

Private Images in Place of the Beloved Bodies: Relics Against the Politics of Disappearance

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Abstract

By analyzing some case studies that develop in different ways the symbolic value of home pictures in terms of restorative burial, the article reflects on the relationship between photography and memory in response to the campaign of political repression and terror occurred in Argentina and Chile from the 1970s to the 1990s. In the last decades, several artists have based their works on the reuse and recontextualisation of private photos, aiming at denouncing the denial of burial. This study will firstly focus on two well-known projects by Argentinean photographers – Marcelo Brodsky's *Buena Memoria* (*Good Memory*, 1997) and Gustavo Germano's *Ausenc'as* (*Absences*, 2006) – which not only highlight the physical absence of the disappeared, but also translate the aesthetics of the family into a depiction of grief and violent past. Secondly, the study moves into the Chilean political arena: by examining some sequences from two documentaries – Silvio Caiozzi's *Fernando ha vuelto* (*Fernando Returns*, 1998) and Patricio Guzmán's *Nostalgia de la luz* (*Nostalgia for the light*, 2012) – it will demonstrate how it is possible to turn the natural assumption of “(private) images are relics” into “relics are (private) images.” By using both social practices of memory and visual artistic operations, it is possible to notice on the one hand an aesthetic need to give real identity back to the victims; on the other hand, a practice of looking, which is specifically marked by postmemorial interpretations, and *backshadowing*.

In the aftermath of the military dictatorships in Latin America, many art works, including films, were produced in order to deal with the phenomenon of massive and forced disappearances. Between the 1970s and the 1990s, all the promises of modernization were tragically betrayed and repressed throughout the continent by subverted governmental authorities that led to the extrajudicial kidnapping and executions under the Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile, the Dirty War in Argentina, the military repression in Brazil, to name a few. The political ideals of social justice and equality, shared by the young generations during the 1960s, were quickly wiped out and methodically oppressed by the military rule, aiming at creating a climate of violence and pervasive threat of social persecution.

From different points of view and with different representational strategies,

several artists and filmmakers have made strong standpoints on this issue. On the one hand, the aestheticization of loss has represented the main creative force in dealing with a traumatic past. On the other, from a political perspective, those artistic responses have aimed at denouncing the denial of burial, which has been used as a means to extend the state of terror to the afterworld.

The annihilation and the funerary obstruction of the material body have led the victims' families to sublimate the private pictures of the beloved as privileged channels for their personal mourning. In other words, this common social practice has usually revealed the purpose of rehumanizing the victim before finding scattered remains, while the indexical nature of the photographic sign has intensified the relic value of a portrait that cannot be placed on the grave. Meeting the need of these people to reject the idea of their relatives' forced non-existence and to fill the empty space left by their death, the essay will analyze some case studies¹ that develop in different ways the symbolic value of the private photographs in terms of restorative burial.

Firstly, this study will focus on two significant projects by Argentinean photographers – Marcelo Brodsky's *Buena Memoria* (*Good Memory*, 1997) and Gustavo Germano's *Ausenc'as* (*Absences*, 2006) – which not only highlight the physical absence of the disappeared, but also translate the aesthetics of the family into a depiction of grief and violent past. Secondly, the study will move into the Chilean political arena: by analyzing some sequences – Silvio Caiozzi's *Fernando ha vuelto* (*Fernando Returns*, 1998) and Patricio Guzmán's *Nostalgia de la luz* (*Nostalgia for the Light*, 2012) – the essay will demonstrate how it is possible to turn the natural assumption of “(private) images are relics” into “relics are (private) images.” The films show not only how private images are physically used as a sort of dowsing rods during the search for body fragments, but also how the practices of exhumation may offer an uncanny representation of these two intertwining and complementary ways of visualizing the emanation of the referent, that is to say, of the irreplaceable, beloved body. Thus, the filmic representation becomes a burial gesture in order to dispose the missing people in their lacking physicality and at the same time assign a position to those who still live. Facing a broader theoretical debate about visual culture, memory and postmemory related to specific

¹ The four case studies are well-known within the cultural debate about the visual practices connected to Argentinean and Chilean post-dictatorships. From a methodological point of view, the selected works have been chosen with the purpose of highlighting the transnational nature of the political trauma that has affected Latin America since the 1970s. Moreover, they were produced in different historical periods: on the one hand, Brodsky's and Caiozzi's projects represent acts of memory much closer to the crash of the military dictatorship; on the other hand, Germano's and Guzmán's ones testify a persistent lack of restorative justice in the present. Finally, according to the previous literature, it is possible to reflect on two different, but coexisting, social practices of re-use of private images in public spaces. Brodsky's and Germano's works need to be related to the visual and performance practices that deal with disappearance and engendered by the cooperation of human rights organizations (*Madres y Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*, H.I.J.O.S, etc.) and artists since 1983. Whereas Chilean documentaries, specifically Caiozzi's one, must be read in the light of actions and discourses of the *Comisión Nacional de la Verdad y la Reconciliación*.

politics of memory in Argentina and Chile,² such case studies show the intimate connection between photography and trauma, as well as the subjective turn as an ideological and conceptual reconstruction of the past based on the privatization of memories and juridical testimonies.³

A hindsight glance at pictures from the past

In 1996, twenty years after the coup d'état in Argentina, Marcelo Brodsky began his photographic essay *Buena Memoria*,⁴ in which he meditated on the collective memory from a private perspective. To carry out this project, the photographer drew on emotional memory and the purity of childhood in order to denounce the human tragedy occurred during the years of the Dirty War.

The title 'Buena Memoria' alludes both to the personal memories brought back through the photographic shots, which render present an absent past, and to the fact that having a good memory means remembering people, events and things so that they do not fade into forgetfulness.

Through the reuse of private images, previously stuck into his teenage photo album, Marcelo Brodsky created a visual space where the memories of the disappeared symbolically intertwined personal and social needs of recovery. Most of the pictures had been taken and gathered by the artist since 1968, when he was fourteen and had just begun his photographic practice.

In a specific part of the project, a selection of fifteen pictures taken from the family album depicts the artist's brother, Fernando Rubén, as a main subject, kidnapped in 1979 at the age of twenty-two. The series *Nando, mi hermano* starts and comes to an end with black and white snapshots of Nando where he is either alone or looks like a ghostly presence. In the key image of the series, *Fernando en la pieza*, one of the first pictures Brodsky had shot in his life, Nando is in the room he shared with his brother, sitting on the bed, but his face appears blurry and shapeless. Taken with the underexposure of a Euming, an old camera Marcelo's father gave to him, the subject was still and motionless for one minute. The fact that in the picture Nando seems to have lost his face features may be interpreted as a sort of premonition of future events, an uncanny sign of a tragic destiny.

Photography with its ability to freeze a point in time is a perfect tool that can

² See Nelly Richard, *Crítica de la memoria*, Ediciones Universidad Diego Portales, Santiago de Chile 2010; Ludmila Da Silva Catela, Mariana Giordano, Elizabeth Jelin (eds.), *Fotografía e identidad. Captura por la cámara-devolución por la memoria*, Nueva Trilce, Buenos Aires 2010; Gabriel Gatti, *Identidades desaparecidas. Peleas por el sentido en los mundos de la desaparición forzada*, Prometeo Libros, Buenos Aires 2012.

³ Beatriz Sarlo, *Tiempo Pasado: Cultura de la Memoria y Giro Subjetivo: Una Discusión*, Siglo Veintiuno Editores, Buenos Aires 2005, pp. 21-22.

⁴ The photographic series can be accessed in the web exhibition at <http://www.marcelobrodsky.com/intro.html>, last visit 1 December 2014.

be used to connect the past with the bodily reality of the photographed subjects. According to Roland Barthes, by looking at a photograph we cannot deny that the “thing has been there.”⁵ As such, the picture of Nando attests to the physical existence of a person, whose body literally vanished, and as it usually happens, it helps people think about the present in light of the past.

Although the image shows a concluded, past event, it is boundlessly accessible through interpretation and recontextualisation, and thus becomes a changeable and not a fixed reference point. A dialectic is involved between the factual source and its re-appropriation in the present; in other words the future events directly influence the reading of the past. Re-displaying Nando’s old pictures acknowledges not only the incommensurability between the meaning of the image in the past and the one it holds now, but also the possibility to carry a message of death into the future.

In this section of the exhibition there is another picture, a crystallized vision explicitly read by Marcelo Brodsky as a “portent of later events.”⁶ In *Fernando en la fiesta*, Nando was photographed during a family party, where adults and children were spending time together. However, in that precise moment, the line of sight that connects the pictured subject and the observer is interrupted: whilst Nando appears with his eyes closed, the people next to him are looking the other way:

*The backs of the guests remind me a little of the way people turn their backs on what was happening around them during the worst years of the military dictatorship. There also seems to be a generation gap: the grown-ups ignore the children, represented by Fernando, and look the other way.*⁷

It is possible to imagine that the nostalgic desires shape the current act of viewing, because it is clearly settled on the discrepancy between what the viewer knows and what the subject of the image cannot have known. That is the reason why, as far as the work of postmemorial interpretation is concerned, Marianne Hirsch assumes that “the picture’s indexicality is more performative – based on the viewer’s needs and desires – than factual.”⁸ Moreover, in front of every “picture from before,” the vectorial temporality typically displayed in the family album collapses. The representation of a lifetime is marked by the natural growing of children or the unfolding rituals of the social space, but the recollection of traumatic events, such as disease and death, are left in the blank space between the images. Thus, if the picture was taken to preserve

⁵ Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire. Notes sur la photographie*, Ed. Gallimard, Paris 1980 (Eng. ed. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Hill and Wang, New York 1981).

⁶ Nerea Arruti, “Tracing the Past: Marcelo Brodsky’s Photography as Memory Art,” in *Paragraph*, vol. 30, no. 1, March 2007, pp. 101-120.

⁷ <http://www.marcelobrodsky.com/intro.html>, last visit 1 December 2014.

⁸ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, Columbia University Press, New York 2012, p. 61.

the memory of a precious and intimate experience, by trying to immortalize the originality of an instant (the projection of the past onto the future), the emotional involvement in seeing a lost happiness actually activates an opposite reaction: the projection of the future onto the past.⁹

From a personal point of view, Marcelo Brodsky delves into heterogeneous time plans to analyze the dynamic layering of time, intrinsically related to the mourning process of a death without a body. It can also be noticed that the restorative looking is constructed by unveiling a subjectivity that permeates the single images taken into account as well as the whole visual project. Personal memory, by working in an articulated way through an artistic expression, triggers the process of collective memory. Following Brodsky, the viewers are perfectly aware that these pictures play a part in both private time and the time of history. This temporal intertwining produces the collapse of the conventional time frames, which surfaces in conventional historicizing of the dictatorship. Instead of the common concept of linearity and chronological progression, an emotional connection to the past signals that the temporal dimension is porous: not only does the very moment of the past penetrate into the present, but also the very moment of the future penetrates into the past.

Reframing the private absence

The migration of the original private image into a new one, affected by the superimposition of heterogeneous projections, shows how the familial structures of mediation and representation increasingly favor the transgenerational relationships. As Marianne Hirsch points out:

*Familial structures of mediation and representation facilitate the affiliative acts of post-generation. The idiom of family can become an accessible lingua franca easing identification and projection across distance and difference. This explains the pervasiveness of family pictures and family narratives as artistic media in the aftermath of trauma.*¹⁰

Private images are not only affective memories of personal experiences, but they are also conventional representations, through which the family is perceived from the outside. The family snapshot is the image through which family members imagine themselves, and can be recognized by others.¹¹ In this sense, a person can easily imagine to be in the pictures of other people and share their

⁹ Nelly Richard (ed.), *Políticas y estéticas de la memoria*, Editorial Un Cuarto Propio, Santiago de Chile 2000, p. 166.

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 39. See also, Nelly Richard, *Fracturas de la memoria. Arte y pensamiento crítico*, Siglo XXI, Buenos Aires 2007.

¹¹ Luisella Farinotti, "Fuori di sé. Identità e immagine," in *Comunicazioni Sociali*, (special issue on *L'impulso autoetnografico. Radicamento e riflessività nell'era intermediale*, ed. by Alice Cati and Glenda Franchin) no. 3, 2012, p. 450.

aspirations and desires they secretly harbour. Thus, the recovery process of those who have been lost appears particularly effective when the past is re-enacted in the present by means of private images.

A literal re-enactment of past family experiences is presented in Gustavo Germano's visual project, *Ausenc'as*, inaugurated on 26 February 2008 at the Centro Cultural Recoleta in Buenos Aires.¹² The photographic exhibit displays fourteen sets of two pictures, where an old family picture from the 1970s is placed next to a new one shot more than thirty years later with the same people, décor and conditions as the originals. However, the viewers immediately face the empty space left by the vanished body. Even the title of the exhibition alludes to the idea of erasure by removing the stem in the letter 'i' of the word 'ausencias'.

Ordinary moments as well as extraordinary rituals are eternalized by the original pictures that still spread their poignancy in the present. Their euphoric and crystalline atmospheres deeply move the observer, whose gaze is suddenly magnetized by the palpable void of the second picture put beside the former one.¹³ Every sign is methodically rearranged and every scene is artificially re-staged, except for the fact that someone is not there anymore.

Germano captures absence by re-photographing families, including his own, prior to and following the disappearance of one or more loved ones. For instance, for the recreation of the photograph of his own family, he chose a portrait of himself with his brothers – Guillermo, Diego and Eduardo.

The picture was taken in a photographic studio, during a journey from the province of Entre Rios in Argentina to Uruguay, its neighboring country. While the family was crossing the international border, the Argentinian police officially requested a picture of the four brothers. Except for the fact that Eduardo is missing, the grown-up men carefully performed their old picture in the new one. Also here, three temporal levels are interconnected: firstly, the original picture congeals forever a moment in time; secondly, it is allowed to look at it in present time; thirdly, such an image projects itself into the future by reiterating its message forever. In other words, a weird tension influences the reading of the signs of the past: why shouldn't Germano's photo be interpreted as a memory of the future? Is it really possible to disregard the latent gaze of the main enunciator/addresser, the Argentina military control that ruled the private/family life before and after the atrocity?

Moreover, making the absence of the body visible, another element stands out: the passage of time and the traumatic interruption of the natural and progressive continuity of life. Actually, the ghostly presence of the disappeared is

¹² The group-photograph can be accessed in the web exhibition at <http://www.gustavogermano.com/#ausencias>, last visit 1 December 2014. The project has also been developed in two other series: *Ausencias – Brazil* and *Distancias*, devoted to displaced people.

¹³ Celina Van Dembroucke, "The Absence Made Visible: The Case of *Ausenc'as*, Gustavo Germano's Photographic Exhibition," in *InTensions Journal*, no. 4, Fall 2010, <http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue4/articles/pdfs/celinavandembrouckearicle.pdf>, last visit 1 December 2014.

not in a condition of invisibility, that is to say, someone or something that is present but not visible. On the contrary, it might be said that the proper aesthetic dimension of the disappeared body is that of a-visibility. After being defeated by the violent politics of forced disappearance, the victims are the *sans-traces*, because for them there is not even an inscription on their tombs that could be the only traces left after their death.¹⁴

For example, in the last diptych of the series, the picture of two young parents, who are showing their few-months old baby to an amateur photographer/addressee, is followed by the portrait of a thirty-year-old woman deprived of her parental care. Leaning on her knees on the same bed where her parents sat, Laura Cecilia Mendez Oliva looks at the camera, in order to evoke that nothing can replace the material emptiness of the bedroom, which symbolizes the most intimate space in the house. Birth and death are put side by side, although the latter cannot be honored by a decorous inscription in the social space.

The very uncanny effect of Germano's photographic project is produced not only by giving prominence to the empty spot that results from reshooting the same pictures, but also by depicting a spectral community which overlaps into the political community of the living.

Moving from a personal experience, represented by the private image of the four Germano brothers, the author is interested in reaching the grief and the mourning process both at a personal and collective level. Because of its serial visual and narrative structures, *Ausenc'as* stands for a symbolic palimpsest of memory, where the intrafamilial relationships (the transmission of memories among the members of the same familial group) open up to the intergenerational and transgenerational exchanges (the transmission of memories among different generations and different social contexts).

A "warm" piece of evidence

In the range of the visual expressions devoted to cultural trauma, we can find many documentary films that aim to witness human suffering inflicted by state terror. The operations of borrowing and recontextualizing private images drew the attention to documenting the victims' physical existence, since the light emanating from the body had chemically affected the photographic film. If that unique analogical shot had been impressed by the individual and irreplaceable body, there are still irrefutable proofs and tools that can be used to ensure resistance to oblivion and contradict national attempts to seclude the country. Similarly, representing a material connection with the past, family pictures turn into relics both at a symbolical and ritual level: under conditions of disappearance, when there is no physical body to mourn, any image of the beloved is considered as an object

¹⁴ Jean Louis Déotte, *La Falsification par les disparus*, in Alain Brossat, Jean Louis Déotte (eds.), *La Mort dissoute. Disparition et spectralité*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2002, p. 228.

of credence, a fetish that bears the traces of the missing person. Reflecting on the concept of index, it is not surprising to find documentary works that enlighten the strong relation between photographic signs and human remnants.

For instance, in the documentary *Fernando ha vuelto* the Chilean filmmaker Silvio Caiozzi filmed the dramatic identification of Fernando de la Cruz Olivares Mori's skeleton by the team of forensic experts and members of the Instituto Médico Legal, namely the coroner's office in Santiago.

Spectators are asked to participate in the dramatic experience of the relatives of a detained person, who later disappeared, and whose corpse finally returned home. The film documents the family process of bereavement, in particular of Fernando's widow, Agave Diaz, to ritualize an unnatural mourning. Following the development of the four chapters of the film (*The Identification*, *The Wait*, *The Return*, and *The Goodbye*), we become aware of the fact that the exhumed remains of the victim need to be identified, seen, described and assessed before giving him a respectable burial. Thus, only the recovery of the relics is able to interrupt and put an end to the state of superimposition of life onto death and indeterminacy that conditions the fate of any disappeared person, as long as he/she is still missing and, as a consequence, not proven dead. Nevertheless, as Hito Steyerl explains, "Being subject to observation provokes the second death of the victim: the one that ends its state of limbo."¹⁵ During the investigation conducted by Patricia Hernández, a forensic medical doctor, and Isabel Rebecco, a forensic anthropologist, on Fernando's bones, the documentary assigns a specific ethical role to the spectator, because by watching the film he/she is included in the process of observation, which is going to declare the person dead. It is as if a kind of eye-witnessing is provided, as a final support not only to the belief that the person has died, but also to attest the countless injuries he/she received at the hands of his torturers.

Probably, the crucial sequence of the film concerns the moment when Hernández describes in great detail the methodology employed to identify Fernando's skeleton that needs to be superimposed with Fernando's private portraits. While some shocking documents are shown to the camera, the spectator is forced to watch a macabre montage of Fernando as a living being over images of his skeleton. In other words, four pictures are glued on a sheet, highlighting a development of the somatic features as a result of the juxtaposition of a private image and a picture of the victim's skull. Inscriptions of the anthropometric measurements point out the good match between the two figures, or the entanglement of death and life. For instance, by using the split screen filming technique in a frame, a sweeping motion from left to right of the dividing line turns a wedding picture into a depiction of death. Slowly, Fernando's profile becomes a skull and Agave, by his side in the snapshot, progressively disappears. Although more wedding pictures appear

¹⁵ Hito Steyerl, "Missing People: Entanglement, Superimposition, and Exhumation as Sites of Indeterminacy," in *E-Flux Journal*, no. 30, October 2012, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/missing-people-entanglement-superposition-and-exhumation-as-sites-of-indeterminacy>, last visit 1 December 2014.

a few minutes later with the clear purpose of re-humanizing the victim¹⁶ and making the spectators familiarize with Fernando's semblance,¹⁷ it is impossible to look at Fernando's portrait without thinking of him as a "soon-to-become-victim" of a waiting atrocity. In this sense, the reuse of family memories seems to emphasize a state of vulnerability, as if intimate life naturally relied on ephemeral happiness and fleeting plenitude, because an overwhelming catastrophe is always forthcoming.

On the contrary, a sort of strength stems from the factual evidence of bones and the related images of all the remains. By providing a direct contact with Fernando, the irrefutable proof of his death¹⁸ engenders a restorative effect in those who have suffered the loss of the vanished body. Instead of distancing and abjection, Fernando's widow felt the warmth of the bones. In a moving sequence, she picks them up and makes the skeleton part of the family's ritual of mourning. It is a gesture of familiarity and closeness as a response to the outrage and acts of denial perpetrated by the military. Later she declared: "I had to touch them, but I also had to give them warmth."¹⁹

Once identified, the remains of the missing person can return to his/her siblings and be buried again, allowing the bones recover their former dignity. Although, at the beginning, Fernando's family photographs and the close-ups of his skull could not be integrated smoothly, but such a photographic superimposition challenges the spectators to accept the entanglement between death and life.

The documentary ends with the preparation of the funeral and the ceremony at a public cemetery, where the burial is attended by Fernando's relatives and a crowd of political activists. Without forgetting that many of the disappeared remain nameless, Caiozzi makes the victims (Fernando, but also his relatives Agave, Fernando's mother and his son) both recognizable and representative in order to stand in the family as a prime site of affliction as well as of social recovery.

Collecting fragments of matter

According to Michel de Certeau, burying a dead person has a symbolic meaning that reassesses his/her place in history. By marking the boundary between present and past, societies try to reshape the horizon of possibilities for those

¹⁶ See Tomás Crowder-Taraborrelli, "Exhumations and double disappearance: Silvio Caiozzi's *Fernando ha vuelto* and *¿Fernando ha vuelto a desaparecer?*," in *Social Identities*, vol. 19, no. 3-4, p. 393.

¹⁷ See Macarena Gómez-Barris, *Where Memory Dwells: Culture and State Violence in Chile*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 2009, p. 113.

¹⁸ As Caiozzi's second documentary *¿Fernando ha vuelto a desaparecer?* (2006) clarifies, Fernando's corpse had been re-exhumed in order to conduct a second survey on his identity. Because of the new forensic analysis, the family suffered a double disappearance of their beloved relative.

¹⁹ Macarena Gómez-Barris, *Where Memory Dwells*, cit., p. 111.

who are living.²⁰ In other words, inserting the person as an ancestor, means revising familial genealogies as well as national ones.²¹

Since the indeterminacy of remains universalizes family relations, any political hindrance to victims' identification is an interruption of the genealogical order. Literally mixed up with dust and heterogeneous fragments, the corpses are only nameless and faceless human remnants in the mass graves dug by the military forces.

To unfold this issue, the last documentary of Patricio Guzmán, *Nostalgia de la luz* follows a group of women in search of human remains scattered around the desert lands of Chile.

The Atacama Desert of Chile, 10,000 feet above sea level, is considered the driest place on Earth. It is a place where archeologists search for traces of humanity's past collecting human remnants kept intact by the fiery rays of the sun, from pre-Columbian mummies to explorers and miners, to the bones of political prisoners disappeared during Pinochet's dictatorship. At the same time, Atacama Desert's sky is so translucent that it allows astronomers to see the movement of stars and constellations very clearly by means of dozens of high-tech telescopes. Whilst the astronomers scan the skies looking for clues to the history of the universe, at the foot of the observatories a group of women is still digging for bone fragments of their relatives who vanished during the repressive dictatorship.

Recurrently in *Nostalgia de la luz*, the filmmaker wanders around the sterile, rocky, desolate ground of the Atacama Desert with his camera. In one of these scenes, associated with Vicky Saavedra's testimony, the camera lingers on a black and white frame plongée portrait of her disappeared brother. The woman tells the viewer that a few teeth and bits of bones are all what is left of her beloved relative. Furthermore, the archeologists found only one foot, which was still in his shoe. Again the camera moves toward José's photograph, showing the smooth surface and sharpness of the image as opposed to the parched and fissured soil underneath it. Bleached by the dazzling light of the sun, the young man semblance is increasingly losing his recognizability. This close-up symbolically represents the dialectic between the whole and the fragment.

The aesthetic strategy of recontextualizing private images is employed in two more sequences of Guzmán's documentary, but they engage different practices of memory. Toward the end, the director assigns Valentina Rodríguez, the daughter of detained and disappeared parents, to unveil the deep meaning of the film. As an astronomer, she has learnt to give another dimension to pain, absence and loss. What happened to her parents can take on a new meaning if we consider the universe as an vast site of energy and recyclable matter. Thus, celestial bodies and human bones are materially, temporally and visually connected. While she is speaking of her own experience, some private pictures are shown as they are put into a frame and displayed in the domestic space. Wedding pictures of her par-

²⁰ Michel de Certeau, *L'Écriture de l'histoire*, Gallimard, Paris 1975.

²¹ Eviatar Zerubavel, *Ancestors and Relatives: Genealogy, Identity, and Community*, Oxford University Press, New York 2012, p. 10.

ents, black and white portraits of a smiling Valentina when she was a child, snapshots of her grandparents, the real fulcrum of her life, are intertwining like ties of a genealogical lineage. In spite of the tearing pain they suffered, the family aims to perpetuate their values through the bright memories that the pictures document.

The long sequence ends with a cross-fading of two scenes, which apparently cannot be compared: on the one hand, Valentina is seen while she is lulling her newborn baby to sleep; on the other hand, there is a huge mosaic made of thousands private, brownish-yellowish photographs of disappeared people. Because of the passing of time, these photographic images have faded, and some of them are completely illegible. Rather than bearing the traces of memory, they are now affected by the flow of time, so that the corroded patina which covers them represents an index of oblivion and amnesia. Placed side by side on the memorial wall, the pictures look like small tiles of a mosaic; or the pixels of a screen. As well as the fragments of a body.

As a result, the spectator is forced to reckon that together with those women who handled the desert matter to collect human remains, he/she might be looking for a past that is impossible to find. The indeterminacy of these human remains is part of their essence, and their essence defines their indeterminacy. The deterioration of the images is not a deficiency, but an additional layer of information, which is about the *mise en forme* of the ghostly presence. This shape shows how the image is observed, treated or ignored in the present, along with the clashes of time frames.

The metaphorical image of the Shakespearean pearl diver, described by Hannah Arendt in the portrait dedicated to Walter Benjamin, is suitable to define the endless action of collecting the remains of the remains.²² Like all relics, private pictures might be imagined as those living eyes and living bones that the sea had changed into pearls and corals. Consequently, any precious fragment defies with its uniqueness any systematic classification and, at the same time, represents a break in the chronological order of time. The collector – who collects his fragments and scraps from the debris of the past – sacrifices the present to invoke the shades of the departed. Not only are memory and forgetfulness perfectly entangled, but also the work of juxtaposing heterogeneous fragments entails both interconnection and disjunction of incommensurable temporalities.

Conclusion

In Chile and Argentina, photographs have been used as a political vehicle to denounce state cruelties. From the very beginning family pictures such as portraits, snapshots, cut frames or blow-up details represented a practical way of finding people, as well as an undeniable proof of the material existence of those people who had either vanished or been executed. Even today, for example, so-

²² Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, A Harvest/HBJ Book, San Diego-New York-London 1955, pp. 199-200.

cial practices of traumatic memory are mediated by the huge placards displaying the enlarged images of the *desaparecidos*' faces, carried around public spaces by the *Madres* and *Abuelas* of the Plaza de Mayo.

Thus, by looking at both social practices of memory and visual artistic operations, it is possible to notice an aesthetic need to give real identity back to the victims. Through private pictures it is possible to turn the spectral condition – the state violence imposed on them – into a visible and recognizable body with a personal and emotional history.

Nelly Richard explains that the connection between photography and ghostly presence is sturdier than ever in the case of pictures of the disappeared. The images remind us that the missing were there and are no longer, suspended between life and death.²³ Typically copied from analogue photos, the grainy images of the disappeared, as well as the missing people themselves, seem frozen in the past or, as she puts it, in the continuous present of a suspended death.

At the same time, images taken in the private sphere urge the viewer to focus on the fate of singular individuals who metonymically stand for all the other victims. The uniqueness of the beloved body is reflected on the uniqueness of the relics left after his/her death. Unfortunately, in too many cases, the relics the disappeared leave behind are only their own private pictures. The photos show the victims in a state of innocence, a vulnerable pose which designates a unique and unrepeatable moment of life in safety.²⁴

For this reason, those images are being looked at as if they were marked at a formal level by backshadowing. What's more, the denial of a public grief in the present influences the perception of the past and its representations. Hence, any euphoric home picture may be seen paradoxically as a gloomy foreboding, influencing the perception of time and therefore leading to the consciousness of the irreparable loss. This device of "retroactive foreshadowing," as Michael André Bernstein introduced it, highlights the latent vulnerability of the represented subjects, as if their painful destiny had already been written out.²⁵ By warning about the risk of the "illusion rétrospective de fatalité," Paul Ricoeur suggests that being aware of the fact that people in the past formulated hopes, desires, projects, fears and expectations means breaking up historical determinism, in order to reintroduce contingency in history.²⁶ Although human actions had unwanted consequences, people in the past imagined a possible future. From the philosopher's point of view, the gap between the present and the past looks like a "cemetery of shattered promises."²⁷ Therefore, a proper restorative action both

²³ Nelly Richard, *Políticas y estéticas de la memoria*, cit., p. 166.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 168.

²⁵ See Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*, University of California Press, Los Angeles-London 1994 and Id., "Victims-in-Waiting: Backshadowing and the Representation of European Jewry," in *New Literary History*, vol. 29, no. 4, 1998, pp. 625-651; see Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, cit., p. 63.

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Seuil, Paris 2000, p. 497.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

at a political and social level should reanimate and revive those shattered promises. If societies pathologize victims' hopes defining them as mere willful delusions, they risk obliterating permanently the horizon of possibilities which the disappeared envisaged for their present lives.

Therefore, it is important to recognize that private pictures not only bear traces of happiness or simple openness to life, but also that they are not images of victimhood. Injuries belong more to the observers and the current need of claiming the right of burial rather than to the smiling or thoughtful expressions shot in the images. As Richard suggests, the migration of home pictures from a private to a public and mediatic domain transforms the testimonial value (*consignación/insistencia*) of photographic trace into an act of political protest (*no-resignación/resistencia*).²⁸

However, in the mourning process, home pictures show that individual life is deeply intertwined with or, better to say, carved in other people's stories. Ricoeur says that the story of a person's life does not belong totally to him/herself. Birth, childhood and even death are stages of life that cannot be told in first person, because the memory of them is lost or because they are inherently incommunicable as they belong to others more than to the subject himself or herself. Consequently, if personal history cannot assume a closed narrative structure, any fragments of life can be placed as segments of a larger scale framework.

As it has been shown with regard to relics in the strict sense, both the distinctiveness and the representativeness of private pictures universalize family relations. Social communities aim to restore familial bonds as a necessary step to renew political connectedness. Where mortality, as opposed to Arendtian "natality," has been for a long time the central category of political thought, neither individual existence could have been preserved nor real conditions for remembrance could have been created.²⁹ The capacity of beginning something new is inherent in all living beings, as long as they belong to the visible world. The attempt to begin something new from the (represented) past, and despite that past, is indicative of an ethical perspective to hand down the meaning of any forced disappearance.

²⁸ Nelly Richard, *Políticas y estéticas de la memoria*, cit., pp. 171-172.

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1958, p. 9.