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# Contesting Memories: A Brief Recount of the Struggles to Talk About the Violent Past in Argentina

**Keywords / Palabras clave**

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# DISSIDENCES

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## *Contesting Memories: A Brief Recount of the Struggles to Talk about the Violent Past in Argentina*

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In his “Five Theses on Torture,” the Latin American cultural studies critic Idelber Avelar remarks that the practice of torture during the military regimes in the Southern Cone is a “truth,” that has been “universally recognized” and therefore it cannot be disputed. (254) Though this remark [1] is only secondary to his main argument, I would like to challenge here the idea of a “universally recognized truth.” What does it take for a “truth” to be sanctioned (or considered as “universally

recognized”) and how could it be “no longer contested” (254)? At the risk of leaving aside relevant information, in this article I intend to present a brief recount of how the “truth” has been –and still is- both disputed and sanctioned in the context of Argentina’s struggle to narrate the past of political violence. In the case of the Southern Cone the “truth,” inscribed within the contradiction between the desire to remember and the will to forget, has barely had institutional sanction. Argentina, after prosecutions and amnesties, has now reinitiated trials against those who committed human rights violations during the last military government. But in both Chile and Uruguay the promulgations of laws and decrees of amnesty not only legalize impunity but open the door to disputes and revisions. Since the end of the military dictatorship all democratic governments in the Southern Cone at some point had to face the debate on ensuing public policies on what was to be remembered and what was to be forgotten about the political violence of the seventies, and what to do about its consequences.

Though the role of the judiciary system has been crucial in Argentina, nonetheless it has proven not to be the only way to establish “truth” -or at least an authorized narration of happened during the dictatorship (1976-1983). Certain political practices have demonstrated that alternative spaces for social sanctions can also be generated. The weekly rounds of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who are still demanding justice and the right to know the fate of their children, dispense a sanction of a different order than the judiciary. So also do the demonstrations known as “escraches,” in which the organization H.I.J.O.S. –mostly integrated by children of the disappeared- used to paint the word “killer” in the walls of the homes of known torturers during street performances that include chants and slogans such as “if there is no justice, there is ‘escrache”” (“si no hay justicia, hay escrache.”) Alternative sanctions such as these have produced an inscription. Other cultural productions -literature, film, monuments-, also create an inscription but in a different code. Thus art can take on a social function -different from the denouncing role it assumed during

dictatorship- and can be an active participant in the debate about what should be remembered and who and how should be remembered.

In the last section of this article, I will briefly discuss how a “universally recognized” version of history has been supported by several Argentine films, particularly Garage Olimpo (1999), and challenged by others such as The Blondes (Los Rubios, 2003).

My argument sidelines the common historical and sociological question of how groups of people can remember together, how the need to present a “correct” version of history prompts endless debates, and how the space of memory is actually a space of political struggle which takes place in different arenas, not just in Courts and Legislatures but in the realm of the symbolic and in all forms of cultural productions. I suggest that the attempt to obtain an appropriate form of expression –an adequate answer to the question of how to represent- involves not only aesthetics but is the object of political debate and allusions to moral values. This political dimension acquires different significations with the passage of time.

### **Sanctioning and Disputing “the truth” in Argentina: A Non-Exhaustive Historical Recount**

From the late 60s to the late 80s, the military took power over Latin American Southern Cone countries. The particular historical and institutional role of the military in politics differed in each country. The coups of 1973 in Chile and Uruguay interrupted a long tradition of civilian rule that had only experienced brief interludes of military involvement. In Argentina, on the other hand, military intervention in politics had been a recurrent historical routine (six interventions have taken place since 1930). Southern Cone military governments also varied in their internal structure, from a tight hierarchical control under General Pinochet in Chile, to interforce (army, navy, air force) divisions in Argentina, to hard/soft line factions in Uruguay. Despite these differences, the regimes

in all three countries shared a common commitment to national security doctrines that articulated the mission of the military as one of protector of the “patria” from external and internal threats. In brief, the military regimes targeted two goals: to “normalize” the economy and to “restructure society” by demobilizing popular sectors. Repression targeted organizations and individuals associated with the left, especially, but not limited to labor and political activists or students. In all three countries, the process of transition to democracy began with self-amnesty decrees through which the military intended not only to avoid trials but to delineate the way the past was to be interpreted; [2] and as soon as the dictatorships were over, the battle to write their history began.

In Argentina in 1976, though some citizens opposed the military coup, many considered it the only way to stabilize the country. Prominent newspapers and citizens openly called on the military to save the country. Instead, the junta leaders began what they called the “Process of National Reorganization,” which included social, political and economic components. Most notoriously, systematic violations of human rights became state policy. In order to enable military forces to participate in the repression without controls of any type, the military junta dissolved the Congress, replaced a significant number of judges, suspended the Constitution and changed existing laws. Despite these changes in the legal order, most of the repression took place through clandestine procedures, where state terror combined with official denial. Torture, murders, kidnappings and “disappearances” occurred routinely. In response, small groups protested and denounced these actions locally and internationally. They also sought to support and assert victims by leading to the rise of a defined human rights movement, [3] hidden at first, then gradually gaining greater visibility to the point of leading political mobilization and finally occupying a significant place in public space, particularly during the transition to democracy.

As the dictatorship weakened, [4] the concept of human rights became tied to the re-building of democratic institutions; tacit support of the dictatorship diminished greatly and a public political

language gradually emerged. For the first time in Argentine history, the public -- through the use of the language of individual rights and support for democracy-- expressed a general intolerance towards human rights violations. Thus, while the human rights movement did not contribute directly to the fall of the dictatorship, it gave Argentines a new vocabulary with which to conceive of a new society under democracy (Jelin "Politics" 48). Specifically, the notion that democracy and human rights were inextricably bound was established. Thus, an ethical reconfiguration of the Nation became possible, one in which there was no room for revenge but for Justice.

Since the end of the Holocaust, it has become almost a truism that to recall the memory of past atrocities to avoid repeating the past, one should honor the victims and consolidate democracy. The recalls of memory and the demands for justice merged with the internationally dominant language of human rights, which was used to justify both the trials of the people involved in human rights violations and the commemorations of the victims, the latter as part of a right to truth. Today, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo embody these demands with their slogan: "Truth, Memory, and Justice." During the last years of the military government and the transition to democracy, human rights movements, not without controversy within the different organizations, brought to the political arena such non conciliatory slogans as "neither forget nor forgive" ("ni olvido ni perdón"), "reappearance with life" ("aparición con vida"), "they took them alive, we want them alive" ("con vida los llevaron, con vida los queremos"), and "trials and punishments to the guilty" ("juicio y castigo a los culpables"). [5]

What happened during the transition to democracy was not the result of planned strategy but a process of political confrontations in which all three parties --the government, the military, the human rights movement-- could not reach their highest goals. In 1983, three days after taking office, President Raúl Alfonsín (1983-1989) ordered both the arrest and prosecution of members of the first three military Juntas that ruled the country between 1976 and 1983, charging them with illegal

detentions, murder, torture, and the prosecution of conspiracy. He also cited guerrilla leaders for violations against the public order and internal peace. The criminal prosecution of guerilla leaders was a key pidge for Alfonsín's strategy intended to show the public and the armed forces themselves that he was not articulating an "anti-military" campaign, but was trying to punish "the two devils" responsible for political violence in the previous decade. This theory of the "two devils" was further developed in the report Never Again (Nunca más) presented by the National Commission on Disappeared Persons (CONADEP) that was created by Alfonsín five days after taking office. By his assigning all responsibility to the two most extremist groups, the military Juntas and the guerrilla leaders, the rest of Argentine society was left in the position of an unflinching witness with no agency. Thus, the narrative of Argentina's recent past was presented in terms of perpetrators and victims, a framework that produced a collateral effect. Activists were portrayed as isolated or innocent victims more engaged with literacy programs or struggles to obtain reduce bus fare for students than with politics, and perpetrators as irrational beings who acted outside of any ethical standard at the margins of society to which they belonged, as shown in films such as La historia oficial (The Official Story) (1984), La noche de los lápices (Night of the Pencils)(1986), and Garage Olimpo (Olympo Garage) (1999). The history of political activism of the 70's had no room in such Manichaeian terms. Hence, it became obliterated and had to wait till recent times to start being told.

Composed of prominent intellectuals and community members, CONADEP was charged to receive complaints and evidence of disappearances. The Commission was to refer the charges to justice, and ascertain the whereabouts of missing persons as well as to determine the location of abducted children. [6] Whatever the strategy of the Presidency was -the formation of CONADEP might have been clogging a bicameral investigative commission (Acuña 20-5)- it is noteworthy that the effects of their work had an impact that far exceeded expectations at the time of its creation. On the one hand, CONADEP officially recognized the crimes of the dictatorship, and thus partially



fulfilled the demands of the human rights groups. On the other hand, Alfonsín acknowledged these human rights violations in a forum, independent from trials, that was less threatening for the military. In this way, CONADEP partially satisfied the demands of both groups and helped Alfonsín strike a middle ground.

The CONADEP report, Nunca más (Never Again), quickly became a bestseller, and has been continually reprinted. Never Again told the story of institutionally directed kidnapping, torture and murder, emphasizing that the repression was ordered from the highest ranks of the junta. In this way, CONADEP provided not only a set of stories, but also a new historical narrative, to replace the military's propaganda. After its release, Never Again became the standard from which debates about the past began and also a source for future trials.

In condemning the military's lack of cooperation with the Commission, despite a government mandate to comply with its requests, the report by CONADEP addresses in the first pages an important issue that it later on avoids: reconciliation. It states, "[the military] accuse[s] us of hindering national reconciliation, of stirring up hatred and resentment, of not allowing the past to be forgotten." (CONADEP 5) This statement demonstrates that, from the beginning, "reconciliation" was soon to be discredited in Argentina. The military and their supporters used the concept of "reconciliation" to demand recognition of the "service" the army had performed for the country. Only after reconciliation of the different factions, the argument implies, would the newly "reformed" population would move forward. Never Again rejects this notion and implies that until the army acknowledged its crimes, there would be no room for "reconciliation." Nevertheless, the army obstructed all efforts at truth telling, resisting the many requests by the Commission. (253) "Reconciliation" then became the preferred term for those pushing for policies of oblivion.

Political difficulties in the following years led to revisions and reversals in the official policy. In 1986, the Law of Final Point determined an end date to present evidence of those accused of committing human rights violations; and in 1987, the Law of Due Obedience discriminated degrees of responsibility and only the members of the Juntas are tried. These laws, on the pretext of an alleged fragility of democracy or the need for national reconciliation, intended to bring closure to the possibility of taking more legal actions against those who exercised state terrorism and thus created what human right activists describe as a “culture of impunity,” silencing the memory of the violent past and leaving open the door to the continuity of a the cycle of violence.

The reversals of these policies grew during the presidency of Carlos Menem (1989-1998). In 1990, three months after coming to office, through two presidential decrees, Menem pardoned all military officers, Junta leaders, leftist guerrillas and participants in the military rebellions of the 1980s. He supported this policy by promoting “reconciliation.” In consonance with the two devil theory, Menem promoted an understanding of recent history in which the violent left and the violent right were two enemy groups within the wider Argentine society. In this view, the military did not violate human rights, but rather acted to stop a conflict in which all sides shared equal responsibility. In Menem’s view, in order to move forward, specifically toward economic progress through neoliberalism, Argentines needed to forget about past violence. The search for truth and justice was once again to be sponsored predominantly by NGOs, which continued to make their claim for justice and to “keep memory alive” in the public space . In addition to the pardons, Menem attempted to demolish ESMA (“Escuela de Suboficiales de Mecánica de la Armada”), the Navy’s training school which became the most infamous clandestine detention center. His policy replaced criminal law strategies with civil law strategies, which granted financial compensation to victims of state terror after the military and leaders of the guerrilla convicted in the 1985 trial were first acquitted. Such strategy was read by most of human rights organizations as a bribery, which

deepened his alienation from the government. As a consequence of these decisions many human rights activists and supporters became disillusioned with democracy and rejected the political class as a whole. This disillusionment further increased when Menem's later policies ended up provoking an attrition of civil rights. The chasm between government policies and human rights activists continued to increase to the end of the millennium and into the 2001 economic crash and the collapse of the following government (1998-2001) lead by FREPASO (Front for a Country in Solidarity) coalition.

In the early 1990s, opinion polls demonstrated little interest in the dictatorship on the part of young people. [7] Then in 1995 a vivid debate about human rights violations reopened when a former navy officer, Adolfo Scilingo made a public confession of drugging "disappeared" prisoners and throwing them out of aircraft into the Río de la Plata, as part of a systematic military policy. Following this confession, the media open its doors to other members of repressive squads. This gave rise to a paradoxical situation in which some of them were brought to court not because of their acts during the dictatorship –the amnesty law protected them- but because their arguments were infringing on laws against apologies for a crime (i.e. ex- Capitan Astiz case after his interview in Tres puntos magazine). These declarations generated a new interest among the public, and the human rights movement capitalized on this to renew the memory of the dictatorship into a newly receptive society. Their strategy of seeking justice through the courts had never stopped and they were now focused on the prosecution of those who had kidnapped the children of prisoners who had been born in captivity. In 1998, after a series of appeals to different courts, they got the State commitment to initiate Truth Trials, with no condemnns involved, [8] resulting in a new generation of publications and films that discussed a broad variety of aspects related to the time of the dictatorship.

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is a growing proliferation of stories dealing with the activism of the 70s have come about following very specific incidents: the opening of new legal causes of human rights violations, the repeal in 2001 and later nullification in 2004 of impunity laws (Final Point and Due Obedience laws), and the planning and construction of parks and museums of memory, many of them in places where they had operated secret detention centers and torture, such as ESMA (Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada).

Since the first months at his presidency (2003-2007), Néstor Kirchner attempted to build an alliance with the human rights groups through both symbolic and policy action. As part of his first measures in power, he invited human rights groups to meet with him in the Casa Rosada, the presidential house. He declared March 24, the anniversary of the last military coup, the National Day of Memory for Truth and Justice and in 2004 he promoted the creation of the Museum of Memory at ESMA. Human rights played during his presidency a symbolic and political key role.

### **The Struggle for Memory in Film: Garage Olimpo vs. Los rubios**

Cultural productions that focus on Argentina's violent past, have been part of the complex socio-historical background described above and had become part of a debate on how to represent this past that goes beyond issues of aesthetics or a dispute of memory vs. oblivion to become a political and ethical discussion. In this sense, I see Garage Olimpo (1999) by Marco Bechis and Los rubios (The Blondes, 2003) by Albertina Carri as two opposed tendencies in the way they organize images related to memory. Garage Olimpo was filmed at the time where the Truth Trials began and it shows the need to recover narrations of the recent past. Los rubios was filmed a few years later, and though one could have the expectation that the film would be about the story of Carri's disappeared parents it turns out to be something different. Garage Olimpo recreates everyday life experience

during the dictatorship, outside and inside the horrors of the clandestine centers of detention and torture run by the military. The film compiles several narratives taken from the testimonies of survivors (some of them included in Never again) and from the director's own experience. These micro-narratives based in real facts --people been thrown from airplanes to the Rio de la Plata, the "love story" between victim and victimizer, the prisoner who is forced to fix an electric prod used to torture, slave work, high volume music to cover the screaming, the Church's connivance with the regime-- constructs a narration not based in one particular case but in every case. The film offers a basic repertoire of emblematic images and stories that circulated since the testimonies of the first survivors (the river, military airplanes, hooded heads, kidnapping, torture.) The plot is been told in easy to follow a linear fashion and representation is not questioned. If Garage Olimpo tries to conciliate different memories into one narrative, Los rubios -a much more complex film with a fragmented narration-- shows that memories are plural and irreconcilable. By commenting explicitly on the difficulty of its own production Los rubios subverts the cinematic conventions and thus, it presents an innovative rework of issues around the topic of memory and identity. Its gist is not so much bringing back known images (or memories) but rather installing a tension between symbolic and ritualized memories and the personal memory. Los rubios creates its own "private" repertoire of images. It presents memory as instable and unreliable, and makes evident that these images are constructions, fictions. Though based on pre-existent representations (pictures, testimonies) those representations are questioned and made to look out of place: pictures from the Carri's family album are constantly manipulated and cropped in a way viewers cannot recognize any member of the family; testimonies, traditionally serving to structure documentary films, are here mediated by monitors or through off-camera voices; the most traumatic situations for the family story are represented by Playmobil toys and turn into sci-fi animations.

Carri's movie is not so much about her parents' story but about what she can do with the pieces she got from it. Los rubios creates a tension between the public memory and the personal memory, bringing to evidence that the struggle to remember is not only against oblivion but against other memories as well.

Establishing a memory requires some type of repetition. The rounds of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo on Thursdays, the symbols that represent their struggle (the white handkerchiefs, the pictures, the silhouettes), the commemoration of certain dates, all these elements constitute ritualized representations. In Los rubios there is a work of memory that bans ritualized repetition. The film puts constantly in evidence its own artifacts and mechanisms of production (an actress playing the role of the director, cameras filming cameras, crew meeting) as well as its fragmentation and apparent lack of structure. More than repetitions, with this movie, we are in the presence of re-elaborations through the recombination of different strategies and elements. Different genres (documentary, fiction, animation) and diverse stylistic resources produce in their heterogeneity a liberation of forms, an excess to talk about an absence. By unmasking representation (there is the camera and the camera that films the camera; there is a director and the actress who plays the director) and questioning reality and truth criteria, by challenging the way in which the past has been –so far- told, Los rubios claims a new space in the context of the struggles to represent the past, a space where different recollections could juxtapose, contradict, or coexist, but would never reconcile into one settled memory. If Garage Olimpo organizes a repertoire of set images and thus normalizes stories that have been already circulating for several years, Los rubios Los rubios produce disorder on those narratives, shows memory as unstable, and propose a different way to talk about the past. Carri's film seems to be stating that narrating the "truth" about Argentina's violent past is an impossible task. The likelihood of "truth" can only be contested once and again.

## Footnotes

[1] “This truth is no longer contested, nor relegated to the category of ‘accident’ or ‘excess’. Torture is universally recognized as a central part of the repressive politics of those regimes.” (254)

[2] Soon after the democratic president took office, Argentina derogated the self-amnesty decree. In Chile and Uruguay the self-amnesty remained valid. Furthermore, Uruguay ratified it via a referendum.

[3] Humans Rights organizations in Argentina are usually divided into two groups: those of the directly affected and those of the solidarity groups. The first group is composed of family members of the disappeared, including the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Madres de Plaza de Mayo, 1977) - which split into two organizations in 1986-, the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, 1977), Families of the Disappeared and Imprisoned for Political Reasons (Familiares de Detenidos-Desaparecidos por Razones Políticas, 1976), and HIJOS (Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice Against Forgetting and Silence or Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia Contra el Olvido y el Silencio, 1995). Most of the Solidarity Groups existed before 1976. They include the Argentine League for Human Rights (Liga Argentina por los Derechos Humanos, 1937), the Permanent Human Rights Assembly (Asamblea Permanente por los Derechos Humanos, 1974), of which the first democratic president after the dictatorship, Raúl Alfonsín, was a founding member, SERPAJ (Peace and Justice Service or Servicio Paz y Justicia, 1975), the Ecumenical Human Rights Movement (Movimiento Ecueménico de los Derechos Humanos, 1976), and CELS (the Center for Legal and Social Studies or Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales, 1979).

[4] In 1982, after losing the Malvinas/Falklands war the military government debilitated and called for elections in 1983.

[5] In Los trabajos de la memoria Elizabeth Jelin offers interesting insights about the slogans.

[6] Decree 187/83. Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas

[7] Roniger and Sznajder 2002.

[8] For more information about this (and other) trials, check

<http://www.derechos.org/nizkor/arg/juicios>.

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