Mesiano’s contravention of the waiting list of families to appropriate children born in detention. In this case, by contrast, the narrator, who is no longer Mesiano’s subordinate, is invited to join the family gathering underway when he arrives. The narrator’s access to this intimate environment underscores the change of position from conscript to civilian that has taken place during the four years since the conclusion of the first part of the novel. Incidentally, this change entails a shift in perspective that compounds the sense of estrangement that the narrator expresses in his observations regarding the reencounter with Dr. Mesiano.

The denouement of the first part of the novel frames the narrator’s return to normalcy as the repetition of his movement through the places he had been earlier that same night in the absence of Dr. Mesiano. Immediately after the argument between Dr. Mesiano and Dr. Padilla regarding the appropriation of the child, which, coincidentally, signals the end of the narrator’s



encounter with the detainee, the narrator returns with Dr. Mesiano to the ESMA in the capital. The return trip takes the narrator through many of the same places he had been earlier that night, but his comments indicate that his perception of these places has changed:

Los que saben de psicología tienen un término para definir eso: la impresión que a veces uno siente de que lo que está viviendo ya lo vivió antes. Yo tenía esa impresión aquella mañana. Pero es que de veras estaba pasando por los mismos lugares, unas horas después. . . . Los que saben de cine tienen también una expresión para esos momentos en que se vuelve para atrás en la historia y se repasan algunas imágenes de lo que ha ocurrido antes. La diferencia es que, por lo general, esas imágenes aparecen en cámara lenta; y ahora, en cambio, pasaban para mí un poco más rápido que la primera vez. (143)

[Those who know about psychology have a term to define that: the impression that you sometimes feel that you are experiencing something that you have experienced before. I had that impression that morning. But the truth is that I was passing by the same places I had passed by a few hours later. . . . Those who know about cinema also have an expression for those moments in which you go back in history and look back on some images of what has occurred previously. The difference is that, in general, those images appear in slow motion; and now, by contrast, they were moving a little faster for me than the first time around.]

The narrator's recurrence to the psychological phenomena *déjà vu* and the use of slow motion in cinematic representations of this sensation draws attention to the impact of different velocities on visual perception, experience, and memory. In this particular instance, the narrator recurs to these terms to describe his experience as a negative analogy ("I was passing by the same places";

“now, by contrast, they were moving a little faster than the first time around”). In doing so, he makes an indirect allusion to the first time he had been through those same places that night and how he had processed his experience in those places the first time around.

The repetition or return movement through the spaces the narrator had passed through the night before –this time in the moving car, in the light of day, and in the accompaniment of Dr. Mesiano—signals or mimics the effect of the routine. The sense of derealization and depersonalization that he experiences earlier that same night in a different context is cancelled out upon the return to a more stable context akin to the narrator’s habitual routine. If *déjà vu* and flashback are associated with moments of contemplation and reflection on past experiences, then the narrator’s use of these concepts to describe an inverse relationship would point to the opposite effect. The immediacy of the present, tied to the speed of his perception from inside the moving vehicle, suggests a break with the memory of his experience associated with these same places earlier that night. In other words, the return or repetition of this trajectory within the more familiar context at the conclusion of the night entails the erasure of the experience of this same trajectory in the unfamiliar context from earlier that night. In essence, the sense of estrangement that he experiences is displaced or screened in the narrator’s memory in the course of the return or the repetition of this trajectory. In the epilogue, the routine is invoked when he returns to Mesiano’s house but he is not there. The trip to the sister’s house, where the housekeeper redirects him, is a repetition as well but, in contrast to the repetition that allows him to block out the memory of his experience, this case is a repetition of the disruption of the routine. In this case, however, the return to the home of Dr. Mesiano’s sister, where he had been at the end of the night four years prior (or so we can infer, even though this is never made explicit in the narration), unearths the details of that night that had been suppressed in the narrator’s memory.

As in the first part, this trip begins with the narrator driving to Mesiano's house, continues with the narrator not finding him where he expects to find him, and ends at the sister's house.

The daily cleaning regimen of the car in which the conscript spends the majority of his time on duty is significant for its function in mediating his perception of reality:

El aseo interior era tanto más importante. Con frecuencia nos tocaba caminar sobre la tierra reseca, por lo que convenía quitar cada mañana las alfombrillas de goma y pegarles un par de sacudidas para desprenderles el polvo. Debajo de mi asiento guardábamos siempre un frasco de desodorante Crandall en aerosol: mi deber era echar en el auto una buena cantidad cada mañana.

No obstante esos cuidados cotidianos, el coche era llevado al lavadero una vez por semana, todos los lunes. Un día apareció una mancha en el tapizado del asiento de atrás, y hubo que hacer un lavado urgente esa misma noche. Terminé cerca de las diez, pero a cambio la mañana del lunes me quedó libre. (39-40)

[The interior cleaning was even more important. We often found ourselves walking over dusty terrain, because of which it was best to take out the rubber floor mats every morning to shake out all the dust. Underneath my seat we always kept a bottle of Crandall aerosol spray: my job was to spray a good bit in the inside of the car every morning.

Despite this daily attention, the car was taken to the carwash once a week, every Monday. One day a stain appeared on the upholstery of the back seat, which required an urgent washing that same night. I finished around ten, but I was free the following Monday morning.]

The routine deodorizing of the car's interior recalls the need to maintain the barrier between the "reality" for which the car acts as a frame or as a barrier between his sensory perception and the Real. In this case, the "encubrimiento" of the odors in the car with the "Crandall deodorant" is a safeguard against the (non-visual) perception of any material traces of the outside world or the Real. The habitual repetition of these tasks reinforces this function. The appearance of the stain that "un día . . . apareció en el tapizado del asiento de atrás," however, interrupts this routine, presumably evoking the memory of the night of the narrator's search for Dr. Mesiano.

In *Looking Awry*, Žižek explains the appearance of a stain, or a spot (or 'screen' as he also calls it) in Lacan's writing as the instance in which the illusion of objectivity gives way to the subjective position of the observer before the observed:

The ground of the established, familiar signification opens up . . . . The oscillation between lack and surplus meaning constitutes the proper dimension of subjectivity . . . . [T]his paradoxical point undermines our position as "neutral," "objective" observer, pinning us to the observed object itself. This is the point at which the observer is already included, inscribed in the observed scene . . . . (91)

As in the appearance of the stain in the aforementioned passage initiates a similar process in both the narrator and the reader. The stain, which is of indeterminate origin (much like the rumors regarding the nature of Dr. Mesiano's wife, the description of the "wanton" wife who takes a beating, and the rape scene), "denatures" the otherwise routine and familiar scenario and "opens up the abyss for the search for meaning." Insofar as the point at which the stain is recalled in the novel is devoid of any contextual marker that would elucidate its significance in the overarching event of the narration, it seems like an insignificant detail in the narrator's memory it seem insignificant. Nevertheless, instead of rendering the detail insignificant, it is precisely the lack of

context that makes it stand out as an object of inquiry and as a detail that undermines the automatism that reinforces his perception of reality.

By the end of the first part of the novel, the origin of the stain is suggested by the bundle that Dr. Mesiano situates in the back of the car, which we can presume is the child born to the detainee earlier that same night and by the coincidence of Dr. Mesiano's concession of a free day the following Monday. Nevertheless, the certainty of this connection is unavailable (and, in fact, rendered problematic) in the text itself. The point, however, is not to discover the origin of the stain (or the veracity of the rumors, or the origin of the other seemingly unrelated scenarios), but to recognize it as an index of the narrator's shift in perception from the objective observer to the subjective participant. This shift becomes even more important considering that the first part of the novel consists in a memory or series of related memories that are evoked by something in the second part (the epilogue).

The significance of the car is also underscored by the shift in perception that the narrator recalls at two key points in the narration: 1) When he leaves the car parked near the stadium and has to fill the (unstructured) time until the end of the match (he hears what he describes as the sound of rats being hunted by cats behind a large wall; his disgust for the old, reheated slice of pizza is not registered in the taste of it; he finds a gold ring with an inscription and buries it so that he would be unable to find it if he were to return to look for it; he "sneaks a listen" to the radio of the man in the pizza shop and discovers that he is listening not to the game but to classical music, which the narrator "for reasons he can't explain" puts on the radio after his visit with Dr. Mesiano at the end of the novel, etc.); 2) When Mesiano takes the car and the narrator is left wandering around aimlessly for a second time that night (at which point he mentions that, "as the saying goes, you always return to the scene of the crime"); and, 3) When he is waiting

inside the Centro Quilmes while Dr. Mesiano argues with other superior officers about appropriating the child—which is when the conversation between the narrator and the detainee/mother of the child takes place.

This shift in perspective has to do also with the odd encounter with the sister and the “near-encounter” with the wife at the brother-in-law’s house. But this is also complicated by his (conscious) decision to change the dial to the sports broadcast, and then again by the narrator’s comment that his excuse for leaving the gathering at Mesiano’s brother-in-law’s house was a lie — “No es cierto que tenga una cita con un amigo en un bar del centro. Vuelvo a mi casa y me quedo solo, sin salir. Me quedo pensando y recordando; ni siquiera siento ganas de prender la televisión” (188) [“It is not true that I am meeting up with a friend in a bar downtown. I return home and stay alone, without going out. I keep thinking and remembering; I do not even feel like turning on the television”] –, the repeated mention of the child’s two names –the one they call him and his ‘real’ name: the one that the mother gave him the night of the first part of the novel.

Kohan offers an explanation as to why he chose to establish the setting of *Dos veces junio* the night of a losing match of the ‘78 World Cup, which the Argentine national selection ultimately wins. One of the factors that motivated this decision was that it allowed him to incorporate a critique of the role that communications media plays in the construction of social memory:

A la gente se le quedó muy grabado y muy mal grabado [el mundial]. . . . Pero acá son vivencias de la gente distorsionadas por la reconstrucción. Digo en detalles: acá el mundial no se transmitió en televisión a color. Y la gente lo recuerda en color. En el momento de la dictadura se crea ATC (Argentina Televisora Color)

para transmitir al exterior las imágenes de los partidos. Pero no para verlos acá.

(N. pag.)

[The memory of that event was seared into the mind of most people, but not as they perceived it at the time. . . . But here the lived experience of the people is distorted in the reconstruction. For example: here the World Cup was not broadcast in color. In the moment of the dictatorship they create the ATC (Argentine Color Television) to broadcast the games to an international audience, but not here.]

The images disseminated through the audiovisual media, especially the recorded images that are reproduced later, contribute to the process whereby a significant event is formed, informed, and later transformed before a partially inaccurate permutation of the experience before it is crystallized in collective memory.

The narrator's compulsion to quantify everything is reflected in the titles of each chapter. In this sense, the few exceptions to this are indicative of things that remain outside of the narrator's referential framework. The first instance of this takes place in the chapter entitled "Veinticinco millones." This title presumably refers to the official march of the 1978 World Cup, which begins "veinticinco millones de argentinos jugaremos el mundial" ["all twenty-five million of us Argentines will play the world cup"]. In this chapter, which takes place during the match that Dr. Mesiano is attending, the narrator finds himself making time until the end of the game, at which point he will find Dr. Mesiano as he leaves. He sits in the car for a while before getting out to walk around and going into a pizzeria for something to eat. During this idle time, he sees a girl running away crying, he sees a dog playing with something that turns out to be a wedding band, which he buries in the sand (for some reason that he does not know) and, in the

pizzeria, he sees a man listening to headphones, and when the man gets up to go to the bathroom, the narrator listens to the man's radio and discovers that he is not in fact listening to the game as he had let on when a police officer asked him about the score (to which he responds "0-0").

The implicit reference to the official march sheds light on several moments in this chapter that would otherwise seem out of place in the main components of the "narrative" interlaced in the first part of the novel (i.e. the events that transpire during the night of the narrator's search for Dr. Mesiano, the testimony of the detainee, and the radio broadcasts of the Mundial). Of particular interest in this regard is the conscript's experience with the only other patron in a pizza shop that he visits as he bides his time until the end of the match that Dr. Mesiano is attending. The man, seated at one of the tables, is listening attently to a transistor radio through earphones. In response to two separate inquiries regarding the status of the match in progress, the patron answers dryly "0 a 0." After he leaves the table to go to the restroom, the narrator uncharacteristically approaches the table and inserts one of the man's earpieces in his ear:

Entonces sentí un impulso difícil de explicar. Me levanté y me acerqué a la otra mesa. Yo no era tímido, pero tampoco confiado, y lo que estaba haciendo me resultó un tanto impropio. Tal vez me venció la ansiedad por escuchar un poco del partido, tal vez me confié al saber que nadie me estaba viendo. Tomé el audífono de aquel hombre, lo limpié frotándolo contra mi pulóver, y me lo puse en el oído. No conozco nada, nada en absoluto sobre música clásica, así que no puedo decir si lo que aquel hombre escuchaba en una sola oreja era Mozart, Beethoven o qué.

Con un sobresalto dejé el audífono en su lugar y regresé a mi mesa. Pronto el hombre salió del baño. Ocupó su lugar y volvió a colocarse el audífono. Me pareció que me miraba, y quise irme. (67)



[Then I felt an impulse that was difficult to explain. I got up and approached the other table. I wasn't timid, but I wasn't confident either. And what I was doing seemed a little strange. Perhaps because I was anxious to hear a little of the game, perhaps I took confidence in knowing that no one was watching me. I took that man's headphone, I rubbed it against my sweater to clean it, and I put it in my ear. I know nothing, absolutely nothing about classical music, so I couldn't say if what that man was listening to was Mozart, Beethoven, or what.

With a jump, I left the headphone in its place and I returned to my table.

The man soon came out of the bathroom. He took his place and put the headphone back in his ear. He seemed to be watching me and I wanted to leave.]

This particular instance gains further significance in the final part of the novel or the "epilogue" when the narrator notes that, upon leaving the home of Dr. Mesiano's brother-in-law four years later, the morning after the match between Italy and Argentina with the same outcome as the night in question during the first part in the 1982 World Cup, the radio in his car is tuned to a classical music station:

Subo al coche y enciendo la radio. No sé por qué está puesta en una estación de música clásica. Cambio el dial y busco Rivadavia. Supongo que se estarán ocupando de todo lo que pasó ayer, y no me equivoco. ... Dice que en la atmósfera de la concentración argentina se nota que hay preocupación, pero no desesperanza. ... El mensaje que tiene para dar, a la distancia, a los argentinos, es que ahora estemos más unidos que nunca. (187)

[I get in the car and turn on the radio. I don't know why it is tuned to a classical music station. I change the dial and search for Rivadavia. I suppose that they will

be discussing all that happened yesterday, and I am not wrong. ... [The sportscaster] says that in the atmosphere of the Argentine crowd there is an air of worry, but not desperation. ... The message he has to give, from a distance, to the Argentines, is that we be more united now than ever.]

A comparison of the circumstances surrounding these two moments reveals a number of implications. First of all, it is important to remember that both parts of the novel revolve around the narrator's search for Dr. Mesiano and that the search in the second part of the novel takes the narrator to the same place as in the epilogue: the residence of Dr. Mesiano's sister. In commenting that he does not know why the radio is tuned to a classical music station implies that he had set the station to that frequency previously and without forethought, presumably at some point during or before embarking on his search for his former mentor in the epilogue. This would suggest that, this time, the search for Mesiano has evoked the memory of the narrator's experience during the previous search and that the memory draws him not to the spectacle of national pride and unity that characterizes the World Cup and its effect on the majority of the citizenry, but to his encounter with several of the 25 million who, like himself at that moment, were not playing the game.

This sense of shock, or estrangement, frames the encounter with Dr. Mesiano that follows. If the narrator goes in search of his former mentor as a means to restore balance to "the order of things," this perspective, rendered askew, makes this endeavor impossible. In the first part of the novel, when the narrator is left with no alternative but to wait for the soccer match to end so that he can intercept Dr. Mesiano upon his departure from the stadium, he evinces a sense of anxiety or estrangement that is alleviated when he does finally locate him. "Las caras se parecían en la peregrinación oscura y desconcertada. Mi propia cara se volvía seguramente igual.

Pese a todo, cuando ya empezaba a perder las esperanzas, en el sector indicado alcancé a distinguir, casi como por milagro, la cara severa del doctor Mesiano” (83) [“All of the faces looked alike in the dark and bewildered pilgrimage. My own face surely became the same. Despite everything, when I had already begun to lose hope, in the indicated sector I managed to distinguish, almost as if by a miracle, the severe face of Dr. Mesiano”].

The shock that the narrator senses when he sees Dr. Mesiano’s wife, confined to a wheelchair, rocking back and forth as if praying, or better said, when he imagines the possibility that she may look back at him, can be attributed to another confrontation with the Real that undermines the portrait of integrity of the Argentine family (as opposed to the guerrilla women who get pregnant as a safeguard against torture) that Dr. Mesiano preaches. The sister further exemplifies this point, but in the opposite direction. As the narrator leaves the house to return home, the sister tells the narrator that she often sunbathes nude in a certain spot in the backyard, extending him an implied invitation to witness the spectacle. In light of this proposition, the sister’s willingness to exhibit her body finds resonance in the prohibition against displaying the crippled body of Dr. Mesiano’s wife.

The sense of failure to rationalize the methods of state violence in the first part of the novel is further compounded by the tone of the epilogue, which takes place four years later. After visiting the home of Dr. Mesiano’s sister to pay his respects for the death of Mesiano’s son, the narrator seems disturbed by several aspects of the family reunion. His comment regarding the formation of the Argentine national team in the World Cup (“como si el tiempo no hubiera pasado”) foreshadows the impact of his re-encounter with his former mentor in this “familiar” yet unfamiliar situation. The appearance of the child in the epilogue alludes to or acts as a catalyst for the process of resignification of the first part of the novel. At the same time, the

child, as a child of the disappeared who has been appropriated by a military family, points to the process of identity resignification at the extra diegetic level. Only the narrator knows the name that the boy's mother gave him at birth, but the repetition of the two names "que se llama Guillermo, al que llaman Antonio" serves to highlight the boy's own misrecognition of the name that his adoptive family has given him. As Mesiano's sister calls to him repeatedly, the boy "sigue jugando con su pelota azul y blanca . . . como si no lo estuviesen llamando a él" (185) ["keeps playing with the blue and white ball . . . as if they were not calling him"]. This foreshadows the displacement of identity that he is likely to experience in the future and the same process that many children of the disappeared are beginning to undergo during the period when the novel is published.

The narrator's insistence on the false identity of the child casts his anonymity as a function of military conscription and citizenship. Early in the novel, the narrator tells of the day when he attended the draft lottery. In this process, the individual is identified only by his national identification number: "Seiscientos cuarenta era yo" (12) ["Six hundred forty was me"].<sup>23</sup> The system of conscription subsumes his identity and redefines him as a subject of the state.

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<sup>23</sup> This is yet another example of how Kohan uses numbers to point to personal identity; he may have been thinking about the ways in which numbers replace names in the detention centers and in other totalitarian spaces. Consider for example the Jacobo Timerman testimonial narrative *Preso sin nombre, celda sin número*, among a host of other examples.

### 3.0 DISPLACED NARRATIVES OF MEMORY IN ALBERTINA CARRI'S *LOS RUBIOS*

Albertina Carri (1973-) is one of the most prominent directors of the New Argentine Cinema. She has directed a number of short films, including *Barbie también puede estar triste* (2001), *Aurora* (2001), *Restos* (2010), and *Pets* (2012); four feature-length films, *No quiero volver a casa* (2000), *Los rubios* (2003), *Geminis* (2005), and *La rabia* (2008) and the television series *23 pares* and *Visibles*, both co-produced with Marta Dillon. Carri's works stand out for her experimentation with the generic conventions of melodrama, documentary, pornography, and thrillers, as well as with the incorporation of photographic, animated and filmic media.

*Los rubios* is structured around the director's search for her parents, Ana María Caruso and Roberto Carri, two prominent intellectuals and active participants of the armed struggle who were kidnapped from their home in 1977 and presumably assassinated by the end of that same year. Together with the film crew, Carri travels to the neighborhood where she lived with her parents when they were abducted to collect interviews with neighbors who potentially witnessed or heard second-hand accounts of her parents' disappearance, to the Villa Insuperable police station in Buenos Aires, the former detention center known as "El Sheraton," where her parents were detained, and to "El campito" where Carri and her sisters lived with their extended family following the abduction of her parents. *Los rubios* also stages the testimonies of the parents' friends, comrades, and family members, a recital of the epigraph from Roberto Carri's book

*Isidro Velázquez*, a DNA test in the Center for Forensic Anthropology, and reenactments of the director's own memories with Playmobil dolls in stop-motion animation. The compilation of these fragments is interspersed with scenes filmed inside the director's home, which also functions as the production studio, depicting various aspects of the editing and production process such as the alteration of family photographs and a discussion of the INCAA's (Argentine National Film Board) letter that explains the committee's motives for its initial refusal to fund the project.

The criticism lodged against *Los rubios* in the immediate aftermath of its release throws into relief a notion of the past that has been demarcated and crystallized by a certain notion of generational authority. The director's position as the daughter of disappeared parents, a central issue in these criticisms, reveals inherent contradictions of this frame of reference by setting the anti-realist impulse and the politics of the family in tension. By distancing herself from the already familiar narratives, *Los rubios* denatures the memory of her parents by presenting it as a composite of her own memories, combined with those of her siblings and older family members, and the public representations of them disseminated in the communications media during the Trial of the Juntas. In the process, the film sheds light on the conflictive relationship between public and private discourses of memory that both emerge from and constitute subjective experience. In this way, the film's deconstruction of the institutional narrative of the recent past complicates the notion that theirs is a "second" or subsequent generation and but rather another generation of direct victims of State terror. The film's partial displacement of the parental figure speaks to this conflict and positions the film as an active form of mediation between the generation of the director's parents and future generations.

### 3.1 THE TIES THAT BIND: CULTURAL POLITICS OF MEMORY AND FAMILY

*Los rubios* stands out among other films directed by the children of the disappeared in that it confronts the forms through which memory is mediated in such a way that displaces the object of representation. As the daughter of two high-profile figures of the 1970s armed struggle, Carri is expected to carry on her parents' political legacy with absolute and unwavering deference. Rather than attempt to recuperate an image of her parents and vindicate their ideals and struggles, *Los rubios* navigates the available images and discursive formations surrounding the figure of the disappeared in order to comment on the impossibility of recuperating lost ties to the parents. By reworking the available images and discourses, Carri situates herself in the gaps and fissures that these materials cannot fill and establishes a subject position articulated from the absence of her parents.

In an interview in Argentina's preeminent leftist newspaper *Página/12*, Carri responds to the symbolic association of her film *Los rubios* to the project of the H.I.J.O.S., with the following reflection:

Cuando aparecen los H.I.J.O.S. no me interesan nada. No es esto exactamente lo que quiero decir. Pero no sé qué palabra utilizar. No me interesaba la mirada reivindicativa y me daba impresión el nombre. Yo no quiero ser hija toda la vida. Quiero ser otras cosas y en el medio también soy hija. Cuando empecé a hacer cine había una gran presión para que mi primera película fuera sobre ese tema. Pero utilicé la reparación económica para hacer *No quiero volver a casa* y eso que el dinero me quemaba las manos. (“Esa rubia debilidad”)

[When H.I.J.O.S. appears, they do not interest me in the least. That is not exactly what I am trying to say. But I do not know the exact word to describe it. I was not

interested in the revindicating outlook and the name left an impression on me. I do not want to be a daughter my whole life. I want to be other things and, somewhere in between, I am also a daughter. When I began to make movies, there was a lot of pressure to make my first movie about that topic. But I used the economic reparation to make *No quiero volver a casa* and it was as if the money was burning my hands.] (“Esa rubia debilidad”)

These remarks at once highlight one of the primary weaknesses of the group’s political project and shed light on how Carri seeks to distinguish herself from her parents’ political project by facing the historical present. By assimilating their parents’ historical experience as their own, H.I.J.O.S. appropriates their status as orphans of the disappeared and transmogrifies it into a platform of vengeance against their parents’ aggressors. In their refusal to accept the loss of their parents as the result of anything less than victimhood, this group firmly anchors its political agenda in the past, thus limiting its vision of the present and the possibility for political and social change in the future. *Los rubios*, by contrast, works to break free from the confines of the director’s status as the biological legacy of her parents’ political project while, paradoxically, she finds the means to reconnect with their shared past beyond the biological link between parents and child.

The context of “postmemory” and an attendant consideration of the film’s experimentation with the conventions of documentary film figure prominently in the criticism about *Los rubios*.<sup>24</sup> In “Postmemory Cinema and the Future of the Past in Albertina Carri’s *Los*

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<sup>24</sup> Postmemory is a concept developed by Marianne Hirsch as an approach to issues of intergenerational transmission of memory in the context of Holocaust studies. Postmemory, as she conceives it, “describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (“The Generation of Postmemory” 103). See also *Family*



*rubios*,” Gabriela Nouzeilles develops a more positive reading of *Los rubios* as a “postmemory artifact,” or an affront to the narratives and experiences of Carri’s parents’ generation that threaten to displace those of the director’s generation. “An even more controversial aspect of *Los rubios*,” she contends, “comes from its irreverent interrogation of the secondary logic of postmemory, as well as of the heavy demands on the children of the disappeared imposed by the combination of biological, judicial, and political legacies” (266). Echoing Martín Kohan’s allegations that *Los rubios* elides an adequate consideration of the Carris’ political activism, Beatriz Sarlo condemns the film as “un ejemplo casi demasiado pleno de la fuerte subjetividad de la posmemoria” (153) [“an almost too complete example of the strong subjectivity of postmemory”]. Insofar as the film deliberately excludes the public and political dimensions of the Carris’ biography, she argues, it makes no effort to understand the motives of the director’s disappeared militant parents. In this sense, *Los rubios* exemplifies a devaluation of critical historiography, symptomatic of what Sarlo terms the “subjective turn.”

As Gabriela Nouzeilles points out, the film “alters the roles sanctified by the prevalent discourses of memory, taking apart their commonplaces and questioning the identity principle that feeds them” (266). In light of the polemic that *Los rubios* provoked almost immediately after its release, I would add to this affirmation that, parallel to the interrogation of the identity principle, *Los rubios* interrogates the principles of authority that sanctify these discourses and dictate how and to what end they are to be registered in cultural productions. In effect, *Los*

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*Frames*. Examples of the critical texts that apply this concept to *Los rubios* include “*Los rubios* o del trauma como presencia,” Celia Macón’s early response to the article by Martín Kohan, Joanna Page’s “Memory and Mediation in *Los rubios*,” Jens Andermann’s chapter on the contemporary resurgence of the documentary film in *New Argentine Cinema*, and Beatriz Sarlo’s indictment of the film in *Tiempo Pasado*.

*rubios* constitutes an attempt to dismantle the structuring mechanisms of personal and collective memory.

Despite the range of positions that unfold around a consideration of postmemory, the majority of the critical work that develops an analysis of *Los rubios* from within this interpretive framework overextends the application of this concept to the director herself. According to Hirsch's formulation, which almost invariably informs the criticism concerned with this concept in relation to Carri's film, postmemory describes a process of transmission whereby one generation inherits the memories of a traumatic event that precede their own birth or consciousness. While this description of postmemory does hold the promise for a productive approach to the film's treatment of memory and its mechanisms of mediation, the critical work that applies this concept to *Los rubios* tends to overlook fundamental aspects of the film; namely, the self-conscious staging of the director's personal experience of her parents' abduction, the fact that Carri and her sisters were themselves briefly held in custody, and the intermittent contact with her mother during the period between the abduction and the parents' final "disappearance."

That is not to say, however, that an examination of the postmemory context in the film is unfounded. Indeed, postmemory narratives are thematized in the interviews with the children in the director's neighborhood and in the off-camera allusion to Carri's nephew's declaration of his desire to seek revenge for his grandparents' disappearance, which, as Gonzalo Aguilar points out, is included in Juan Gelman and María La Madrid's compilation of the testimonies of the children and grandchildren of the disappeared, *Ni el flaco perdón de Dios* (165). Rather than classify *Los rubios* as a "postmemory artifact" according to the director's position within a particular notion of generation, I argue that a more productive approach would be to consider the director's refusal to participate in the imposition of narratives of her own experience on others.

Aware of her position as mediator, Carri expresses her desire to film her nephew as he expresses his revenge fantasy, but does not subject him to the immortalizing effects of the filmic image in order to fulfill this desire. More than an “interrogation of the secondary *logic* of postmemory,” *Los rubios* is an active refusal to perpetuate the secondary *operation* of postmemory.

Likewise, *Los rubios* refuses to participate in the inverse of this operation whereby the children of the disappeared who extrapolate their parents’ ideals as the basis of their political activism and whose artistic productions are motivated by their parents’ legacy reproduce the logic of victimization by subjecting their life story to pre-established narrative parameters. One of the points that Sarlo makes against *Los rubios* is Carri’s choice to omit the detail that her mother took care of the newborn child of Paula Luttringer, the only survivor of the detention camp where her parents were imprisoned, focusing instead on what the photograph of the slaughterhouse is capable of relating in regards to her experience. What Sarlo sees as a sign of irreverence or hostility, I suggest, can be read as a gesture to undermine of the centrality of kinship (and maternalism, in particular) as the primary basis for legitimacy in the politics of memory. Rather than expound the relation between her mother and the photographer as one formed on the basis of reproductive identities, Carri gives form to the imaginative and critical legacy of her mother. The fact that it is the mother’s, not the father’s, writing that is represented in unmediated form in the film (in a letter she addresses to Carri to wish her happy birthday) suggests the nature of her inheritance not as a political objective, but as the affective formation of critical perception and creative production.

There are a number of issues at stake in both Sarlo’s and Kohan’s critiques of *Los rubios* and, to a certain extent, in the use of postmemory as an analytical category in a significant portion of the critical work that approaches this film. In my interpretation of the film, I will

consider the criteria that determine generational divides, the valorization of certain forms of experience over others, and the ways that these factors contribute of the conceptualization and consolidation of modes of cultural and social authority and the legitimation of political projects.

In response to the critical debates surrounding the film, Carri published *Los rubios: cartografía de una película* (2007) in which she narrates the stages of production for *Los rubios* and articulates her response to the film's detractors. The book also includes the definitive version of the film's script, explanations as to why certain parts were cut from the final version, and facsimile reproductions of many of the personal texts and other materials, such as transcriptions of personal letters that her parents sent from captivity.

Carri reconstructs and deconstructs her own story through the already failed search for her parents in *Los rubios* from the narrative disjuncture, from absence, that the disappearance of family and community members exposes. According to Verónica Garibotto, the hyper-reflexivity of the documentary mode in the film signals a manipulation of the *testimonial* narratives that structure the majority of the film (113-15). These narratives, in turn, are deployed as a means of questioning the truth claims not only of memory, but also of the documentary rigor that the INCAA committee privileges over the subjective conflict that arises from the director's fictionalization of her own experience, of the constructions of the past, and of their residual effects in the present. In a two-directional operation, the film's reconstruction of the past is contingent upon the simultaneous deconstruction of the available discourses of memory in order to move, in Verónica Garibotto's terms, "beyond the memory format." The film's treatment of the testimonial accounts about her parents, its aesthetic rendering of multiple temporalities, and the lack of narrative continuity forestall the processes of audience identification. The director's search for her disappeared parents dramatizes the director's efforts to produce the absent

signifiers as a parody of the biographical form. In staging the relationship between subject and object, the film produces the autobiographical portrayal of a de-centered subject.

The treatment of the recorded testimonies of the parents' comrades and family members has been a point of contention. The staging of an interview with a woman (whose name is undisclosed in the film) of the parents' generation provides a clear example of the film's critique of the INCAA's insistence that the film approach the search for the director's parents with "greater documentary rigor" by including testimonies of the parents' comrades. The scene in question begins with the actress who represents Carri is filmed arriving at the home of a woman in her 50s. After greeting her, Couceyro asks the woman if she has had a chance to think about what they had discussed in a previous conversation. This question, together with the artifice of the setting and the interaction itself produces a distancing effect that carries over to the woman's account. The performative nature of the encounter is made manifest not only in the use of an actress to represent the director, but also in the allusion to the rehearsed nature of the biographical depiction that the interviewee is about to give. Before the woman begins to speak, the scene cuts to Couceyro's departure. The woman's testimony plays in off as Couceyro leaves the apartment and walks through the streets a few blocks before re-entering the park where she is shown prior to the interview.

As the disembodied voice of the woman continues to play, Couceyro, framed in front of a wooded section of the park facing the camera, begins to scream. The scream in this context stands out in tension with the commentary in off that continues in the soundtrack, opposing the nostalgic inflection of the woman's narrative to the frustration that stems from the impossibility of finding the director's parents in the woman's portrayal of them. In a subsequent scene filmed inside Carri's apartment, bits of the woman's recorded testimony are screened on a small

television set mounted on the wall as Couceyro, positioned with her back to the screen, listens. The interview with the woman is cut short and followed by another interview with a man who appears visibly nervous as he looks into the camera and shifts position in his seat several times. The videocassette reaches the end before the end of the interview, prompting Couceyro to eject the tape and exchange it for the previous one to resume the footage of the woman from before. The juxtaposition of these two interviews establishes a series of oppositions that, nevertheless, all draw attention to the presence of the filmic apparatus and its mediating effect on the narratives themselves.

### 3.2 LIFE FROM UNBEARABLE IMAGES

The critical controversy surrounding *Los rubios* unfolds around Martín Kohan's hostile analysis of the film in two articles published in *Punto de Vista* in which he criticizes several of the formal strategies through which Carri chooses to confront the issue of memory and representation. Citing, for example, the treatment of the testimonies offered by comrades of Carri's parents, the use of Playmobil figures to reenact the abduction of her parents, and the use of an actress to represent Carri as daughter while Carri herself appears as director, Kohan accuses the film of passing over "the more specifically political dimension" of her parents' story and labels the film "un juego de poses y un ensayo de levedad; donde las poses consiguen pasar por postura, y la levedad por gesto grave" ("Apariencia" 30) ["a game of poses and an essay in frivolity; where the poses manage to pass for a stance, and frivolity for a serious gesture"].

In "Ficciones críticas de la memoria," Ana Amado takes an alternative stance toward these elements of the film when she argues,

los padres guerrilleros . . . se apartaron de ellas (como del resto de los hijos en su misma situación) por la fuerza de un deseo y una elección. Albertina Carri se queja de las derivaciones siniestras de esa opción; reclama y desafía más allá de la muerte al espectro del padre y de la madre que se le vuelven extraños, casi extranjeros por la invisibilidad, el sin lugar de su muerte. (61)

[militant parents . . . were separated from them (as is the case with the rest of the children in their same situation) by the force of a desire and a choice. Albertina Carri complains of the sinister ramifications of this choice; she protests and challenges beyond death the ghost of the father and that of the mother who become strange, almost foreign, to her because of the invisibility, the placelessness of their death.]

The invisibility and “placelessness” of the death of the disappeared poses a challenge to the second generation’s relationship with the past. Carlos Gamerro also points to the inter-generational dimension of the polemic that Carri’s framing of her parents’ politics in the film. In response to Sarlo’s and Kohan’s accusations of irreverence, discourtesy, disrespect, etc., Gamerro identifies the politization of the director, as the child of disappeared, in her defiance of the authority of her parents’ generation to police memory and determine the legitimacy of its representations. The appropriation of the infantile perspective, accordingly, mirrors the infantilization that diminishes the historical agency of the generation of children of the disappeared.

Another line of interpretation within the critical work surrounding *Los rubios* takes as a point of departure the documentary form as a particular mode of expression for the children of

the disappeared. Jens Andermann argues that Carri's film and others directed by children of the disappeared insist:

[O]n the political nature of their own, contradictory feelings of reverence and scorn, admiration and abandonment, which they translate into a documentary form that, by refusing to provide closure and putting under suspicion the self-sufficiency and presence of the image, remains true to the tenets of radical filmmaking in the 1970s but questions and challenges its political assumptions. (120)

Gonzalo Aguilar makes a similar argument about *Los rubios* in his book *Other Worlds*. Aguilar proposes that *Los rubios* stands apart from other films directed by children of the disappeared such as Andrés Habbeger's *(h)istorias cotidianas* (2001) and María Inés Roque's *Papá Ivan* (2004) in that it questions the political militancy of the director's disappeared parents in order to move past mourning and construct an image of a "vital present" through formal experimentation, the staging of the director's memory through the lens of childhood perception, and an exploration of the mechanisms of memory from the perspective of the present. "Confronting her parents' choice of political militancy," he argues, "Carri responds with a choice of aesthetics as the territory in which it is worth living or giving one's life" (159-60).

The visual presence of the cover of two different editions of Roberto Carri's book *Isidro Velázquez, formas pre-revolucionarias de la violencia* stands out against the conspicuous absence of the father's own writing from that same book. To clarify, the scene in question depicts the actress who plays Carri as daughter reciting the epigraph from this book outside in the neighborhood where the Carri's lived prior to their disappearance. The passage she quotes, which refers to the spontaneous collectivization of the people, stands in contrast to the absence of an audience on the empty streets where she is reading it. This scene has been cited on numerous



occasions in scholarly work on the film. Critics such as Kohan and Sarlo, for example, claim that the omission of the father's words in the staged reading, together with the apparent disjuncture between the setting and the message of the text, illustrates the director's outright rejection of her parents' political ideals.

The omission of the father's writing bears relevance on the use of representation (for both Carri father and Carri daughter) as a political strategy. *Isidro Velázquez* is a biographical account of a popular rural bandit who had been on the run from and was ultimately killed by the police only one or two years before the book is published. Roberto Carri compiled the data for this biography from non-traditional/non-authoritative sources. In his preface to the book, he states that “[e]videntemente, el material utilizado puede ser cuestionado por los investigadores serios, pero no tengo ningún inconveniente en declarar que eso me importa muy poco” (*Cartografía* 7) [“evidently, the material used can be questioned by the serious researchers, but I have no qualms with declaring that this matters very little to me”]. In *Cartografía*, Carri (daughter) states the motives behind writing a book about the film as follows: “Hacer este libro tiene sentido porque la película cumplió su objetivo: generó discordia, avivó el debate y se posicionó, generacionalmente, como una nueva voz. De este modo, el libro hace un recorrido por las diferentes etapas a las que se ve sometida una película para convertirse en voz” (10) [“Making this book makes sense because the movie achieved its objective: it generated discord, enlivened debate and positioned itself, generationally, as a new voice. In this way, the book takes a trip through the different stages to which a film is subjected in order to become a voice”].

The above-cited passage from the foreword of the father's book is transcribed as the epigraph to *Cartografía*. Considered together with the stated motives behind the realization of the book about the film, the positioning of this quote, the first words transcribed in the book

version (I say transcribed because there are two images of textual reproductions in the two pages preceding the quote: a facsimile of the signed letter from the INCAA pre-qualification committee and a facsimile of the cover of the first edition of *Isidro Velázquez*, which is not the one that is shown in the earlier scene of the film) in the pages before the introduction of *Cartografía*, establishes a contrast with the reasons for refusing to subsidize the film stated in the letter. The letter, read in its entirety on screen, reports the following:

En Buenos Aires, a los 30 días del mes de octubre de 2002, el Comité de Preclasificación de Proyectos decide NO EXPEDIRSE, en esta instancia, sobre el proyecto titulado “LOS RUBIOS”, por considerar insuficiente la presentación del guión. Las razones son las siguientes:

Creemos que este proyecto es valioso y pide --en este sentido-- ser revisado con un mayor rigor documental. La historia, tal como está formulada, plantea el conflicto de ficcionalizar la propia experiencia cuando el dolor puede nublar la interpretación de hechos lacerantes.

El reclamo de la protagonista por la ausencia de sus padres, si bien es el eje, requiere una búsqueda más exigente de testimonios propios, que se concretarían con la participación de los compañeros de sus padres, con afinidades y discrepancias. Roberto Carri [sic] y Ana María Caruso fueron dos intelectuales [sic] comprometidos en los ‘70, cuyo destino trágico merece que este trabajo se realice. (cited in *Cartografía* 5)

[In Buenos Aires, the 30th day of October 2002, the Project Prequalification Committee announces its decision not to support the project

entitled *Los rubios* on the view that the presentation of the script is insufficient. The reasons for this decision are as follows:

We believe this project is valuable and, as such, deserves to be revised with greater documentary rigor. The story, in its present formulation, generates conflict through the fictionalization of the [director's] own experience when the pain may shroud the interpretation of the horrendous facts of the matter.

The protagonist's mourning over the absence of her parents, if this indeed is the central theme of the film, requires a more demanding investigation of appropriate testimonials, which would specify the participation of her parents' colleagues, with both affinities and discrepancies. Roberto Carri and Ana María Caruso were two dedicated intellectuals in the '70s, whose tragic destiny deserves the realization of this project.]

This gives the impression that the script that the committee reviewed in order to make this decision did not yet include the "testimonios propios" or much participation of the parents' friends. Before the INCAA finally agreed to subsidize the film, the director turned to several of her parents' friends and comrades for funding.

It would seem, then, that the inclusion of the testimonies in the final version of the film and the alternative source of funding is part of a strategy whereby the director yields to the expectations of the INCAA without ceding to their expectations entirely, while at the same time, she manages to articulate a critique of these expectations. If in fact the father's project was also criticized for not following a standard protocol of investigation, then the omission of his text in the film achieves a similar effect as the inclusion of his text in the book. That is, just as the omission of the father's text in the film was criticized as a sign of irreverence, and the director

herself was criticized on a personal level for not “listening” to her parents or heeding their message because of this omission. The facsimile of the letter includes a caption with the following observation: “A pesar de que el Comité de Precalificación del Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales decidió no expedirse en relación al pedido de subsidio, sí expresa su opinión sobre cómo debería hacerse *Los rubios*” (5) [“Even though the Prequalification Committee of the INCAA decided not to grant the request for subsidy, it does express its opinion about how *Los rubios* should be made”]. It also seems noteworthy that the quote from the father’s book is juxtaposed with the cover of the first edition of *Isidro Velázquez*, which includes a black and white photograph of the recently fallen body of the popular bandit sprawled out on the ground and surrounded by feet and the rifle butts to the right on the preceding page. The cover of the edition that appears in the film has replaced this photograph with an illustration of the outline in black ink of a figure presumably discharging a firearm.

The significance of the visual presence of the father’s book and the omission of the father’s text itself in the film can be read as a critique of the biographical form itself. By highlighting the absence of the biographical subjects (i.e. the parents) in a film that, judging by the title, can ultimately be considered a biography of the family, *Los rubios* could be considered a critique of the biographical form itself, perhaps a critique of the fossilization of a life story in textual form. The secondary representation of the father through the visual presence of his book and the omission of his own writing may also suggest that this objection to the biographical form entails a rejection of the third-person representation of the biographical subject as a synecdoche of historical experience. When Carri addresses the motives behind her decision not to participate in H.I.J.O.S., she cites the underrepresentation of the children of disappeared campesinos, a

demographic that comprises a significant portion of those who were disappeared during the dictatorship.

Another facet of this critique would be the assumption that the text and the ideas it sets forth remain unchanged with the passage of time or can be unproblematically applied to any context without regard for the circumstances in which it is created or to which it responds. This may provide a possible explanation for the use of the more recent edition of the book rather than the father's personal copy in the film. As a "document of the present," the appearance of the newer edition of the book would allude to the uncritical extrapolation of the ideals and proposals articulated therein.

There seems to be more to that than a simple rejection of form and adoption of method on Carri (daughter)'s part. In his foreword to the Colihue edition of *Isidro Velázquez*, the first edition of the two that appear in the film, Horacio González characterizes the text as an essay, emphasizing the self-reflexive impulse with which the author situates himself before the popular subject from the margin of the academy and gives account of the immediacy of the subject matter in his contextualization of this relationship:

El ensayo de Roberto Carri siempre da en una grave cuestión cual nunca ninguna época está preparada y para la cual, siempre, quizás, todo ensayo debe estar abierto. Cuestión que por momentos adquiere un tono de reticencia, de inesperada vacilación, pero que se corresponde, en verdad, con la verdad interna del ensayista, que es *él* escribiendo lo que *él* se pregunta, dubitativo, a sí mismo. (15, emphasis in original)

[Roberto Carri's essay constantly targets an urgent question that no generation is ever prepared [to confront] and for which, perhaps always, every essay should be

open. A question that at times acquires a tone of reticence, of unanticipated hesitation, but which corresponds, in reality, to the internal truth of the essayist, who is the *he* writing that which *he*, dubious, asks himself.]

The emphasis on the significance of Carri's use of the essay form highlights the never consummated project of interpretation that inheres in the very nature of the essay form and the protean nature of the arguments it presents. Moreover, as González proposes in the above cited passage, the use of the essay reveals an additional component of the father's work that might elucidate the significance of its material presence in *Los rubios*; namely, the self-reflexive underpinnings of the work.

Some of the father's comments in the preface of the book further illustrate the importance of this element in the timing of the publication. The discussion of Sarmiento in one of the final chapters seems to have the most promise for elucidating some of the political strategies in *Los rubios* insofar as it is used to highlight some of the characteristics of Sarmiento's brand of "sociology" (as expressed in *Facundo*) that persist in the evolution of the field through to present of the father's book (i.e. 1967-68).

El hecho de comenzar este capítulo con citas del *Facundo* parecería indicar cierto acuerdo con las posiciones de Sarmiento respecto al problema. Pero no es así, trataré de demostrar que los que continúan el hilo teórico de Sarmiento son los sociólogos contemporáneos que imbuidos de una falsa idea del progreso y la evolución de las sociedades y también de la capacidad intelectual de los "primitivos", analizan la cuestión aceptando la tradicional dicotomía entre civilización y barbarie. (113)

[To begin this chapter with quotes from *Facundo* would seem to indicate a certain agreement with the positions of Sarmiento relative to the problem. But this is not the case; I will attempt to demonstrate that those who continue the theoretical thread initiated by Sarmiento are the contemporary sociologists who, imbued with a false idea of progress and the evolution of society as well as the intellectual capacity of the “primitives,” analyze the question accepting the traditional dichotomy between civilization and barbarism.]

Despite the similarities between Sarmiento’s characterization of the gaucho’s *bandolerismo* and that of rural banditry by Carri’s contemporaries, the most suggestive aspect of his analysis for a reading of *Los rubios* comes from the primary differences that he notes between Sarmiento and contemporary sociology in general, vis-à-vis the “objective” treatment of the object of study.

Sarmiento, salvando las diferencias de temperamento que lo hacían vivir apasionadamente sus luchas, es el precursor de los patrones de los sociólogos, sean estos organismos estatales o fundaciones. El tecnócrata a suelto y el reformista o desarrollista de izquierda que respeta la objetividad, no puede . . . superar el frío y burocrático enfoque de la ciencia positiva.

Pero las concepciones de la ciencia no tienen autonomía real, se subordinan a un orden o práctica social y política, y más allá de la buena o mala voluntad del investigador. (115)

[Sarmiento, save for the differences in temperament that made him live out his struggles so passionately, is the precursor of the patterns of the sociologists, be they state organisms or foundations. The technocrat at large and the reformist or

leftist developmentalist, who respects objectivity, cannot . . . overcome the cold and bureaucratic focus on positive science.

But the conceptions of science do not have real autonomy, they are subordinated by a social and political order or practice, and lie beyond the good or bad will of the researcher.]

One of the points that Sarlo makes against *Los rubios* is the fact that Carri chooses to omit the detail that her mother took care of the newborn child of the only survivor of the detention camp where her parents were imprisoned and chooses to focus instead on what the photograph of the matadero is capable of relating about her experience. What Sarlo sees as a sign of irreverence, however, can be read as a shift away from the indelible link between “parentesco” and the politics of memory. Rather than focus on the relation between her mother and the photographer as one formed on the basis of a maternal community, Carri gives form to the imaginative and critical legacy of her mother.

Despite claims by some critics that the film depoliticizes the armed struggle by highlighting the subjective dimension, this has the opposite effect. That is, rather than depoliticizing the already politically charged story of her parents (as figures of the armed struggle, martyrs and myths) by incorporating the subjective dimension, she is politicizing the treatment of the disappeared in other documentaries (as much those by the children of the disappeared as those by directors of the same generation as the parents). In essence, she is showing that, despite the claims to objectivity of documentary films or the fictionalization of history in others, the objective and subjective, or reality/fiction, are never mutually exclusive terms.

In this regard, the sentence that follows the one about the parents’ generation would also bear relevance on this interpretation: “Los que vinimos después, como Paula L. o mis hermanas,



quedaron en el medio, heridos, construyendo desde imagines insoportables” [“Those who came after, like Paula L. or my sisters, were left in the middle, wounded, constructing/building from insufferable images”]. This statement positions the subsequent generation as intermediaries in that it frames “los que vinimos después” as both those who were not in a position of historical agency, including those who did live during the dictatorship and who were affected by it. Though they did not “survive,” according to the director’s characterization, they did live during this period and their lives are profoundly marked by this experience. Rather than shaping the past, this intermediate generation is, in essence, the product of this historical moment.

Carri’s use of Playmobil dolls to create, interpret, and re-create the traumatic experience of her parents’ disappearance has been at center stage of the criticism both against and in favor of the film. The critical storm that this particular aspect of the film generates invites a comparison between *Los rubios* and “Lego,” the installation of Polish artist Zbigniew Libera, in which the dolls are displayed as recreations of typical scenes in the concentration camps of the Holocaust and packaged in kits for sale and consumption. In much the same vein as the reception of Carri’s film, the installation’s detractors cite the use of the Lego dolls as an irresponsible mode of representation. In both cases, the interpretation of the children’s toys as antithetical to the seriousness of the issue undermines the potential for productive discussion that the use of such a medium opens at several levels. Such an outright dismissal of representations that use toys, especially miniaturized humans, betrays a gap in communication and an unwillingness to consider the child’s perspective as a potential space for critical explorations of cultural memory. The re-configuration of the dolls as part of the process of play insinuates the need for a change of perspective toward the correlation between fantasy and reality.

In what is perhaps the most controversial segment of *Los rubios*, the film uses Playmobil dolls and stop motion animation to recreate the disappearance of Carri's parents as an alien abduction. The sequence shows two Playmobil dolls driving a yellow car at night. The car stops at a gas station where the two figures get out of the car and meet up with another group of Playmobil dolls that give the couple firearms. As they continue their trip along an isolated stretch of highway, an alien spacecraft appears from out of the night sky and projects a beam of light over the car and transports the dolls, one by one, through the air aboard the spacecraft. The soundtrack, taken from the 1951 science fiction film *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, suggests a connection between the environment of fear and paranoia of the Cold War era and that of the Proceso.

Both Sarlo and Kohan discuss this sequence in their objections to what they see as the dissociation of politics and history from memory as a kind of subjective excess in the film's reconstruction of the past. Kohan complains that the use of a typical of science fiction plot line in the resolution of the scene annuls the possibility of armed conflict that the weapons exchange anticipates: "El grupo que irrumpía con agresividad en la noche, y el arma que le vimos, han sido eliminados, y suplidos por esta versión que remite más bien a una escena emblemática de *Encuentros cercanos del tercer tipo*. Lo que iba a ser o pudo ser causa política, ahora pertenece al más allá" ("Apariencia" 29) ["The group that appeared aggressively in the night, and the weapon that we saw them carry, have been eliminated and supplanted by this version, which conforms instead to an emblematic scene from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. What would have been or could have been a political cause now pertains to the beyond"]. The anti-mimetic character of this scene, for Kohan, is indicative of the de-politicizing gesture that runs throughout the film.

The use of Playmobil dolls establishes a link between forms of extreme repression that characterize State terror and more subtle manifestations of violence that inhere in the experience of childhood itself. The interposition of animated scenes in the film also gives an account of child's play as a fantasy space that reproduces the child's perspective and displaces the established narratives about the past transmitted in the institutional arenas and the mass media. The use of the dolls to stage an alternative scenario for the parents' disappearance hints at the traumatic nature of the event for the child. The fictionalization of the event itself provides insight into the confluence of fantasy and reality as a means to integrate this experience of loss into the symbolic realm without proposing a definitive, rationalized account of the event. Furthermore, the reenactment of the parents' disappearance using these dolls suggests the traumatic nature of the event for the child. In this sense, the traumatic repetition of the event through different modes of representation resists the closure that mastery of the traumatic experience would entail. Rather than aim at the integration of the experience within a determined system of signification, the playful repetition seeks to maintain the traumatic event as an open referent external to but in tension with pre-established discursive regimes.

The family is framed by the artificial setting of the toy set, but the abduction is staged in such a way that partially sutures the split between the private, personalized memories and the public, politicized memories within the imaginative realm of childhood fantasy. The parents' abduction, perpetrated in this instance by extraterrestrial beings, signifies an incomplete process of 'working through' trauma by exposing and occupying memory's disjunctures that clears the path for the formation of the non-biological family that skips off in the closing scene. In effect, this sequence symbolically harnesses the creative potential of infantile make-believe as a means

to transform absolute loss into absence and bring forward the dialectical relationship between absence and presence.

### 3.3 SPACE, REPETITION, COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Unlike the majority of the more recent films of her generation that have dealt with this difficult era through a recurrence of childhood and memory, Carri veers away from a focus on the impossibility of recuperating the lost generation, instead taking this impossibility as a given. In this sense, *Los rubios* is not a search for the truth about the director's parents, nor is it an attempt to uncover the truth about Argentina's recent past. Rather, this film is an attempt to map the fissures that the treatment of this traumatic past has left in the national imaginary since the fall of the military dictatorship. In her approach to this trauma through various permutations of the narrative memory available to her, Carri exposes the inherent tensions that constitute the relationship between the public and the private at the core of the national imaginary, a connection that has been clouded in the intellectual environment since the formal dissolution of the dictatorship.

Though the recitation of one of the epigraphs from *Isidro Velázquez* staged in an early scene of *Los rubios* uses the more recent Colihue edition of the book, the first edition does appear briefly in the film a few seconds after the second appearance of the later edition. The framing of the father's copy of the book on screen later in the film stands in direct contrast from that of the later edition in both the opening sequence and in the later sequence in which both copies appear on a worktable among a scattering of photos and documents. The second time that the Colihue edition appears on screen, it is situated atop an unsorted pile of family photographs,

newspaper clippings, personal affects, and other miscellaneous materials of the Carri family “archives.” The father’s personal copy of the book, located at the edge of the same pile, is captured in the same shot, but does not appear in the frame at the same time as the later edition at any point. The composition of this shot reveals one of the most significant differences in the presentation of the two books in the film. In both the opening sequence of the film and the later shot that includes both copies of the book, the newer edition is partially obscured by the hands of the Actress who plays Carri (as daughter). The second shot begins with the actress setting the book (now closed) on top of the pile of scattered photographs. The establishing shot shows her typing something at the computer from a medium angle, and then transitions to a zoom shot that closes in on her hand before panning across the materials spread out before her. The camera is positioned at a downward angle such that the images and clippings fill the screen as it moves away from the actress. The camera continues to pan across the pile of personal documents, moving toward the father’s copy of the book, positioned upside down but uncovered and face up at the edge of the pile. The movement from the shot of the actress working on the film across the photographs and personal mementos to the first edition copy of the book suggests a backward movement through the life of the director’s personal archives. This movement, in turn, highlights the process of mediation through which these materials are manipulated and transformed into both personal memories and public history in and through the film.

A similar operation takes place in a later sequence (one that comes right before the comment about “la generación de mis padres...”). The camera shows a close-up of a photograph (that appears to be included in an album) of the father with the two older daughters at birthday celebration. As the camera pans across the photograph a caption in printed text that reads “Especial: oficio de sociólogo” enters the frame for a brief moment before the camera pans

across to a handwritten letter from the mother wishing one of her daughters (Andrea) happy birthday. Following this shot is a series of stills that shows the letters held in and partially covered by the director's hand. The final still in this series frames the director's hand arranging a series of family photographs on a cutting mat, presumably preparing them for alterations. In contrast to the seamless movement of the previously described shot, the materials are arranged in a sequence that moves from the unmediated documents that record moments from before the disappearance, to the letters that the mother sent from captivity, to the anticipation of the director's intervention in these materials. The inverse relation of these two shots is further emphasized by the presence of the actress in the first and the director herself in the second.

Any attempt to accurately describe the representational strategies of *Los rubios* must take into account both the visual plane of the film and the use of sound as two mutually imbricated elements of the film's aesthetic composition; an appreciation of the multi-faceted visual plane—with its combination of photographic images, still shots, quotations in typed text—must be accompanied by a consideration of the sonorous elements. One scene in particular that illustrates the impact on meaning that the consonance and, in many cases, dissonance between the visual, sound, and written text is a scene early in the film when Analía Couceyro recites the epigraph from the book *Isidro Velázquez. Formas pre-revolucionarias de la violencia*, a sociological study on a popular bandit written by the director's father Roberto Carri. The text speaks of a spontaneous uprising of the masses resulting from an inevitable taking of consciousness from the shared experience of oppression. The visual field in this scene reveals the setting of the recitation as the sidewalk of a lower class neighborhood, while the camera focuses in on the actress and the front cover of the book from which she is reading the passage from a frontal shot at an upward angle. The message of the epigraph, which corresponds to the public

setting of the performance, stands out in contrast to both the focus on the individual and the sound of cars passing through an adjoining underpass. The message of community consciousness and shared experience on the textual plane express the unity of shared experience while the image and the sound track work together to emphasize the alienation of the modern existence through both the isolation of the vehicular mode of transportation and the accelerated rate of perception that the automobile implies.

In the scenes filmed in the neighborhood of Carri's childhood home, Carri does not identify herself to the interviewees, allowing them to articulate the gap between their experience and their memories of the family. One of the women interviewed reveals the gap through an expression of the Carris' difference relative to the other people in the neighborhood. This woman with jet black hair mistakenly recalls, and in no uncertain terms, that the entire family was blonde, a distinction that led her to redirect the paramilitary agents to their residence the night they were detained: "Digo, son tres nenas rubias, el señor es rubio, la señora rubia. . . . Cuando yo di ese dato, dijeron '¡Uy!, Nos equivocamos' y rajaron para allá" ["I say, 'they are three blonde girls, the man is blonde, the woman blonde. . . . When I gave [them] that detail, they said '¡Uy! We made a mistake,' and they headed off in that direction"]. The inaccuracy of this detail that stands out in her memory of the family can be read as an indication of the woman's perception of the family's "otherness" in the neighborhood and the Carris' alienation from the rest of the community.

The final scene of *Los rubios*, which shows the film crew putting on blonde wigs as they walk away from the camera, also suggests a critique of the unfavorable conditions of authority that dictate the criteria according to which representations of the disappeared or the atrocities of the dictatorship in general are deemed appropriate or acceptable. The wigs are an allusion to the

inaccurate recollection of one of the women from the director's childhood neighborhood interviewed earlier in the film that the Carri family was blonde. If, as Beatriz Sarlo asserts, this error can be attributed to the family's disconnection from the inhabitants of the lower-class neighborhood where they lived prior to the abduction, the voluntary assumption of this identity in the final scene can be viewed, on the one hand, as the artificial return to the past and, on the other, as the departure from the authoritative discourses that determine how this past is to be represented in the present.

One of the final sequences of *Los rubios* shows Analía Couceyra entering a wig shop and trying on a number of blonde wigs. She is then filmed walking along the streets of Buenos Aires wearing the wig. The following sequence, filmed in the "Campito," the countryside near where Carri lived after her parents were disappeared, shows the entire film crew waking up together in a small house, preparing for the days filming by putting on a blonde wig. The film crew then leaves the house and follows Couceyro as she walks away from the camera into an open field at daybreak. She turns and looks back toward the camera two times before the entire crew, still donning the blonde wigs from their early-morning preparations, emerges from behind the camera and approaches her. Once they are joined in front of the camera, they proceed toward the horizon together without looking at the camera again. The affective intensity of this moment is increased as the soundtrack plays Charly García's remake of Todd Rundgren's "Influenza," appropriately titled "Influence" in the Spanish translation. In *La imagen justa*, Ana Amado says that "[e]l tema . . . amplifica desde la banda sonora lo [sic] términos precarios con los que asumen su destino" (192) ["from the soundtrack, the song amplifies the precarious terms under which they assume their destiny"]. While I don't disagree with this interpretation, there is more to the selection than a symbolic appropriation or transposition of the lyrics in the closing scene. Despite the closing



title card announcing “The End,” the film continues after the credits, both literally, on screen, and figuratively, through the continuation of artistic collaborations across generational, linguistic, and medium-specific divides.

Another line of interpretation that may arise from this scene would point to the configuration of an artistic community that transcends generational and national boundaries. There are a couple of points that should be clarified in regards to this particular hypothesis: first, Charly García was strongly criticized by Hebe Bonafini, one of the founding members of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, after he opened one of his concerts by dropping dummies from helicopters into the auditorium, a spin on the infamous death flights from which the drugged bodies of the detainees were dropped into the ocean. Second, the lyrics of the song echo several of the statements made by the director and other members of the crew at various points throughout the film. The lyrics speak of escaping the control of an external influence, likened throughout the song to the influenza of the title, when they say, for instance, “Debo confiar en mí, lo tengo que saber. Pero es muy difícil ver, si algo controla mi ser. Puedo ver y decir y sentir mi mente dormir bajo tu influencia” [“I should trust in myself, I should beware of this. But it is very difficult to see, if something controls my being. I can see and speak and feel my mind sleep under your influence”].

The song that plays before the closing credits has as much to do with the appropriateness of the lyrics to the issue of influence in the film as it does with another issue that comes to the fore via the scenes depicting the process of directing, editing, and producing that maintain a presence throughout the film; namely, the formation of a community based on experiences that are invalidated by the voices of authority. The choice of the song, an interpretation by way of

translation of the Todd Rundgren song “Influenza” performed by Charly García, speaks to the formation of community beyond the unofficially sanctioned biological and generational ties.

When García announces his plan to drop dummies from helicopters into the River Plate as part of his performance for the music festival “Buenos Aires Vivo III” in February 1999, representatives of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo publicly shame him. Hebe de Bonafini, outright forbids him from representing the disappeared in his performance, stating: “Vos no podés usar la muerte para un show, bastante ya hemos sufrido con esos vuelos para que vos los recreés. . . . el dolor de las desapariciones no puede ser bastardeado. Vos no podés montar vuelos de la muerte ni en broma” (Pintos) [“You cannot use death for a show; we have already suffered enough with those flights for you to recreate them. . . . the pain of the disappearances cannot be bastardized. You cannot stage death flights even as a joke”]. In response to García’s continued insistence, Bonafini, who had previously agreed to participate in the show by invitation of García himself, announced the Mothers’ intentions to boycott the festival. Instead of dropping dummies from helicopters into the river, they decided on having dummies emerge out of the river to reflect the continued presence, or “rebirth” of the disappeared.

The film highlights the tensions that arise between the interpretation of individual experience and collective history. As noted earlier, the director comments that “la generación de mis padres, los que sobrevivieron una época terrible, reclaman ser protagonistas de una historia que no les pertenece. Los que vinimos después, como Paula L. o mis hermanas, quedaron en el medio, heridos, construyendo desde imagines insoportables” [“my parents’ generation, those who survived a terrible era, demand to be the protagonists of a story that does not belong to them. Those of us who came after, like Paula L. or my sisters, were left in the middle, wounded, building from insufferable images”]. This comment, situated as a belated response to the

exigencies of the INCAA letter, is open to several interpretations. One of the first questions that the statement raises is that if “la historia” doesn’t belong to the parents’ generation, to whom does it belong? Before laying out the possible answers to this question, it is important to recognize the inherent ambiguity in “la historia” as either “history” or “story.” While a case could be made for either one or the other, but the comment makes use of this ambiguity to convey several different meanings at once: First, the parents’ generation wants to determine the way that the personal story of the director and/or the story of her parents, insofar as these relate to the legacy of the armed struggle, is presented in line with the current political project of the Left. Second, the parents’ generations wants to be in charge of how personal narratives are used to confirm a particular version of history. Finally, in their insistence that the director frame the film as a documentary, the product of an adherence to “mayor rigor documental,” implies the imposition of a unilateral version of history and, by extension, the formulation of its interpretation of the past and its bearing on the present. The definition of the generation of her parents as “los que sobrevivieron una época terrible” seems especially relevant to the interpretation of this comment. I think that in part Carri is referring to the story that she is telling (i.e. *her* story) but, more than that, I think that this statement speaks to the predominant view of the parents themselves, those who did not survive that terrible era as the only victims of state repression. In other words, the members of the committee, most if not all of them contemporaries of Carri’s parents, draw from their personal experience of that period as the basis of legitimacy for their authority over the meaning of both their own experience and the experience of those who did not survive, and how this meaning is to be applied to the present. Rather than delegitimize their authority over their personal experience or over the representation of that

terrible chapter of history that they survived, *Los rubios* articulates a critique of the presumption of authority over how this period is depicted in artistic productions.

Instead of de-privileging the personal or subjective narrative in favor of a distanced “objective” narrative as Beatriz Sarlo would advocate, the near constant movement of the film—through spaces, time frames, mediums, perspectives, etc.—lends itself to a dynamic construction of identity that further discredits the claim as much her own as of others’ to exclusive narrative authority. This disclaimer to any claims of the real or the possibility of narrating an objective documentary representation of the self or of the past forms is central to Carri’s reinsertion of political agency in the present.

The void of any verifiable cultural identity and the constant recurrence of either exclusively political or exclusively physiognomic depictions of her parents and family highlight the both the role of testimonial discourse in the formation of a collective identity as how that identity is translated into the indeterminacy of these experiences in the contemporary cultural imaginary. Moreover, the attitudes of fear remain as a barrier to or stagnate the formation of meaningful social relations even in the post-dictatorship era lend a sense of urgency to her project. One of the interviews positions the “witness” and the camera on opposite sides of the bars, resembling the bars of a prison cell, that gate the entrance as the woman only acknowledges having known the children of the family. The prison metaphor is extended in the neighbor’s vague recollection of the children with whom she was closest, because she took care of them from time to time and, as she states “Uno se acariña a los niños.” [“You grow fond of children.”] Unable to recognize Carri as an adult, the woman reveals how the fear cultivated by the military repression functions to sever community ties once the child’s ideological formation begins to take shape in the adult. Solidarity then is limited to the defense of mere life for defenseless

children. Foreshadowing one of the intertitles of a subsequent interview, self-preservation depends on the sheer lack of recognition of shared ideals within the community.

The preemptively failed nature of the search for Roberto Carri and Ana María Caruso around which *Los rubios* is structured gives primacy to the movement through and between the significant sites of memory. This movement is initiated within the first shots of the film when Carri, the actress who represents her, and the film crew travel to Carri's childhood home from which her parents were forcibly disappeared. The reconstruction of the scene of the crime centers on the interviews of potential witnesses from around the neighborhood. The fragmentary, necessarily incomplete reconstruction of the Carris' story from the neighbors' memories is emphasized almost to absurdity with the "testimony" of a group of neighborhood children who, not unlike Carri herself, are operating within the impossibility of direct knowledge of the circumstances surrounding her parents disappearance and the family's presence in the neighborhood in general. Insofar as these children's account of the family take on the characteristics of what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory," memories of potential witnesses can therefore be read in terms of the personalization of collective memory, which establishes an inverse correlation with the overtly political nature of the director's personal acquaintances.

In a scene filmed in front of her childhood home, Carri (as director) instructs the actress she enlists to portray her as daughter to repeat over several takes what she remembers of the kidnapping. After the second or third on-screen take, the actress describes the car in which Carri is interrogated, explaining "I think it was a red Ford, though I am not sure if I imagined it that way, or if it really was like that. Really, a lot of these things I do not know if I remember them or if I constructed them along with the things that my sisters remembered." This detail, which is transposed in Carri's fantasies as the vehicle in which her parents return from what she was made

to believe was a work-related trip, is framed in such a way as to demonstrate the construction of memory (and memory *as* construction) as the superimposition of other's memories over the those recalled from personal experience. Rather than the erasure of one version by another, this declaration of uncertainty depicts memory as a composite of fragmentary recollections. In this sense, also, the film situates memory and the task of remembrance in the interstices between reality and fantasy, fact and fiction.

#### 4.0 THE MISSING BODY: GUILT AND HAUNTING IN LUCRECIA MARTEL'S *LA MUJER SIN CABEZA*

Lucrecia Martel (1966-), like Carri, is a dominant figure in contemporary Argentine cinema. Her short film *Rey muerto* (1995) is included in the compilation film *Historias breves* together with other films that received recognition in the short film competition sponsored by the INCAA (Instituto Nacional de Cinematografía y Artes Audiovisuales), which is often cited as one of the inaugural works of the “New Argentine Cinema”. *La mujer sin cabeza* is the third feature-length film of what some critics have begun to call Martel’s “Salta Trilogy,” preceded by *La ciénaga* (2001) and *La niña santa* (2002). Martel is also director of *Las dependencias* (1999), a television documentary about the life and works of Silvina Ocampo and of the upcoming film *Zama* based on Argentine writer Antonio di Benedetto’s 1956 historical novel of the same name.

As discussed before, *La mujer sin cabeza* came out in 2008 and was Lucrecia Martel’s third feature length film. It conveys a feeling of estrangement, doom, and suspense and, as we will discuss here, deals with issues of collective denial and alienation of the middle class in the political history of Argentina’s interior provinces. It is different from the other texts analyzed here in that it does not seem to deal explicitly with the past. However, the film’s representational strategies, such as the defamiliarization of perception and the impulse to blur the boundaries between past and present, the living and the dead, and the everyday and the exceptional, establish

points of connection with those of the other novels and films that confront the country's recent past.

In an interview with Natalia Barrenha, Martel explains the connection between the accident and Vero's shift in perspective as the result of a traumatic experience. She describes the traumatic impact of a serious accident or illness as a perceptive disorder that triggers a process of "unlearning." The shock that such an experience entails denatures perception, rendering the everyday strange and uncanny.

#### 4.1 SENSORIAL DISJUNCTURE

In "Accidents and Miracles: Film and the Experience of History," Jens Andermann bases his analysis of Martel's cinematic oeuvre on the accident, a recurring narrative trope in the three films of Martel's "Salta Trilogy" that he discusses. According to Andermann's argument, Martel's cinema renders a mode of historical experience in which the potential for change only comes about through the irruption of accidents and miracles and yet, particularly in the case of the accident, this possibility is subsequently thwarted by "the state of absolute determination" that characterizes the end of history. At the heart of this narrative double bind, he identifies a "mode of narrative organization" in the sensorial uncertainty particular to Martel's films:

While making the shot uncertain and ambiguous for the spectator, this sensorial disjuncture at the same time forges an enigmatic interpellation of the intradiegetic subject, which is never fully in perceptual control of the situation in which she finds herself involved. Accidents are thus often the consequence of an insufficient awareness of, and control over, the out-of-field, which intrudes into and shatters



the internal coherence of the screen as a contained audio-visual and narrative space. (158)

In light of Andermann's consideration of the spectator in the above passage, it comes as somewhat of a surprise that his discussion of this effect in *La mujer sin cabeza* is limited to only a few brief comments on the narrative trajectory of the film, while his discussion of Martel's relationship with the audience is centered exclusively on *La ciénaga* and *La niña santa*. Nevertheless, his treatment of the "sensorial disjuncture" invites a more nuanced interpretation of affect in relation to the aesthetic composition of this film.

*La mujer sin cabeza* centers on the disoriented woman who "loses her head" after being involved in an automobile accident in which she collides with an unidentified figure in the middle of a dusty road after being distracted by a ringing cell phone in her purse. In her disorientation, presumably caused by her head hitting the steering wheel in the course of the collision, Vero, the protagonist, drives away from the scene of the accident without inspecting the damage resulting from her careless distraction. As she drives away from the scene of the accident, the lifeless body of a dog comes into focus in the rear view mirror. The opening sequence of the film, in which the dog is seen running with a group of young boys, complicates this image's implication that the dog was the only casualty of the crash. The remainder of the film reflects Vero's disorientation as she attempts to come to terms with her potential involvement in the death of an innocent child. She first dismisses the significance of the accident, then becomes convinced that she killed someone on the road and, finally, appears to be dissuaded from this conviction by the repeated assurances of her husband, cousin, and brother that nothing happened.

Despite the fairly simple linear progression of the film's narrative, Vero's disorientation, the cover up of the accident by her husband, brother, and cousin, as well as a number of other ambiguous circumstances that come to light by the end of the film, complicate the spectator's perception of the events that have transpired. The incoherence of the narrative structure, as Andermann argues, is enhanced by the aesthetic composition of the film, which, in effect, transfers the perceptual disorientation of the protagonist to the spectator. The use of the car as a framing device contributes to the sense of uncertainty that results from the spectator's reliance on the visual field. While the viewer does have visual access to the scene of the accident as Vero continues on her way after the collision, the shot is framed through the rear window of the car. Nevertheless, this is only made apparent by the edge of a text printed on the glass. Is this a shot taken through the rear view mirror, replicating Vero's point of view as she looks back at the scene, or does this shot indicate a break between the spectator's perspective and that of Vero? The reflection of the text at the border of the frame is most likely a false clue intended to lead the viewer on a fruitless search for answers. Even if it were possible to determine whether the text is printed on the interior or exterior side of the glass, the prospect that this image is shot as a close up of the rearview mirror adds another variable to the equation, rendering the viewer's attempt to piece together the clues made available in the visual field empirically null. In any case, the viewer, like Vero, is left attempting to connect bits and pieces of information that defy any attempt at piecing together clues.

In the absence of empirical data to sustain a particular version of events, as in the presence of the dog and the conspicuous absence of the body at the scene of the accident at the beginning of the film, vision is demoted in the cinematic mode's hierarchy of perception. The disorientation of the protagonist is conveyed by the recurrence of sounds that imply actions that

take place out of the line of sight of both Vero and the spectator. The contrast between what is seen in the frame and what is heard off screen suggests but does not confirm the presence of something that is apprehended in the cognitive register of both the protagonist and the spectator, but not seen and, as such not verifiable. The absence of the body at the scene of the accident and the conceptual link to the body found in the ravine established in a much later scene, for example, seal off the possibility of any conclusive interpretation of the events that transpire in the narrative space.

In what can perhaps be considered the most gaping lacunae in his analysis, Andermann fails to recognize the appearance of another accident in a later scene, one that marks a definitive point in Vero's apprehension of her experience. In this notable sequence, Vero is walking outside in what seems to be the interior patio of the social club where she is shown among a group of women conversing before they leave a social gathering in one of the first sequences prior to the accident. As Vero turns the corner marked out by two solid interior walls, the image on the screen is over exposed, and a pale yellow almost shrouds the image, presumably in an aesthetic rendering of Vero's visual perception since, as if in response to the sudden infiltration of light, she puts on her sunglasses. As she continues to move toward the camera, she approaches a chain-link fence that partitions the soccer field where a game is in session. As the camera faces Vero, a series of noises originating off screen startle her and she turns toward the fence to see what has happened. As she looks to the fallen player who had hit the fence, a dog barks again off screen. From one of the few point of view shots in the film, the spectator takes in the image that Vero sees—the body of an injured player laying listless on the ground at her feet—at the same time and from the same perspective as she does. In contrast to the scenes in which Vero is framed against the windows of the car or of her house passively gazing upon the figures outside, the

fence, the literal and figurative barrier between her and the young boy laying on the ground, is blurred and the yellow light disappears, bringing the body into full focus.

Through the unmediated gaps in the chain link fence, Vero is confronted, according to the audio-visual cues off camera, with what comes to signify the inversion of the audio-visual scheme of the accident. The dog, in this instance, is heard but not seen and the body of a young boy, like the one that she refused to acknowledge at the time of the accident, interrupts her visual frame of perception, consequently destabilizing the imaginary and often real dividing line between the two social worlds that separated the protagonist from the exterior spaces outside her car and home. That is not to say that film establishes a direct link between the boy who has been injured in the soccer match and the boy whom Vero may or may not have killed with her car in the first accident sequence. Rather, the “state of trance”—borrowing Andermann’s words—in which she confronts her own social world following the first accident is interrupted here as the protagonist is made to bare witness to another accident in which she is clearly not implicated. The violent materialization of the accident victim on the other side of the fence serves as a visual cue for the destabilization of the presence/absence and silence/clamor binaries that regulated the protagonist’s cognitive perception of these conflicting realities prior to her own accident.

This process comes to fruition in the following sequence that depicts Vero’s emotional breakdown in the club’s restroom. The conspicuous absence of the mirror in this scene, takes on meaning in light of the impact that this rupture of the organizing structure has on the autonomy of the individual subject. As Vero begins to cry, a spark of light emanating from within a utility closet to the side of the sink where she is standing, revealing the presence of another invisible body in the room with her. She approaches the figure, still obscured from view by the walls of the utility closet, and informs him that there is no water coming from the sink. A man of notably

dark complexion, in contrast to Vero's pale skin and bleached-blond hair, emerges from the closet to confirm Vero's observation. As the man faces her, she begins to sob again. "Está bien" ["It's okay"], he assures her, to which Vero responds by locking the man in a tight embrace. Afterward, the man takes out a bottle of water from among his supplies and uses it to help her wash her hair and face. The encounter with this figure of alterity in the bathroom, the space that perhaps most accurately captures the tenuousness of the public/private distinction at the base of the social structure, can be read as an expiatory ritual in which the social "other" exonerates her of her guilt.<sup>25</sup> Rather than discredit the validity of her confession or erase any potentially incriminating evidence, Vero's other facilitates the affective relief of her burden by recognizing her repentance.

Moreover, the affective exchange that takes place between Vero and this figure marks an inversion of the capitalist logic of monetary exchange. In contrast to the employees at the service of Vero and her family at home, this man has no contractual obligation to the woman. Since the service that he provides her is based exclusively on an affective exchange and arises from a fortuitous encounter, it lies outside the system of capitalist exchange that depends on the regulation of desires. As such, the spectator is forced to accommodate the convergence of these two realms of existence within an affective framework that bridges the temporal gap between the moment of the accident and the materialization of these bodies in the visual regime of the film. What *La mujer sin cabeza* offers the spectator is not so much moralizing critique of its characters, but the distortion of the perceptual regime that naturalizes or makes sense of class structure as the organizing mechanism of our disjointed reality.

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<sup>25</sup> In this case, it is important to note the distinction between guilt in the legal/judicial sense and Žižek's notion of a "universal free-floating guilt," which establishes "the difference between the factual truth (the accuracy of facts) and the 'inner' truth concerning our desire" (59).

## 4.2 DISRUPTIVE BODIES

Vero's breakdown in the restroom also contradicts her earlier assertions that "no pasó nada" ["nothing happened"] in response to the family's questions about the accident. Almost no one (except Lala, Vero's housekeeper, and her assistant at the clinic) seems to notice that something about her is awry. Most of the comments and the questions they ask convey a sense of concern about the material traces of the accident. "¿Qué golpazo le diste al auto! ¿A qué le diste?" ["What a hit you gave the car! What did you hit?"], one of them says when they see the damage to the car. "Nada, se me cruzó un perro" ["Nothing, a dog ran in front of the car"], Vero responds. Vero's cousin, Juan Manuel, then makes a comment about the sound that the accident must have caused, linking it to the cause of Vero's later (and, in his and her husband's eyes, delusional) declaration that she killed someone in the accident: "Habrà sido un ruido espantoso" ["It must have been a dreadful noise"]. The concern of the family is limited to reinstating a sense of normalcy by erasing any trace of the collision. In this sense, the episode depicting Vero's breakdown in the public restroom stands out in contrast with the ways that the family deals with her "situation" as something to be remedied so as not to reflect negatively on them or occasion any undesirable consequences, and her need for a different kind of help that they cannot provide her. In effect, the affective exchange marks a transformation in Vero's perception that results in her recognition of the mechanisms underlying these social relations.

In the opening sequence of the film, the scenes depicting Vero among a group of women as they prepare to leave a social gathering discuss the upcoming inauguration of a swimming pool. Before long, the conversation about the pool raises concerns about its proximity to a veterinary clinic and the possible implications of this location. The anxiety responds to a rumor that someone lets the potentially disease-carrying turtles loose in the pool, contaminating the

water and putting the patrons at risk of infection: “Es una inmundicia lo de las tortugas.” [“The turtle thing is disgusting”], says one of the women who then asks, “¿Qué enfermedades contagian las tortugas?” [“What diseases do they transmit?”]. “No es cierto. El cloro las hubiera matado ya. Si el cloro mata las plantas. Mirá si no va a matar una tortuga por más acuática que sea,” [“That’s not true. The chlorine would have killed them already. Chlorine even kills plants. It’ll kill them even if they are water turtles”], Josefina assures them. Later, at the inauguration of the pool, Josefina confirms her earlier assertion when she declares that “el agua es impecable” [“the water is impeccable”]. The alternation between this scene and those depicting the boys running in the empty drainage ditch registers the spatial division between the two social groups and, at the same time, foreshadows the violent clash that will shatter the illusion of this division between them for Vero.

As this conversation implies, the issue of cleanliness in Martel’s films points to the indistinctness of human/animal, human/waste in the boy who was killed. The man who approaches the car when Josefina stops tells her that it may be a person or an animal, and the drainage ditch is used to channel waste away from “el centro.” In a more general sense, cleanliness as a trope serves to negate the distinction between purity and impurity or to undermine the notion of stable boundaries between bodies, social classes, and private and public spaces, etc. Likewise, the recurrence of water as a trope throughout *La mujer sin cabeza* works to destabilize the polarization of such terms as pure and impure, cleanliness and filth, and, perhaps most prominently, the healthy and diseased body.

In an analysis of *La ciénaga* Ana Amado cites children’s capacity to disrupt domestic repose and disorder the present:

Hay un estado de la experiencia en su relación con el mundo y las cosas, colocada entre la potencia táctil y olfativa de los chicos – que deviene una manera de sobrevivir – diferente a la de la existencia embotada de los adultos. Allí donde éstos establecen un corte radical con el entorno (con los hijos, la familia, los amigos, los objetos), los niños reponen una relación con el mundo, con el afuera, con los semejantes, con el otro. (54)

[There is a state of experience in its relation to the world and things, situated between the tactile and olfactory potential of children—which becomes a way to survive—different that that of the muddled existence of adults. Where these establish a radical cut with their surroundings (with children, family, friends, and objects), children recover a relation with the world, with the outside, with others, with the other.]

Such is the case when a small child disrupts the perceived directional flow of social contamination. The issue of “pollution” through which Josefina’s channels her anxieties about the social order is set in reverse when, for example, Candita sets down a glass of drinking water and, almost immediately thereafter a small child, the son of one of Lala’s house takes a drink from the same glass. Though the film does not address the potential transmission of Candita’s illness beyond this suggestion, the implication behind this gestural detail is that by drinking from the same water as Candita, the young child is exposed to the contagious illness, even a contagious sexuality.

In addition to Vero, there are at least two other “headless women” in the film that challenge the notion of bodily autonomy: Vero’s niece Candita and her aunt Lala. One of the first times that Candita appears on screen, she is shot in a horizontal position and her head is



covered by Vero's body. Lala's headless condition is pathological: she suffers from dementia, which impairs memory and other functions of the brain, often language. As with the other two headless women, Lala's name is embedded with cultural expectations imposed on her by the previous generation, i.e. her parents. For all three of these women, illness impacts the head, standing in for the cultural and social conditions inscribed on the body. The names of the female characters correspond to their roles and interactions in the film: Vero's name is etymologically tied to the image and truth (*vera icon*, or *imagen verdadera*); Lala, short for Eulalia, means well-spoken; Candita means innocent, free of disguise, open and sincere, and; Josefina, the feminine form of the name Joseph, means "Jehova increases," signaling Josefina's role in reproducing the masculine, patriarchal order.

Relative to the issue of transmission, the indeterminate origin of the "disease" is important. Candita has hepatitis, which affects the tone of her skin (i.e. there is also the fear that race is contagious, which is compounded by the implied sexual relationship between the two girls), an infection that can be either sexually transmitted or transmitted through ingestion of contaminated water, food, "the fecal-oral route." The indeterminacy of the source of infection is important because it makes visible (or audible, rather) the way that class and social distinctions are inscribed on the non-normative or "diseased" body through the containment of the subject within the home and how the fear of infection is made manifest in the fear of social contagion.

Candita's mother, Josefina, says, "Llegaron las ladies . . . que no entren a la casa esta. ¡Que no entren! Dentro de la casa, no" [The ladies are here . . . do not let them in this house. Do not let them in here! Not in the house]. The imposition of boundaries in the material construction of the house as a symbolic social space or space of socialization, is extended to the car as well. In this case, however, the material boundary of the car is transparent, thus allowing visual

perception of the outside from within and vice versa. The framing in the scenes in which Candita is traveling with Vero and her mother in the car while her friend is traveling beside them on a motorcycle is important for a couple of reasons. The car and the motorcycle in synchronized movement establish a distinction between the closed, controlled space of the car's interior and the open, exposed or exterior quality of the motorcycle.

Candita is effectively quarantined to the overdetermined space of her bedroom and to the car. It is the mother, in both cases, who attempts to impose the spatial restrictions on her daughter. Nevertheless, the daughter's confinement doesn't work. There is one scene when Vero is at Josefina's house and she goes to visit Candita in her room, since she is forbidden from leaving it. Candita confronts Vero about her lack of response to a love letter she had sent her. "¿Yo te gusto? ... Las cartas de amor se contestan o se devuelven" ["Do you like me? ... Love letters should be answered or returned."] The attempt to confine the diseased body to specific spaces, her bedroom and the car, and to limit the access to the home of bodies she considers aberrations or threatening reflects the anxieties of Josefina. At one point, Josefina complains about Candita's friends, saying "No sé de dónde saca esta gente. Todo el día machoneando con la moto. Hay días que no las aguanto" ["I don't know where she finds these people. Butching it up all day on the motorcycle. There are days I can't stand them"]. The supposed sexual deviance of the "ladies," together with their belonging to a lower social class, establishes them as a site onto which the ideological and social conflicts are projected. Their status as outsiders of a lower class is compounded by the "ladies'" supposed sexual deviance and, as such, poses a threat to the normative identity of the middle class family. Josefina's affective aversion toward her daughter's circle of friends reflects her position within the regulatory networks of power and, by extension, mirrors the social anxieties in circulation among the Argentine middle class.

Candita's confrontation of Vero for her refusal to acknowledge or answer the letter can be read as a double transgression of the regulatory mechanisms that control, sublimate, or repress desire. With the exception of the parents' room, the space of the bedroom is significant because it is supposed to be a non-sexual space within the house:

Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the rule. The legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law. The couple imposed itself as model, enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy. A single locus of sexuality was acknowledged in social space as well as at the heart of every household, but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents' bedroom. The rest had only to remain vague; proper demeanor avoided contact with other bodies, and verbal decency sanitized one's speech. (Foucault, *History of sexuality*, 3)

The vocalization of Candita's sexual desire for her aunt stands in contrast to the silencing of the incestuous desire between Vero and her cousin, Juan Manuel, the night of the accident. The night of the accident, Vero has an incestuous affair with her cousin Juan Manuel. The missing registration record, presumably carried out by Vero's cousin, is not explained as the erasure of a potentially incriminating trace of the accident, but as the threat of scandal that the discovery of the incestuous affair would occasion.

Insofar as the elimination of the hotel record is intended to suppress the threat of potentially destabilizing knowledge, it fulfills the same function as the cover up of the accident that the husband and the brother orchestrate. This connection is established when Vero's

husband, Miguel, asks Juan Manuel to come over to the house. When he arrives, Juan Manuel greets him saying, “tenemos una situación” [“we have a situation”]. The cousin is visibly nervous. When the husband comes back, the cousin starts a confession: “Mirá, Marcos, vos sabés lo que yo quise siempre a la Vero, lo que siempre la hemos querido todos los primos. Hemos sido muy unidos” [“Look, Marcos, you know how much I’ve loved Vero, how much all of us cousins have loved her. We’ve always been very close”]. The husband cuts him off without registering the tone of the worried cousin. Juan Manuel misreads the “problem” and begins to confess the affair to Vero’s husband, but he is cut off before he reveals too much. Vero being cut off in this same scene has to do with her inability to express desire or the obstacles that prevent her from doing so. In this sense, it is Candita who vocalizes what the other family members either ignore or actively negate when she asks to accompany Vero to the nursery, saying, “Quiero ver donde encontraron al chico que mataron” [“I want to see where they found the boy they killed”], to which Vero responds: “Se ahogó. El diario dice que se ahogó” [“He drowned. The paper says he drowned”]. This response incites the viewer to interpret, in retrospect, Vero’s reaction to something she reads in the paper after the gardener informs her of something, a fountain or a pool, he supposes, buried in the backyard.

Both Kristeva and Butler enter into dialogue with the ethnographic work of Mary Douglas in *Danger and Purity* regarding the material and cultural constitution of the body and its limits. Judith Butler draws from Douglas’s view of the body as a site of inscription through which social prohibitions are maintained in her understanding of the “boundaries of the body as the limits of the socially *hegemonic*” (179). The indeterminate origin and mode of transmission of hepatitis, Candita’s affliction, suggests both the anxieties regarding the “polluted status” of the lesbian community and the social class of her companions. It is in this sense telling that

Josefina's anxieties regarding the sexual identity of Candita's friend blinds her to the same traits in her own daughter. As Josefina tells Vero of a conversation that she had with Cuca's father, she explains that she did not continue a particular line of inquiry with him as a measure of delicacy, since he has enough on his plate with his daughter being "machona." Meanwhile, Candita is in the backseat exchanging flirtatious glances with Cuca who is riding her motorcycle alongside the car.

Josefina from off screen while there is no movement inside the frame, which shows the staircase, the bedroom door, and the front door, both of which are slightly open: "Está insufrible la pobre tía. ¿Por qué será que ha faltado tanto la cordura en nuestra familia? Decime de uno que haya muerto en sus cabales. Ninguno." ["Poor aunty is insufferable. Why is it that everyone goes insane in our family? Tell me of one who has died of sound mind. Not one of them."] The framing of the shot, Vero's confused look as she listens to the voices originating off screen and out of her line of sight, and the presumed interlocutor, Vero's niece, Candita, makes it uncertain whether Josefina is talking about Vero or the aunt (Lala) who has yet to appear on-screen. The ambiguous referent in this comment serves to establish a parallel between Vero and Lala who, as we learn in a subsequent sequence, suffers from dementia. While this comment initially suggests that Josefina and others share the spectator's awareness of Vero's altered condition, the later scene causes the viewer to reinterpret the subject of the comment, "la pobre tía" as Lala, thus giving the impression that Josefina is oblivious of any change in Vero. This link is reinforced by Lala's observation of a change in Vero's voice. "Esa voz no parece tuya," ["That voice doesn't sound like yours"] Lala tells her as they watch Vero's wedding video. She makes a similar comment when, during a later visit, she wakes up with Vero in the room. "¿Quién es?," ["Who is it?"] she asks, to which Vero responds "Soy yo, Lala," ["It's me, Lala"] and she says "Qué voz

rara” [“What a strange voice?”] and asks who she is again.

Josefina’s comment also defines Lala’s dementia as a genetic or inherited disorder, which, in contrast with Candita’s hepatitis, establishes a sense of enclosure (Lala is literally closed up in her bedroom and the disease originates and circulates within the family). This contrast with the communicable type of disease that infects Candita comes into sharp focus when, tellingly, during a visit to Lala’s house, Candita takes a drink of water and sets the glass down on the kitchen counter. After she walks away, a young boy, the son of one of Lala’s housekeepers, enters the frame and takes a sip of water from the same glass. The fear of contamination from the outside, in this case, is nullified in the suggestion that Candita has transmitted the disease to a young child of a lower social class.

### 4.3 THE RETURN OF HISTORY

In *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema*, Joanna Page disputes the classification of contemporary Argentine cinema as apolitical. Rather than an avoidance of the political, she argues, “this retreat into private spaces does not primarily reflect a shying away from politics but is symptomatic of certain shifts *within* politics that demand a revision of the critical categories we use when discussing political cinema” (182). In reference to Martel’s work in particular, Page proposes:

While her films perform a retreat into bourgeois domestic spheres, ... they do so in order to explore the boundaries between the public and the private and to suggest new ways of understanding the political significance of contemporary Argentine films, often erroneously labeled apolitical in their eschewal of explicit

representations of class conflict or their refusal to organize their narratives around an identifiable program for social or economic change. (181)

While a number of critics, such as Aguilar and Andermann, make a similar argument to Page's regarding the political significance of the "retreat into bourgeois domestic spheres" in *La ciénega* and *La niña santa*, there is a tendency to overlook the significance of interior spaces in the critical work on *La mujer sin cabeza*. Andermann's previously cited analysis of these three films provides a case in point. In contrast to *La ciénega*, for example, he argues,

change appears to come about as a result of Vero's accident, putting her into a state of fragility and confusion that seems to incubate a new self-awareness. But in the end ... Vero is more than happy to accept and connive in the little cover-ups and precautions taken by her family to ensure there will be no consequences. The only change that does eventually occur in *La mujer sin cabeza*, definitely sealing off the possibility of a less epidemic transformation, is that of Vero's hair color. (160)

Though I do agree with Andermann's assertion that Vero ends up with "a new self-awareness," it seems to emerge as a result of the second accident when she sees the boy who has fallen against the fence during the soccer match rather than the accident in the opening sequence, so his claim that she is "more than happy to accept and connive" in the cover-ups so as to avoid facing any repercussions for her actions is debatable. She says repeatedly that she killed someone and she does not accept the explanation that her husband and cousin give that "se pegó un susto" or that the accident was somehow the result of the storm that weekend. It is undeniable that *La mujer sin cabeza* does not present the possibility of a radical transformation of the social or class structure that it portrays. Nevertheless, the transformation in perception that Vero undergoes extends

beyond just the change of her hair color to the viewer.

Unwilling to passively accept the narrative about the accident that her husband and cousin construct on her behalf, Vero sets out to investigate the incident in search of evidence that would either confirm or disprove her suspicions. When she returns to the hospital to retrieve a record of the x-rays that she took after the incident, she learns that her brother, a physician who works at the hospital, had removed them, even though Vero left the hospital that night before completing the registration forms. In the closing scene of the film, when Vero returns to the hotel where she stayed after leaving the hospital, the hotel clerk tells her that there is no record of any occupancy in that room on the night in question.

In the scene that follows Vero's emotional breakdown in the restroom described in the previous section, Vero tells her husband, that she killed someone on the highway: "Maté a alguien en la ruta. . . . Me parece que atropellé a alguien en la ruta" ["I killed someone on the highway. . . . I think I ran over someone on the highway"]. The husband then drives her to the scene of the accident to check for any trace of the accident that would confirm or disprove her assertion. It is already dark and they do not stop or get out of the car, but the husband reassures her that, as Vero herself repeated several times after the accident, she had run over a dog only. The darkness of night and the limited range of visibility that the car headlights provide the two from their position within the car renders suspicious the certainty with which the husband insists that Vero is mistaken in her confession.

This apprehension is further compounded by the conspicuous secrecy with which Vero's husband and cousin collude to resolve the matter. Despite the husband's repeated assurances that she had not killed a person, he invites Vero's cousin Juan Manuel to their house to explain the situation. He tells him that Vero had an accident on the road and that "se pegó un susto." Vero



interrupts them to tell the cousin, “maté a alguien en la ruta,” adding “No me quise bajar. No me bajé” [“I did not want to get out of the car. I didn’t get out”]. The husband then interjects to deny that she killed someone. He tells the cousin that it was the night of the storm, suggesting either that she did not have complete control over the car because of the weather conditions or that the falling rain impaired her vision. Vero again interrupts to clarify that it had not started to rain until after the collision. Then the cousin reiterates the husband’s insistence that she did not kill anyone on the road because, “Si hubiera pasado algo yo me habría enterado. Nos tienen que informar la policía” [“If something had happened I would have found out. The police would let us know”]. Vero’s memory of the accident is clear but the attempts to disqualify her memory become apparent with the husband’s insistence that she is mistaken in her recollections. Vero’s declaration of guilt, then, is not that she killed someone but that she refused to verify the situation. The statement “No me quise bajar. No me bajé.” could refer equally to her refusal to leave the car at the scene of the accident during the day immediately after the incident and when her husband takes her back to the scene at night several days later.

When the servant brings them the coffee the husband had requested, he instructs her to close the door. He then gives the cousin the telephone and they go to the sofa, moving to the background of the image while Vero remains in the front to the right of the frame with a look of consternation on her face. This is one of the few instances in which Vero is facing the camera. As the cousin dials the number of a friend, to ask for the number of another acquaintance, the two men begin speaking in hushed tones. The camera pans over to Vero removing the men from the frame. The look on Vero’s face, combined with the voices now coming from out of the frame and the implied presence of another voice that remains inaccessible to both Vero and the spectator, that of the person on the other end of the line, give the sense that something is wrong

or that something is not as it seems.

Vero's unsuccessful search for clues that would allow her to piece together the events surrounding the accident and her failure to realize any heroic (i.e. morally redeemable) act of reconciliation may cause discomfort because it incites spectatorial identification. In other words, the spectator (or critic) identifies with Vero's impotence in this situation and perhaps gains a sense of the futility or impossibility of this type of intervention. What are her options here? She could turn herself in but her confession to the "authorities" would most likely be met with the same reaction as her confession to her husband and cousin. She would either be dismissed as a hysteric or shielded by her family's connections (to the police and/or key political figures). Even if she were to face prosecution and serve a sentence for the crime, what would that achieve? It forces the viewer to ask what he or she would do in the same situation. It may be that this sense of disillusionment prevents recognition of the transformative potential that the reconfiguration of perception offers.

The film constructs the traumatic encounter of the two social worlds around Vero's successive returns to the places she went the night of the accident. This movement is initially framed as Vero's attempt to recover the loss caused by the traumatic event. The inability to rectify the situation speaks to the impossibility of achieving justice for the death of the child. There is no course of action that would return the boy's lost life to him or erase the impact of this loss on his family (there are a few references to the boy's family, and Vero sees the mother when she drives Cuca home to the shantytown). On another level, this inability to reconcile her role in causing the boy's death, despite several attempts to appease her guilt through symbolic gestures (the search for evidence, and the offerings of food and clothing, to the young boy who comes to her house looking for odd jobs to do, for example) indicates a transformation in subjectivity

through the denaturalization of her perception of the world around her.

The scene with the man in the bathroom is a key example of how the shift of emphasis from a monetary to an affective logic of exchange constitutes, in part, the ethical imperative of the film. Vero's perceptive transformation comes a heightened awareness of the inherent inequality of the logic of exchange that inheres in and forms the basis of social relationships. Prior to this encounter, the use of shallow focus marks a clear division between social classes. While Vero and the other members of her social class are most often shown in focus positioned in the foreground of the image, the individual members of the household staff populate the background as indistinct shadowy figures in shallow focus. After this transformative encounter with her social and racial other, however, these figures begin to come into focus.

This scene stands out in contrast to another scene that takes place, shortly after the accident earlier in the film. From inside the bedroom on the second floor of the house, Vero looks out the window through half-closed blinds at the gardener working below as her husband talks with their daughter on the phone from the bed. Insofar as this later scene shows Vero stopping to watch the gardener through the window from inside, this later scene initially seems to reproduce or repeat the earlier one. Nevertheless, the subtle differences in Vero's position and movement indicate a shift in perspective. In this case, Vero first sees the gardener from the window of a common area on the lower level of the house and she is alone. The distance imposed by the position of the bedroom window is reduced in this case and there are no blinds to fragment the window frame in this later scene. Nevertheless, the frame of the window itself still emphasizes and contrasts the closed space of the house with the relatively open space outside the window (the garden is still enclosed by the exterior walls of the house on one side and by high privacy walls on the other three). Rather than turn her attention back to the interior of the house,

as was the case in the earlier scene, Vero pauses only briefly at the window before joining the gardener in the garden outside.

Another example of this is the comment that Lala makes when Josefina and Vero are watching the wedding video with her on her birthday. When she stops the video and rewinds it and, at some point she says: “Al que no veo es Monseñor Pérez” [“The only one I don’t see is Monseñor Pérez.”] When Josefina tells her that she already passed him in the video, Lala responds: “Mejor.” The reference here is to Monsignor Carlos Mariano Pérez Eslava, the archbishop who officiated in Salta during the dictatorship (1963-1985). Martel recalls in interviews that Monsignor Pérez is remembered in Salta for his adoption of the military epithet “las locas” for the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo during the dictatorship (“La mala memoria”). He is quoted as proclaiming to the press that “hay que erradicar a las Madres de Plaza de Mayo y a los organismos de derechos humanos que pertenecen a una organización internacional, lo mismo hay que terminar con la exhumación de cadáveres N.N. que es una infamia para la sociedad” and voiced his opposition to the prosecution of military leaders in the aftermath of the dictatorship (quoted in Mignone, 116) [“[W]e must eradicate the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and the human rights organisms that belong to an international organization; likewise, we must put an end to the exhumation of unidentified bodies, which is an infamy for society”]. The acknowledgement of his presence at the wedding and Lala’s preference to not see him in the video is important for the issue of what people do to make things disappear or go away.

This comment [“al que no veo es Monseñor Pérez. . . . Mejor”] resonates with another that Lala makes in a later scene that follows Vero’s emotional encounter in the restroom of the athletic club. When Vero visits Lala, she finds her in the throws of a delirious episode. She hears the noises of people walking around, but believes them to be ghosts. This perception is reflected

in the visual plane of the film by the use of shallow focus, which shows the characters in the background of the shot, especially the servants, as blurred figures with indistinguishable form and personal characteristics. As Vero turns to acknowledge one of the figures standing at the door, Lala says, “No los mires y se van. ... Yo hubiera preferido la modernidad. Aquí te movés y todo cruje” [“Don’t move and they’ll go away. ... I would have preferred the modern. Here you move and everything creaks”]. But this mandate does not reflect Vero’s experience following the accident. As she tells her cousin, “No me quise bajar. No me bajé.” The ambiguity of the accident and the uncertainty that marks the tone of the entire film stems from this refusal to look at the outcome of the accident. In Vero’s case, they do not go away as Lala had promised but begin to appear everywhere after her declaration of guilt. The shot out of the rear window showing the corpse of the dog in the middle of the road as Vero drives away from the scene of the accident illustrates her adherence to this social code. Rather than framing the scene of the accident through the rearview mirror to replicate Vero’s perspective, the scene of the accident is shot through the rear window from inside the car. This gives the viewer the illusion of a privileged perspective by giving him or her visual access to that which Vero refuses to see. The sense of certainty that this image may evoke, however, is undermined by the material barrier that the glass of the rear window, the presence of which is indicated by a portion of the windshield wiper and a portion of text printed on the glass at the bottom of the frame. In other words, the image of the dog neither confirms nor disproves Vero’s guilt in the death of the young boy seen with the dog in the opening sequence and, presumably, found dead in the drainage ditch later in the film.

This scene is also important because it shows shots of the video straight ahead playing at normal speed, and at angles being fast-forwarded or rewound. When the video plays at regular

speed, it shows Vero walking down the aisle but the light coming in from the cathedral window behind her makes it so that you cannot distinguish her face. You can only see a blurry outline of the head and everything else is black except the dress. The visual implication here is that Vero's "headless" condition predates the accident. The context of this image in the video frames a critique of the traditional family as a religious and social institutional. Vero's headless condition in the video is associated with the ritual in which the father gives the daughter to the husband in symbolic transference of property. The suggestion that she is figuratively decapitated is compounded by Lala's comments regarding her appearance. Lala comments that she had a great figure, skinny arms. "Una muñequita" ["a doll"] she says. Later, she says something like "Para qué arruinarte!" ["Why go and ruin yourself!"].

This scene also stages an encounter between Vero and her past self by positioning the camera immediately behind Vero pointed over her shoulder such that the faceless figure on the screen confronts the headless viewer with an image of her past self. Insofar as Vero's gaze is fixed on an image of herself, this scene stands out as a variation on the recurrence of mirrors. In each of these cases, Vero is facing the mirror, but her gaze is directed elsewhere. In this instance, by contrast, the position of the camera directly behind Vero pointing over her shoulder, reproduces Vero's perspective. Though, strictly speaking, this is not a point of view shot, it does mimic the Vero's perception of her past self from the disembodied perspective from which she views her surroundings following the accident in the opening sequence. The figure that approaches her unsettles any notion of a clear distinction between the living and the dead, and the past and present not as a result of the constant presence of images of the past that the medium entails, but because of the figure's resemblance to a ghost or one of the silhouettes that represent the disappeared the de-individuated figures that "haunt" the public spaces around former torture

centers.

Lala's commentary regarding the conspicuous absence of Monseñor Pérez and the uncanny presence of another figure later in the video reinforces this indistinction between past and present that gives the scene a spectral quality. Near the end of the scene, she sees in the video someone, a relative or family friend, who Lala is convinced had died prior to the wedding. Visibly distressed, Lala uses the remote control to rewind the video so as to confirm the presence of this person in the video. Lala does not see those who are present in the video and does see those who are not. Despite the illusion of mastery over memory that the manipulation of the video playback suggests, the return of the repressed history presents a constant threat to the temporal integrity of the present as closed off from the history.

## 5.0 COLLECTIVE INACTION AND OPPRESSIVE FEELINGS IN EUGENIA ALMEIDA'S *EL COLECTIVO*

Eugenia Almeida (1972-) is a journalist and author of prose and poetry, and has taught communications, literature, and discursive strategies. Since 2001, she has participated in the Grupo de Investigación sobre el Humor Research Group on Humor (GIH). In 1997, she is recognized as one of the winners of “Concurso literario de poesía para autores inéditos” (“Literary contest in poetry for unpublished authors”) organized by the Department of Letters and Theater of Córdoba’s Ministry of Culture. In addition to *El colectivo*, Almeida has also published the novel *La pieza del fondo* (*The Room at the Back*, 2010), which was among the 12 finalists of the Premio Internacional de Novela Rómulo Gallegos 2011 (The 2011 Rómulo Gallegos International Prize for a Novel), the forthcoming novel *Cuerdas*, and contributions to the anthologies *25 ciudades. Las mejores lecturas de verano de la Voz del Interior* (2007), *Dora narra* (2010), a compilation of young women authors from Córdoba, and *Autopista* (2010), which unites a series of short stories by authors from Córdoba and Rosario. In 2005, the Salón del Libro Iberoamericano de Gijón (Spain) awarded *El colectivo*, Almeida’s first novel, the Premio Internacional de Novela “Dos Orillas,” (The “Two Shores” International Prize for the Novel) which led to the book’s publication in Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, and Greece before it was considered for publication in Argentina by Edhasa in 2009. El Premio Las Dos Orillas is a biannual literary competition that, according to its mission statement, aims to “reparar las



injusticias cometidas con muchos escritores [...] que [...] por incomprensibles políticas editoriales, se ven condenados a no traspasar las fronteras nacionales, no obstante el valor de sus obras, y el aprecio y popularidad con que puedan contar en sus respectivos países” (<http://www.eldigoras.com/premios/premios0924.html>). Despite the recognition that *El colectivo* has garnered in literary competitions, it has been almost completely ignored by cultural critics in Argentina.

*El colectivo*, Almeida’s first novel, reveals the tensions underlying everyday interactions that come to the surface when a seemingly minor occurrence disrupts the tranquility of a small town in the interior province of Córdoba: the only bus that stops in the town passes by without opening the door and continues to do so for several nights. Among the few individuals directly affected by the discontinuation of the bus service are Victoria, the town lawyer’s sister, and two strangers staying at the hotel. After the first couple of nights, rumors begin to circulate about the two strangers. Fueled in part by fragmented information from radio broadcasts, informal speculations about their origins and the nature of their relationship enter into circulation among the townspeople and quickly evolve to include theories about the travelers’ connection to the bus incident. One night, after the radio announces the search for two subversives, everyone starts to think that the two strangers who, desperate to escape their virtual confinement, leave town on foot are the same fugitives indicated in the radio broadcast. The allegations of subversive activity by the couple is seemingly corroborated by an article in the local paper that features an image of the couple’s slain bodies inside a train car.

The title of *El colectivo* calls attention to the process of defamiliarization of an otherwise familiar term that takes place in the novel. In Argentina and in other countries of the Southern Cone, “el colectivo,” a shortened version of “transporte colectivo,” or (“collective

transportation”) is a common term for the bus. The use of the term *colectivo*, however, is usually limited to a local form of public transportation that services the neighborhoods of a given city. Strictly speaking, the mode of transportation described in the novel would be more accurately called a “micro” since it covers the route between Córdoba and Buenos Aires. Considering the author’s undoubted familiarity with this distinction, the use of the term *colectivo* in the title and throughout the novel does not seem inconsequential. Given the inaccessibility of the bus to the townspeople resulting from the military’s restrictions on the transportation company’s normal route, however, the term “el colectivo” also alludes to the mechanisms of repression at work on the collective level. This defamiliarization thus displaces the reader’s attention from the unusual incident itself to the character’s use of everyday language and other non-verbal forms of communication to affect the perception of the event.

Almeida, like the other authors whose works I include in this corpus, experienced the dictatorship as a young child. By many accounts, she is not included in the “post-dictatorship generation,” insofar as this term characterizes the group of artists, authors, and filmmakers whose parents were disappeared during the dictatorship. Nevertheless, *El colectivo* evinces an essential concern with the experience of this period that moves beyond this biological definition of this generation. In an interview with Silvina Freira, Almeida reflects on the extent to which her own experience influenced in her treatment of the dictatorship in the novel:

[E]s una época que me ha marcado. Yo tenía cinco años y vi cómo secuestraban a un hombre en pleno centro de Córdoba. Tengo el recuerdo de ese clima tan silencioso, un silencio que se sentía, no el silencio que pasa desapercibido, sino el que uno sabe que están construyendo los adultos. Y no había qué preguntar. (“El lenguaje nos da una falsa serenidad”)

[It is an era that has left its mark on me. I was five years old and I saw them kidnap a man right there in downtown Córdoba. I still remember the climate of intense silence; it was a silence that you could feel, not the kind that goes unnoticed, but the kind that you know the adults are constructing. And there was nothing to ask.]

*El colectivo* reproduces the intensity of this climate by setting silence in tension with the excesses of language and noise. The construction of silence, presented as an inextricable component of the narrative structure throughout the novel, sheds light on how language and informs personal and collective experience during the dictatorship and the construction of collective memory during the post-dictatorship.

The inexplicable refusal of the bus driver to pick up passengers from the town anticipates an enigma that urges the reader to solve from the outset of the novel. Nevertheless, the way that the reader accesses information regarding the circumstances surrounding this mystery shifts the focus of the narrative from the search for the reasons behind this occurrence to the narration itself. Though the reader has access to the eyewitness testimony of the “confrontation” between the alleged subversives and the military that contradicts the official narrative reported on the radio and in the newspaper, none of the characters except the commissioner has access to this account. The commissioner’s silencing of this account is attributed to the dictum “El silencio es salud” [“Silence is health”] (121) or, as he tells the eyewitness, Murúa: “En mi trabajo hay que ser discretos” (143) [“In my line of work you have to be discreet”]. Nevertheless, the silence of the truth only generates more speculation regarding the circumstances leading to the assassination. The eyewitness account does nothing to clarify the situation. On the contrary, it only adds to the confusion. The problem, then, becomes the act of narration itself.

Though the novel provides a clear explanation for the bus driver's refusal to stop—the military ordered the transportation company to stop exclusively in the larger cities to facilitate the control of passengers—the nature of the rumors and conjectures that begin to circulate regarding the underlying motives and circumstances surrounding the discontinuation of the bus route in the town pose a more complex series of problems at the level of the narration. The title implies that the bus incident will be the mystery to solve in the novel (and in part it is), but how the characters interact and what that reveals about the subjective composition of certain characters (especially that of Ponce and Marta, but also of a number of ancillary characters) and the social structure of the town. Even though the narration clears up some of the factual details for the reader (the military ordered the discontinuation as part of a systematic control of the area; the discontinuation of the route is tied to the blockade of the train tracks; the young couple from out of town is killed just outside of town; they were the object of the military's search), the assumptions voiced by the characters or the metadiegetic narrative that takes shape through the dialogue becomes one of the focal points of the novel.

In this sense, the title of *El colectivo* also alludes to the processes by which collective memory takes shape. The speculation about the pair of young outsiders whose image appears as visual evidence of the account published in the newspaper contributes to the crystallization of the official account of their death as the military's defeat of dangerous subversion. The conflicting accounts of this incident, accessible to the reader and only select characters in the novel, set collective memory in tension with individual memory and experience. After hearing an eyewitness account of the assassination that contradicts the narrative constructed by the military officials, the police commissioner advises the witness against communicating what he has seen to anyone else. The commissioner's repetition of the then common euphemism "el silencio es

salud” (“silence is health”) points to the pervasiveness of State terror in and through language. The silencing of this version of events lends coherence to the official narrative and, in the process, points to the voids in collective memory and national history. At the same time, rather than clarify the true story of the assassination, the eyewitness account further confuses both the reader and the commissioner, the only other character who learns of this version of events. While the witness’s report establishes the constructed nature of the official narrative published in the paper, the sequence of events that he describes defies any attempt to define a motive for the murder. In this sense, silence is more than an effect of State terror; it also reflects the inadequacy of language as a means to represent or make sense of reality.

According to Almeida, the uncritical perception is one vestige of the dictatorship that remains even today. She identifies this effect in her secondary students as:

La imposibilidad de pensar *colectivamente*. Aún con buenas intenciones, no surge *un pensamiento colectivo*, que es más difícil, pero más rico y apasionante.

También la dificultad para escuchar, cualquiera sea el que hable. La dificultad de comprender la ambigüedad. . . . [L]os chicos se resisten a poner en cuestión cosas, tienen una mentalidad de que ‘esto es así’ y no se piensa. Entonces la única convicción que puedo intentar transmitirles es que las cosas no siempre son lo que parecen, que el mundo es más complejo, que *percibimos lo que esperamos ver* y hay que tener cuidado con eso. (“Los efectos de la dictadura,” emphasis added)

[The impossibility of thinking *collectively*. Even with the best of intentions, *collective thought*, which is more difficult but richer and more passionate, does not emerge. It is also difficult to listen, no matter who is speaking. The difficulty in comprehending ambiguity. (...) [T]he kids resist questioning things; they have

the mentality that ‘that’s the way it is’ without thinking it over. So the only conviction that I can try to transmit to them is that things are not always what they seem, that the world is more complex, that *we perceive what we expect to see* and you have to watch out for that.]

*El colectivo* gives shape to this fundamental preoccupation by highlighting how the characters’ perception contributes to the distortion of reality, challenging the reader’s critical faculties in the process. In effect, the action of the novel becomes secondary to the process by which the townspeople piece together fragments of information from both formal and informal communications media (the radio and networks of gossip, respectively) in the construction of narratives to explain the disturbance of the routine happenings of the town. The shift of focus from the narrative itself to the process of the narrative’s construction highlights how the characters’ perception contributes to the distortion of reality.

Finally, the term “collective” also evokes the context of the armed struggle of the 1960s and 1970s. The term is reactivated in cultural discourse during the period of transition from authoritarian to democratic rule in Argentina and in other post-dictatorship countries throughout Latin America, where the political and cultural agenda is centered on the recuperation of collective experience and the active construction of collective memory. Nevertheless, as Almeida points out in her above cited comments regarding her student's difficulties in viewing the present through a collective lens, the primacy of individual experience in shaping perceptions of historical experience presents an obstacle to the reformulation and application of collective memory in the present.

## 5.1 DEFAMILIARIZATION AND INTERPELLATION

The defamiliarization of the common term for bus in the title extends to the novel's appropriation of recognizable elements from other narrative modes and the manipulation of their generic codes. The sentimental novel and the *novela negra* are two such forms that give way to a process of formal and contextual expectations for the reader. The subsequent deviation from these forms leaves these expectations unmet, thus denaturing the reader's perception of the text in retrospect. Admittedly, we would be hard pressed to classify *El colectivo* as either a work of sentimental literature or an example of the *novela negra*; some of the most recognizable formal elements of these genres are conspicuously absent in this text. In this case, I would argue, it is precisely the absence of these characteristics that gives meaning to the identification of other elements common to these forms. The process of interpretation, in this sense, draws on the reader's expectations that the recognition of these conventions will activate and ultimately discourage. In the process, the novel calls attention to the reader's interaction with the text as a dynamic of both reception and production. In reframing recognizable elements of these genres, the novel activates the reader's expectations and calls attention to the reader's interaction with the text.

This discussion of *El colectivo* within the parameters of the *novela negra* may seem somewhat tenuous, especially considering the absence of many of this form's most essential elements at the level of both theme and structure. There is a murder, for instance, but its status as a crime is obviated in the diegetic frame of the novel and its late appearance in the novel precludes the characteristic sequence of events that unfolds in a work of crime fiction. Moreover, the circumstances that advance the story annul the function of the detective in the crime novel. The representatives of legal authority in the novel, the local police commissioner, the military

officers, and Ponce, the town lawyer, preclude any formal investigation of the crime. The commissioner silences any interrogation of the crime and any conflicting accounts of the official narrative, while the military's perpetration of the crime blurs the boundaries between crime and legality. For Ponce, the suspension of normalcy in the town undermines his status as a legal authority, activating a sense of estrangement that results in his retreat from public activity.

In *Looking Awry*, Žižek describes the function of the detective charged with solving a crime as an essentially narrative operation. According to Žižek's formulation, the murder stands in for the real; insofar as it ruptures the "normal" chain of causality, it resists integration into symbolic reality. The detective is charged with the task of restoring the symbolic order by re-establishing the link between cause and effect that is effaced by the irruption of the real that the murder brings about:

This radical opening, this dissolution of symbolic reality, entails the transformation of the lawlike succession of events into a kind of "lawless sequence" and therefore bears witness to an encounter with the "impossible" real, resisting symbolization. Suddenly, "everything is possible," including the impossible. The detective's role is precisely (. . .) to resymbolize the traumatic shock, to integrate it into symbolic reality. The very presence of the detective guarantees in advance the transformation of the lawless sequence into a lawful sequence; in other words, the reestablishment of "normality." (58)

According to this formulation, the story comes to an end only when the detective is able to articulate his interpretation of the clues in the form of a linear narrative. If, as Žižek suggests, the effect of this function is the neutralization of the traumatic shock induced by the murder, then the



conspicuous absence of the detective figure in *El colectivo* signals or foreshadows the reactivation of this shock.

The centrality of the legal profession in the novel is highlighted in both the main character, Ponce, and in Marta's father, who is a judge in the town where Ponce's adoptive aunt and uncle live.<sup>26</sup> The significance of this profession can be gleaned by a consideration of the differences in the characterization of these two figures within their respective settings. Marta's father, known throughout the town as "el juez Flores" ("judge Flores") is almost the complete opposite of Ponce. When Ponce relocates Marta to the town where the majority of the novel takes place, the narrator tells us that Marta's father did not understand his daughter's decision to move so far away from her hometown and her family but that "[e]l juez Flores . . . era partidario de que cada uno hiciera su vida" (58-59) ["Judge Flores believed that everyone should live his or her own life"]. Though Marta's father plays a decidedly minor role in the development of the narrative, the relatively few descriptions of this character provide a glimpse into the characterizations of Ponce and Marta as alienated from themselves, from each other, and from the rest of the community.

The differences between Ponce and Marta's father, the other practitioner of the legal profession can be understood in the same way as the distinction between morality and ethics.

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<sup>26</sup> Given the predominance of the figure of the lawyer in the novel, it may be worth taking note of a possible biographical connection of the author with the legal profession. Eugenia Almeida's father, Pedro Almeida, holds a licentiate in law from the Universidad Católica de Córdoba and in political and social sciences from the Université Catholique de Louvain in Belgium. In 1977, the year during which the main story of the novel takes place, he served as coordinator of the "Diagnóstico Social de la Provincia de Córdoba" for the Secretaría de Estado de Planeamiento. Until December of the same year, this was known as the Ministerio de Planeamiento, which was headed by Díaz Bessone who authored the *Proyecto Nacional*. For a more detailed account of the role of the Ministerio de Planeamiento and the implications of the *Proyecto Nacional* for the early stages of the dictatorship, see Paula Canelo's article "Los desarrollistas de la 'dictadura liberal.' La experiencia del Ministerio de Planeamiento durante el Proceso de Reorganización Nacional en la Argentina."

Ponce is described as an especially gifted law student. He is known around the university “por su rapidez para memorizar datos y relacionarlos” [“for his ability to memorize facts and relate them to one another”]: “Nadie, entre los alumnos, manejaba tan bien la jurisprudencia. Uno proponía un tema y Ponce enseguida recitaba cada uno de los casos relacionados” (36) [“Of all the students, no one managed jurisprudence as well as he did. One could propose a topic”]. Ponce’s understanding of jurisprudence is described here as a set of facts with a with an internal referential logic demonstrates is illustrative of the notion of the law’s autonomy from society rather than a living set of relations. The function of a judge, by contrast, is to arrive at a conclusion based on the specifics of a given circumstance. It requires the judge to examine the particularities of a situation in order to determine how the circumstances that influence the application of the law and to what extent the legislation still applies to the present. In other words, a judge has to recognize the context in which a given piece of legislation is passed into law and to what end in order to determine whether the original intentions maintain relevance in light of the historical and social transformations that it undergoes over time. Ponce holds a more rigid perspective toward the law, treating it as stable and unchanging. As the source from which he derives his authority in town and the means by which he garners the respect of his classmates and professors, the suspension of the legal order and, by extension, his control over the symbolic order result in the disintegration of Ponce’s sense of self.

The emphasis on narrative as a process of construction in *El colectivo* also invites consideration of the novel’s use of structural elements of the *novela negra*. In Žižek’s analysis of the detective story, the detective figure charged with solving the crime carries out an essentially narrative function. This figure carries the story to its conclusion by organizing the seemingly disparate elements of the narrative into a logical, ordered narrative sequence. This is achieved in

no small part by the establishment of clear causal relationships between the motives of the murderer and by unraveling the confusing scene that the antagonist has staged in order to conceal his or her guilt in the execution of the crime.

The most obvious manifestation of this operation is the nature of the crime and its position within the structure of the narrative. It almost goes without saying that the typical structure of a work of crime fiction unfolds around a crime, most often a murder, that the detective must investigate in order to identify the individual who orchestrated the nefarious deed so that he may then be apprehended by the authorities and brought to justice. Although such a crime does occur in *El colectivo*, the discovery of the crime is postponed until the end of the novel and, as such, does not dictate the structure of the narrative. More importantly, the nature of the murder *as* a murder is only revealed, and only implicitly, in a dialogue between Murúa, the only eyewitness of the assassination and the local police chief. Murúa tells the commissioner that one group of four men (three of them dressed in civilian attire and one in a military uniform) ambushed the couple hiding in the train car at night and that the couple did not put up a fight. “Si los otros ni tuvieron tiempo para disparar,” he clarifies, adding “Para mí que estaban dormidos” (141) [“The others didn’t even have time to shoot. It seemed to me like they were asleep”]. Two days later, a second group of men arrived in trucks to look over the bodies. The following day, the first group returned to photograph the bodies and remove them from the abandoned train car. This account directly contradicts the version of events reported on the radio, according to which the two fallen subversives initiated a shootout with the military.

According to the timeframe of the sequence of events that the witness recounts, the murder occurred the same night that the couple of guests at the hotel departed on foot, following the train tracks to the next closest town, Pozo del Sauce. The revelation of this eyewitness

account near the end of the novel does little to shed light on the “truth” of the matter. On the contrary, the sequence that Murúa describes only adds to the confusion. It is unclear who was involved, how and to what extent, why they would have left the bodies in the train car for so long before removing them or reporting the incident. In other words, rather than clarify an already confusing set of events, the presentation of the “true” scenario at this late point in the novel unsettles the previous narratives that the townspeople elaborate prior to the revelation of this knowledge.

While Murúa’s description of the murder establishes the falsity of the official version published in the newspaper, the truth that comes to light in his account is problematic in that it presents an obstacle for the detective’s apprehension of the crime’s underlying rationale. Rather than elucidate the true nature of the crime, the eyewitness account further obscures the chain of causality leading up to the murder, the motives of the assassin or the identity of the responsible party. The details of the true events distract from the true meaning of what he has witnessed. In the classic detective novel, Žižek argues: “The crucial thing about the distance separating the false scene staged by the murderer and the true course of events is *the structural necessity of the false solution* toward which we are enticed because of the ‘convincing’ character of the staged scene” (54). Murúa’s testimony reveals the true circumstances that the staged scene aims to conceal and, at the same time, the act of staging itself. In addition to emphasizing the convincing character of the official narrative of the event by way of contrast with the true course of events, the distance separating the two suggests that the articulation of a rational solution would be impossible without the false solution.

A second possible false solution presents itself to the reader through the depiction of Victoria, Ponce’s sister. A possible red herring, Victoria’s silence raises as much suspicion as her

words. By the end of the novel, there is sufficient detail to allow the reader to infer or to at least entertain the possibility that Victoria rather than the young girl is the object of the military's search. The first communication that the commissioner receives indicates that they are searching for a woman in her thirties. Victoria would be at least in her early forties by the present of the novel, but the girl from the hotel couldn't have been more than 18 years old. Either way, it is more or equally plausible to confuse a woman in her forties for a woman in her thirties, as it is to think that an 18 year old is in her thirties. Moreover, Victoria's administration of her uncle's estate in Córdoba would be more likely to raise suspicions, especially given her educational background and the history of student/worker alliance in Córdoba (an issue to which the novel alludes in Marta's description of "la chica Fuentes" who was taken by force and presumably disappeared after she started frequenting the local cooperative and factories on the "other" side of the tracks). The point is not to prove that the military assassinated the wrong person but rather to foreground the doubt that may arise from merely entertaining the possibility.

Moreover, though Victoria is technically an outsider, her status as the only living relative of the town lawyer affords her a certain degree of immunity to the scrutinizing gaze of the locals. In the chapter that goes most into depth about Victoria also suggests a sense of urgency in her departure from Córdoba, where she had been managing her uncle's estate:

Victoria necesita descansar a la sombra del naranjo, escuchar otros ruidos al dormir, no ver luces en la oscuridad. Necesita hablar de lo que no debe nombrarse. Sentir el silencio ensanchando corredores. Decide viajar a casa de Antonio. Quizás allá los rumores, los chirridos, los zarpazos, los golpes, las corridas, los moretones, las botas, los disparos no hayan llegado. No todavía.

(106)

[Victoria needs to rest under the shade of the orange tree, hear other noises as she falls asleep, not see lights in the darkness. She needs to speak of that which should not be named. To feel the silence widening the corridors. She decides to travel to Antonio's house. Perhaps there the murmurs, the creaks, the lashings, the hits, the sound of urgent retreats, the bruises, the boots, the gunshots have not arrived. Not yet.]<sup>27</sup>

The confluence of visual and aural sensory imagery in the above cited passage indicates the mutual influence of each mode of perception in her apprehension of the events taking place around her. Even though, as the narrator tells us, Victoria “aprende a ver todo y a guardar silencio” (104) [“learns to see everything and to keep quiet”], the intensification of the climate of repression in Córdoba compels her to seek refuge from the insurmountable tensions that this compulsory self-censorship provokes.

Within the intimate confines of her brother's home, far removed from the rest of the country, Victoria is able to find temporary relief through her conversations with Marta and Ponce. Outside of this familial context of the domestic sphere, her comments would undoubtedly raise suspicions, especially among the other characters from town. In a private conversation with Ponce, for example, she consoles him by suggesting that he consider his solitude as a means of protection rather than an affliction. The narrator tells us that Ponce leaves the conversation at that: “Ponce sabe que en esa frase está el huevo de la serpiente. Que si sigue hurgando entre las palabras una verdad suya, íntima y privada, puede quemarle las manos, los ojos. Quizá lo ciegue. Sabe que hay algo ahí, algo que contiene todos los secretos que no quiso oír, la otra posibilidad

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<sup>27</sup> The use of the term *golpe* in Spanish is suggestive here. It is likely also meant as an allusion to the repression of the military regime since it means both “hit” and “overthrow,” or “coup,” as in *coup d'état*.

que nunca se ve” (104) [“Ponce knows that in that phrase lies the serpent’s egg. That if he continues to dig through the words a truth of his/hers, an intimate and private one, may burn his hands, his eyes. Perhaps it would blind him. He knows that there is something there, something that holds all the secrets that he refused to hear, the other possibility that is never seen”]. His hesitance to consider the intended meaning behind his sister's conveyance could be read as the fear of having to face an “intimate truth” about himself or his unwillingness to acknowledge an unpalatable truth about Victoria.

The speculation about the pair of young outsiders whose image appears as visual evidence of the account published in the newspaper contributes to the crystallization of the official account of their death as the military’s defeat of dangerous subversion. The conflicting accounts of this incident, accessible to the reader and only select characters in the novel, set collective memory in tension with individual memory and experience. After hearing an eyewitness account of the assassination that contradicts the narrative constructed by the military officials, the police commissioner advises the witness against communicating what he has seen to anyone else. The commissioner’s repetition of the then common euphemism “el silencio es salud” (“silence is health”) points to the pervasiveness of State terror in and through language. Marguerite Feitlowitz discusses this exact phrase in *A Lexicon of Terror*. The expression originated as a slogan for a campaign to reduce noise pollution in Buenos Aires prior to the dictatorship. “After the coup, ‘silence is health’ took on a different meaning, and it was that which lodged in people’s memory. Interestingly enough, the generals did not use this expression. They didn’t have to: The translation they wanted was made for them—reflexively—by the people whose minds they had set out to conquer” (34). Remarkably, Feitlowitz also mentions the use of *zona de detención* (“detention zone”) to designate bus stops. It was meant to encourage

people to form orderly lines at the bus stop, but the sinister double meaning was obvious for most. The suppression of the true course of events, making it inaccessible for the majority of the characters, contributes to the crystallization of the official narrative while, at the same time, it points to the gaps in collective memory and national history. In this sense, silence is more than an effect of State terror; it also reflects the reliance of language on other modes of perception to represent and make sense of reality.

## 5.2 SENTIMENTAL OPRESSION

In *El imperio de los sentimientos* (1985), Beatriz Sarlo identifies a number of recurring elements in the sentimental literature published as *folletines* or serial novels in circulation in Argentina between 1917 and 1927. The “empire of feelings” that this literature constructs is organized by the three orders of desire, society and morality, which must necessarily enter into conflict in order to create the conditions of possibility for the narratives. These stories tend to mitigate the tensions between the individual and the social world and the dissatisfaction with daily existence to the point of dissolution:

El mundo de estas narraciones coloca sus obstáculos frente al amor, pero nunca es presentado como espacio social o político que deba ser transformado radicalmente. No les imponen a sus lectores la tensión incómoda de enfrentarlos con una realidad representada como colectivamente injusta y, por lo tanto, como posible escenario de prácticas que tengan como fin cambiarla. (26)



[The world of these narratives positions its obstacles in front of love, but it is never presented as a social or political space that should be radically transformed. They do not impose upon their readers the uncomfortable tension of confronting them with a reality that is represented as collectively unjust and, as such, as a possible setting of practices with the objective of changing it.]

The objective of Sarlo's study is to delineate the relationship between the reader and the text within a specific historical and sociocultural context. The characteristics of sentimental literature that she identifies in her study respond to the ideological conditions of narrative production. Rather than entertain the possibility of social transformation, these narratives emphasize the possibility of redemption through conformity to the existent social and moral orders. When the protagonists' desires are set in opposition to the social order represented in the bourgeoisie ideal of marriage and reproduction, the outcome is either death or ruin. The redemption of the individual, in other words, is contingent upon his or her conformity to of the social and political realms.

Marta transgresses the moral and social orders by giving in to the order of desire when she initiates her first sexual encounter with Ponce. She later submits to the social order and transgresses the order of desire when she resigns herself to marrying Ponce. "Era un gran hombre y, aun en esas circunstancias, Marta debía estar feliz de haberse casado con él. . . . En su rabia, había pensado no volver a tocarla, como un modo de castigarla. Ahora sospechaba que, si ella estaba arrepentida del casamiento, sería un castigo peor someterla a todas las rutinas, los engranajes, los mecanismos de un matrimonio" (58) ["He was a great man and, even in those circumstances, Marta should have been happy to have married him. . . . In his rage, he had considered never touching her again, as a way to punish her. Now he suspected that, if she

regretted the marriage, a worse punishment would be to subject her to all the routines, the inner workings and mechanisms of a marriage”]. The domestic bliss within close reach of the protagonists of the sentimental literature that Sarlo examines becomes the means by which Ponce punishes her. At the same time, Marta’s indifferent conformity to the minutiae of everyday domesticity counters Ponce’s punishment, effectively turning it back on him.

Marta’s feigned contentment with the domestic arrangement further exemplifies the illusion that conformity to the social order as a path to redemption. Her submission to the moral order is framed as an act of sacrifice for the benefit of the social order. She agrees to marry Ponce only after he points out the potential repercussions that her defiance is likely to have for her family. Her submission to the social order, however, leads not to social or financial ruin, but to the disintegration of her autonomy and self-determination. The loss of the subjective dimension, however, also results in Marta’s alienation from the family and the identity shaped by her participation in the community beyond the domestic space of the family.

The fate of the couple left stranded in the town by the temporary discontinuation of the bus service is another twist on the sentimental as Sarlo describes it. The initial conjectures regarding the couple originate when the radio announces the search for a man who has gone missing in the area. According to the description of the man on the radio, everyone believes that he is the same man who had been staying at the hotel. In addition to confirming the identity of the man who had been staying at the hotel, the description on the radio includes sufficient detail to confirm suspicions regarding the illicit nature of the couple’s sojourn. When the hotel owner tells the police chief that the radio announced that the family is looking for the man and that “creen que pudo haber tenido un accidente o algo que le impidió volver,” [“they believe that he could have had an accident or something that kept him from returning”] the police chief asks in

response, “¿El algo tenía pollera?” (93) [Was the something wearing a skirt?]. The assumption about the relationship between the missing traveler and the girl is underscored by moralist judgments by other characters. After hearing of the *enfrentamiento* (“confrontation”) later on, Victoria presents Marta with the possibility that the two people who were killed may have been the couple who had left town in the same direction as the fallen “subversives.” Marta retorts, “¿y si fueran ellos qué? Andarían metidos en algo raro. . . .” (139) [“And so what if it was them? They were probably getting mixed up in something strange”]. When Victoria points out that hiding out in another town to be together does not constitute a crime, Marta defends her assertion by framing the couple’s actions as a transgression of the moral and social orders that regulate the domestic sphere. “Pero es pecado” [“But it is a sin], she contends, adding: “Andá a explicarle a la mujer de él que no es delito. No estarás de lado de esa puta vos, ¿no?” (139) [“Go tell his wife that it is not a crime. You’re not taking that whore’s side, are you?”]. Marta’s censure of the couple on moral grounds is linked in this instance to their political identity as enemies of the state: “Los que mataron eran subversivos. Y los mataron porque son una amenaza para todos. Y ellos dispararon primero. -¿Y si eran el viajante y su amiga? -Entonces eran subversivos. Y listo” (139-40) [“The ones they killed were subversives. And they killed them because they are a threat for everyone. And they fired the first shot. –And so what if they were the traveler and his friend? –Then they were subversives. And that’s that”]. As in Sarlo’s characterization of sentimental fiction cited above, the couple’s transgression of the moral and social order ends in their symbolic death. Rather than serving as an affirmation of these established orders, however, their death urges the reader toward a critical examination of the mechanisms by which the three orders function in tandem.

On the level of the narrative itself, the appeals to the sentimental serve as an affirmation of the moral and social orders since, like Marta, the majority of the twonspeople conflates the couple's supposed moral dalliance with their alleged political affiliation. When Sarlo writes of the symbolic death of those who do not affirm the social order through marriage, she is referring to the relationship between the characters' actions at the diegetic level of the narrative and to the use of the sentimental mode as a means to influence the actions and character formation of the reader at the extra-diegetic level reader. Marriage, death, or ruin—those are the only possible outcomes for the actions carried out in sentimental narratives and, as the only perceived outcomes for the readers of these narratives, they obscure the readers' perception of any alternative modes of communal existence.

This notion of the sentimental as a reactive force of opposition to any radical transformation of the social, political and economic structures for the reading public calls attention to the social function of literature. In staging these formulaic scenarios as catalysts for flashbacks in which the omniscient narrator gives clues as to the characters' motivations but offers no explanation, *El colectivo* appeals to the reader's affective sensibilities as an alternative to a tidy resolution or any clear or restricted presentation of causal relationships that a linear narrative would ground.

A consideration of the sentimental in *El colectivo* raises another point of interest; namely, that of spectatorship. In her discussion of the sentimental in *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick emphasizes the significance of the viewer's position in defining the sentimental. The few consistencies in the use of the term sentimental that she traces from the end of the eighteenth century to contemporaneity have little to do with subject matter. "Rather," Sedgwick proposes, "they seem to inhere in the nature of the investment by a viewer *in* a subject matter" (150,

emphasis in original). “It may be only those who are themselves prone to these vicariating impulses who are equipped to detect them in the writing or being of others,” she concludes, “but it is also they who for several reasons tend therefore to be perturbed in their presence” (153).<sup>28</sup> Nowhere in *El colectivo* does this phenomena come to the surface more in the disparaging remarks that Marta makes about the young woman boarding at the hotel.

Early in the novel, before any causal relationship between the discontinuation of bus service and the couple is made explicit, Marta fixates on the woman’s external appearance: “Al llegar al hotel, Marta y Victoria se quedaron lejos de la pareja. Marta no dejaba de mirar a la mujer. Con una risa tapada, filosa, le dijo a su cuñada: ‘No tiene enagua, ésa. Y no es del pueblo’” (16) [“When they arrived at the hotel, Marta and Victoria stayed far from the couple. Marta didn’t stop looking at the woman. With a concealed, sharp laugh, she said to her sister-in-law: ‘She’s not wearing a slip. And she’s not from here’”]. Marta’s attempt to conceal her laughter as she expresses her contempt for the young woman reveals the sinister underpinning of her reaction to the young woman’s failure to comply with the social conventions of dress. While on the surface Marta’s observations seem intended to differentiate her from the girl by characterizing her as an outsider, a subsequent external analepsis gives a portrayal of Marta as a young woman who is even more of a stranger to her present self than the young woman from another town. This narrative digression reflects an image that portends the fate of Marta and the tragic fate to which she (together with the rest of the town) condemns the young couple.

However, the comments that she makes in continuation of this are pronounced without much logical coherence and without regard to the reception of her interlocutor: “Victoria parecía

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<sup>28</sup> In this particular instance, Sedgwick is referring to the position of the critic whose derisive classification of a text as sentimental denotes an underlying identification of the critic with the aspect of the text that he or she finds most objectionable. Nevertheless, her elaboration of this principle elsewhere in this same study lends itself to a consideration of how it operates on the level of the narration as well.

no oír. . . . Trató de entender lo que decía su cuñada, que hablaba casi sin respirar” (16) [Victoria seemed not to hear her. . . . She tried to understand what her sister-in-law, who was speaking almost without breathing, was saying”]. As the passage quoted above indicates, both Marta and Victoria are positioned in an equal proximity to the woman at the hotel and they both experience a somatic response of heightened intensity. The nature of those responses stand out by contrast. While Marta seems fixated on the woman’s clothing (“no tiene enagua”; “no tiene medias” [“she is not using a slip”; “she has no stockings”]), Victoria looks into the eyes of the woman, who answers her gaze “con un gesto de asco” (16) [“with a gesture of disgust”] that takes her aback, provoking an intense somatic response that leaves her speechless. Drowning out the silence left by Victoria’s loss for words, Marta continues spewing sentence fragments in her breathless rant in which she pieces together a life story from her speculations about the woman’s identity, her past, and disjointed fragments of conjectures about “la chica Fuentes,” the daughter of one of the prominent families in town. “Se tuvo que ir,” [“She had to leave”], Marta proclaims, “se tuvo que ir del pueblo. . . . Los Fuentes hacen de cuenta que no existe” (17) [“She had to leave town. . . . the Fuentes pretend that she doesn’t exist”]. The suspicious activities of the Fuentes’ daughter—associating with men at the cooperative and distributing literature with strange ideas, for example—are perceived as a threat to the peace and tranquility of the town’s everyday goings on. In much the same way as the couple of strangers at the hotel, the “subversive” activity of these individuals, and their consequential alienation from the rest of the community, results in their transformation into non-entities. The Fuentes girl is betrayed by one of the men at the factory and consequently disappeared, while the couple, after having desperately escaped their plight as unofficial entertainment for the whole town, is reduced to a stain, formless blots of ink on the pages of the newspaper and in the archives of official history. Despite the different

positions of these characters relative to the local community and the different ways that the town either refuses to openly acknowledge or fabricates and adapts an easily digestible narrative about them, advocacy for political change is conjugated as admonishment for their presumed moral and social deviance.

The characterization of Marta at the beginning of the novel as an empty headed, broken doll without foresight is rendered problematic when the narrator provides a glimpse into her past to show how she is perceived by those who know her before Ponce uproots her and relocates her to this small town far-removed from the rest of the world. The description of the first time that Ponce and Marta meet, 32 years prior to the present of the novel, provides a particularly compelling point of contrast with the character who condemns the young woman boarding at the hotel. Ponce sees Marta for the first time during a dance at El Náutico, the country club where his adoptive aunt and uncle were members:

En el Náutico estaban las chicas de un lado y los muchachos del otro.

Cada grupo se empujaba entre sí, los muchachos con codazos y las chicas con pequeños golpecitos en los brazos. Murmurando bajo, riéndose de secretos tontos. Y entre las chicas Marta. Que lo miraba, como un pájaro. Que no tocaba el brazo de nadie, que no empujaba a nadie, que no se reía. Ponce la miró un minuto y bajó los ojos. Apenas lo hizo no soportó la idea de esa boba diciéndoles a todos que él no le había aguantado la mirada. (41)

[In el Náutico the girls were on one side and the boys on the other. Each group was pushing each other among themselves, the boys nudging each other with their elbows and the girls with small slaps on the arm. Whispering quietly, laughing at silly secrets. And among the girls was Marta. Who was watching him,

like a bird. Who wasn't touching anyone's arm, who wasn't pushing anyone, who wasn't laughing. Ponce watched her for a minute and lowered his eyes. As soon as he did, he couldn't bare the idea of that dumb girl telling everyone that he couldn't withstand her stare.]

The two lock eyes for the rest of the night as Ponce, in a gesture of defiance, dances with other girls “[s]iempre mirando a Marta hasta que, en un giro, dejó de verla” (41) [always looking at Marta until, in a turn, he no longer saw her]. On his way home after leaving the dance, Ponce sees Marta again: “A mitad de cuadra, vio una sombra apoyada contra la pared de la fábrica. Marta tenía el vestido levantado. Lo sostenía con sus manos a la altura de la cintura y lo miraba sin sonrisas. ‘Venga’” (42) [“Halfway down the block, he saw a shadow leaning against the wall of the factory. Marta had her dress lifted up. She was holding it up to her waist with her hands and she was looking at him without smiling. Come over here”]. Little more than a month after this encounter, Ponce returns to the town to celebrate his graduation from the university. During a dinner with his adoptive parents and some family friends, he finds out by chance that Marta is pregnant. Assuming that he had fathered the child that night after the dance at the social club, Ponce seeks out Marta. Determined to protect the reputation he had made for himself at school, he insists that they wed so that people will not say that he left her in a difficult situation. Marta reveals her intention to keep the baby and raise the child out of wedlock. Despite Marta's insistence that she has no desire to marry him, Ponce persuades her to abide by this arrangement by convincing her that to do otherwise would bring disgrace to her family. Shortly after they marry, Marta miscarries the child. Ponce is infuriated, believing himself the victim of a trap orchestrated by Marta to marry him for the wealth and status that his future as a lawyer at a prestigious law firm in Buenos Aires surely holds in store. Ponce resents Marta and, in an



attempt to punish her for thwarting his plans for the future with her grand deception, he relocates her to the small town where most of the novel takes place. In this sense, Marta's harsh criticism of the young woman staying at the hotel can be read as a response to the recognition of the autonomy that she had sacrificed in order to maintain the social order for the benefit of her family.

Ponce treats his body as a machine that must be serviced on occasion. This is evidenced in his attitude toward sex and the suppression of his own sexual desire as inconvenient rituals that distracted him from his studies, "algo molesto y a veces complicado; una rutina a repetir para poder seguir viviendo" (35) ["something bothersome and sometimes complicated; a routine to repeat so that he could keep living"]. He takes the same attitude toward food. This perspective is extended to his lack of interpersonal relationships with those around him.

At one point in the novel, the narrator recalls the first time that Victoria and Marta met. Marta had to travel to the city to meet up with Victoria and take her to the town. Ponce did not go because, as the narrator explains, the idea of seeing his father-in-law again bothered him. By this time, Marta had already changed. At first, he makes several attempts to resuscitate the Marta that he knew before but gives up after his attempts fail. The judge's mental deterioration in the years leading up to his death puts him in the same state of oblivion as his daughter. First, her change in personality causes him to see in her "la imagen de una gallina loca" but, when he is also in the throws of dementia, he appreciates her chatter as if she were a caged bird that sings when it gets dark. Compare this to the assertion belies the rumors that the coupling is arranged by the judge and that "Ella, siempre tan sumisa, como una muñequita, había aceptado . . . Sólo Ponce y Marta se miraban entendiendo la oscuridad que estaba al fondo de las cosas. Secos, como dos álamos muertos, se aceptaron para alegría de todos" (55-56) ["She, always so

submissive, like a little doll, had accepted. . . . Only Ponce and Marta looked at one another understanding the darkness at the bottom of the matter. Dry, like two dead oaks, they accepted one another to the joy of everyone”]. For both the judge and Marta, the isolation from public life is described as the death of the private self. This comparison denotes a loss of conscientious responsiveness to outside stimuli. Moreover, it links their confinement to the domestic space and the uncritical fulfillment of domestic norms and practices in terms of the spatial division between the private and the public.

### **5.3 SPECTACULAR VIOLENCE: IMAGES, COMMUNICATIONS, AND THE INTERSUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE OF HISTORY**

As the novel progresses, Ponce is displaced as the central figure of the novel. The dissolution of his authority relative to the symbolic order opens space for the perception of other voices that this system of meaning had previously obscured. As Ruben, the owner of the hotel, tells him sternly, effectively stripping away the lawyer’s illusion of authority and status: “Mire doctor, se lo voy a decir una sola vez, muy claramente. Esto no es algo que le están haciendo a usted. Esto es algo que está pasando” (76) [“Look, doctor, I’m only going to say this once, very clearly. This is not something that they are doing to you. This is something that is happening”]. Although the refusal of the bus driver to pass by the town has little effect on the movement of the characters who live there—as one of the school children comments: “¿Y qué? Si total nosotros no vamos a ningún lado” (71) [“So what? We never go anywhere anyhow”]—the enigma serves as the unifying factor for the development of multiple and divergent perspectives toward the situation and a bridge for other events outside of the temporal and spatial context of the novel.

This detail comes to the fore in the reflections of Ponce regarding the deracination to which he subjects both himself and his wife from the cosmopolitan environment to which he believes himself entitled. Ponce's self-imposed displacement extends to his refusal to allow others to dictate where he belongs within the town: "El único diferente, el único apartado, extrañamente confundido en su geografía, es el doctor Ponce" (27) ["The only different one, the only exception, oddly confused in his geography, is doctor Ponce"]. Though the primary objective of this geographical displacement is described as a form of revenge or punishment that he imposes on his wife, Marta, it is ultimately self-imposed. That is, the effects of his acts of defiance and condemnation are most intensely experienced by Ponce himself.

As the days pass, it becomes "un hilo que une todas las charlas..." (70) ["a thread that ties all the conversations together"]. The bus incident functions not as an event that centers the narrative, but as the disturbance of normalcy that denatures the symbolic unity of the narrative. The narratives about the young couple elaborated through informal speculations (gossip) about a young couple from out of town take on cruel undertones as official communications reporting the search for a pair of "subversive terrorists" become confused with local gossip. Suppositions arising from the external appearance and mannerisms of the couple are exaggerated and embellished to the point that the town gossips fabricate nearly a whole life story about them. The unreliability of the official communications, which change by the day, combined with the reproachable nature of the informal development of the story about the two strangers throws the issue of narrative in disrepute. After the two strangers are assassinated, the bus resumes its normal route and begins to stop in the town again. With this return to normalcy comes the dissolution of the town's isolation from the outside world. The most significant sign of this re-

connection is the newspaper in which the incident is reported and visually depicted in a photograph of the slain bodies of the missing couple.

The photographic representation of the couple that appears in the newspaper undermines the integrity of the narrative. In a similar way as Barthes's characterization of the photograph, *El colectivo* calls attention to the shortcomings of the literary medium through the incorporation of a commentary on the photographic image. At the same time, the representation of the photographic image within the narrative functions as a strategy to overcome that shortcoming around the photographic image. In *El colectivo* the *studium* and *punctum* of the image of two "subversivos abatidos" undermine the veracity and certainty of the context established in the official narrative summarized in the factual language of the published incident report. This photograph, which strips the deceased of any identifying marks, recalls Barthes's characterization of the photograph as death. Their faces are covered, their heads are surrounded by a halo of blood, and the official report registers no name.

The photograph is intended to support the factual claims of the official narrative. Nevertheless, the image is the locus of the conflict between the objective and subjective dimensions of interpretation, as in the coexistence of the *stadium* and the *punctum* in the same plane in the visual field of representation. Rather than provide affirmation of the narrative, the potential for divergent interpretations of the images is suggested by the repetition of the color grey, indicating the conflation of black and white on the surface of the paper: "La foto ocupa tres columnas. Gris, inhumana. Son manchas. Una mancha gris cuerpo, otra mancha gris sangre, una mancha gris arma, otra mancha gris tierra, una inmóvil y seca mancha gris cielo. No se ven caras. Se ve sangre, se ven cabezas que apuntan al lado opuesto al de la cámara. Se ven dos bultos, tapados con diarios. Bultos que fueron cuerpos" (147) [The photo takes up three columns.

Gray, inhuman. They are stains. One gray body stain, another gray bloodstain, another gray weapon stain, another gray earth stain, an immobile and dry gray sky stain. You cannot see their faces. You can see blood, heads pointing away from the camera. You see two shapes, covered with newspaper. Shapes that used to be bodies”]. In pointing to “something” on the opposite side of the camera, the death heads in the photograph call attention to the relationship between the photographer and the frame of the visual representation. The object looks back at the viewer to destabilize the objective grounds of the photographic representation.

Both Rubén and Gómez had taken note of the white dress that the young girl was wearing as she and her partner departed along the train tracks four nights prior to reading of their death in the paper. The significance of this detail, which has a similar impact on each of these characters, activates their apprehension of the broader implications of the event but exceeds of the capacity of language to articulate its meaning within the framework of the narrative:

Rubén deja que Gómez mire hasta que ya no duela. Pero Gómez no ve.

Rubén apoya la vista, cansada, en un ángulo de esa foto. Y de ahí abajo,

escapando apenas a la manta de papel de diario, brota un pedazo de tela blanca.

Una tela que agita a Rubén, que lo obliga a pararse y girar rápidamente y ponerse

de espaldas de Gómez y apoyar su dedo índice justo arriba de la mancha y querer

hablar y golpear otra vez con el dedo mientras Gómez vacía el vaso de golpe y se

frota la garganta con la mano derecha.

--¡El vestido, el vestido blanco!

A Gómez la frase lo trae de golpe aquí, aquí abajo, al bar, a la mesa, a las

manchas de sangre que hay en la foto.

--¡El vestido, Gómez, el vestido de la mujer! . . . Gómez entiende y le agarra la mano y la presiona con fuerza hasta que la palma se apoya, vencida, contra la madera. (147-48)

[Rubén lets Gómez look until it no longer hurts. But Gómez doesn't see. Rubén rests his weary vision on an angle of that photo. And from there below, barely escaping the paper blanket of the newspaper, emerges/appears a small piece of White cloth. A cloth that agitates Rubén, that compels him to stand up and whip around and get behind Gómez and set his index finger just above the stain and want to speak and hit again with his finger while Gómez empties the glass in one swallow and rubs his throat with his right hand.

--The dress, the white dress!

The phrase brings Gómez here all at once, down here, to the bar, to the table to the blood stains in the photo.

--The dress, Gómez, the woman's dress! . . . Gómez understands and he grabs Rubén's hand and presses it down hard until his palm rests, defeated, against the wood.]

The characters' recognition of the white dress in the photo, a seemingly inconspicuous detail, confronts the truth and certainty not with untruth or uncertainty, but with an absolute truth derived from the viewers' subjective apprehension of the image, the truth of which remains inaccessible to verbal elaboration.

Another prominent theme in Almeida's novel is the circulation of information through informal networks of communication and official media. As long as the bus service is discontinued in the town, the only available source of information from the outside world

available to the townspeople are the radio emissions that announce different happenings that may or may not be related to the hiatus of public transportation in and out of town. Though the immediate cause of the bus driver's refusal to stop in the unnamed town and the blockade of the train tracks at the local station are eventually revealed as part of the military's systematic control of the area intended to restrict the circulation of a pair of alleged "subversives," the coherence of the official narrative is undermined by the eyewitness account given to the commissioner by Murúa, another character who maintains an ambiguous relationship to the town as both insider and outsider.

Consequently, there are very few characters in the novel that do not subscribe to the official narrative that is published in the paper. One of these characters is Gómez, the man who crosses the train tracks to the "respectable" side of town daily. The other character who questions the motives behind the assassination is Victoria, the sister of the protagonist lawyer, Ponce, who is visiting from Buenos Aires. Both of these figures assume an ambiguous position as outsiders whose ties to the town, in different ways, make them invisible to the suspicious watch of the townspeople. In other words, their presence on the plane of action does not evoke suspicion, unlike that of the young couple that becomes the center of the town gossip. Gómez, for his part, has genealogical ties that link him to the foundation of the town. Victoria, on the other hand, is related to the town lawyer, Ponce, the most prominent figure in the novel who, in an act of defiance, chooses to live on the "other side of the tracks."

The internal division of the town is also important. This town, like many others that developed around train tracks, is divided in two by equally ambiguous terms. The town is divided in two by the train tracks. The distinction between one side and the other is a purely subjective matter, as expressed in a dialogue between Rita, the hairdresser from the "right" side

of the tracks, and Gómez, the courier from the “other” side. Gómez, who lives on the “other side of the tracks,” has crossed over as he does every other day. In the conversation with the hairdresser, he refers to the side of town where the conversation is taking place as “el otro lado.” When Rita corrects him saying, “dirá mejor a este lado. Estamos acá, ¿no?” [“you mean to this side. We are here, right?”]. Gomez replies: “pero para nosotros éste siempre va a ser el otro lado” (22) [“But for us this will always be the other side”]. The sense of alienation that the enclosure of the physical space highlights the illusion that tends to naturalize the social order by screening out the historical and economic conditions that gave rise to and naturalize the differential power structures. The distanced perception of the characters, described almost *ad nauseam* throughout the novel reflects the effect of this isolation on the individual characters and at the collective levels.



## 6.0 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The purpose of this dissertation has been to examine the ways that literary and cinematic representations register the legacy of the most recent military dictatorship in Argentina. The self-denominated Process of National Reorganization deployed extreme violence and repression that resulted in the atomization of social ties and the dismantling of the intellectual community. Following the formal dissolution of the military regime, the task of the intellectual community mobilized around the possibility of resignifying the past in new cultural forms. The reconstruction of history, the recovery of voices that had been silenced, and the restoration of the intellectual community around the political dimension of cultural reconfigurations of private and public life are all visible in the four texts examined here.

The two novels and two films that I focus on register the legacy of the most recent dictatorship in Argentina and respond to ongoing debates about the representation of that past. I have dealt with issues such as the cultural politics of memory and family, the problem of violence and representation and the tensions between visual culture, print culture, and oral transmission that arise in the debates about how to conjugate the historical experience of the dictatorship in the present. In my consideration of how the texts included in my corpus respond to these issues, I organized my reading around three broad thematic and formal strategies that each of these novels and films use to respond to the aforementioned categories of analysis: defamiliarization, the body as the site of inscription for traumatic experience and the grounds for

subjectivity, and, finally, the movement through or enclosure within spaces that activate memory and signal transformations in the characters perception of the relationship between the past and the present.

The defamiliarization of common discursive modalities serves the dual purpose of recognizing the confluence of different discursive regimes in any given articulation of experience and, at the same time, engages the reader or spectator to consider how certain modes of representation determine subject positions and naturalize perception. In both *Dos veces junio* and *Los rubios*, the defamiliarization of testimonial narratives responds to a certain crisis of representation that both emerges from and responds to the practice of forced disappearance during the most recent military-civil regime. Kohan's novel plays on the tensions between the testimonial narratives of ex-detainees and the confessional or apologetic declarations of former members of the armed forces. *Los rubios* denatures the testimonial narratives about the director's parents by calling attention to the mechanisms that facilitate the spectator's identification with the testimonial subject. In *La mujer sin cabeza*, the violent collision of two social worlds triggers a traumatic shock that dislodges the structures that mediate the protagonist's perception of the world and people around her. The film undermines the notion of narrative unity by delinking the visual and aural regimes of representation, displacing the production of meaning to multiple planes of perception for the spectator. The transformation in Vero's perception opens her up to encounters with the Other that alters her subjective experience. In *El colectivo*, the enclosure of the town generates a sense of oppression that exceeds the spatial and temporal coordinates of the narrative framework. The defamiliarization of conventions of the traditional detective novel or crime fiction precludes the elaboration of a linear narrative, disrupting the establishment of clear causal relationships that would give a sense of closure to the historical trauma of the dictatorship.

Thinking of trauma as a wound (from the Greek *traûm*) or an opening in or the destruction of the boundaries that separate or screen the body from the real opens space for a consideration of how these novels and films tap into the tensions between individual and collective experiences. Through their explicit and implicit treatment of historical trauma and its residual effects in the present, these texts suggest the possibility of breaking open the pre-established frames of understanding, of making-sense of, or interpreting reality.

My approach here builds on earlier work on the dictatorship in Argentine literature and film. However, by doing a comparative reading, I have added a new dimension to these studies of recent Argentine cultural production. By linking image and text, showing how the films absorb literary motifs and print culture, while the novels work explicitly with photographic and cinematic images made spectral by their being represented through description and suggestion in literary texts.

The terms of the debates about culture and politics and the attempts to link cultural productions with the possibility of political action are often articulated in terms such as “oppositional” or “resistance.” Nevertheless, these terms are no longer adequate for the classification of cinema and literature as political. Rather than find a common objective within the political and social arenas, the debates regarding the most appropriate forms for the representation of history and the forms of violence that inhere in the social fabric have turned inward toward the pros and cons of different modes of representation.

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