

ARCHIVE/MISSING. NO(BODY'S) IMAGES?
REFLECTIONS ON ARGENTINIAN DICTATORSHIP (1976-1983)
AND ON ITS VISUAL RECOLLECTION

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On 24 March 1976, General Videla assumes the presidency of Argentina with a coup that was supported by a military junta formed by General Orlando Ramon Agosti and Admiral Emilio Eduardo Massera – who served as Supreme Court and Attorney General, respectively. The dictatorship called “Process of National Reorganization,” lasted almost eight years, until 30 October 1983, the date of the elections won by the Union Civica Radical headed by Raul Afonsin.

From the very beginning, the military dictatorship started out by practicing systematic repressions of every political and social dissent, in particular that of left-wing militants. Repression had already been planned since 1975, a year before the coup (1976). The preparation had been meticulous. This mechanism, developed in order to eliminate any kind of opposition (real or alleged), worked through 364 clandestine concentration camps, where the detainees were first tortured to extort information and then, literally “made to disappear” primarily through bureaucracy: once seized, it was impossible to get information about them, they did not appear even on police or military registers anymore. This was the first step. Subsequently, the prisoners were made to disappear physically with the so-called death flights: they were thrown, still alive, into the sea, the Rio de la Plata. Between 1977 and 1983, the Argentine military dictatorship disposed of more than thirty thousand alleged “opponents”. While the Nazis had followed an ethnic-religious policy of selection (all Jews had to be eliminated without exception), the Argentinean dictatorship followed an *ideological criterion*: to eliminate all young dissenters because, as far as the dictatorship was concerned, it was not possible to erase ideology from their heads.

The escalation of repression led to a clampdown not only on political activists and dissidents but also on those who had simply, even indirectly, sympathized with any social, humanitarian or student association. Therefore, to “disappear” were also, and in great part (!), people who had, actually, in no way been involved in activities against the regime. In fact, 94% of detainees were civilians and only 6% *guerrilleros*, most of them between 15 and 30 years old. A whole generation gone.

Unlike what had occurred in Chile, where the 1973 coup had provided the press and therefore the world’s public opinion with images of aerial bombardment of the Palacio de La Moneda, Argentina’s military dictatorship undertook its repressive activities with secrecy (also in view of the Soccer World Cup that were to take place in Argentina two years later). Therefore, the kidnapping of suspects and their transport to the clandestine detention centers usually occurred by

night. After the kidnapping, the missing people's relatives were not informed of their fate: they simply didn't figure on any record and just "disappeared." There were no traces left and therefore no archives.

Another peculiarity of the Argentine case relates to the places of detention and torture. These were in fact not built *ad hoc*; instead they were situated inside of the civic buildings themselves: city garages, military schools, shooting ranges, police stations etc... most of them were located in the city center undergrounds. Therefore, in a sense, the tragedy was carried out in broad daylight, so to speak, under the eyes of everyone, while remaining, at the same time, invisible.

At one point (30 April 1977), the mothers and relatives of the missing persons, by now convinced of the military's responsibility of the disappearances, began a silent protest: it consisted of a march, the largest and best known of which took place every Thursday in Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, with the image and the name of the missing relatives on a sign and a white handkerchief on their heads. This is the only image we have of the events (fig. 1). The victims of this



Fig. 1 – Madres de Plaza de Mayo (1983).

wave of death were recognized only in 1983 after the declaration of their presumed death, obtained by the *Madres* and *Abulas* (grandmothers) de Plaza de Mayo, with the support of human rights movements. Two years later, this step gave rise to criminal proceedings against the members of the military junta.

There are at least three reasons that compel us to re-propose these historical events, in order to understand the complex relationship between visual archive and social memory when the first one is missing.

The first reason is *political* and concerns impunity. Unlike in Chile and Paraguay, in Argentina the governments that have succeeded the dictatorship have never willfully and unequivocally recognized and thus condemned the crimes committed. In 1986, after the report *Nunca Más* (Never again), 2,000 trials were held against the military that were involved in tortures and human rights violations; even if only for reasons of "national reconciliation" with the *Ley de Punto Final*,¹ the judges were allowed a small margin to initiate the process, after which all charges would have fallen in prescription. In 1988, under the *Ley de Obediencia Debida* (Law of Due Obedience), all of the soldiers who had tortured or killed prisoners by executing an order were declared innocent by the Pardon. The tangible proof of the precise will and determination of the Argentinean post-dictatorial governments' to visually censor as much as possible the tragedy, is also evidenced by the modes of recording the only visual document of military dictators' process in 1985, which were very different from those used in Eichmann's trial: it is in fact composed of still images from a camera placed at the bottom of the courtroom in which all defendants are taken from behind, and one never sees their faces. There were no condemnations and no public recognitions

of what had happened. There were no archives, no museums, no places of memory until the most recent Kirchner government brought about a decisive change in Argentinean history. Firstly, by declaring the *Laws on Pardon* unconstitutional and, secondly, by reopening all trials on 14 June 2005.

The second reason is *social*: during the period when thousands of opponents disappeared, there were, under the military, waiting lists to have a baby from imprisoned women who had given birth in the camps. Those children (about 500) would eventually grow up as true sons of the nation. Those children are now in their thirties and do not know their true identity. The fact is a serious issue both in terms of identity and in social ones implying somewhat suspect in the interstices of the social construction itself.

The third reason pertains to the *symbolic* and relates specifically to the reworking of the trauma and its possibilities of representation. That is specifically what I am going to undertake in this paper.

Desaparecidos have no images, not even one. No traces. No pictures. No archives.

The archive as visual evidence

The importance and value assigned to images in the exercise of memory is certainly not a recent discovery, and the idea that images can play a decisive role in the making of personal and collective memories is nowadays widely shared. Unlike what happened in Europe at the end of World War II, when journalists and filmmakers filmed and photographed concentration camps to document the event and places of Nazi tortures, the murder of more than 30,000 Argentinean dissidents left absolutely no visual cue, no footprint, no visual archive, and no place of memory: *desaparecidos*.

The archive is above all “the law of what can be said”² and, as I have argued, it is secrecy that characterizes the Argentine case from the very beginning.

In the words of Ruth Klüger, a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp, “where there isn’t a grave, mourning does not cease.” How, then, did post-dictatorial Argentina visually rework the trauma?

In Derrida’s formulation, the unyielding etymological ambiguity of the archive (from the greek *arché*: *beginning*, but also *authority*) indicates both beginning and injunction.³ Therefore, the archive seems to be both site of the original and jussive-memorial deposit, place/site where the document is kept in its *authority* and together certification of his *authoriality*. Before the archive as historical memory, Derrida intends the archive as an essentially political institution. It arises first as memory of power, the power claimed by documental heritages and historical sources: there is no political power without the control of the archive, if not that of memory.⁴ Therefore, to control the archives means to govern memory. “The archive has the eminent value of potential memory or, better, it is the material condition of a subsequent cultural memory.”⁵

Ricœur’s reflections uphold this position.⁶ According to the philosopher, archives pertain not only to the management of the past, but also (and in great part) to the planning of the future: documentary traces are instruments that keep the dialogue going between past and present, at least in two respects:

1. The archive is a *physical place* that preserves documental traces, allowing the work of historiographical reconstruction;

2. But, it is also a *social site* that stores and protects a *futura memoria* social memory, which stored and archived documents help to preserve.

Therefore, archives arise as social institutions. Their nature is an eminently social one, as physical places where primary sources are kept, and as sites of potential preservation of social memory.

Given that nowadays both history and social memory no longer pass through only traditional and institutional channels, and that in our contemporary cultural paradigm there are more often images and their different forms of mediation that seem to establish a privileged relationship in the formation and sustenance of personal, collective and historical memories;⁷ and if, as anticipated, in our contemporary culture, this task seems to be increasingly delegated to images, in face of the absence of a record due to a mere non-existence, or because of censorship, how can cultural productions resulting from the symbolic processings of the survivors' testimonies of Argentina's tragedy respond figuratively to the absence of a visual archive? In the case of Argentina, the problem has been (and is) that of putting back on screen documental images of events that have never had an image of their own, in order to *visually support* social memory through symbolic elaborations able to act as "surrogate archives."

What is the image's responsibility in the face of this problem? Obviously the question is both social and political; therefore, it immediately raises at least two ethical issues:

1. Primarily, given the absence of an original archive, cinema candidates itself to act, to play the role of a figurative archive – albeit a surrogate one. Given these circumstances, the first question is that of a "rightness" of a *voluntary act of figurative memory* production without any visual evidence.
2. Secondly, what is the responsibility of the image in the event of the lack of an original? Indeed even of a virtual one: survivors themselves have no visual memory because of the *tabiquamento*⁸...

Furthermore, how does one shoot violence? There is no objectivity in violence.

Given that (a) the contemporary canon of historical filmic reconstructions seems to be mainly that of the *re-semantization* of archival records (either in the form of found footage, and that of the cast); and that (b) we are usually used to *trust* in archival documents (confidence and trust which coexist with the idea that its handling, its hypertextual re-contextualization, is going to preserve its original sense, already dense of all ethical connotations of "History's Judgment"); mindful of the absence of a figurative canon resulting from the absence, the disappearance or the censorship of a visual archive, how is it possible to produce a figurative memory of the event and through which linguistic strategies?

Argentinian trauma on screen

From the sampling and analysis of Argentina's post-dictatorial film productions that have tried to symbolically rework the trauma (only a few films, indeed) different narrative and topic modes emerge. Upon general analysis, both in the more recent productions and in those immediately following the fall of the dictatorship, we can observe the coexistence of more *realistic genres* both in their declination of *drama* (*Jacobo Timerman*, Linda Yellen, 1983) and that of an *explicit thematization of trauma* (*Garage Olimpo*, Marco Bechis, 1999; *Hijos*, Marco Bechis, 2002; *Das Lied in mir*, Florian Micoud Cossen, 2010), or an *indirect* one (through the detective story in *El*

secreto de sus ojos, Juan José Campanella, 2009); with *fantastic genres* in their heterogeneous declinations like that of the *surreal* (*Moebius*, Gustavo Mosquera, 1998; *Imaging Argentina*, Christopher Hampton, 2003), or even the *horror* (*Aparecidos*, Paco Cabezas, 2007). By virtue of their ability to lead to displacement and disorientation produced from the intrusion of the surreal and the supernatural in everyday life, these genres are thus able to manage a metaphorical and symbolical *processing of the trauma* in terms of disbelief in front of disappearance.

1. At a first glance, a kind of cinema obsessed with reality that it is able to recreate only through a *hallucinatory form* seems to emerge.
2. In fact, in terms of style, the common *fil rouge* that runs through the mood of many texts seems to be *dreamlike* in differing degrees, narratively transposed through the admixture and hybridization of reality and imagination (synthesized in figures of dreams, clairvoyance, zombies, story within the story, etc.), able to recreate the surreal dimension typical of incredulity and disbelief in front of disappearance's absurdity.
3. With regard to screenplays, given the lack of archives, they are in most cases *adaptations* of novels (*The Honorary Consul*, John Mackenzie, 1983, *La noche de los lápices*, Hector Olivera, 1988, etc.), or texts based on testimonies on which I am going to pursue later.
4. A further issue that pertains to the aesthetical level and that all productions have in common, is encountered in the use of *chromatic codes*. Whereas the canon used by contemporary mainstream cinema to establish the historicization and indirectly the "archivation" of historical events seems to follow more and more often the standard of black and white (even to facilitate the overlapping/juxtaposition of images in the editing of *footage* with *ex novo* images), it is a chromatic option absent in all the filmic texts for at least two reasons: (a) there is no visual document nor archival footage available to strengthen the documentary status of the filmic text; (b) nor does it seem that the event has been in somehow archived into the common social conscience, into the present. Instead, the question remains more open than ever because of identity issues raised by the *hijos* (the sons) of *desaparecidos*.
5. In terms of representation *per se*, given that there are no images of the disappeared, the only available figurative materials – which may in some way constitute an iconographic archive of the tragedy – are the images of the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* and the few remaining photographs of the disappeared. Nothing but a few *wrecks* are left of the Argentinean tragedy.

They are, however, tracks, traces, ghostly imprints that stay "in place" of an original absent,⁹ *disappeared*, again. Only a text, the most recent, re-enters these traces linking them to the pro filmic narrative: for example, in *El secreto de sus ojos*, the photograph on the bedside table strongly resembles the mosaics of the missing we already know (fig. 2).



Fig. 2 – *El secreto de sus ojos* (Juan José Campanella, 2009).

Reconstructing the tragedy on screen is a political issue, and as Godard used to say “you don’t have to shoot political films, but to shoot films politically.” Therefore, if the archive is missing, what kind of images can reprocess violence and trauma?

Marco Bechis’ autobiographical writing in *Garage Olimpo*, and his biographical writing in *Hijos* seem emblematic because of the way they develop, starting from the research and possibility of reshooting the archive. Let us take, for example, *Garage Olimpo*. Firstly, under a purely *technical* aspect the film was shot entirely in Buenos Aires, and in continuity. On the *aesthetical* level, the underground scenes are always shot with the camera on the operator’s shoulder, and with intradiegetic lights, nothing is artificial (unlike the city that is shot as fiction). Secondly, the construction of a realistic and almost documentary figurativeness is obtained through images built on sound and words. They are built up through the words and sounds evoked by the witness – given that even survivors have no images of the event – and are recalled by survivors both *on and off the set*. Thirdly, the effort to build the profilmic *with* the witnesses and *through* their evidence – among them objects and dresses belonging to the *desaparecidos* – is what largely establishes an affinity between the fiction and the archive understood as rest, as a significant trace of the past that can engage in a dialogue with the present.¹⁰ On the other hand, both Ricœur¹¹ and Assmann¹² emphasize the importance of testimony for historical reconstruction and its ability *to become archive*. In the case of Bechis’ movies, testimony plays a key role for at least two reasons. *Garage Olimpo* is not only built through the survivors’ evidences (from 1991 on, he gathers more than 70) and through their concrete presence on the set as active participation in the creation of the filmic text; but, even the director himself in some way certifies the text through its *own biographical experience*. Fourthly: shooting violence. It is always the hint, the *allusion of the gesture* that prevails on the unseen and on the un-shown, in this way always avoiding the risk of abjection, as described by Serge Daney on *Kapò*’s final traveling.¹³ Finally, Bechis’ movies are not to be considered only as *ethical images*, but as *distressing images* that literally leave an impression on the audience when they leave space to time. Editing solves a key role in this sense because rather than as conceptual device it is deployed as a strategy able to unlock image’s whole potential, thus conferring ethical and moral resonances to the filmic text. Bechis’ images never show violence, on the contrary they imagine the violent gesture, in this way becoming stronger than mere representations, or than possible footages. They never give, rather they suggest (fig. 3).

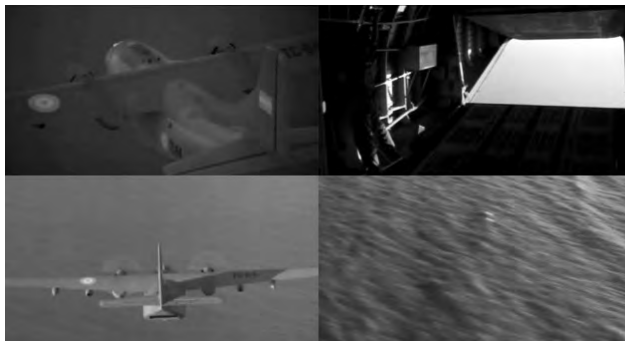


Fig. 3 – *Garage Olimpo* (Marco Bechis, 1999).

Conclusions

The archive is thus not just a place of storage and preservation of an archivable past content, it goes further. The archive concurs to some extent to produce, to bring into existence into the past, recording them, the archivable events, determining the content of (future) knowledge itself. Archiving means not only preserving, but somehow capitalizing the possibility of a future testimony. What archives imply is the ethical imperative of preserving the memory of what has gone (and therefore they contain the potential, the opening to a future).

Therefore, how is it possible to have knowledge without archive? What type of imagery reprocesses trauma? Based on what if the archive is missing? As we have seen, in this case the only solution seems to be that of the *living archive*¹⁴ and the memories, the recollections and the social discourses that constitute what has been defined by Aleida Assmann¹⁵ as *memory-archive*, it is a memory of the memories that includes everything that has already lost a vital relationship with the present. In this kind of memory as many testimonies as cultural productions that rework and sustain themselves through them are included, turning them again into *functional memory* through the establishment of that dialogue between past and present released by the recirculation of witness in its various forms.

The works of Bechis – through the effort of telling the *guerra sucia* (dirty war) through ethical images drawn from a symbolic *density* built on the evocation of an alternative archive, it is that of the traces and the wrecks, and evoked entirely through the reiteration of the un-shown and unseen and through the soundtrack that imposes itself on the images – seem at first sight to establish themselves as master works in social discourses. Indeed, *Garage - Olimpo* and *Hijos* have both received an archival form intended as *physical place* (as described at the beginning by Ricœur¹⁶) from the *Cineteca Vida* in Buenos Aires. This is clearly a form of institutionalization, *a futura memoria* through the *recognition of their national interest*. Furthermore, both have in some ways received an institutionalization as *social site*: UGC on Argentinean *desaparecidos* use, in most cases, scenes taken from *Garage Olimpo* as source material and therefore they play a big part in the visual reworking process by re-entering fictional images onto the audience understood as a *subject-archive* (fig. 4).¹⁷ Moreover *Hijos* has been able to virtually generate a meeting



Fig. 4 – Homage to *desaparecidos* by the amateur videomaker Leon Gieco, who cites Bechis' *Garage Olimpo*.

place for the sons of the disappeared (<http://www.garageolimpo.it>); that by itself does not say much about its ability to become an archive, but certainly it says much on its co-option as figurativeness able to establish itself *as* a document.

Finally, the question at stake here is that the image as discourse broadens the archive as a set of discursive forms that enable the emergence of future discourses, a prerequisite both for a proactive action by the audience and for the fulfillment of the role of constitution, preservation and maintenance of social and collective memory, which had already been identified from the outset as a primary function of the archive.¹⁸

Filmography

Jacobo Timerman: Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number (Linda Yellen, USA 1983)

Las madres de Plaza de Mayo (Susana Blaustein Muñoz, Argentina 1985)

Missing (Costa Gavras, USA 1982).

The Honorary Consul (John Mackenzie, UK 1983)

Sur (Fernando E. Solanas, Argentina/France 1988)

La noche de los lápices (Hector Olivera, Argentina 1988)

Moebius (Gustavo Mosquera, Argentina 1998)

Garage Olimpo (Marco Bechis, Argentina/Italy 1999)

Vidas privadas (Fito Páez, Spain/Argentina 2001)

Hijos (Marco Bechis, Italy 2002)

Imaging Argentina (Christopher Hampton, Spain/UK/USA 2003)

Aparecidos (Paco Cabezas, Argentina 2007)

Salamandra (Pablo Agüero, France/Argentina/Germany 2008)

Desaparecido (Peter Sanders, Argentina 2008)

El secreto de sus ojos (Juan José Campanella, Argentina 2009)

La mirada invisible (Diego Lerman, Argentina/France/Spain 2010)

Das Lied in mir (Florian Micoud Cossen, Germany/Argentina 2010)

1 The *Ley de Punto Final* (law 23.492, Extinción de la acción penal) is a law passed by the Argentinian National Congress on 24 December 1986, during the presidentship of Raul Alfonsín within the process of democratization of the country after the end of the military dictatorship of the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional (1976-1983). The law dictates the end of investigations and prosecutions against people accused of political violence during the dictatorship, up to the restoration of the democratic rule on 10 December 1983. Literally: “Are to be extincted prosecutions brought against all people who have committed crimes tied to the establishment of violent forms of political action until 10 December 1983.” The law, by decreeing the impunity of the military for the disappearance and torture of at least 9,000 people, was extremely controversial in its time and afterwards. This law had a complement in the *Ley de Obediencia Debida* (Law of Due Obedience), which exempted subordinates from any accusation when they were carrying out orders. Both laws were considered null and void by the National Congress in 2003 and declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of Justice on 14 June 2005, under Néstor Kirchner’s presidentship. In this way allowing the re-opening of cases that involved crimes

- against humanity. The first of such cases, which involved the former Buenos Aires Provincial Police second-in-command Miguel Etchecolatz, ended in September 2006 and laid down precedent by acknowledging that the dictatorship's state terrorism was a form of genocide.
- 2 Michel Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir*, Gallimard, Paris 1969 (ed. it. *L'archeologia del sapere*, Rizzoli, Milano 1971).
 - 3 Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'archive. Une impression freudienne*, Galilée, Paris 1995 (ed. it. *Mal d'archivio. Un'impressione freudiana*, Filema, Napoli 1996).
 - 4 *Ibidem*.
 - 5 Aleida Assman, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung (Oscar Beck), München 1999 (ed. it. *Ricordare*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2002, p. 383).
 - 6 Paul Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oublié*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 2000 (ed. it. *La memoria, la storia, l'oblio*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2003).
 - 7 Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore 1973.
 - 8 *The tabiquados* were prisoners whose eyes were blindfolded so that they could not recognize any people or places.
 - 9 Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'archivio*, cit.
 - 10 Georges Didi-Hubermann, *Images malgré tous*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris 2004 (ed. it. *Immagini malgrado tutto*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2005).
 - 11 Paul Ricœur, *La memoria, la storia, l'oblio*, cit.
 - 12 Aleida Assmann, *Ricordare*, cit.
 - 13 Serge Daney, "Le Travelling de Kapò," in *Trafic*, no. 4, Autumn 1992.
 - 14 Daniele Dottorini, "Nachleben: l'archivio dei gesti," in *Fata Morgana*, no. 2, October 2007.
 - 15 Aleida Assmann, *Ricordare*, cit.
 - 16 Paul Ricœur, *La memoria, la storia, l'oblio*, cit.
 - 17 Ruggero Eugeni, "Lo spettatore-archivio: Cinema – Memoria – Modernità," in *Fata Morgana*, no. 2, October 2007.
 - 18 Further bibliographical references: Orlando Baroncelli, *Su la testa, Argentina! Desaparecidos e recupero della memoria storica*, Libriliberi, Firenze 2008; Marco Bechis, *Argentina 1976-2001 filmare la violenza sotterranea*, Ubulibri, Milano 2001; Michel De Certeau, *L'Écriture de l'histoire*, Éditions Gallimard, Paris 1975 (ed. it. *La scrittura della storia*, Jaka Book, Milano 2006); Maurizio Ferraris, *La documentalità*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2009; Carlo Ginzburg, *Il filo e le tracce: vero, falso, finto*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2006; Carlo Ginzburg, *Rapporti di forza, Storia, retorica, prova*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2000; Roberto De Gaetano, "L'inarchiviabile," in *Fata Morgana*, no. 2, October 2007; Hayden White, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore-Maryland 1987.