

Post-Dictatorship
Argentinian Cinema
as a Renarration of
Collective Memory

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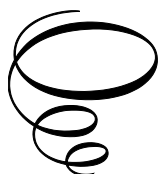
The Spectrum of Absence

By

Carla Grosman

Translated by Lilen Gillet

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ABSTRACT

Although Film Studies is an area with important epistemological advances, in recent decades most of the analyses related to the Southern Hemisphere present an approach to this region's cinema that places importance on its historical-political descriptive capacity without paying attention to its symbolic power as a performative actor in the processes of social change. This book focuses on this epistemological gap by highlighting the discursive relationships between the ethical-aesthetic modes of production of Argentinian cinema in the first post-dictatorial decade and the competing discourses that were negotiating a narrative of the truth of the dictatorial past. *The Spectrum of Absence* covers the hyperreal dynamics through which this cinema stands as a cognitive map able to promote critical interpretations of the post-dictatorial world, represent a theoretical model about how society is structured, and guide the individual's sense of place at that moment of intersubjective forgetting. The book starts with an analysis of Luis Puenzo's film *The Official Story* (1985) presenting it as a pattern of reinterpretation, representation and reconstruction of the historical narrative that generates a new syntagmatic chain – a new syntax of memory – capable of promoting the social elaborative work of memory that confronts the symptoms of postmodern and post-dictatorial schizophrenia. For this reason, this syntactic organisation serves as a “cognitive map” for the examination of two other later films: *A Wall of Silence* (Lita Stantic, 1993) and *Buenos Aires Vice versa* (Alejandro Agresti, 1996), so that the three, together in one intertextual dynamic, are integrated into a post-dictatorial poetics that renarrates collective memory.

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FOREWORD

For the generation of Argentines born during the “National Reorganisation Process”, or in the immediately preceding years, it is difficult to disconnect our lives from this *process*; the very term implies the development of a determination towards a specific objective, that began with the military regime and that extends to life under the *democratic* regime. Those of us who went through our socialisation process under this system and later grew up in the world they left for us cannot help but feel that we are *instruments* of such a reorganisation. Thus, the “re-democratisation” and the “process” have become two faces of the same coin, without which we would be unable to pay for our orphanhood.

We have been taught everything, everything, even what we should not have learned. Thus, the adults of the present have naturalised that fear and instilled conservative values as the only way towards coexistence. We believe in national myths as the true milestones that forged history, and we have become increasingly intolerant because this attitude seems to be the only truth constitutive of social life. Perhaps all this is due to this generation, to which I belong, being deprived of all connections with the alternative, that today constitute a hole in the social network: 30,000 disappeared fathers, mothers, educators, intellectuals, artists, scientists and workers of all kinds who were not there to educate us and will not be here to tell the story.

Up to the time when I was writing this book (2003-2005), the story of the past had been told, – relying on the horror and disregarding the civic and economic responsibilities that instigated it –, with the guarantee given by those who were present. These were the 38 million amnesiacs, deaf, blind and mute who were unwilling, or unable, to acknowledge themselves within the catastrophe.

Thus, what concept of social memory did they bequeath to us? One that builds a sense of belonging to the culture in which one is born? If every generation is educated by the memory of past generations, where was the generation that should pass down memory to us? Instead, we have received a transplanted memory of the national anthems and holidays that celebrate an independence in which no one believes, a memory that leapt over the

historical void of the unnameable, that which was not in books or discussed in classrooms.

From the place of a new young adult who refused to accept the teachings of their “education” and declined to educate new generations through the mechanical repetition of a sick Argentine society, I found it necessary to unveil the traces of memory of that utopia so it could “return with life” in the solidarity song of artistic expression.

Considering that 20 years separate the writing of this book and its present edition, and aware of the theories and perspectives with which analysts of the past two decades have offered possible explanations for the social catastrophe, this manuscript would be now completely obsolete. But it is not. In order to be so it would require today’s Argentina to have overcome the conflicts by socially agreeing on a collective memory of the dictatorial past. If it were inconsistent with what this book reveals about the construction of the real carried out by the discourses of neoliberal democracy, the average Argentine would already have visualised the ways in which power manipulates them and would not have repeated electoral decisions that undermined their own present and future economic and moral well-being. It is sad to note that, despite the efforts of popular cultural politics that followed the writing of this book, none of this has been consolidated in any substantial way. Therefore, in the fortieth anniversary of Argentinean re-democratic process, I feel that the reflection that this book intends to communicate in 2005 is still valid and that, consequently, its original dedication could also serve as a motto today:

“This book is being written for all of us who recognise ourselves within a still solidary and still collective historical narrative.”

PROLOGUE

XIMENA TRIQUEL

In his introduction to Lacan through popular culture, Slavoj Žižek wonders why the return of the living dead is such a recurring motif in films produced in the second half of the 20th century.¹

From George A. Romero's movie, *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968), to *Pet Sematary*, originally directed by Mary Lambert (1989) – whose remake was recently released (Kevin Kölsch and Denis Widmyer, 2019) –, the dead return once and again to our screens.

Why, Žižek wonders, do the dead return? Resorting to Lacan, the answer he finds is that they do so because they have not been duly buried. Dead people return – he says – because there is a symbolic debt that remains unpaid. For him, an exemplary case of this return are the victims of the Holocaust and of the Gulags, whose shadows “will continue to haunt us like the living dead until we give them a decent burial, until we integrate the trauma of their death into our historical memory” (Žižek, 2000, 48). However, there is no doubt that there are also other deaths that remain without graves, and whose subjects likewise return on these and other screens.

Funeral rites represent symbolisation par excellence – through them, the fundamental function of signs becomes evident: to make the absent present. Where else would the absence of a person who dies find its place if not within the symbolic framework that constitutes us as a community? Without ritual, without this “second death”, the dead cannot “stay in death”, but rather persist in that intermediate space (“between-two-deaths”, as Lacan would say): which is that of the ghost, that of apparitions – the one in the title of this book, the “spectre”.

This is what Antigone claims for her brother, the possibility of a grave, a symbol to give death a closure. This is also what the ghost of Hamlet's father demands from him: a debt has to be settled.

Now, if the spectres return because they have not been properly buried, how would it be possible to ignore them in relation to the deaths that in Argentina

remained unwritten, without a grave to symbolize such absence?² And what is post-dictatorship cinema if not the space – one of them – where these spectres are allowed to appear?

For this reason, and unlike the historical period that we refer to as “post-dictatorship”, post-dictatorship cinema cannot be circumscribed to a certain historical moment, but rather continues, insistently, despite time, even in movies produced nowadays. “Post-dictatorship cinema” does not constitute a temporary reference, but a spatial one: it is, as we have mentioned, the space where these spectres appear.³

* * *

Carla Grosman’s text was written between 2003 and 2005, in a foreign country. At that time in Argentina, the laws of *Punto final* and *Obediencia debida*⁴ were revoked, and President Néstor Kirchner ordered the removal of Videla and Bignone’s portraits from the directors’ gallery of the National Military School.⁵

A new stage in human rights issues was beginning in this country, as was a new stage in the development of “post-dictatorship cinema”.

Why then dwell on the previous cinema? Why go back to see and read those movies belonging to what we can call “the first post-dictatorship cinema”?

What can this reading contribute today, in such different circumstances, to reflecting on the past and, even more, the present or the future?

This book is the very answer to that question. The author focuses on the analysis of three movies, which extend throughout the decade – Luis Puenzo’s movie *The Official Story*, (1985), Lita Stantic’s *A Wall of Silence* (1993) and Alejandro Agresti’s *Buenos Aires Vice versa* (1996). She proposes to identify operations that go beyond the historical situation, even though they refer to it. Thus, in *The Official Story* she finds the possibility of thinking about a new “syntax of memory”, which enables the elaboration of collective mourning, while establishing a poetics that is repeated in subsequent movies. Grosman’s text addresses the theme of the last Argentinian dictatorship, but, at the same time, it encompasses what can be shared in other latitudes: the construction of collective memory, the work of mourning, cinema as a space for its development.⁶

Concurrently, in line with other works on the subject written from outside Argentina – such as those by William Foster or Richard King– it allows us

to see how these movies were read by the foreign academy and viewers from other countries, and in what way can project the Argentinian historical experience to other contexts. It should be noted that the three movies dealt with in this book, have had great international recognition.⁷

At the beginning of this prologue, I quoted Zizek's book whose title is *Looking Awry*. In Carla Grosman's study, she looks at the movies that she analyses in that way: "awry", "from the corner of her eye", not to read in them what they say – or rather said – about recent history to their contemporaries, but to see what they expose – or exposed – unknowingly, a "political unconscious" (to use, as Grosman does, Fredric Jameson's term).

Grosman's text, written in 2005, views Post-dictatorship Argentinian cinema from a spatial and temporal distance, through the eyes of someone who watches from another continent and decades after it was made. Its publication, 18 years later, creates further distance. Paradoxically, it is thanks to this gap, the void left by such distance, where it is possible to think again. That is, after we have looked at this cinema "vis-à-vis", once we have already analysed and understood it in its aesthetic, narrative, historical, political dimension, and, when it seems that there is nothing to discover there any more, this book provides us with the opportunity to look at those old movies again, this time "awry", and, by doing so, find new meanings there.

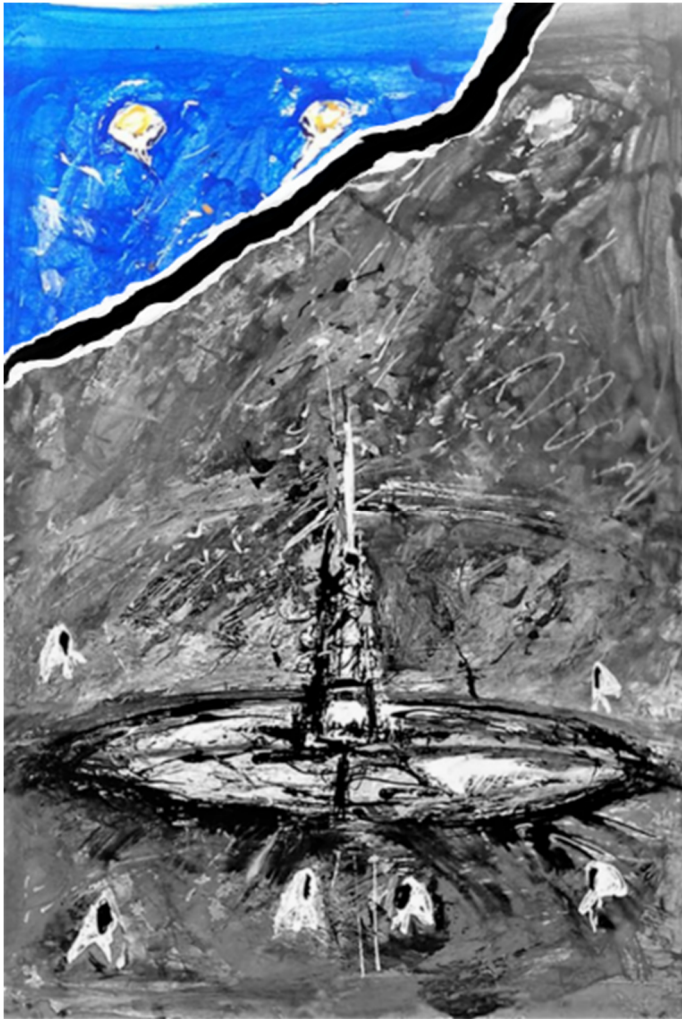


Image – 01

“Fragmento 1”

Digital editing on *Ronda* by Alejandro Failla

INTRODUCTION

CINEMA, MEMORY AND FORGETTING: TWO SOCIO-SEMIOTICS STUDIES

I -First Decade of Post dictatorship. Cinema as a Symbolic Act for the Re-narration of Collective Memory

We must start by recognising that, during the re-democratisation (which, from a cultural perspective, I regard as the first post-dictatorship decade), Argentina showed characteristic symptoms of a generalised trauma typical of a society emerging from social catastrophe towards a system that does not channel their collective suffering and expresses itself socially through silence, forgetting or avoidance. Thus, while in the institutional sphere the political meaning of the events from the past were manipulated, in public discourse the claims of the direct victims of state terrorism were isolated. This isolation could occur through direct action, such as manipulation of the mass media, or by the monopolisation of painful accounts provided by direct victims.

In *The works of Memory* (2001, 48-50) the Argentine sociologist Elizabeth Jelin makes a distinction, essentially relevant to our analysis, between two groups that at the moment of redemocratisation began to negotiate the memory of the dictatorial past. The first is that of the “guardians of memory”, a concept that applies to groups that, having been directly affected by state terrorism and having failed to find the conditions of social audibility to describe their experience, think of themselves as the only mourning relatives of the catastrophe, continually resorting to repetition and symbolic commemorations. In this way, they inadvertently hinder the possibilities of social elaboration of the experience by not allowing the intergenerational transmission of these memories. Unlike them, Jelin (2000) proposes the concept of “agents of memory” applied to groups that generate projects, new ideas and expressions of creativity that, regardless of whether they are direct victims, promote a collective redefinition of past experiences within present contexts. That is to say, looking at their actions in the cultural field, these groups understood the need to undertake the social elaboration

of collective historical memory. Now, what is history and what is memory? And how are the structural conditions to reformulate their social frameworks of interpretation created?

Theoretically, historical discourse is considered a textual construction since post-structuralists broadened the boundaries of the concept of text, which now encompasses objects that were, until then, thought of as realities or objects of the real world, such as social education, political power, social classes, institutions and events. Therefore, this new text is no longer restricted to written documents, but focuses on its constitution as an object beyond its empirical form and its relationship with other constructed objects; historical facts do not speak “for themselves”. Frank Graziano (1992, 8) is part of this line of thought. He establishes the affinity between the discourse of history - often called fact - and that of literature, because history does not consist of raw events per se, but events that have come to us as more or less constructed narratives. Both are, in fact, the author’s constructions with complex connections between their production conditions and some non-neutral paradigm that organizes them, gives them morality and meaning as truth. In Graziano’s view, if history is a form of discourse that produces, rather than represents, past events, it must be the result of a methodology similar to that of textual strategies.

Fredric Jameson (1981, 20), using the same variables, sees history as neither a text nor a narrative, but, being an absent cause, is inaccessible to us except in its textual form. For this reason, the author argues, our approach to history of the real necessarily goes through a process of textualisation; narrativisation in the political unconscious. For Jameson (1981, 286) then, the discourse of history has two fundamental moments. The first is textualisation, the ideologisation process that narratively orders the events of the past. The second is narrativisation, the process of mental assimilation of this narrative, conveyed by textual means through a language that satisfies certain archetypal “drives” or “utopian values” that are present in the unconscious as archetypal impulses that find satisfaction in the narrations of cultural texts because both cultural production and religious practice are expressions of nostalgia for the collective. Jameson (1981) observes that these utopian values have been detached from daily life by the historical reification of the symbolic program of capitalism, but, he adds, they remain latent in the political unconscious. It is with this utopian reformulation in our psyche that the cultural artifacts of hegemonic power are connected with each other through a complex strategy of rhetorical persuasion on an unconscious scale. It is with this latent utopian impulsiveness that, according to Jameson, counter-hegemonic discourses must reconnect.

For Jelin, the materialisation of historical discourse is operated in the intersubjective dimension of memory where individual experiences can be transformed into collective experiences and embedded within shared cultural codes. Jelin sees memory as a representation of the past built as shared cultural knowledge that responds to a social organisation and its cultural codes. Thus, “personal memories are inserted into collective narratives that are often reinforced in group rituals and commemorations” (Jelin, 2001, 21).

But what role do these shared cultural codes play in the narration of experiences that aspire to become memories? Jelin’s answer (2001, 20), based on Maurice Halbwachs (1980), is as follows: “we can only remember when it is possible to recover the position of past events within the frameworks of collective memory [...] Forgetting is explained by the disappearance of these frames or part of them”. Quoting Gerard Namer, Jelin highlights: “...as these frameworks are historical and changing, in fact, memory is a construction rather than a single memory, and what does not acquire meaning within that frame is likely to be forgotten” (21).⁸

The sociologist concludes that forgetting occurs when public and collective practices no longer serve as the framework of individual memory: “when, due to political conditions, collective practices end up consisting mainly of ritualisation, repetition, deformation or distortion, silence or lies, and this is what causes the breakdown in the intergenerational transmission” (Jelin, 2001, 34).

Under these circumstances, and in order to help conceive a way out of forgetting, Jelin (2001, 31) proposes a clarification of the processes of memorialisation as “passive” and “active”. This coincides with Tzvetan Todorov’s distinction (2000) between the “literal” memory of an event (the social group preserves what is remembered as a non-transferable experience) and the “exemplary” one (when, “without denying the singularity of the event, the memory allows for learning, and the past becomes an action principle for the present”).

The author then claims that there may be information stored in people’s minds or in public and private archives, but these reservoirs are “passive” because they do not impel human activity in the present in relation to them. However, these memories can be enabled at the individual level, for which Jelin (2001, 23) incorporates another distinction, one introduced by cognitive psychologists between “recognition” - the identification of an item referring to the past - and its “evocation” - which implies the evaluation

of what is being recognised with active effort on the part of the subject -. Thus, the author states that in the social field passive memories are not per se a guarantee of their evocation, but, if the subjects evoke them when interacting, they become actions aimed at giving meaning to the past in the tragedy of the present; that is the social elaborative work of memory.

It is important to point out that Jelin recovers the Freudian term of “elaborative work” – which, in a therapeutic context, refers to the work of mourning. Laplanche and Pontalis (1981, 435-436) define elaborative work as the process by which the analysed subjects acknowledge specific repressed elements and free themselves from the control of the repetitive mechanisms that refrained them from such acknowledgement. In the context proposed by Jelin, such psychic work would be at play throughout the mourning process, which these authors define as an intrapsychic process following the loss of a fixation object, and by means of which subjects manage to detach themselves progressively from such an object. Based on this reading, Jelin (2001) applies the concept of “[s]ocial elaborative work of memory” to the political and collective fields with the aim of overcoming repetitions, forgetfulness and political abuses, as this would promote debate and active reflection on that past and its significance for the present and the future. This promotion of elaborative work has to do with the act of narration itself because, as Jelin (2001, 37) emphasises, “individual experience builds community as a result of the shared narrative act, of narrating and listening”. That is precisely what we consider relevant when studying post-dictatorship cinema as an active factor in the processes of social elaborative work of memory. It is relevant, also, because if the experience is mediated by the symbolic acts that give and at the same time gain meaning within the interpretative cultural framework, it is possible to use symbolic mediations to resignify the historical interpretative framework of power. Hence, the evocative images of art and of the fiction of cinema and literature can - from an alternative textualisation strategy - restore alternative meanings to the construction of collective historical memory that could later be configured as a sociolect that legitimises the historical text as truth. That is why I consider symbolic mediations not only as acts that represent history, but also as facts that constitute it.

I agree with Jameson (1981) that the aesthetic act has a mythical status in the social imaginary because it both reflects and constructs an awareness of our historical present, which is what the author calls “the paradox of the subtext” (67). I contend that this simultaneity of reaction and situation that defines the “symbolic act” (Jameson, 1981, 62) constitutes the inherent historical performative capacity of the cultural text with which to modify

the perception of our own experience of the real and its interpretation as a narrative of the past.

Postmodernity and simulacrum as a cognitive map

Examining Jean Baudrillard's and Jean-François Lyotard's statements regarding the end of Modern referents such as the Real, Meaning, History, Power, the Revolution or even the Social, Jameson (1991, p. 50) claims these authors are covering up the theoretical problem of providing a narrative for contemporary history. He insists that the absolute rupture between Modernity, marked by totalising theories and revolutionary politics, and so-called post-modernity does not allow for certain existing continuities between the two. While these French critics propose that the "postmodern condition" is a new social formation, which is no longer governed by the laws of classical capitalism, Jameson disagrees. Instead, he suggests that "any postmodernist position in the field of culture - be it apology or stigmatisation - is simultaneously, and necessarily, an implicit or explicit political stance on the nature of current multinational capitalism" (1991, 14). He maintains that this "new society" is at all levels a phase of capitalism, since today capital penetrates territories that had never before been commodified, such as the unconscious. In this sense, Jameson (1991, 106) expresses that "what we have been calling postmodernism is inseparable from, and unthinkable without the hypothesis of, some fundamental mutation of the sphere of culture in the world of late capitalism which includes a momentous modification of its social function." This logic configures for Jameson the culture of the simulacrum, where the real is transformed into a series of "pseudo-events" or "spectacles" that are non-existent originals. In his opinion, the "culture of the simulacrum" has materialised in a society that has generalised exchange value to the point that all traces of use value have vanished. Images have become the ultimate form of mercantile reification, the society of the spectacle in which "the past, as 'referent', is between parentheses and, finally, absent, leaving us nothing but texts" (Jameson, 1991, 46). The author argues that the effects of the new logic of the postmodern spectacle is the crisis of historicity, where subjects lose the ability to organise their past and future into a coherent experience. Their cultural production is now, according to Jameson (1991, 64), the fortuitous practice of the random or fragmentary, that is, "schizophrenic writing". Jameson uses such an adjective, following the Lacanian definition of schizophrenia that implies the breakdown of meaning along the syntagmatic chain.⁹ Thus, for Jameson (1991) the logic of the simulacrum not only replicates, but also reinforces the logic of

advanced capitalism. Therefore, he declares that the only means of social change in the postmodern scene is to “reject this cultural form of icon-addiction that transforms reflections of the past into stereotypes and texts” (1991, 103).

So, what is the prescriptive possibility of postmodernity, given the exploded sphere of culture? In this context, says Jameson (1991, 21), art’s mission responds to the need to invent and design “global cognitive mappings, both on a social and spatial scale” keeping the object and forcing a break with it. A “progressive art”, the author continues, must involve a cognitive mapping of its cultural and aesthetic program to encourage critical interpretations of the postmodern world; it should represent a theoretical model of how society is structured, and guide the individual’s sense of place. Ultimately, the mapping should become the “moment of truth of postmodernism”, the “sublime postmodern”, thanks to its ability to represent and, at the same time, constitute reality.

In my opinion, as a cognitive map, the simulacrum can fulfil the role Nelly Richard (1993, 453) prescribes: that of being a “postcolonial instrument of decolonisation” because “the use of the postmodern form (ephemerality, discontinuity, fragmentation, simulacrum) can redefine the roles in Latin American identity.”

In view of this aim, I see in Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacrum (1994, 2) perhaps the only possible instrument to “intervene in history”: its ability to distract power. Baudrillard considers that simulation is opposed to representation because the latter is a consequence of the equivalence principle of the sign with the real, while the former is a consequence of the utopia of the equivalence principle by the radical negation of the sign as value. As such, simulacrum cannot be controlled from the real because, as Baudrillard asserts, this is a hyperreal interconnection which referential order only governs over another referential order. Therefore, proposes the author, it can turn against power the same factors of distraction that power has successfully used for such a long time.¹⁰ Consequently, I understand that there is still a possible field of negotiation within the hyperreal scene in which “the intervention in history” (which Jameson 1991, 21, upholds), should not diverge so radically from this logic of simulacrum but rather, in my opinion, the quality of the cognitive map that he prescribes should be the simulacrum itself.

If we agree with Baudrillard (1978, 146) that, in this context, the definition of reality itself refers to what is always reproduced, the hyperreal, how

should we approach the functionality of the simulacrum as a cognitive map of criticism, representation and orientation against the schizophrenic context of post-dictatorship and postmodernity? Perhaps observing what, until now, has been “always reproduced” in connection to memory and the treatment of a traumatic past.

The concept of “Cultural industry” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944, 95) plays a fundamental role in the construction and reproduction of a type of memory which Jelin (2001) calls “passive” and Todorov (2000) refers to as “literal”. This is so because the media - traditionally linked to hegemonic power - constructs reality by providing a convenient interpretation of the past that contributes to distortion and forgetting by associating their images and meanings with the utopian impulses that capitalism installed at the time of its establishment.

Jelin refers to this epistemological violence when examining the way in which the past gains meaning in a memory. She states that the past is expressed in a communicable story and with a minimum level of coherence if it has managed to link with the present, in a socially constructed act of remembering/forgetting, in dialogue and interaction with the frameworks of social interpretation that make experiences narratable. Without its narrative incorporation, traumatic events create cracks or gaps in memory because it is impossible for them to make sense of the past event in the present. In addition, she assures that, at this level, forgetting is not absence but the presence of that absence, the representation of something that was and is no longer there. That is why denial and distortion of past scenarios, such as post-dictatorship, causes interruptions and traumatic gaps in the narratives, which renders them isolated and incommunicable since they cannot be narrated (Jelin, 2001, 29).

I believe that non-hegemonic cinema is the privileged actor to fill in the gaps that the violence of official discourse has created in the representations of memory. Within this symbolic confrontation, cinema has all the weapons for such a fight because it has the iconic and symbolic potential to attach images to facts that were not visible, and, in doing so, the image embodies what was heard or suspected, and provides us with materiality and proof (even if it is only a simulation). In this way, what the cinematographic narrative reproduces by means of its meta-intertextualisation is an image that, repeated in the diegesis as a symbolic act of reaction and situation, replaces the gaps in the collective memory, modifying the perception of the spectator’s individual experience. This makes explainable what the traumatic has rendered unrelatable; it recycles the legitim dynamics of the

discourse of power with the aim, now, of favouring the conditions of audibility of another narrative. The simulacrum would then be using the logic that Jameson (1991, 103) criticises as “icon-addictive culture” in order to propose another reality, one constituted in accordance with the logic of simulated power. This could be achieved by assigning image, body and truth to a narrative of the past that satisfies the utopian impulses that our unconscious archetypically has borne since the pre-capitalist era. This produces narratives that rescue, reconnect with - or at least express nostalgia for – the sense of belonging to the collective as a founding value of the social order.

***The poetics of post-dictatorship: the “social elaborative work”
from the cultural field***

It has not yet been possible to eliminate either terror or the sinister to overcome the crudeness of the experiences lived. The (individual and collective) victims’ recovery from situations of social catastrophe requires the support of a social process that acknowledges and names its gaps and “holes” suggests Jelin (1995, 142). In my opinion, the “elaborative work” in the field of culture should begin by dealing with the form of reference of the political moment at which efforts are aimed. Nelly Richard (2001a) asserts that “naming is exercising a signification control and also determining the terminological convenience of that word according to certain pacts of socio-communicative legitimacy” (9). Thomas Mulian (1997) analyses the handover process from a dictatorial government to a democratic one in the recent Chilean context, refusing any attempt to divide history into periods; for him there was no transition towards democracy whatsoever, but one towards neoliberalism: “The [Chilean] transition is thus a continuity and not a break” (15).

Given that the names imposed on these processes are signs that evoke the presence (manifest or tacit) of a myth, of a matrix of behavior, of a pattern of thought on the basis of which the entire socio-cultural life of the country has been organised, the word used to denote the aftermath of the military dictatorship period becomes highly relevant. Thus, hegemonic discourse in Argentina still refers to the history of the last 47 years of cultural policies as divided into three periods: the dictatorial regime (1976-1982), democratic transition (1982-1983) and the democratic regime (from 1983 onwards). Authors like Guillermo O’Donnell (1992, 17-55) and J. Samuel Valenzuela (1992, 17-55), who have dealt with the democratic period and defined conscientiously the limits of democracy as a “virtuous institution” from a

“perverse one” respectively, have made very valuable contributions, although they have continued to approach history in a fragmented way. Personally, I have chosen to prioritise continuity, as Moulian proposed. Therefore, I suggest pursuing a historicity criterion in relation to the word “post-dictatorship”, which links historical moments via a process of transformation to the neoliberal system, sustained by the infliction of fear or its myth and by the exploitation of this memory of terror.

I consider that the word “post-dictatorship” is inclusive because it tries to unveil the extent to which the last dictatorial regime determined today’s political-economic and social program.¹¹ We must admit that “post-dictatorship” is also a conflictive term because, as Felipe Galende (2001, p.144) argues, it reveals “terror as an accident in the passage towards the liberation of its own logic of accumulation”. Such seems to be the triumph of the neoliberal offensive. Richard (2001a, 10) also advises that the word post-dictatorship gives way to various misunderstandings because it relies too much on the forthright semantic meaning of the prefix “post”. First, it intends to convey the end of a time of hardship and to leave behind, just like that, the multiple traumas that still poke at the resentful contours of our “after”. Secondly, such a word pretends to equate the experiential locality of our “after the dictatorship” with the more generalised meaning of the other “posts” (post-revolution, post-ideology, post-history). It is a rhetoric that makes up, continues Richard (2001a), “the triumphant repertoire of dismissals and cancellations of the end of the century, taking to a period of no return what was previously marked by discord, the tragic, the utopian and the rebellious” (10).

Despite these very pertinent remarks, “post-dictatorship”, rather than “re-democracy”, better explains the economic-political function intended to be assigned to memory, which is that of reproducing the myth of the market in its common sense. In this respect, I regard “post-dictatorship” as a term that could satisfy the discourse of those to whom Jelin (2001) refers as “agents of memory”, particularly in their search for a dissident language that could operate to re-narrate memory, representing the conflicting experiences of this present as evidence of a surviving sense of the past.

In my opinion, “post-dictatorship” linguistically summarises the complex articulation between the political, social, cultural and representational problems that I have set out to address in this study when I was wondering about the re-narration of historical collective memory. In addition, the term provides the analysis with a perspective that presents that Argentine socio-political moment in relation to and contiguous with other post-dictatorial

processes in the Southern Cone. This analysis is important as it brings together several national cases which were simultaneously under a dictatorial regime in South America, as if they were pieces of the same neoliberal system. Their political and historical concurrency also evidences their respective bourgeois national state projects as their process of self-legitimation. They were the foundational fiction with which their dictatorships have been successively justified.¹² For this reason, my perspective is theoretically aligned both with Jelin's concepts related to the processes of social memorisation in Argentina, as well as with the perspective of re-narration of memory carried out by the authors of the "Critical Scene" in Chile. The latter is especially relevant here because their performative politico-critical mission aims, from their non-reconciliation with the neoliberal paradigm, to change the conditions of discourse production in the Chilean post-dictatorship "by diverting the executive line of its bureaucracy and technocracy from meaning towards the zones of uprising of memory, desire and imagination" (Richard, 2001a, 20).

Following the authors from the Critical Scene, who argue that by re-narrating memory we could de-totalise and reconnect with a heterogeneous political space, I am interested in how the cinema of the first decade after the end of dictatorship in Argentina compromised common sense in an active and participatory work of mourning. As such, this cinema is focused on giving new meaning to individual experience outside the margins of hegemonic discourse, which it does by incorporating these individual experiences into a heterogeneous narrative of the collective that operates as a new interpretative framework for re-elaborating past experiences in the present. Specifically, as regards the entire process of "elaborative work", I am interested in recognising its possibilities in the cultural field, from the intervention with symbolic means in the hyperreal process of constructing reality and history and therefore, of the processes that narrate this text in the collective memory. That is why in this work I emphasise the production mechanisms of this re-narrative, its symbolic system, its language; how, where and when symbolic means are used to achieve the transfer of memory that goes - in Todorov's terms (2000) - from a "literal memory" to an "exemplary memory".

Let us then follow Jelin's distinction between "the place of documentary discourse and the imaginative place of art and literature" (2001, 130). The author emphasises that, although the actors and institutions may display a will to act on - preserve, transmit - memories of the past, these must be studied as the "records of learning and remains, practices and orientations that 'are there'", implicit, and also like "ritualised repetitions, nostalgia,

idealisations, ruptures and fissures...” (131). Those “remains” emerge through the interstices of the narrations, omitted from official documents and artistic or literary texts. Mulian (1997) agreed with this observation when he opposed the concept of re-narrative to that of discourse, because the latter belongs to a logic that expresses the tendency towards historical totality. Thus understood, discourse corresponds to the fields of explanation or referentiality - the documental, according to Jelin; instead, a narration is about understanding an experience that cannot represent all the horror and suffering with a discourse.

This shift from discourse to re-narration in the field of representation is analogous to what occurs in the social sphere. In a way, it is the same strategy - that of distancing from the official institutional forms - that “the agents of memory” use to tell (their) version of history, by means of performances, theatre, exhibitions, poetry, literature and cinema. In this way, the “scenes of production of languages of the expressive media will be the inscription surfaces where memory has displaced the traces of experience in response to discursive requests from the present” (Richard, 2001a, 12).

Richard refers to such active work of reconfiguring meaning as the “subject memory” in process and in motion, a term similar to Jelin’s “elaborative work” regarding the exercise of “active memory”, or Todorov’s “actualize exemplary memory”. All these concepts refer to interventions in the narration of history by the use of cultural texts as symbolic acts to modify the political meaning of memory in the present.

We have already discussed the need for the symbolic act to intervene in the two fundamental moments of historical discourse performance: textualisation and its narrativisation. From Jameson’s point of view (1981, 66), the function of any current Marxist cultural analysis cannot be content with demystifying or unmasking - what happens in textualisation or documentary discourse - but it must seek, by demonstrating the instrumental form of a given cultural object, to project its simultaneous utopian power (i.e. performative, transformative of the real). Doing so requires delving into the process of narrativisation of the cultural object, that is, approaching it as a symbolic act in the political unconscious and recognising its possibilities for connection with pre-capitalist utopian impulses. It requires artistic re-narrations to deal mainly with the creation of a new language capable of developing a completely new dynamic logic of the collective, a language whose categories and contents break away from an epistemology of individualism.

Moulian (1997, 7) describes the re-narration and creation of a new language at such a socio-historical moment as the “poetics of the post-dictatorship”. For this author “re-narrating” meant reimagining what preceded the naturalisation or normalisation of a prevailing order. In accordance with Jameson (1981), this would involve assuming collective desires as legitimate utopian impulses of pre-capitalist communal solidarity that reject the individualistic solitude imposed by the dominant discourse.

For Bret Levinson (2001), Moulian’s *poetics* “is the emergence of a discourse after we have exhausted all conventional language, paradigm or measure of representation. Poetics is the articulation of my union with the Other” (53). This is the evocation of a common subjectivity, with which the subjects identify.

Poetics would be the new symbolic system of the post-dictatorship insofar as it forges a future which does not ignore, as in “passive forgetting”, “literal memory”, “documental discourse”, “blocking”, nor obsess over the past, as in the monopoly of pain experience exercised by the “guardians of memory”. Instead, such a future must make its way through the past, producing identifications in the present, as in “subject memory”, “exemplary memory”, “active memory”, to make active mourning possible. I argue, then, that Argentine post-dictatorship cinema is framed within such poetics.

***Mapping, syntax and re-narration: The reinterpretation,
representation and reconstruction of memory
in post-dictatorship cinema***

My premise is that Argentine post-dictatorial cinema builds its own narrative of truth, which creates a new historical narration by considering itself as a simulacrum in hyperreal dynamics. This re-narration configures a new interpretative framework with which to frame another collective historical memory. In such logic of simulation, the cinematographic narrative is not supported by any previous historical account, but refers only to its own logic of representation. That is to say, the cinema of this period works with a closed corpus of images and represented meanings that interrelate in a dynamic of “meta-intertextuality” (Genette, 1997) and thereby build a new symbolic system with which to re-semanticise reality. With this hyperreal dialectic, the cinema of the first post-dictatorship decade becomes an “agent of memory”.

Its main function has been the reformulation of the interpretative framework to present images, evidence, voices, experience and remains previously

marginalised by the official discourse. This is how such cinema succeeded in intervening, -with its heterogeneous signs-, the univocal references of “the real” that circulated in the self-legitimising hyperreal discourses of the dominant system. In the context of archival documentary discourses such as *Nunca Más* and the numerous official commemorative plaques at the time of re-democratisation, this fell within the strategy of past cancellation. This discourse without future claims that reinforced among the population fear of a recurrence of the horror, facilitated the continuance of the neoliberal program that paved the way for dictatorship and that was now veiled under the libertarian myth of democracy.

The film *The Official Story* re-narrates collective historical memory in a number of ways, the first being its great historical significance, because its narration challenges the totalising interpretative frameworks of hegemonic historical discourse in which it was possible to frame a collective memory of the horrific past detached from its political, economic and social causes. The film helped to articulate the problems of the democratic present connected with the events of the dictatorial past, since it unveiled the existing connections between the establishment of a neoliberal economic system and the violation of human rights committed by the Argentine military dictatorship against those who had opposed it. It made it clear that the external debt that the Argentinian dictatorship handed over to the democratic government was not the only debt with which Argentina, as other countries of the Southern Cone, signed its *ad eternum* dependency contract with the neoliberal system. The film brought us closer to that immense moral debt of the State to civil society due to the blood spilled during the transferral of its responsibilities to the hands of the market.

The second reason is its great epistemological relevance, since, by describing history only as a textual representation, it dismantled the narrative of power in which responsibilities for the violent acts of the past are disassociated from oligopolistic economic interests while such acts are presented as naturalised. This discursive deconstruction of History within the fictional representation of the film fulfils the essential role of orientation, or cognitive mapping with respect to the hyperreal and post-dictatorial postmodern logic in which it is embedded. This means that the film was capable of unveiling, through simulation, the way the simulacra construct a notion of reality, from which history is textualised and later narrativised as collective historical memory. That is why, with its own act of representation of - and in - a hyperreal configuration, the film gained the performative power of reality.

The third and last reason is derived from the previous two, when observing how this film fulfilled a politically crucial role by joining the dynamics of conflicting stories in the interpretation of reality, appealing to the statute of historical narration in the traditional sense. As symbolic mediation, *The Official Story* was not only a representation, but also a fact, as a vehicle for the constitution of political history. Its symbolic language named those archetypal utopian impulses of the collective, thus becoming a text of ideological persuasion able to legitimise the work of those who, in the social field, spread another version of the events: the “agents of memory”. As such, they became the other members in the dialectical process (fiction-reality) with which this film sought to carry out a utopian-political re-narration of memory.

Luis Puenzo’s film is presented, therefore, as a pattern of reinterpretation, representation and reconstruction of the historical narrative that generates a new syntagmatic chain capable of promoting the social elaborative work of memory that confronts the symptoms of postmodern and post dictatorial schizophrenia. Therefore, this syntactic organisation serves in my analysis, as the “cognitive map” with which I approached the examination of two later films in order to claim that the three, in an intertextual dynamic, are integrated into a post-dictatorship poetics revitalising collective memory. These films are *A Wall of Silence*, by Lita Stantic (1993), and *Buenos Aires Vice versa*, by Alejandro Agresti (1996).

Summarising these films as cognitive maps

The Official Story managed to re-frame the memories by re-presenting what Jelin (2001, 130) calls “the symbolic and material marks” of that past in a new historical narrative configured within the margins of fiction. I suggest that this is achieved by incorporating into its narrative a simulation of the main testimonial techniques of this socio-historical period, providing it with credibility and ensuring the spectator’s identification with the source of its political-utopian values. With the appropriation of testimonial aspects into the cinematographic text - incorporating a new truth story - the viewer becomes an affected party, leaving their previous position as “guarantor audience” (Graziano, 1992, 71) of the official history. I contend that the film is a utopian re-narration of collective memory because its allegorical representation facilitated a shift from a “literal” to an “exemplary” memory.

In the case of *A Wall of Silence*, we observe how, faced with the melancholic scenario of the early 90s, when institutional denial of the truths of the past (pardons) made it impossible to give meaning to the victims’ experiences of