

November 2023

Memories and Trauma of an Absent Past- Women Filmmakers in Argentina

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<https://doi.org/10.7275/35992732> https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_2/2939

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Memories and Trauma of an Absent Past- Women Filmmakers in Argentina

A Dissertation Presented

By

NICHOLAS P. PEZZOTE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2023

Spanish and Portuguese Studies

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DEDICATION

This is for my dad who was my biggest supporter of writing this dissertation. To my wife and mom who encourage me every day.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Barbara Zecchi, for her guidance, comments and encouragement throughout the entire writing process of this dissertation. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the members of my committee, Patrícia Ferreira and Adriana Pitetta, for their willingness to serve on this committee and for their support as well.

I also want to express my appreciation to all my friends who volunteered their efforts to read and review my writing throughout this project.

Also, a special thank you to everyone whose love, friendship and encouragement helped me continue the work on this project from the beginning to the end. I am forever grateful.

ABSTRACT

MEMORIES AND TRAUMA OF AN ABSENT PAST- WOMEN FILMMAKERS IN
ARGENTINA

SEPTEMBER 2023

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This work analyzes the relationship between personal and historical memory in five Argentine films made after the end of the country's last dictatorship. All are directed by, and feature, women. Besides approaching the topic of memory, this work examines how patriarchy influences narratives of both personal histories and, more broadly, of history in: *Camila* (María Luisa Bemberg, 1984), *Un muro de silencio* (Lita Stantic, 1993), *Los rubios* (Albertina Carri, 2003) and *La mujer sin cabeza* (Lucrecia Martel, 2008). Trauma and the handing down of memory—issues that appear in all of the chosen films—are approached from a critical feminist perspective. At the middle point between oblivion and remembrance, fiction allows chaotic memories of dictatorship to be organized into a coherent story. Though intensely private and personal, these worlds that are at the same time part of a shared history and belong to all Argentines, in a society-wide push to mend identities disfigured by state terrorism. At the same time, in defiance of the previous generation, these women leverage their ostensibly personal films to challenge family, social, and cultural structures.

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INTRODUCTION

I was born into an Italian-Argentine family in 1983, the year that saw the end of a dictatorship that had begun seven years earlier in Argentina. My grandmother would talk of little else during my childhood and this is perhaps the reason why I have thought so extensively about this period and the aftermath of the regime. During high school and university, I also became aware of the privileges I had as a man, acutely aware that women had to work harder to get the same job or earn the same salary. In my desire to understand more, my interest in literature and film led me to works written and directed by women. As a man, I believe it is critical to talk about gender in order to make whatever contribution I can to the fight for women's rights. While women have achieved much, work still remains, and taking responsibility for inequality is—again, for me as a man—highly important.

Taking responsibility for inequality means looking at the past and memories are our first entry point. As part of social discourse, the notion of memory has been expanded in recent years into the plural: diverse and diverging memories are sources of debates and struggles. Memories are also a cultural and social product with political reach. Drawing attention to memories is, in my view, a necessary task, especially as a heterosexual, American male, and graduate student. This level of privilege is what led me to delve into different worlds, into small communities that are universes unto themselves. Although memory originates in the private sphere of memories and personal meanings, it is always configured within the framework of a given culture. This is what Halbwachs referred to as the “social frameworks of memory.”

Memories are woven into a map that indicates the shifting points of collective

remembrance.

On March 24, 1976, the military seized power in Argentina yet again, with the support of a great part of society. A military junta governed the country between 1976 and 1983. Unlike in previous coups, this was a joint, organized effort between all three branches (Navy, Army, and Air Force).¹ In order to undermine the social and economic betterment of the working classes under Peronism and put an end to the armed leftist struggle, the military leaders came up with a systematic plan for kidnapping, torture, and disappearance.

Under Argentina's dictatorship, which the military referred to as the "national reorganization process," law enforcement oversaw the torture and forced disappearance of some 30,000 citizens. Under another policy, the children of those forcibly disappeared were given away to other families and though many have since recovered their identity, hundreds are still living under these assumed identities. Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo² is the organization that continues searching for the missing children. By the end of the dictatorship, approximately 500 children had gone missing. Finally, countless Argentines were forced into exile.

On October 30, 1983, Argentines voted in the country's first presidential election in a decade. Raúl Alfonsín was the candidate who echoed society's demands for memory and justice. The new president was sworn in on December 10, 1983, and in his inaugural speech, he declared the day a new official holiday: Human Rights Day. After seven long

¹ Argentina's dictatorship drew heavily on Operation Condor, a secret U.S.-sponsored system to coordinate repression between Latin American dictatorships like that of Uruguay, Chile, Paraguay and Brazil as part of the national security doctrine.

² The Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo is a human rights organization that aims to find the children appropriated during the last military dictatorship so they can be reunited with their extended family and know the truth about who they are.

years of censorship and repression, a democratic spring had sprung in Argentina. Yet the trauma of the past had left profound, indelible marks. This thesis focuses on the relationship between personal and historical memory in Argentina post-dictatorship through four films.

The first is *Camila* (1983) by director María Luisa Bemberg, a film that appeared just as democracy was being restored in Argentina. It examines the recent past by harking back to a nineteenth century episode in which the state also exercised a particularly cruel form of violence with no respect for the rule of law. Although the crimes of the military dictatorship of 1976 were not committed in public and tended to be hidden (though often in plain sight), like the execution of Camila and the priest, they served as a lesson.

The second film, *Un muro de silencio* (1993), by Lita Stantic, is a bridge between the previous generation of filmmakers and that which came of age around 2001, a pivotal moment in terms of thinking about politics and art. It works within a cruel realism, though one in which memory and the vain attempt to recover what has been lost to the past regularly intervenes. Part of this realism includes documentary film materials, which add layers to the diegesis.

Directed by Albertina Carri, *Los rubios* (2002) is the third film in the corpus and is considered part of a group of films produced at the dawn of the new century that began known as New Argentine Cinema. As one of many films by the generation whose activist parents had been kidnapped, disappeared, and murdered during dictatorship, it articulates memory with artistic explorations. Though it relies on testimony as a constitutive element, it also questions its effectiveness at presenting and re-presenting a story that is both personal and social. When faced with the impossibility of reconstructing the past, director

Albertina Carri also makes use of parody.

The fourth and final film is *La mujer sin cabeza* (2008) by Lucrecia Martel. It was the third feature-length film, one of the established directors of New Argentine Cinema. The film works with “...a constant emphasis on language, a series of lapses and an inability to express oneself that suggests a state of fragmentation, or womanhood as a distinctive quality” (Acosta 8). Martel’s film begins when a woman hits something—or someone—on the freeway. She decides not to get out of the car to see what happened. After that, she is trapped in a state of shock, and the people around her minimize or shrug off what she might have hit, repeating the infamous phrase used to deny any wrongdoing under Argentina’s military dictatorship: *No pasó nada* (*Nothing happened here*). Besides offering an insider’s look at the life of Salta’s eminently patriarchal and conservative upper class, the film sketches a road map of Argentina’s traumatic, recent past.³

Based on an understanding of memory as a story, this thesis examines how it is passed from one generation to the next, changing as it is relayed. In other words, this is a continual reinterpretation, especially with regard to the trauma society has suffered. Even when the traumatic experiences themselves are limited to certain individuals, these still form part of the memories and identity of all members of society. The personal, then, is woven into collective memory. Certain types of films serve as a medium in which a trauma, wound, or pain that cannot be resolved is manifested at the individual and collective level.

³ This corpus also explores the ways in which social roles and discourses surrounding women’s roles in different situations are questioned. As noted by Zecchi, Maseda García, and Gámez Fuentes in their introduction to *Gender-based Violence in Latin American and Iberian Cinemas*, the challenge can come when a woman acts in unexpected ways or demands agency instead of merely adopting the passive role expected of most female characters.

Film can be understood as a way of relaying meaning that “excludes any meaningful matter positioned for the spectator to see” (Gianfranco Bettetini 33). In other words, all of the production mechanisms that help make the film a reality are erased once it is screened. Bettetini introduces the concept of the “enunciating subject” to refer to articulate the narrative:

(...) The enunciating subject, understood as a symbolic apparatus that is the organizing principle of all of the semiotic processes of a text, including the ways in which the text attempts to position the reader: an “absent” apparatus, producer and product of the text, which leaves traces of its organizing procedures in its signifying materials. (13)

This focus is especially fruitful for film analysis, since the enunciating subject refers here to who is actually speaking, that is, the on-screen character. Gaudreault and Jost (1995) have used the term “the great imaginer” to speak of this way of organizing the story. In the view of these authors, this disembodied subject can be seen in markers of subjectivity found in the story of the film that cannot be attributed to any character in the diegesis. In general, these traces of subjectivity—the art of credits, shots, voiceovers, music, etc.—tend not to be explicit.

Through the corpus of films chosen for this thesis, a timeline can be traced that reveals salient issues during this period and the ties between how memory is passed and represented. At the same time, film can reflect how art and society related in the building of collective and individual memory. In my work, I found film to be a place where a trauma or wound—a past that has not fully been resolved or depicted—is manifested individually and collectively. Each of these films chooses a path, an aesthetic, and a narrative, drawing on the tools provided by different genres.

With regard to the expansion of women’s rights after dictatorship, the most significant advances included an act restoring shared parenting rights (Law 23,264 in

1985) and the act legalizing divorce (Law 23,514 in 1987). The new Argentine Constitution of 1994 incorporated articles to protect women's rights, including their political rights. More recently, efforts have been aimed at ending domestic violence and expanding women's rights in many areas. In 2020, after plenty of lobbying, marches and protests that became known as the "green wave," due to the color of the scarves worn by the women activists, abortion was legalized.

In the approach to the corpus of films discussed herein, memory appears as a response—and a form of resistance—to the frenzy of contemporary life. "This veritable memory 'boom' represents a challenge to the transience of events and a life without any ties or solid foundations, governed only by fleetingness" (Jelin 9).

In Argentina, a South American country with a bloody dictatorship in its recent past, these four films reflect on memory and the act of remembering under democracy. By so doing, they necessarily engage with oblivion, navigating the tension between forgetting and remembrance. Fiction here is born as a need to organize the chaos of memory and come up with a possible story. This story reconstructs private, personal worlds that are at the same time historical, and thus belong to everyone in society. Yet these worlds interact constantly and are mutually dependent.

There are two different ways of remembering or bringing the past into the present. This can be done voluntarily or involuntarily. As noted by Marianne Hirsch, memories can potentially carve out a space for the stories and experiences of social minorities, even when their memories challenge hegemonic versions of the past.

Under Argentina's dictatorship, almost an entire generation was massacred. Remembering becomes a redeeming mantra, a way to avoid repeating a horrific past

while also shaping an understanding—not only from the survivors, or at least not exclusively—but also from “the children,” that is, the descendants, regardless of whether or not they are blood relatives. The aim, then, is to embody a memory, a past not entirely one’s own.

Elizabeth Jelin establishes three fundamental premises for analyzing the past that shed light on the relationships between history and memory: The first is that memories need to be understood as subjective processes, anchored in experiences and in symbolic and material markers. Recognizing that memories are the object of disputes, conflicts and struggles is the second, in an aim to bring attention to participants’ active role in producing meaning in these struggles, which are framed within power relations. The third is historicizing memories, acknowledging the historical changes to meanings of the past and the place memories are assigned in different societies, cultural climates, and political and ideological struggles. (Jelin 2)

One’s personal story is always soaked in history. For this aspect of the analysis, Paul Ricoeur and his thoughts regarding memory and narrative prove insightful. Another source will be Walter Benjamin, who views memory as a conscious action that allows him to influence the subject he is seeking within ruins from the past that persist in the present, but is also interested in the form that search takes. Memory, according to Benjamin, is not a tool to access the past but the earth in which the past lies buried” (79). Past and present overlap as part of remembering and blossom into images that beg interpretation.

The fact that biographical stories currently occupy such a predominant position in social research is indicative of the obsession with memory and the recovery of subjects’ past experiences. However, instead of limiting the use of biographies to the recovery of

each subject's voice, it is necessary to think about how the individual relates to the social. In other words, access to what individuals have experienced enables a reflection on the specific social world in which these individuals are immersed.

During the 2001 crisis, there was a shakedown not only in politics but also in political and aesthetic representations. This resulted in a wave of production in film, literature, and photography by the generations whose activist parents had been kidnapped, disappeared, and murdered during the military dictatorship. In these productions, memory is articulated with an artistic will to capture history in a way both personal and social. Autofiction thus emerges as a tool for working through trauma. Yet, as shall be seen in this corpus, the trauma is often indirect. In other words, the person who is narrating or attempting to remember the trauma—and then reconstruct the past—has not suffered it in the flesh. Instead, it is a second-generation or inherited trauma. Marianne Hirsch has used the term postmemory to refer to this particular idea of inheriting.

Returning to the social and collective sphere, these events have had an enormous impact on the construction of memory in Argentina. When Maurice Halbwachs analyzes the concept of memory, he notes that however personal a recollection, it is intrinsically related to an ensemble of notions, persons, places, dates, words, forms of language, and even reasoning and ideas. In other words, individual memory is related to both collective memory and to our social world.

On March 24, 2004—the anniversary of the 1976 coup—Argentine President Nestor Kirchner took down the portraits of dictators Jorge Rafael Videla and Roberto Bignone still hanging at the military academy and asked for forgiveness on behalf of the

Argentine state. This simple yet symbolic act freed artists from the responsibility of denouncing the crimes of recent history and reiterating society's demands for state acknowledgment, allowing both film and literature to take on new styles, tones, and creative forms. This can be seen in the corpus of films explored here. Although *Los rubios* was shot a year before President Kirchner's liberating act, it is free and innovative in both formal and stylistic terms.

In the case of *Un muro de silencio* (1993), its fragmented narrative places great emphasis on a historical reconstruction. However, as the character of the foreign film director pushes to understand what happened and tell the story as accurately as possible, the film verges on the pedagogical. The other film in the corpus made after 2004, *La mujer sin cabeza*, takes a much freer, relaxed approach to the topic. Martel is not interested in providing a historical reconstruction or sending a "message" about the years of terror in Argentina; she feels no need to compensate for an absent state unable to serve justice. Along a similar vein, these films do not function solely as metaphors of the denial of state terrorism or the disappeared, though they could be interpreted in this way, as shall be explored in the chapters to come.

Trauma theory has helped us understand that it is never possible to fully understand or work through what happened in the past, which is why the past continues to resurface and trouble the person who has suffered the trauma years later. Caruth argues that being traumatized is to be possessed by an image or event situated in the past. This description clearly applies to Verónica, the main character in *La mujer sin cabeza*, and—though in different ways—to the main female characters in *Un muro de silencio*.

By taking on both the role of director and main character in *Los rubios*, Carri

positions herself differently in relation to the past. She takes on the past, diving into it at will as she pushes to remember and rebuild her own history. This is not a film about Argentina, her parents' activism or motivations, or what they were willing to sacrifice in the struggle.

Yet besides preventing a repetition of the past, what is memory's social function? Past violence must be remembered in order to perceive different forms of violence in the present. The duty to remember is one of the pillars of postwar society. What happens, then, with the sons and daughters whose parents are missing? As Noa Vaisman asks, "The resulting paradox—the ethical obligation to remember something impossible to remember, becomes even more palpable for the children of the disappeared" (185). Here Vaisman posits that the sons and daughters of the disappeared build memory around an absent core and a specter-like presence, what she refers to as "disappeared memory." This term appears more suitable than Hirsch's postmemory, since that concept does not cover either the texture or the aesthetics of the memory of the sons and daughters of the disappeared: "the only aspects of a memory that has both social and collective connotations along with individual meaning" (187).

Unlike the post-Holocaust, when memory was passed down by parents to children, the sons and daughters of the disappeared are unable to appropriate their parents' experiences as their own, as these mothers and/or fathers were never able to share them. Therefore, although the term postmemory provides insight into what is passed down to the generations that did not suffer the violence or death in the flesh, it is not fully applicable here, since the contact between the parent-victims and their children has been lost. Though memory is not passed in the traditional way, it does trickle down.

Therefore, I believe Vaisman's term "disappeared memory" is more suitable for this case. Returning to the debate that Beatriz Sarlo began in 2004 on the use of the concept of "postmemory" in the case of Argentina, Vaisman argued that the disappearance of the parents' generations limited its applicability. According to Vaisman, certain features of the reconstruction by the children's generation distinguish it from post-memory. "The resulting paradox—the ethical obligation to remember something impossible to remember—becomes even more palpable for the children of the disappeared" (185).

Besides the myriad topics of memory and the overlap between private and public, the second pillar of this thesis is gender. Collective processes of remembering draw on a political and methodical strategy to tell the stories that have been silenced in hegemonic (and almost inevitably masculine) versions of history. That is why it is so important to historicize women and their struggles. Although men continued to dominate the film industry in the 1990s, the number of films produced and directed by women rose substantially by the end of the century. Besides the directors analyzed herein, others that fit into this category include Julia Solomonoff, Paula Hernández, and Lucía Cedrón.

The corpus of this thesis is made up of films starring and directed by women.⁴ For that reason, all of the elements already mentioned will be seen from a gender lens. It is a perspective from the margins, and while many margins are possible, the margins of women in the eminently male field of film seems like a solid position for thinking about the past and relationships between parents and children. Women—or whoever serves as a

⁴ Although this thesis is focused on women directors and the films they made about women, it avoids categories like "feminist film" or "women's films." As Barbara Zecchi has noted, "Not all film directed by women is necessarily feminist, nor is all feminist film directed by women..." ("Mujeres y cine" 91). Therefore, the common thread among the films in this thesis involves a challenge to a patriarchal order that enables reflection on the gender issues surrounding memory.

mother—are the ones who provide nourishment, introduce children to the world, and transmit language. They inherit and pass down experiences of the past, gathering their children’s first struggling (like the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo) for memory and justice. Although film as a genre has incorporated dissident viewpoints in recent decades, their narratives are still often male-dominated.⁵ Bringing a gender perspective to film analysis reveals certain nuances, yielding another way of thinking about the ideas, tensions, and connections between personal and social memories. The influence of patriarchy in film narratives about Argentina’s most recent dictatorship (1976-83) and the way in which that past is entangled with the present is one of the issues addressed herein. Another is the role of the women’s perspective—if said perspective exists—eliciting, in turn, new questions.

Each of the films chosen here deconstructs a specific film genre: in *Camila*, it is melodrama; in *Un Muro de silencio*, metafiction; in *Los Rubios*; documentary; and in *La mujer sin cabeza*, the thriller. María Luisa Bemberg and Lita Stantic both broke ground as women filmmakers in Argentina. The use of historical allegory in *Camila* makes this film an essential part of the corpus. Although Bemberg’s film relies heavily on female stereotypes, it also challenges them, treating her middle (or upper-middle) class female character as a victim of her social status.

Un muro de silencio is the only film Stantic directed and the first to address society’s role in the dictatorship. *Los Rubios* is a documentary that represents the

⁵ As Barbara Zecchi has noted in her analysis of feminist Catalan film and other Spanish cinema after Franco, “Fictional female characters depart from both the models of purity and self-denial that characterized the representation of women in films during the dictatorship and the paradigms of sexual liberation that freed men by positioning the female body as object of male (hetero)sexual desire” (“Intervening in the Present” 73). This also applies to the corpus of films selected for this thesis.

director's attempt to recover something of who her parents were, often employing techniques from fiction filmmaking along the way. Its personal approach to the topic, and its refusal to treat the disappeared activists as heroes, sparked a great amount of controversy.

Lucrecia Martel is one of the most important women directors of her generation in Argentina. As a woman and lesbian who situates her films not in Buenos Aires but in the north of the country, she contributes what I consider an enriching perspective. A visual tour de force, *La mujer sin cabeza* is teeming with innuendos of dictatorship, remembrance, and oblivion. The film can also be read as a thriller or whodunit: did a crime in fact occur? What actually happened on the freeway? The film circles around these questions yet avoids classification in any single genre. At the same time, it connects with stories and emotions that run deep in Argentine society.

According to a critical feminist reading of film, it is a medium whose psychological structures depend heavily on its makers. Therefore, in film produced by men, women are both signifier of the patriarchal order and fetish, always from the male viewpoint. Feminist film analysis, then, offers a unique lens into the construction of the sexist and patriarchal image in film production in general, and into films made by women (Acosta 6).⁶

One of the focuses of feminist thought has been to question the dominant cinematographic discourses and to challenge them through an examination of film,

⁶ In this regard, the term "gynocine" is relevant when defining the gender perspective that will be used to analyze this corpus: "Gynocine is not necessarily feminist, but its interpretation is (...) if not all cinema is gynocine, and not all gynocine is feminist cinema, all films directed by women belong to gynocine, because all women, including those who explicitly distance themselves from feminism, cannot escape from a system of practices and institutions that discriminates in terms of sex-gender" ("Mujeres y cine" 94).

gender, and society. Film serves as a mechanism for protest and a venue for expressing feminist demands. The British feminist theorist Laura Mulvey set off the debate on how psychoanalysis can contribute to interpretations of cultural expressions. Over the years, new debates have reconfigured feminist thinking on the dynamics between film and forms of representing both women and “the feminine.”

According to Barbara Zecchi, there are two moments in feminist film: during the first, an attempt was made to alter the cinematographic representations of women, and during the second, concern over the language of the representation prevailed (18).

Chronologically speaking, we could say that the first two of the five films chosen here—*Camila* and *Un muro de silencio*—correspond to the first period Zecchi describes, and the three remaining films to the second.

The challenge for women thus also involves appropriating a language (film) historically built by men although, as occurs in all art history, many women’s contributions to film have been overlooked.⁷ Here Claire Johnston’s notion of “counter-cinema” becomes relevant; in 1973, Johnston proposed breaking with a visual order coded to perpetuate gender stereotypes, from a type of cinema that appropriated entertainment films instead of disregarding them.

Current feminist film theory proposes to overcome the gender binary logic that cinematographic representations recreate. In her studies on feminism, film, and semiotics, Teresa De Lauretis underscores the need to distinguish between women as historical

⁷ As Zecchi has noted, “The history of (male) cinema has systematically—and by no means naively—discredited women. It has avoided representing or naming them, leaving more recent generations without models. The names and achievements of these women have been erased by the guardians of the film canon. For that reason, each generation of women filmmakers has been forced to practically start over in order to discover the past anew, forging gender awareness time and again. And yet, despite being erased, the work of women proved fundamental for the evolution of film” (“Mujeres y cine” 95).

subjects and "woman," the fictional construct. At the same time, she focuses on how these two notions are related. In a world largely governed by a hegemonic patriarchal order, the tension between forgetting and remembering draws on this same logic.

Although *Camila*, as noted, operates as a historical allegory, it also stages one of the greatest tensions of nineteenth-century Argentina: the overlap of religious, family, and political power. In this film, events from the past serve to interpellate the present, or to put it more succinctly, a more recent past. Structured as a film-within-a-film, *Un muro de silencio* relies on a foreigner's perspective to create a sense of estrangement, New Argentine Cinema, as the films produced at the end of the 1990s were known, revamped national production entirely. *La mujer sin cabeza* and *Los rubios* both belong to this generation of film.

Each film detailed herein approaches certain aspects of Argentina's recent history in different ways, nourishing personal memory with historical memory and thus yielding a personal version of events.

CHAPTER 1

LIGHT RETURNS TO ARGENTINE FILM: BEMBERG'S CAMILA (1984)

1.1 Introduction

On December 10, 1983, democracy returned to Argentina. After winning 51.75% of the votes, the attorney Raúl Alfonsín was elected president, ending the dark seven-year dictatorship. As Argentina undertook the difficult work of restoring democracy, the film industry slowly began recovering its creative freedoms. At the same time, the depictions of women and conflicts specific to them on the big screen began breaking free of eminently patriarchal perspectives. Like Teresa de Lauretis, I believe that identification, self-definition, and the possibility of seeing oneself as a subject are fundamental issues for feminism. Women had long been denied the opportunity to envisage and configure their own image, doomed to having them constructed by someone else (de Lauretis 130). This first chapter deals with the María Luisa Bemberg film *Camila* (1984), a hit at the box office that enjoyed great international success. Besides an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Film, the film also brought Susú Pecoraro (who plays Camila) the best actress award at the International Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana.

The film is based on the real life story of Camila O'Gorman, a young woman from an aristocratic family who was executed by a firing squad in 1848 at the order of Juan Manuel de Rosas. Camila had eloped with the priest Ladislao Gutiérrez. The romance was such a scandal that even Camila's family supported a dire punishment for the two lovers. At the time she was executed, Camila was pregnant. While the plot of *Camila* is, in many ways, a typical melodrama, with music accentuating the emotional

intensity, certain aspects of the story are decidedly feminist, as shall be seen further in this chapter.

Given the moment in history the film covers and that in which the film is made (as the dictatorship was ending), the chapter starts with an analysis of the Rosas period before noting the similarities between the two periods. As Julia Kratje explains, *Camila* “represents a key moment in configuring the relationship between film and feminism in Argentina’s democratic spring by combining allegory and the genre of melodrama to tell a story” (254).

Juan Manuel de Rosas was the governor of Buenos Aires between 1835 and 1852. As home to the country’s largest port, Buenos Aires is Argentina’s most important province. During those years, Argentine provinces were largely dominated by *caudillos*, local strong men who often forcefully conscripted local inhabitants to fight their battles. Argentina had won its independence from Spain only four decades before Rosas came to power and the country was debating between a unitary or federal system of government (it ultimately opted for federalism).

The tragic story of Camila O’Gorman takes place under the Santa Federación (holy federation), as the Juan Manuel de Rosas was known. Camila was born in 1828 to a well-heeled Buenos Aires family of Irish and French descendants; her father, Adolfo O’Gorman, and her mother, Joaquina Ximénez y Pinto, were both federalists loyal to Rosas. Camila fell in love with Uladislao Gutiérrez a 23-year-old Jesuit priest who arrived to Buenos Aires in 1846 to run the parish church Nuestra Señora del Socorro.

Camila began an affair with the priest that lasted until December 1847, when the couple fled to Goya, a town in Corrientes province. In June 1848, they were discovered

and Rosas decided to make an example of them, ordering the couple be executed by firing squad on August 18, 1848. Since Camila was pregnant, she was forced to drink a liter of holy water before her execution, to baptize her unborn child. By order of the prison officer, the two were buried together. According to documents from the period, the death sentence for a woman—the first in Argentina’s history—was a cause of great public controversy.

Under dictatorship, only feel-good movies made it past the censors. Besides damning a film to being shown only abroad, any allusion to the dark realities of the regime could even put the filmmaker’s life in danger. Beyond politics, the regime imposed scrupulous sexual moralities and its model emphasized the family as the unit of society. Marriage between a man and woman—each of whom had assigned gender roles—was the cornerstone of the family and mothers were the guardians of national traditions. Women played a central role in family and home, generally behind closed doors. Any transgression on the part of children could be attributed to a mother’s lack of care.

1.2 María Luisa Bemberg: Breaking the Mold

Bemberg was born in 1922 to a well-to-do aristocratic family that owned the traditional beer factory Quilmes. Unlike the boys in the family, neither María Luisa nor her sisters attended school. Instead, they were tutored at home, with the sole expectation of marrying well. At age 22, María Luisa married a prestigious architect and moved to Madrid to do what was expected of her: be a good wife, raise children, and dedicate any free time to charitable enterprise. In other words, she would be an “angel in the house,” the only ideal to which an upper or middle class woman could aspire. As a girl, Bemberg

was greatly interested in art of all kinds: painting, literature, theater, and film. Though it took her years to discover her potential as an auteur, she was fascinated by art throughout her life. She was a self-taught artist, though the cultural and intellectual milieu—a privilege of her social class—clearly helped her in this process. In *Más allá de la pantalla*, Alberto Ciria offers the following description of Bemberg’s start in the world of the arts:

After many years, Bemberg divorced her husband, began rebelling against what was expected of her, and took her interest in arts to the next level. After trying her hand at costume design, she cofounded a theater, Teatro del Globo, in Buenos Aires. She wrote the story of *Crónica de una señora* (Chronicle of a Lady, 1970) by director Raúl de la Torre and *Triángulo de cuatro* (Triangle of Four, 1974). The first two films she directed, both shorts, were about predominantly female topics: *El mundo de la mujer* (1972) and *Juguetes* (1978). (153)

Bemberg was nearly 40 when she shot her first short film and between 1980 and 1990, she shot five films, funding them with her family money. These films garnered awards for her at festivals across the world. Though she was always interested in theater and film, she had no formal training. However, her knowledge of art, literature, and the visual arts allowed her to become a film director. According to Claudio España, Bemberg’s filmmaking is so personal that it is easy to identify her films.

The director refused to accept the life she was meant to lead, bravely overcoming biases—those of society and her own—to seek her path in life. Bemberg is remembered as one of the great female directors of Argentina, a pioneer, with a politically engaged discourse and an aesthetics all her own.

1.3 *Camila*: Family, Social, and Political Conflicts

The diegesis of *Camila* is fundamentally defined by the powerful emotions of family, social, and political conflicts; it seeks to intensify the drama by positioning the

viewer on the side of passion, transgression, and love, and against the patriarchal and totalitarian regime that is associated with injustice, conformity, and hatred. Thus, instead of celebrating the traditional values and hierarchies associated with family, homeland, and property, the film builds an emotional identification with the female character.

While it is possible to think of the real-life Camila O’Gorman as a woman ahead of her time, Bemberg goes a step further, building the film *Camila* into a feminist character. The historical documents make Camila out to be a victim of Uladislao. While it is likely that historians opted for this version of events to protect the young woman’s “honor,” Bemberg’s decision to depict Camila differently is neither arbitrary nor naive. The film departs from the classic melodrama in which the gentleman is the one who seduces the maiden, subverting celibacy and the rules of matrimony and freeing sexuality from its reproductive role. Her emancipation from conventional models, however, is still incomplete: the modern woman Camila yearns to become is bound by heteronormativity and an oedipal interest in her God-fearing father (*El cuerpo y la sexualidad como locus de disputa* 257).

In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey is critical of hegemonic male-authored representations of women in cinema. Mulvey’s thoughts are particularly insightful in the first love scene between Camila and Ladislao: Bemberg does precisely the opposite of what is done in mainstream cinema and of what is denounced by Mulvey: Camila is the one with agency, making the first move while Ladislao remains passive.

Besides, Camila is blindfolded, leaving her to rely not on sight but on another, must less domesticated sense: that of touch. When Camila reaches for Ladislao’s face,

her first sense of him is tactile. Forgoing the visuals of desire and its patriarchal conditioning, instinct comes to the fore along with an entirely different logic. In one of the final scenes of the movie, shortly before the execution, the priest sent in to take Camila's confession tells her to focus on the life that awaits. By replying that she is thinking only of this life, Camila takes an open stance against chastity, abnegation, passivity, and the imaginaries associated with them. The erotic and rhetorical "excesses" of the film's melodramatic setting underline Bemberg's allegorical reading and a revision of historical events from the perspective of critical feminist theory. "The mise-en-scène of eroticism and sexuality necessarily repositions the subjectivity of the main character, who is depicted as a feminist character ahead of her times" (El circunloquio de la violencia 76).

1.4 Camila as Feminist Melodrama

In the 1970s, as gender roles became the topic of great debate in other parts of the world during the second wave of feminism, Latin American society was largely focused on other concerns. Second-wave feminism, which can be traced back to the 1960s, is characterized by increased sexual autonomy, a questioning of what constituted "feminine" behaviors, the reduction of male "protectiveness," and a critical analysis of sexual violence and the state institutions and ideologies that enable such violence. Women's association with the sinful and the forbidden, dating back to Eve, was also called into question. (El cuerpo y la sexualidad como locus de disputa 254). Many countries in Latin America were ruled by cruel dictatorships during those years, limiting the possibility of debating gender issues. Bemberg defined herself as a feminist at a time when Argentines knew very little about the movement and generally took a stance against

it. Despite the unfavorable context, Bemberg helped found the Argentine Feminist Union (Unión feminista argentina, or UFA). The group encouraged members to read texts by feminists of the ilk of Virginia Woolf, Simone De Beauvoir, and Kate Millet. In its manifesto, the UFA laid out a series of still very fundamental rights, including economic independence and a woman's right to personal and professional realization outside the home. In its manifesto, the UFA lays out a series of rights that appear elementary today, including economic independence and a woman's right to personal and professional realization outside the home.

To borrow a phrase from Román Gubern (1974), melodrama is the democratic version of the Greek tragedy:

Born in Florence at the end of the 16th century, it [melodrama] was an attempt to recover Greek tragedy at its purest... especially the singing chorus, one of the forgotten elements of this type of theater. The musical melodrama was the outcome of this return to classical theater during the Renaissance. (262)

As the centuries passed, melodramas became detached from musicals, and the use of music served only to emphasize the romanticism of the themes in each work. Luis María Serra, a composer of the music for several of Bemberg's films—including *Camila*—discussed the music for the film as part of an interview series organized by Universidad de Buenos Aires. According to Serra, Bemberg wanted sweet, harmonious music for the film that would underline the romantic aspects of the story. The musical leitmotif, which appears ten different times during the film, highlights the most emotional moments.

In his assessment of the film's contributions, Octavio Getino, Argentine film director and writer, is none too generous:

Narrated in a classic fashion, almost like a good television melodrama, this film by María Luis Bemberg places Love—with a capital L—above any political,

social, or religious consideration, and does so from the feminist vision that will be constant in all of the director's films. The narrative of this particular film, neat and conventional, is not particularly compelling, but its interpretation of two lovers shot by a firing squad under an authoritarian government provides a critical reflection of episodes from Argentina's recent past. At least, that is how spectators—over 2.3 million of them—interpreted it. (46)

It is true that from a formal perspective, there is nothing disruptive about *Camila*, which presents a rigorous historical reconstruction from a classic narrative structure. However, Getino overlooks how the main character—and by association, the film itself—is not only squarely feminist but also entirely innovative for the period, as Argentine scholar Julia Kratje argues in an article about *Camila*.

This is a “period” film in which set design, locations, wardrobe, and rituals emphasize the constructed, artificial nature of femininity, in which the director subjects the script to a political intervention. By rebelling against the rigid norms of sexuality and daily life, the main character is elevated to the status of heroine. (El cine como transgresión 5)

In “Melodrama Revised,” film scholar Linda Williams argues that “if the narrative trajectory is ultimately more concerned with a retrieval and staging of innocence than with the psychological causes of motives and action, then the operative mode is melodrama” (42). In “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” Williams elaborates that in melodrama, ecstasy can be demonstrated as a presumed woe, sobbing, and tears among a passive audience of girls and women. According to this author, the melodrama is a spectacle of women as victims, and that with regard to perversions, “feminists have pointed to the spectacles of intense suffering and loss as masochistic” (6). In these films, a female subject achieves a modicum of power and pleasure within the given limits of patriarchal constraints. However, to address this simply as masochism is “not to address [these films’] function as cultural problem-solving” (12). By subverting the parameters of this genre, *Camila* utilizes melodrama as a means to confront a cultural “villain” (i.e. the

tradition behind a given cultural phenomenon) and to present and rework the cultural climate of nineteenth-century Argentina. Though Bemberg opted to make this film a drama, her main character is engaged in a struggle against the patriarchal norms of the times. In doing so, she entirely disregards the gender roles designated by society and defines marriage by feelings, not the law.

In Latin America, besides Bemberg's work, the resurgence of this film genre in the 1980s can largely be attributed to a new generation of filmmakers like Fina Torres and Solveig Hoogesteijn (Venezuela) and María Novaro and Marcela Fernández Violante (Mexico), who brought melodrama with feminist twists to the big screen. (*El Circunloquio de la violencia* 77-78)

As a film genre, melodrama enables emotional and stylistic excess. In the context of the return to democracy, the melodrama is a "tactic" that substantially alters the configuration of gender relations and sexualities, as seen in the emphasis on the main character's desire.

The codes of melodrama, which seek to keep spectators on the edge of their seats, continue during the final scenes in which the couple is captured and executed. Even when they face the firing squad, there are hints of what could be a "happy ending": first, when the guards discover Camila is pregnant, it seems for a moment that Argentine law might prevent the execution. Later, when the soldiers hesitate to shoot a pregnant woman, the officer in charge must give the order four times. (*El circunloquio de la violencia* 80).

Although she has been brought up by a traditional, conservative family, Camila senses that there is something else in the world, other voices that should be heard. Casting ingenuity aside, and well aware of the risk she runs, she manages to get her hands on books censored by the regime, talks back to her father, and voices her opinion on political matters. Finally, by falling in love with Ladislao, she subverts celibacy and the rules governing matrimony.

1.5 *Camila*: Memory, Allegory, and Historical Reconstruction

Opportunities for reflecting on memory, truth, and justice opened up when democracy returned to Argentina. Suddenly, analyzing and attempting to understand the past became essential. Many began working to keep memory alive as part of defending human rights. Taking on a multifaceted role that ranges from documenting to assisting people to process traumatic events, more than 100 films have depicted state terrorism, and life under state terrorism, to date in Argentina.⁸

In this section, I will reflect on the following questions: how is memory kept alive? When we say memory, what does it refer to and how is it transformed? What is the role of women in film in relation to memory?

1.6 Memory

The first Argentine film, *El fusilamiento de Dorrego* (Dorrego's Execution) (Mario Gallo, 1908), provides a reconstruction of a historic event. History and memory are often treated synonymously, which can lead to confusion, especially if both are inaccurately viewed as settled events from the past. Instead, history and memory evoke moments that can be recreated and are part of a future in which they will also be experienced in unique ways. When a people change course, something similar occurs with the vision of the road already traveled (Getino 158).

As part of social discourse, the notion of memory has been expanded in recent years into the plural: diverse and diverging memories are sources of debates and struggles. There is no hierarchy of diverse traumas of the past—or the memories of them;

⁸ For a list of films dealing with dictatorship, see the online catalogue of Memoria Abierta, an entity jointly run by Argentina's human rights assemblies. Available at www.memoriaabierta.com.ar

instead, memories meld into a dialogue that evokes other historically important elements in a process that is always collaborative. In a discussion in which he distinguishes between lived and communicable experience, Walter Benjamin brings up how the trauma of war leaves soldiers unable to speak. Marianne Hirsch coined the term “post-memory” to refer to the visions of the new generations and the traces that trauma leaves on the social fabric. Although Hirsch’s analysis focused on the Holocaust and its repercussions, the author posits that the term “post-memory” can be used more broadly to explain the experience of the second generations, those who did not experience the trauma personally but are still affected by it. For Hirsch memory is never stagnant; it is not a painting or image that an individual can simply conjure up when desired. Instead, memory is active, existing in the present and guiding one forward toward the future. In his work, Dominick Lacapra asks, “What, in general, is the significance of trauma in history?” (1), a question that underscores the intermingling of history, memory, and the transmission of experience. Similarly, Beatriz Sarlo argues that memory is fragmentary by nature, leading to a proliferation of memories that coexist but often do not coincide in their descriptions of a single event:

If it is no longer possible to sustain a single truth, then several subjective truths flourish, all of which stake a claim to that which was supposedly hidden beneath ideology or immersed in processes difficult to access through mere introspection until three decades ago. There is no truth but paradoxically, the subjects have become cognizable. (Sarlo 51)

Elizabeth Jelin reiterates this fragmented concept around memories, noting that they are built in opposition to other memories in a struggle to build social meaning in present-day discourse.

In order to build the allegory, the narrative draws on different revisionist readings of both the Juan Manuel de Rosas government (1835-1852) and present-day Argentina,

i.e., a country devastated by a military dictatorship that civil society had largely supported (1976-1983).

In 1983, when the regime ceded power, society had to address the demands of those directly impacted by dictatorship: 30,000 disappeared and hundreds of thousands who suffered the military repression that began in 1976 and took many forms: prison, exile, torture, death, or the kidnapping of newborns and children then given to other families.

Shortly after Raúl Alfonsín was sworn in as president, the new democratic administration formed the National Commission on the Disappeared (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, or CONADEP). Writer Ernesto Sábato was appointed to lead the research team that gathered documents and evidence on forced disappearances. The commission's work mainly drew on testimonies from the survivors and reports filed by family members of the disappeared. The outcome of the investigation was *Nunca Más*, a report that laid the groundwork for the trial of the juntas.⁹ The prologue to the report, written by Sábato,¹⁰ introduced two problematic theories that still circulate in Argentina today: the “theory of the two demons,” and the “theory of the innocent victims.”¹¹

⁹ The trial of the military juntas began on April 22, 1985, and ended on December 9 of that year. That day, the trial prosecutor, Strassera, made his closing statement: “Your honors, I expressly renounce any attempt at being original as we bring this trial to a close. I want to use a phrase that doesn't belong to me because it now belongs to all the Argentine people. Your honors, *nunca más*.”

¹⁰ The original prologue written in 1984 was amended in 2006 under the Néstor Kirchner administration, in a clear exercise of post-memory challenging a hegemonic version of the past.

¹¹ According to the theory of the two demons, two extreme groups were both equally responsible for the violence that occurred under dictatorship: the far left (guerrilla fighters) and the far right (the armed forces). The theory of the innocent victims, in contrast, freed civil society from all responsibility and blame. Yet the fact is that the six years of dictatorship, the disappearance of 30,000 people, the torture, and the systematic plan for giving away the babies of the disappeared to other families would not have been possible without the complicity and silence of all society. In fact, when someone learned of a civilian disappearing, a common response was, *Por algo será* (There must be a reason.)

The number of Argentine films produced in the first year of democracy returned to its pre-dictatorship levels. Like other cultural products, these films sought to give testimony on the recent past through images, incorporating the military regime's aberrant crimes to the collective imaginary. Yet how does film reconstruct, analyze, narrate, and elaborate that past? There is, of course, no single answer to this question. Every director who has decided to approach the past has done so in their own way, though many of these films can be assigned to the same category, one of which is "period films." This is precisely the category María Luisa Bemberg chooses to recount two types of violence that have claimed innumerable lives: the ideological persecution on the part of the state and the oppression and violence against women on the part of not only the state but also the church and the family. Perhaps Bemberg chose these historical events from the nineteenth century as an allegory for the dictatorship because such a short time had elapsed since the end of the regime.

1.7 Allegory

Allegory is often prolific during times of authoritarian regimes and subsequent returns to democracy. The most common explanation for this is that when fear and censorship run rampant, artists must resort to roundabout ways of saying things, "metaphors" or "allegories" (understood here in the classical or Romantic sense, as an illustrative image that veils a semantic abstraction). The period after dictatorship stages an evolution-allegory of the symbol. As an image torn from the past—a monad that holds the survival of the world it evokes—the allegory applies old symbols to totalities now broken and dated, rewriting them in the fleetingness of historical time. It reads these old symbols as corpses (Avelar 9-11).

Yet besides operating as an allegory of the recent dictatorship, Bemberg's film offers a critical reading of a chapter in Argentine history that had been subject to little debate at that point in time. Historians had always been kind to Rosas, the governor of the province of Buenos Aires when Camila O'Gorman was a young woman, praising him for imposing "order" on nineteenth-century Argentina and keeping its vast and complex territory together. In 1829, Congress appointed him governor, granting him extraordinary powers and the title of "Restorer of Laws." The social structure of this period was based on owning land, the principal source of status and power.

Rosas imposed ideological unity on the people of Buenos Aires by requiring the use of a political emblem, a red ribbon, and rigorously controlling the press. The intimidation, repression, and even elimination of any ideological or political opponent was entrusted to Sociedad Popular Restauradora, security forces widely known as the Mazorca. During the long years of the Rosas administration, the victims of the Mazorca multiplied. These are the features of the period that Bemberg uses to build an analogy between those years and the dictatorship.

Camila presents two interlaced levels of the text: the first and most obvious is that of a love story set in the mid-nineteenth century. For viewers in 1984, the workings of the allegory are evident in living memories of the recent past: in this allegorical and feminist melodrama, the personal is political. Before the couple's fate is clear, Camila asks, "Are you going to kill us just like that, without even a trial, without giving us the chance to defend ourselves?" This defenselessness can be read in two ways: with regard to the diegesis, it refers to being at the mercy of security forces under the Rosas regime, but given the moment in which the film premiered, it inevitably evoked the question of state

terrorism for viewers. By sketching a series of parallels, the film connects the violence of the Rosas regime to the covert kidnappings, disappearances, and murders that were part of the workings of the dictatorship's repression.

The question, then, is what is important about a "historical" film? Although Camila imagines plenty—no one was privy to the discussions between Camila and Uladislao, or Camila and her parents—what matters is that these dialogues are plausible in their historical and social context. Their role in the present-day, in the case of the events narrated by Eisenstein, is to create an "air" of the historical period in question, not to replicate it. The final shot of Ladislao and a pregnant Camila, both blindfolded and standing before the firing squad, is important not because it is historically accurate but because it evokes those disappeared under the 1976-1983 dictatorship: the blindfolded, tortured men and women, many of whom were pregnant, often thrown from airplanes to meet their death in the ocean. The strength of this image, then, is to evoke Argentina's recent past from the present (in this case, 1984). Yet beyond the ties between two historical pasts—one more distant and the other, painfully present—what does the film say, or what does Bemberg say, about that distant past to contemporary spectators? In Kratje's words,

Camila establishes a direct dialogue with the country's political history. Now, Bemberg's historiographical perspective is, in a certain sense, against a revisionism that has praised Rosas for his bold actions.

In the comments by Camila's father about "The Restorer," and the depictions of the regime in the church and prison, it is clear that someone is responsible for the brutal crimes that are occurring, someone identified as pater familias. This becomes painstakingly clear when the camera pauses for a shot of a portrait of Rosas right after one of the soldiers exits right; the leader, a ruthless look in his eyes, gazes at the camera from a faded sheet of paper. (El circunloquio de la violencia 85)

Therefore, when a film revisits a historical moment and renders it in the present, it is interesting to assess how it captures and reinterprets the ideology and identity of a moment in time, and how the conflicts of the characters can be read in the present-day, i.e., what they have to teach in the present. Without a doubt, the idea of the collective hero that Eisenstein laid out in 1925 Russia is interpreted quite differently in other periods. In the Argentina of 1984, for example, this collective character could be interpreted as the 30,000 disappeared or as the Mothers in their fight for memory, truth, and justice. In other words, historical examples are filled with metaphors and analogies that can be applied to the present, regardless of how true-to-fact they are. Without a doubt, *Camila* is situated in a context in which there is a search to rebuild what has been experienced through the work of memory. As Sarlo notes:

The experience was too complex and for whomever was willing to acknowledge it, too contradictory. This was not only because of the clear-cut, unambiguous division between the criminals and the victims—evident when the military aspect of repression alone was considered—but also because it meant recognizing the deeper, prior cracks in Argentine society. Drawing attention to more amorphous and relegated zones means rebuilding the world as we have experienced it and connecting it with the past, on the one hand, and with the public sphere and the intellectual, moral dimension on the other. (33)

1.8 *Camila* as an Allegorical and Historical Film

A political reading of *Camila* in relation to Argentina's recent past is inevitable, given the number of young people whose fate was similar to that of *Camila's* and *Ladislao's*. The film can thus be considered an allegory of the repression and punishment that characterized that regime.

The topic of the unspoken social support for the regime is reflected in *Camila* in the scene in which the bookstore owner's head appears on a pike. The locals simply look the other way, thus enabling the crimes of the *Mazorca*. At Mass, Father *Ladislao* gives a

sermon in which he alludes to the situation by citing the Gospel (Mark 6: 14-29 and Matthew 14: 6-12) and the story of Salome, the banquet for Herod, and the ultimate beheading of John the Baptist. Though he is reprimanded by his superiors for the cheeky sermon, it only makes Camila's admiration and desire for him grow.

1.9 A Lineage of Women, Inheritance, Transmission, and Politics

In this section, I use the term "lineage" in a symbolic sense to evoke family ties. Camila forges an alliance with her paternal grandmother, who has been sentenced to house arrest for a forbidden romance. When the news of Camila eloping with Ladislao spreads, her father bitterly recalls how close Camila and her grandmother had grown since the grandmother had moved into the family home. Bemberg thus fictionalizes a line of subversive women, an inheritance of breaking the mold.

A core realization of feminism is that creating divisions between women is part of the patriarchal mandate; any woman, under patriarchy, poses a threat to other women. She is a potential enemy—a competitor—who may attempt to steal what is theirs, no matter how little or how much they have. It has taken women time to understand the ancestral knowledge they carry about their bodies that should be conveyed to other women—mothers to daughters, sisters, and friends. When women see each other as peers and sisters, and not as enemies and competitors, their strength is incalculable. One example of this are the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, associations that have spent more than forty years fighting to bring perpetrators to justice. These groups have aided in the recovery of over two hundred of the children kidnapped and/or born to a detained mother. However, many Argentines who are now middle age remain unaware of their real family ties.

In the tradition of the melodrama, the mother is depicted as an obedient woman who practically loses herself to her family. In her article “Mothering Feminism and Representation: The Maternal in Melodrama and the Women’s Film, 1910-1940,” Ann Kaplan says that mothers make sacrifices to satisfy the needs of the men in their family (children and husband, if there is a husband). The mother ceases to be a person and instead becomes a medium to satisfy the needs and expectations of real people, i.e., men. On the other hand, for women viewers, the “message” is conveyed in terms of what is missing and on how her “in-completeness” can be resolved. And women are never complete unless they have a man. Sisterhood between women is totally forgotten in this type of story. That is why Bemberg makes such a rich choice by choosing to tell Camila’s story as a melodrama, showing viewers of both genders that alliances between women are possible and that Camila’s courage goes beyond her love for Ladislao. Even before she meets the priest, Camila has decided against the future her family (and society) has planned for her; perhaps that is why she allows herself to fall in love with the priest. Without this initial decision, the transgression would never have been possible and her fondness for the priest would have remained, at most, a fantasy.

During the feminist movement in Italy in the 1960s and 70s, years of great activism also worldwide, hundreds of women marched together singing, “Tremble, tremble, the witches have returned.”¹² During those same years, women from the W.I.T.C.H. movement¹³ in the United States held rallies in which women dressed up as witches and danced in circles. In recent years, as part of the *Ni una menos* marches

¹² In Italian, the motto was *Tremate, le streghe son tornate* (Dalla Costa).

¹³ The acronym stands for “Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell.” It was an umbrella organization for several feminist groups.

organized in Argentina against the murder of women (*femicidio*) and at protests demanding legal abortion, women have chanted, “We are the grandchildren of all the witches they couldn’t burn.” At first, only one or two women would utter this cry as an event was ending but it later became a chant for everyone to wrap up the event. There is something particular about these protests: women dance, sing, and end with a collective hug. It is a strong and mystical way of forging a symbolic path with all the women who have protested before them.

The immense popularity of the film *Camila* left a legacy that the film’s director probably never imagined. Many little girls born in Argentina in the 1980s were named *Camila*. As a rebellious character who does not back down, *Camila* embodies the struggle against an oppressive world of hoop skirts and corsets that seeks to domesticate and tame women, leaving them at odds with their own bodies and with other women, and dictating their behaviors. *Camila* positions herself as the heir to her grandmother and the little girls named after her—along with those who are not—grew up knowing her story and are thus heirs to it as well. In any case, in keeping with this idea of an inheritance in Bemberg’s film—of belonging and feeling part of a lineage—here it is important to avoid any reductionism, i.e., the idea of “woman” as a uniform being. As with the past and its reconstruction vis-à-vis memory, women must be used in the plural, as must memories. This way, it is possible to distinguish—and choose—a single lineage among the many available. Yet is that feminist lineage for everyone? An Indigenous woman from the countryside is entirely different from a white, middle-class woman. Despite the abysmal differences between them, however, the history of dominance and oppression women have suffered is common to both, and although their struggles may be different, the goal

of acknowledging the autonomy and desires of each individual woman can be quite similar. In the words of the Mexican anthropologist Marta Lama,

Reconceptualizing political practice, characterizing the identity not as an irreducible essence but as a position we assume or that is assigned to us means changing the question “Who am I?” associated with certain demands for diversity and ask instead “Where am I?” Place allows us to see those who are in our surroundings. (26)

And that question about location that Lamas poses can also be applied to time.

Time and space are two essential coordinates for thinking about identity yet it is also interesting to see how some topics fare in different spaces and moments in time. For that reason, a film from 1984 set in the nineteenth century can be alluding directly to the Argentine dictatorship of 1976 and, at the same time, to the feminist struggles that continue into the twenty-first century. Abortion, for example, ceased to be a class privilege in Argentina only recently, when Congress, with the support of President Alberto Fernández, finally passed a law making it legal, safe, and free in December 2020. As women across the country took to the streets to demand legal abortion and the power of decision over their bodies, political action became increasingly urgent.

As groups formed by women, the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo are core participants in the country’s political life, but many feminists have taken a pragmatic approach to political intervention, going to Congress to seek recognition—and legislation—on struggles and demands dating back years.

B. Ruby Rich poses several questions that are also critical to the topics discussed here:

According to Mulvey, the woman is not visible in the audience which is perceived as male; according to Johnston, the woman is not visible on the screen. How does one formulate an understanding of a structure that insists on our absence even in the face of our presence? What is there in a film with which a woman viewer identifies? How can the contradictions be used as a critique? And how do all these

factors influence what one makes as a woman filmmaker, or specifically as a feminist filmmaker? (87)

Despite never referring to herself as such, Bemberg could indeed be considered a feminist filmmaker. Her films ponder women's place in the world and in daily life, because the personal is indeed political. From her first short films and "simple" films like *Momentos* (1981) to the lavish *Yo, la peor de todas* (I, the Worst of All, 1990) on the life and work of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and even *Camila*, Bemberg has made films with which women can identify. In conflicts both recent and long past, where memory is but an exercise of profound reflection, female viewers were able to see a bit of their innermost selves in these characters: not as objects of pleasure for others but as particular, distinctive subjects.

The proximity of historical memory and personal memory, especially in films made by women, now leads to the question as to what happens when a personal story is also the story of a country. To address this question, the next chapter shall focus on the Lita Stantic film *Un muro de silencio* (A Wall of Silence).

CHAPTER 2

A BRIDGE BETWEEN GENERATIONS OF WOMEN: *UN MURO DE SILENCIO*

2.1 Introduction

Argentine President Carlos Saúl Menem took office in July 1989, five months earlier than scheduled, due to social unrest that forced Alfonsín to resign. The new leader veered off the course Alfonsín had taken for memory policies by proposing pardons as a way of bringing closure. In Menem's view, forgiving and forgetting were necessary to unite, bring peace, and look toward the future. This discourse and its specific manifestations—like the so-called laws of impunity, which made it nearly impossible to bring perpetrators of crimes under dictatorship to justice—severely limited the recovery of historical memory. They also had an impact on society at large, encouraging Argentines to turn the page and forget the past.

In this context, Lita Stantic's *Un muro de silencio* (1993) takes a bold stance. Filmed at the height of tensions between those working to build historical memory and President Carlos Menem, who was pressuring to bring the traumatic past to a close, this film-within-a-film refuses to turn its back on memory.

Un muro de silencio tells the story of a British filmmaker, Kate, who comes to Argentina after the return of democracy to produce a fiction film. The main character of Kate's movie is Ana, inspired by the "real" story of a woman named Silvia who was kidnapped with her husband and daughter during the dictatorship. Mother and daughter were freed shortly after, but Silvia's husband was forcibly disappeared. For a few months after his kidnapping, Silvia received several calls from her husband and even managed to meet with him once. The script of Kate's film is based on a book by Bruno, a university

professor who was once close to Silvia and her husband. Stantic's film is a co-production between Argentina, England, and Mexico, and the main female roles are played by non-Argentine actors, like Vanessa Redgrave.

Shot by Lita Stantic, the executive producer of *Camila* and other Bemberg films, *Un muro de silencio* is perhaps bolder than *Camila* in that it abandons any show of allegory in its telling of a victim of the last military dictatorship. A measured yet crude realism permeates the film, which presents an original diegetic complexity for Argentine film at the time.

2.2 On Argentine Women in the Film Industry

It is possible to say that Lita Stantic and María Luisa Bemberg embodied the second wave of feminism in Argentina. The first wave of feminism corresponds to the suffrage movement, dating back to around 1880. During the second wave, which started in the 1960s, women in most developed nations had already won the right to vote. This second wave, strongly impacted by Simone de Beauvoir's work *The Second Sex*, focused on the differences between women and men, celebrating a gynocentric perspective of the body and female sexuality and sexual rights, such as the availability of birth control pills, which brought sexual liberation. However, this second wave focused mainly on the rights of heterosexual, white, middle-class women (Zecchi 14), without forging any ties to the struggle against racial segregation and for civil rights in the same period. Later, in the 1990s, the third wave of feminism began to incorporate sexual, racial, and social diversity, though this was still a fledgling concept.

Stantic, together with other women filmmakers like Bemberg, Beatriz Villalba, Marta Bianchi, Susana Lopez Merino, and Sara Facio, started the Unión Feminista

Argentina in 1970 and an association for women filmmakers, La Mujer y el Cine, 1988. Besides taking on roles in filmmaking previously reserved for men, these women began making radical short films with a gender perspective, addressing politics, ideology, and other issues specific to women that remain relevant even today. These works broke with traditional cinematographic language, giving birth to a counter-cinema that took a stance against the hegemonic patriarchal model. Stantic, for example, started making short films in the 1960s and went on to produce several feature films in the 1970s. In 1981, she and Bemberg founded the production company GEA Cinematográfica that would go on to produce, among other films, *Camila*.

Un muro de silencio is the only film directed by Stantic in her vast career as a producer. During years in which the currency board erased memories of inflation and the laws of impunity fostered an oblivion of the recent past, the film reveals a personal need on the part of the director to share events from the recent past despite state policies to the contrary. More specifically, it reveals the need to share these events on film.

2.3 Menemism and the Years after the Democratic Transition: The Politics of Oblivion

In her book on film and politics, Julieta Zarco uses the term “moments of memory” to refer to the “space assigned to topics associated with state violence in the 1970s” (11). Da Silva Castela has used the term “memory cycles” and Vezzetti, “memory periods.” The first, which Zarco refers to as “remembering to avoid repeating,” starts with the return to democracy (1983-1989). Once dictatorship had ended, it became possible to discuss state violence and the human rights violations that had taken place. In 1983, President Raúl Alfonsín’s administration issued a call for “truth and justice” and

introduced state policies to foster historical memory. The formation of the National Commission on the Disappeared (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, or CONADEP), the publication of the *Nunca más* report, and the subsequent trial of the military junta are three salient examples of this. The Alfonsín administration was particularly interested in clarifying what had occurred under the regime. The second moment corresponds to the presidency of Carlos Menem (1989-1995). Unlike the previous administration, Menem took a completely different approach to memory; this moment is referred to as “reconciliation and forgiveness.”

In a speech included in David Blaustein’s documentary *Botín de guerra* (Spoils of War) from 2000, Carlos Menem says, “Early this morning, I signed decrees 1002, 1004 and 1005, issuing pardons for many military personnel and many civilians, in order for us to begin rebuilding our country in peace, freedom, and justice.” Besides the politics of forgive and forget, Menem’s new economic plan ultimately proved devastating for the country. Neoliberal economics, which included a currency board and the sale of state-owned companies firms to private international companies, initially impressed Argentines but gradually had a devastating impact on both the middle and lower classes. As Zarco notes, “Some authors (Basualdo; Forcinito and Basualdo) have proposed that Carlos Menem’s neoliberalism was a continuation of the liberal economic policy of the military dictatorship” (97). *Un muro de silencio* is set during the Menem presidency (1989 to 1999), this period in which forgiving and forgetting prevailed in Argentine society. The film takes a strong stance against it.

2.4 *Un muro de silencio*: A Twist on Realities, Reflections, and Ghosts

Un muro de silencio is the only film that Lita Stantic directed in her prolific career in film production, which includes several New Argentine Cinema works. Based on historical facts, this metafiction builds a complex weave of stories-within-stories through a meticulous montage that provides both historical information and emotional insight into the characters and events. In a review for the fabled Argentine film magazine *El Amante*, Eduardo Antín writes, “the level of complexity of the script is unusual for Argentine film. Montage here is not used to connect the stories. The scenes, however, are not independent: the narrative weaves them together” (18).

The plot is organized around two overlapping fictions: one stars Silvia in the present-day of the making of the film and the other stars Ana, the character in Kate’s film who is “living” Silvia’s past as the film is shot. The dictatorship was hard on Silvia, changing her in so many ways that her character’s personality seems to be split. When the film begins, Silvia, now working as a professor of sociology, is totally disconnected from her past. Silvia’s daughter is now a teenager and they both live with her new partner, Ernesto, who knows little about her past. Though Silvia has worked hard to remake her life—one of the first scenes of the film is her wedding to Ernesto—her world is turned upside down when a friend tells her that a film is being made about her life. Bruno, a former friend who knows her story as the wife of a missing person, had never consulted her.

Silvia’s first reaction is anger. What right does Bruno have to go public with her story? In Silvia’s view, despite the fact that her history is similar to that of many others who suffered under the regime, she has no interest in it being shared with others. The

issue between Silvia and Bruno, however, is about more than who has the right to go public with this story: it is also a conflict about who narrates that memory, and thus, how it is told, what aspects are selected, and what is remembered. Ultimately, it is Bruno's retelling that sets off Silvia's memories, but the film depicts these memories as scenes Bruno imagines. In other words, the film offers no direct access to Silvia's own memories. Silvia is seen only from Stantic's point of view, never from Kate's. In fact, what Kate's camera lens captures is Silvia's memory, which she has kept carefully hidden due to the pain of the past and the silence overshadowing what has happened. Remembering and reflecting are discouraged in favor of covering up and moving forward.

In the words of Beatriz Sarlo, "There is no testimony without experience but there is also no experience without narrative: language frees up what experience cannot say, rescuing it from its immediacy or oblivion and making it communicable, that is, *common*" (29). Testimonial stories are "discourse" (64), precisely the kind of (cinematographic) discourse that Stantic builds in *Un muro de silencio*, a film brimming with references to the director's own story. According to Stantic, "[The] three characters all have bits and pieces of me: the director who comes to the country to tell a story [...] And Silvia, who tries to erase events from the past through her work but cannot, and Ana, because like her, I was also part of an ambitious project when I was young" (Zarco 116). At the same time, film is a public way of narrating the past, shedding light on the latest strategies a society is relying on to depict the past, ways of referring to topics and objects that fit within the social and interpretative frameworks available at any given time (Rodriguez 179).

What we see of Silvia is her fear of remembering, of reliving the horror. Silvia has amputated her past, going so far as to hide the truth—and thus part of the family identity—from her own daughter. Metafiction allows Stantic to depict this dense interweave between historical and personal memory. Though this simplifies the story in certain ways, as will be analyzed further on in this chapter, it also adds a layer of complexity to montage and character design. The narrative structure has three levels, allowing the viewer to gaze at the past (Silvia's past as played by Ana in Kate's film) but pause in the present (Silvia's life under democracy, Kate's efforts to understand a painful, complex chapter in a foreign country's history through the film she is making). As the foreigner, Kate allows the film to dive into Argentina's past.

Showing the technical paraphernalia of filmmaking, especially the camera, and using the process of shooting a film as a *mise-en-abyme*—building a fictional work through another fiction that is shot within the film—strains the representation by breaking with the tacit understanding that connects a film with its viewers. In this image within an image, the English director of *Un muro de silencio* can reflect on the configuration of the historical enigma. (Amado 121)

In addition, it could be argued that this metafiction helps shape the subject of the enunciation; this figure, however, is a fictitious subject, a *mise-en-scène* of this way of laying out the story.

In her work on Argentine film and politics, Ana Amado poses a very relevant question: “What are the paths of representation for certain historical-political processes in film?” (12). In the case of *Camila*, historical allegory is the basis for the representation. In *Un muro de silencio*, a fiction-within-a-fiction was found as a suitable way to develop the story.

Silvia does not want to look back on her own past and is outraged that others have turned her life into a story to be told to the world. At the same time, she knows how

important it is for the personal stories of dictatorship to be shared; the ghosts of the past, which continue to haunt her, are part of this inner dilemma. In Silvia's experience as a survivor, attempting to banish the past from memory is an attempt to regain a semblance of happiness over a decade after trauma. As opposed to remembering and elaborating, Silvia is compelled to forget and move forward.

The script uses two parallel moments to connect this character's past with her present. Silvia Cassini, the "real" person on whom Kate's fictional film is based, is the protagonist of the present-day story. The moments in the past are staged as flashbacks experienced by Ana (Silvia's character in Kate's film), though her husband never appears in any of them. By engaging with the thorny question of how to depict someone who is disappeared (Zarco 88), Stantic's film broke new ground. As Ricoeur has argued, the representation of social and cultural traumas denote an absence, one the film acknowledges by never showing the disappeared person on screen.

For survivors, situating the disappeared in both a symbolic and concrete sense is a painful, difficult, traumatic act. What to do with them, how to remember them, and how to bury them are just a few of the questions that emerge, all of which come up in films that attempt to represent this. *Un muro de silencio* resolves this through innovative narrative dynamics: "The disappeared is, in fact, disappeared: he is only seen through the actor who is playing him in the film-within-the-film" (Zarco 96). Perhaps this is a suitable way of depicting what is, essentially, a ghost: embodying the absence in such a way that this body expands into the emptiness, as opposed to attempting to substitute or fill it.

As Derrida argues in *Specters of Marx*, “It [the specter] *is* something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it *is*, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence. [...] One does not know if it is living or if it is dead. Here is—or rather there is, over there, an unnameable or almost unnameable thing” (6). Curiously, it is possible to link this idea of the specter to statements by Argentina’s dictator-president Jorge Rafael Videla at a press conference when asked about the people who had disappeared during the dictatorship.

The disappeared are a conundrum: if they reappear, then X, and if the disappearance turns into a certainty, they are dead, then Z. But as long as they are disappeared, they cannot receive any special treatment. The disappeared are a conundrum: they have no status, they are neither alive nor dead, only disappeared. (Casa Rosada, 0:48)

Like ghosts, then, those disappeared under dictatorship are neither dead nor alive. This has a devastating effect on the living, as if the disappeared were haunting them. Without a body, it is impossible to mourn. Through the *mise en abyme*, or film within the film, Stantic achieves the feat of materializing absence, embodying a disappeared man through an actor who plays him. The filmic device is materially incorporated to the fiction, which relies on a biographic reconstruction of one of the characters, who is simultaneously victim, survivor, and woman.

Disappearance is a repressive technology with myriad repercussions for individual and social subjectivity, altering the categories we use to produce meaning. Unlike other types of political violence and other forms of genocide, disappearance is not as much about death as it is about denial: death is what the term “disappeared” denies, the absence of a corpse that provides evidence of one’s death... (Mandolessi 50)

Ana, Silvia’s fictional character, doesn’t want to leave the country or even her home in case her husband returns for her. The feeling that perhaps the disappeared are alive somewhere was common among the relatives of the disappeared. Silvia, the film’s

“real” character, takes Ana’s “feeling” further. When in crowds, Silvia often thinks she has caught sight of her husband a decade later, when it has become painstakingly evident that all of the disappeared are dead. Nonetheless, the specter pursues her, making her doubt her own sanity.

The metafiction, which Stantic uses to narrate the story with precision and grace, builds a constant tension between memory and oblivion. In the words of film critic David Oubiña,

It is no coincidence that Kate’s film covers the full period of the repression. By doing so, one is continuously aware of the fact that these scenes are played by actors—actors, in fact, who play actors within the film—and not by the victims themselves. It is as if emphasizing the impossibility of relaying this were precisely the way to relay it, and Stantic’s story avoids any catharsis. Because she knows that the horror will not be sated with any image; living with the memory of the horror is inevitable (or imperative). (España 81)

When Silvia discovers that a film is being made about her life, forcing her to confront the past, this sneaking suspicion that perhaps her first husband (the father of her daughter) is alive somewhere returns with a vengeance. The sinister phone calls she received from him during his time in captivity, along with the single meeting she has with him after he was kidnapped, have contributed to this idea, yielding a mixture of hope and horror. The Austrian sociologist Michael Pollak used the term “underground memories” (*“une identité blessée”* (23) to refer to people or social groups whose personal or community memory clashes with hegemonic tales; as an integral part of minority, dominated cultures, these underground memories oppose “official memory.”

As imprints of social confrontation, memories are continually reformulated to reveal political stances. In the government-backed discourse of Argentina in the 1990s when *Un muro de silencio* premiered, oblivion was the prevalent approach to the past. In other words, the collective memory of the time pressed forward, turning deaf ears to the

past. Yet the personal memories of the victims of state terrorism persisted, forcing those who remembered to remain silent until these memories could be shared in the public. “*Un muro de silencio* brings forward a topic that no other film had in the past: the question of whether one of the disappeared is alive, a suffering that thousands of relatives have experienced in the flesh.” (Zarco 94).

Without a doubt, reflecting on memories leads us to rethink the oblivion, transience, and productivity of memory. According to Elizabeth Jelin, “Approaching memory means referencing things remembered and forgotten, narratives and actions, silences and gestures. Knowledge comes into play but so do emotions. And there are gaps and schisms” (17).

At the same time, one of the most controversial figures in relation to the past is that of the survivors, whose liberation is a constant source of suspicion. Pilar Calveiro, an Argentine political scientist who was kidnapped during the dictatorship but later freed, explains, “The survivor sees himself—or is seen as, or both together—as someone who survived over others who died” (48). This resonates with a scene in which Ana is buying vegetables at the greengrocers and a former militant says to her, “Everyone wonders about why they let you go. No one took it very well. Leave, Ana.” As Zarco argues, the armed forces actively seeded terror; leaving some people alive was essential to this objective, as it served as both warning and lesson. It also sowed doubt regarding their loyalty and commitment to the cause, debilitating their relationships.

As a film about the victims, *Un muro de silencio* addresses the repercussions of dictatorship for survivors. Kate, the director of the film-within-the-film, asks her scriptwriter about the guilt that—she supposes—the main character of her film must feel

precisely because she was not involved in her husband's underground activities. Thus, Kate surmises, Ana is ultimately but a witness to his kidnapping and death. It is the guilt of having survived that leads Ana to attempt to shut the door on the past and start a new life (Amado 119).

One very interesting aspect about the film is that it is the first to treat a disappeared character as a political activist, not an "innocent" victim. During the first years of democracy, many were fearful of drawing attention to the activism of the disappeared—not to mention the involvement in the armed struggle on the part of many others. Transforming them into "pure and innocent" victims without any political causes became a way to convince society to sympathize with the victims and avoid any justification of state repression and genocide. "The representation of the militant and the disappeared are aspects generally overlooked in film and political analysis of memories of Argentina's recent past" (Zarco 82).

In the 1980s, the Argentine media constantly published testimonies of survivors of the clandestine detention centers and the relatives of the detained-disappeared. This coverage contributed to swaying public opinion against the leaders of the military juntas, especially during their trial. As noted in *Nunca Más*, a widely read report by the National Commission on the Disappeared (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, or CONADEP), voices previously silenced were empowered in this process. At the same time, however, the detained-disappeared were depoliticized, stripping them of the ideals and causes that led to their activism and sparked the armed struggle in the 1970s. The "theory of the two demons," as mentioned in Chapter 1, was the metaphor of the decade, equating the military with the insurgents.

Yet Stantic adds a plethora of historical background to her film. Accompanied with scriptwriter Bruno, Kate attempts to understand Bruno's activism by watching documentary clips of the worker protest that became known as the Cordobazo (1969); marches by the armed militant group Montoneros, whose membership was decimated during the regime; and scenes from the Cámpora and Perón presidency that preceded the coup. The director's desire for the new generations to understand the context that led some (but not all) militants of the 1970s to take up arms is palpable throughout. When severed from the social and political context of not only Argentina but also the regional and world, it is indeed difficult to comprehend today. *Un muro de silencio* thus marks a break from films that to some degree fostered the theory of the two demons and that of innocent victims.

2.5 Autobiography, Sons, Daughters, and Memory

According to Halbwachs, memory emerges as a selective reconstruction of the past supported by groups seeking to protect certain specific memories. This leads the founder of the "sociology of memory" to suggest that all memory is selective, the result of a negotiation to make individual memories compatible with collective memory. Collective memory, then, is different from history: the first is the inner reflection of a group that cannot last more than a human lifetime, while the second involves an exogenous and more long-term point of view.

Un muro de silencio starts with a personal, private experience (individual memory) that later shifts to the public sphere. "In order for memory to exist, there needs to be a social context that allows for a transition from 'me' to 'us.'" (Zarco 82-83)

The filmmaker Pablo Szir, Lita Stantic's partner and the father of her daughter Alejandra, was kidnapped and disappeared on October 30, 1976. As occurs in the movie, Stantic received phone calls from Szir, a member of a group of radical filmmakers known as Cine Liberación, after he was kidnapped. At that point, they had been divorced for three years; he had joined one of the armed organizations after their marriage ended. Although Stantic agreed with the ideas of the militants, she was convinced that film was the only weapon suitable for transforming the world. As cited by Zarco, Stantic says, "It took me quite some time to take on the topic because I felt directly involved. I am part of generation that experienced this suffering in the flesh" (87).

According to Walter Benjamin, the horror of the Holocaust had been so extreme that only silence remained. This idea, which could also be referred to as a "feeling" of muteness, is shared by many of those who experienced either the Holocaust or the dictatorship in the flesh. However, in both cases, the need to share what one experienced as a political and social task—indeed, almost a duty—is as pressing as the urge to remain silent. The numerous testimonies that draw on art in order to convey experiences are evidence of this. It is precisely this conflict—between staying silent and raising one's voice—that comes up as a conflict as social as it is personal in *Un muro de silencio*. Because beyond the direct and personal transmission between a parent and child, the film analyzes how a people's memory expands and is constructed outside the domestic sphere. Halbwachs has this to say about collective memory:

For our memory to benefit from others, their testimonies alone are not enough: it is also imperative that our memory coincide with their memories, and for there to be enough points in common between our memory and that of others so that the memory that the others bring can be reconstructed on a common ground. (Memoria, Esquecimento, Silêncio 4)

A conceptual category for thinking about memory as a living process that has already been developed herein involves Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory. Zarco argues that "post-memory can be used more broadly to explain the experience of the second generations, who have not lived the incident itself but still feel its tremors" (15). In Hirsch's words, "Post-memory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth" (12). This author argues that it is common and feasible for second generations to connect so profoundly with the traumatic memories of survivors, nothing that these experiences often seem to segue into memories of one's own. (Hirsch 103-108). Trauma theory as developed by Caruth posits that it is never possible to fully understand or work through what happened in the past, which is why the past continues to resurface and trouble the trauma sufferer years later. Unlike what happens in other cases of intergenerational trauma, the children of the disappeared are forced to build memory around the figure of an absent parent (or parents).

In a work that explores the culture of memory and the subjective turn, Beatriz Sarlo has argued that the use of the concept of post-memory "appears broader than necessary" (152). In the view of this Argentine thinker, the terms "memory" or "recollection" are enough to impact even the next generation that did not actually live the events. This specific concept [post-memory] proves enormously interesting for this particular type of memory transmission—and thus, identity—when thinking about the individual and collective psychology of the sons and daughters of the disappeared. In *Un muro de Silencio*, the question of how memory is passed is as important as the tension between memory and oblivion.

As the film focuses on a mother-daughter relationship—specifically, the experience of a daughter watching her mother embark on a painful path toward remembrance after years of silence—the way in which memory is passed here is also gendered. There is even a brief reference to a third generation, a paternal grandmother who Silvia greets warmly in the wedding scene.

The film suggests that history should be understood as society's tool to know more about itself and protect its future. Memory here is the active effort to remember and its main (and entirely polysemic) function is that of communicating true experiences. Experience is what produces memory and is never exclusive to a single subject. All memory, even individual memory, takes shape and draws support from group thought.

By the time of the twentieth anniversary of the coup d'état in Argentina, when the pardon and full-stop laws were in full effect, “the memories governed by the hegemonic tale for the past twenty years—and thus, silenced—start to find a way into the public sphere” (Zarco 106). It is no coincidence, then, that the group HIJOS made its first public appearance at Plaza de Mayo on this date. These children of post-memory suddenly became visible to Argentine society.

Alejandra Szir is the daughter of Lita Stantic and Pablo Szir. A poet, she currently lives in Sweden. Her testimony about the story of her parents and her own story brings the reflections contained in this work to life. Beatriz Sarlo notes the limits of victim testimonies of the past, which she refers to as “always conflictive,” not collaborative. However, these can be seen as a perspective—or even an ideological premise—on memory and history in *Un muro de silencio*, as noted above. In Sarlo's words, “History

cannot always believe memory, while memory is distrustful of any reconstruction that does not put the right to remember at its core” (9).

Alejandra Szir’s testimony here provides a particularly insightful source for the reconstruction of memory as a historical-political event.

When I was about five, one day my mom came to get me at kindergarten. I was excited because since she had a job, she didn’t pick me up too often. We went to my grandmother’s house and she took me into our room there... and said, “I need to talk to you about something.” (Even today, when my mom says, “I need to talk to you about something,” I assume the worst). She told me that dad had died in a car accident. I think she hugged me. I imagined my father, his body lying in the street, covered with blood. There was no wake, no funeral, nothing. If someone at school asked about my dad, I said he had died in a car accident... When I was eleven, in ‘82, my mother found some sort of political “manifesto” in my pocket. I was complaining about “student repression.” We kids had done something we weren’t supposed to and the punishment was to do math exercises in the afternoon. Quite the injustice, since we only had math in the morning. So mom took me out to eat. She asked me if I knew what “repression” meant and whether I knew who Mothers of Plaza de Mayo were. “Sure,” I said. “The mothers of the young men who died in Malvinas.” My mom told me that my dad was a guerrilla fighter with Montoneros—I was impressed at the possibility of my dad using weapons to “defend himself,” in my mother’s words. We supposed he was dead but since we hadn’t seen the corpse, “he could be alive.” During my last year at elementary school, I would wait anxiously for them to lower the flag at school and us students to be dismissed, thinking that maybe my dad would be out there waiting with the other parents. He would bear the marks of torture and that might be hard to handle. But he was my dad. My dad. I still had the hope of seeing him again. (H.I.J.O.S. Capital)

Working from this testimony, it is possible to argue that the first “story”—or to return to Sarlo, an experience-turned-discourse—that a child receives about her father’s death is false. It thus becomes part of her identity, the way she presents herself to others. As a little girl who lost her father in an accident, the story changes. Even so, as she grows, she has an urge to rebel against “injustices” and uses words like “repression.” These are typical words in those days, though her mother had never used them. Plus, she was the daughter of a disappeared guerrilla fighter, making it possible to think that memory transmission prevails over any attempt to silence it. Halbwachs has noted that

however personal a recollection, it is intrinsically related to an ensemble of notions, persons, places, dates, words, forms of language, and even reasoning and ideas. In other words, there is an evident relationship between individual memory and our collective and social world.

In addition, as mentioned here, the most sinister aspect of knowing someone who has disappeared is not knowing what happened to them or where they are. The absence of a body nourishes all sorts of fantasies, the most common of which is thinking they might be alive. This is clearly conveyed in Alejandra's testimony and in Stantic's film.

In *Un muro de silencio*, the footprints of trauma can also be seen within the diegesis. In order to bring to life Silvia's encrypted memory, Stantic employs a classic in both film and psychoanalysis: the character keeps "seeing" her former partner, Jaime, on the street, like an ominous presence. When someone is forcibly disappeared, mourning is difficult, because there is no single moment for it, or even a body. (Rodriguez 175)

Besides being a film about the victims—or more succinctly, because it is a film about the victims—*Un muro de silencio* is a film about what violence leaves behind.

2.6 "Everyone Knew": The End of a Film that Few Wanted to See

As mentioned earlier, *Un muro de silencio* builds a discourse of resistance to both the hegemonic tale and the sociopolitical context in which it was conceived, a context entirely adverse to its ideological tenets and its bold proposal. In an interview with the magazine *El Amante* in 1993, Stantic had this to say,

I was compelled to say something about that time... about what dictatorship meant for us after the fact, especially for those of us who stayed. I wanted to talk about that wall we built against the past and in some sense, emphasize that this was a valid way of dealing with things, though it's hard to understand today...I can't turn my back on the past. One of the needs this film expresses is that of not turning one's back on the past.

Yet at the time of the movie's release, audiences did not relate to Stantic's need to talk about and take responsibility for the past, nor were they especially willing to reflect on the role of society in times of terror. As already noted, the moment or period of memory in which this film was shot and released was hardly conducive to this type of reflection. Another aspect to consider is that in the first years of democracy, when a different value was placed on both memory and history as part of the search for truth and justice, there was something else to cover up in relation to dictatorship: society's complicity.

From this perspective, Stantic's film is, at the very least, provocative. When Silvia's daughter asks her mother whether she was aware of the secret detention centers and what happened there, Silvia is categorical in her response: "Everyone knew." Besides ending the film as a sort of collective mea culpa, Stantic goes further, attempting to engage a well-to-do middle class that had argued it was ignorant of what had happened. That "everyone knew" is a stark contradiction to the most celebrated film about dictatorship to have been released at that time: *La historia oficial* (The Official Version) by Luis Puenzo, winner of the Oscar for Best Foreign Film in 1985. In that film, female actor Norma Aleandro plays a history professor who naively welcomes a daughter that her husband—a businessman who had become rich thanks to dealings with the military regime—has "adopted." The fact that Aleandro's character is unaware of the fact that her daughter has been stolen from her real family serves as a sort of collective pardon for a society that did not know what was happening—or opted not to.

Film also serves to work through the terror and violence under the regime through stories that try to overcome the silence through words. The best example may well be *Un*

muro de silencio, where not speaking—even covering one’s ears to avoid hearing—is gradually transformed into not remembering, thinking, or suffering—and thus forgetting. The emergence—after the return to democracy—of a filmmaker with insistent questions breaks with this silence, giving origin to speech and memory. By using two separate timelines, *Un muro de silencio* presents the horrors of both past and present, underscoring how far society is from overcoming the violence it has endured. The narratives of Argentine film will continue to draw on this violence and its aftereffects as new directors bring new questions and conflicts to continue recovering and protecting memory. Again, memory in this sense is seen as a way to prevent injustices in the present that could lead the country to sink into terror once again.

Seven years after making this film, Stantic produced *Los Rubios*, the film that is the topic of the next chapter. In that film, Albertina Carri attempts to reconstruct the disappearance of her parents, Roberto Carri and Ana María Caruso and addresses the configuration of (their) memory in the first person. In a strange coincidence, they were held in the same secret detention center as Pablo Szir.

Besides producing Carri’s film, Stantic went on to be involved in many of the most important films of New Argentine Cinema, including *La ciénaga*. That film, the first feature by Lucrecia Martel, established her as one of the most compelling women directors of contemporary Argentine film. Martel’s third film, *La mujer sin cabeza*, is the subject of Chapter 4.

During the democratic transition in Argentina (1983-1989), public policies were introduced around truth and justice: the National Commission on Disappeared Persons was formed, the *Nunca Más* report was published, and the military juntas were tried in

court. Later, under the first presidency of Carlos Menem (1989-1995), the winds shifted in favor of reconciliation and pardons for the crimes committed during the regime. *Un muro de silencio*, which premiered during these critical years, is a film of crude and complex realism that contradicts the hegemonic narrative. By exploring the middle point between remaining silent and the need to speak of the horror, it reflects on society's role in the terror and the building of collective memory.

CHAPTER 3

THE CHILDREN BURST ONTO THE SCENE

3.1 Introduction

This chapter analyzes *Los rubios* (The Blondes), directed by Albertina Carri in 2003 about the events surrounding the forced disappearance of the director's parents, both of whom were activists. The film enables a discussion of how individual and collective memories often diverge given that Albertina Carri examines the subjective side of memory in what ultimately becomes a personal exploration of the past as opposed to a historical account. The director not only challenges her parents' commitment to revolution but also, more broadly, society's memories of state terrorism. While the previous chapter focused on how metafiction opens a door into the past in *Un muro de silencio*, there is no easy access in *Los rubios*. In this film, it is only by rebuilding emotional memory that one can explore the emptiness that absence brings.

Los rubios is an emblematic documentary in which Carri uses autofiction to try to reconstruct her personal story of her parents' kidnapping and subsequent disappearance (Albertina was kidnapped with them and held for three days). In a way similar to the Nazis, the military had hoped to render the "subversives" invisible by physically eradicating them. In keeping with the national security doctrine, the plan was to do away with dissidence and protest while also keeping the repression under wraps.

The film is a contrast between universes: on the one hand, that of activism, the motivation behind both the resistance and the repression, and on, the other hand, the private world of this particular family. Carri's provides a deeply personal and emotional reconstruction of her parents' social activism and militancy. The first-person account

details Carri's limited memories of her parents, Roberto Carri and Ana María Caruso, before the kidnapping. Yet, in the view of Pablo Piedras, Carri's film "deconstructs the grandiose tale of parent activists to explore, from a daughter's personal perspective, the innermost meaning of loss" (Piedras 142). In *Los rubios*, this radical subjectivity—a subjectivity that does little to contribute to society's understanding of itself and its history—poses a conflict with the subjective turn in films like *Un muro de silencio*, as discussed in Chapter 2.

More than a decade after democracy had been restored, the Film Act (Law 24,377) was passed in 1994. It would lead to a significant rise in the number of Argentine films produced. The law contemplated films aired on television, provided subsidies for filmmakers, and expanded the powers of the National Institute of Cinematography (INCAA). As a result, foreign studios were more eager to invest in co-productions with Argentina, new film schools opened, and Argentina began hosting film festivals. At the same time, technological advances were lowering the costs of making films.

Albertina Carri belongs to the so-called New Argentine Cinema, the decade-long production of a cohort of male and female directors with academic studies in filmmaking came of age during this filmmaking renaissance at the turn of the century. Then, in 2001, a social crisis that had been brewing since the 1990s erupted into widespread protests. Unemployment, poverty, and corruption had all run rampant. Two years earlier, the candidate of a political coalition known as the Alianza, Fernando de la Rúa, had been elected president. Comprised of opponents to Peronism and more left-leaning factions, the coalition largely fell apart in December. When the currency board collapsed, the Central Bank introduced a measure known as the *corralito* to keep Argentines from

withdrawing all their money from the banks. There seemed to be no way out of the political and economic maelstrom. Night after night, people clanged pots and pans in protests while chanting, “Let them all go” (“*Que se vayan todos*”) (in reference to politicians). The police’s violent response to these protests, the looting of supermarkets, and the death of several protesters led to the resignation of President De la Rúa, who was forced to abandon the seat of the presidency in helicopter. The crisis was widely covered on television.

While many of the most prominent directors of this new film (and others who held prominent roles in the industry) were men such as Pablo Trapero, Adrián Caetano, and Martín Rejtman, several women directors are also included in the group. Besides Albertina Carri and Lucrecia Martel, other women making films at that time included Julia Solomonoff, Paula Hernández, and Lucía Cedrón.

In the throes of crisis and protest, film changed, as did the kind of stories it told. One of the facets of this change was a renewed focus on the young and down-and-out in Buenos Aires, as seen in *Pizza, birra, faso* (Adrián Caetano and Bruno Stagnaro, 1997), and on people ruined by the crisis, as seen in *Mundo Grúa* (Pablo Trapero, 1999). The search for new forms of social representation links this generation of filmmakers with their predecessors from the 1960s, where:

Film tells stories... about a middle class in crisis that must take a stance in the face of Peronism’s collapse, in a post-war context characterized by novel consumer spending patterns. Especially in Brazil, where filmmakers Glauber Rocha wrote his iconic manifesto “The Aesthetics of Hunger,” film in Latin America began drawing attention to people living on the margins. Argentine films like *Tire Dié* (Fernando Birri, 1958) and *Palo y Hueso* (Nicolás Sarquís, 1968) are examples of filmmaking with social repercussions, where topics like exclusion and class difference exceed discourse and invade the visuals. (Gómez 48)

Besides social class, a topic present in film nearly since its beginnings, a topic with which the directors of New Argentine Cinema reckoned was the dictatorship and its personal and social repercussion. David Oubiña has argued that the first films of Argentina's fledgling democracy to grapple with dictatorship—films like *La historia oficial* (The Official Version) Luis Puenzo, 1986)—are far from revolutionary. Narratives in these films appear designed to leave the viewer and society at ease, despite their silent complicity with the regime.

The period from 1996 to 2013, which Julieta Zarco has referred to as times of “vindication and criticism” (2016), “emerges in conjunction with a new generation that forms the organization HIJOS and expresses a growing interest in the search for truth and justice” (31). Together, the sons and daughters of the disappeared and the up-and-coming directors represent a generation that inherited the genocide of their parents’ generations and felt an overwhelming need to tell their stories. This was a way of countering the dictators’ attempts to silence the voices of activism and erase any memory of them, thus obliging all Argentine society to “live without history” (Anguita 58). It also coincided with a broader exploration of the recent past that began in 2003, during the first administration of President Néstor Kirchner.

Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio, a collective focused on the generational transmission of experiences of dictatorship (Hirsch), had formed just a few years earlier, on the twentieth anniversary of the 1976 coup. The group built new and urgent ties between past and present, between memory and oblivion. This is what Beatriz Sarlo has referred to as “the memory of sons and daughters atop the memory of parents (157), or “postmemory,” to use Marianne Hirsch’s term. The

generations that follow an event suffered or experienced by their predecessors have no direct memory, only a reconstruction, and the inability to understand traumatic events necessitates imagination and individual creativity. Besides the narrative impossibility of trauma (Caruth), there is the insurmountable personal distance from past events.

On May 25, 2003, Néstor Kirchner became Argentina's president. Genuinely committed to human rights, he moved quickly to repeal the laws protecting those responsible for crimes under dictatorship from prosecution (the Superior Orders Act and Final Stop Act, both enacted under Menem). In a meaningful ceremony, Kirchner stood by as the portraits of Rafael Videla and Reynaldo Bignone (the last of the regime's de facto leaders) were taken down from the walls of the military school on March 24, 2004. A new brand of Argentine politics known as "Kirchnerismo" was taking shape. Decidedly Peronist, it was committed to human rights policies and helped shape an unprecedented economic recovery after the crisis of 2001. After Néstor Kirchner's first term in office, his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner became president and continued the policies begun under her husband. She was reelected for a second term after his death and remained in power until 2015. The memory policies under Kirchnerismo, as seen here, had to do with addressing as broadly as possible the tragic history of the 1970s.

The films made by the children's generation mark a turning point in Argentine film production. How do the sons and daughters approach the recent past in film? In the case of documentary filmmaking, the relationship between personal memory, historical memory, and the questioning of reality as a concept are more complex than in fiction film, which refers not to the world we lived in, but the world we imagining living in (Nichols). In the telling of the sons and daughters, postmemory recovers and rearticulates

fiction as something that is not outright opposed to “reality” but forms an indiscernible part of life’s fabric, reimagining the ethics and politics of everyday practices. These sons and daughters challenge the state responsible for terrorism and repression, the state under democracy (for not serving justice under Menem), and their parents. As a result, they begin to question the militant-as-hero, transforming the 1970s activities from “protagonists of a historic, collective undertaking” to “deserters of the economy of affect” (Amado 157).

3.2 Albertina Carri’s Take

The narrative departs from the classical documentary, blurring the boundary between documentary and fiction by, for example, screening the director’s decisions behind the scenes during the shoot. The film brims with poetry at the visual and sound level, favoring the connotative, evocative level, rather than the denotative, referential one. All of the techniques the director relies on while attempting to reconstruct this chapter of her life ultimately lead her to accept that she will never fully capture what happened.

The filmmaker uses different aesthetic approaches to explore the complexities of memory, borrowing other voices—those of people close to her family, as well as social discourses on political militants, the disappeared, her parents themselves. Carri is not only a direct witness to these events but also, as a daughter, a second-generation victim. Because of her age and the level of trauma associated with events, she has almost no memory of what occurred.

The major plot point of Carri’s film is the kidnapping of her parents. Instead of using archive images, or reenacting the scene with actors, she opts for a stop-motion animation in which Playmobil figurines are intercepted on a highway by a UFO. It would

seem that the pain and emptiness left by this kidnapping are so great that it can only be represented through figurines. At the same time, the use of Playmobil—the only use it is given in the film—takes away from the drama.

Tech equipment (television screen) mediates the testimonies and interviews included in the film, rendering them a backdrop for the other parallel action in the present. By integrating them to the diegesis, they prove anecdotal, incorporating memory to the story or political analysis, but do not satisfy what the director is seeking. In fact, about half an hour into the film, Carri—who is also a character in her own film—affirms, “I have to think of something: something that is film. All I have is a blurry memory stained by all these other versions. I think that any attempt to approach the truth will only distance me from it.” In a performative twist on the film’s director/narrator/star, there are at least three “Albertinas” in the film. There is the camera woman; the director who gives instructions and discusses with the crew; and the daughter of the Carris, played by actor Analía Couceyro, who stands before the camera and reads a rehearsed testimony.

In the film-text *Los rubios*, layers of meaning overlap and multiply through a combination of colors, black-and-white images, the Playmobil scenes, television and computer screens, voiceovers, the actor playing “Albertina,” and blond wigs worn to depict *los rubios*, among others. Carri’s film is a text about listening and absence, one that highlights the difficulties of following the rocky path of memory to where it takes “place”: the terrain of the subjective and the personal. The fact that the only space depicted is the vast countryside is the most evident sign of that unresolved loss. *Los rubios* combines testimony, experience, and reflections on these experiences, blurring the distance between fiction and reality. As the daughter of disappeared parents, Carri

appears to be coming to terms with her own identity while making her film. As Pablo Piedras has stated “The representation of the other in *Los rubios* is more of a deliberate construction than a dialogue with reality” (210).

3.3 Filming Reality

Argentina is a country with a strong history in documentary filmmaking. The generation of Carri’s parents, in fact, learned much about social injustice while watching a series of strong, director-driven productions from the 1950s such as *Tire dié* (Fernando Birri, 1960), *Buenos Aires* (David José Kohon, 1958), and *Faena* (Humberto Rios, 1960). Another film from that period, *La hora de los hornos* (The Hour of the Furnaces) (Grupo Cine Liberación, 1968) marked the start of films as a political intervention, also known as “militant film,” which lasted from 1966 to 1973, challenged viewers to actively work to combat the inequalities it laid bare.

As María Luisa Ortega has noted, the documentary attempts “to speak of the world and make affirmations about it” (188). Carl Platinga goes even further, referring to the documentary as more of a discourse than a record: the documentary, he argues, makes a statement about what is real but does not limit itself to reproducing that reality. It is “a genre of rhetoric,” not one of “imitation” (Platinga 38). In his work on documentary film, Javier Campo concludes that

(...) According to the most renowned scholars of documentary film, there is a sort of ontological relationship between this type of film and its ties to reality. However, because filmmaking is an art (albeit an industrial one, as Deleuze would argue), it is not possible to pin down the particular relationship between the world and its representation/documentary discourse. What can be affirmed is that the definition of reality as “that which is there” no longer holds true. (11)

The narrative process of organizing film material is not unique to either fiction or the documentary: as Carl Platinga has argued, narrative techniques common to both

fiction and nonfiction aim to spark interest, build suspense, and meet people's expectations.

In this dialectic between fiction and reality, Amado argues that more recently, political documentary film does not set out to build its own fictions; instead, it provides a close-up look at the fictions that lay the groundwork for real-life politics. In addition, the films made by the sons and daughters of the disappeared have something unique: encountering and coming to terms with one's own identity through the making of the documentary. The subjective character of this search seems to replace the objectivity that was originally the cornerstone of documentary film, challenging the notion of reality and, of course, its construction. In order to do so, they rely on closer, first-person narratives rarely used in Argentine film: "The neutral voiceover, so characteristic of institutional documentaries but also of political-militant ones, is replaced in these contemporary films by the ordinary voices of real individuals, not to any external, 'objective,' abstract instance," (Piedras 83). Piedras also notes that over time, the new generations of filmmakers have grown increasingly accustomed to moving freely between fiction to documentary in various audiovisual mediums (like television). This helped this new generation of filmmakers—many of whom trained at film schools, as noted earlier—to grow as professionals, experiment, and get to know others in the audiovisual industry.

Yet what happens in the case of *Los rubios*, a documentary in which the director's personal history is so tightly bound to her country's history? What can be said of Carri's use of fiction techniques in what is presented as a documentary?

3.4 Layer of the Past and Generational Transmission

According to Beatriz Sarlo, the subjects born in the 1970s represent the generation of postmemory—or, more accurately, as I explained in the introduction, “disappeared memory”—since they did not directly experience the institutional and social violence they seek to depict in their art. Therefore, they are not technically qualified to give testimony or contribute to the social discourse surrounding these events. In a different reading, Amado notes that the very construction of these narratives evokes memory through the search for other testimonies that the creative subject leverages as part of an introspective exploration of his or her own experiences. This type of storytelling distances itself from traditional documentary realism and, at the same time, expands the parameters of fiction. While Sarlo would say that this new type of narrative loses touch with reality—that is, with history and the duty to remember—Amado argues just the opposite: by strengthening the first person and capturing it on film, it dares to reveal its own subjective and subjectifying configuration, establishing a singular model for filmmaking and contemporary subjectivity.

A bit like *Hiroshima mon amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959) a film that explores the possibilities of remembering and conveying recollections, *Los rubios* proposes a new kind of fidelity to memory yet also challenges existing versions of given events, thus generating what Gilles Deleuze might have considered a time-image. This makes it similar to *Un muro de silencio*, though this film relies on metafiction to provide glimpses into the past and thus avoids the flashback. In any case, the distinction between past and present is always clear. “The catastrophes of history cannot be evoked without revealing

the malaise of memory,” argues Amado (108). *Los rubios* draws attention to this malaise.

The film

...underscores the crucial and unresolved issues of transmitting memories of the violence and terror of the 1970s, where the sons and daughters used their productions not as mere tools for mourning but to stake out positions that are often at odds with one another. (Amado 195)

Piedras has argued that “toward the end of the twentieth century, there was a radical break between the tales of the generation of political militants that had survived the 1960s and 1970s, on the one hand, and the secondary testimony or postmemory of their sons and daughters” (180). This author also notes something interesting in terms of the point of view in *Los rubios*, where a handheld camera is often used or scenes are shot from the film equipment truck. “This movement through space—which represents an uprooted, drifting subject of enunciation, though also an active, combative one—corresponds to a division or crisis in the narrative” (Piedras 190-191). This technique also reveals that the narrative instance is never fully capable of relaying (or thus remembering/reconstructing) the story it seeks to tell, that of the disappearance of the director’s parents.

Though it is a documentary that deals with a traumatic scene from the past, the performative spirit of *Los rubios* makes it a current-day narrative (...) However, the present-day does not advance linearly or chronologically over the course of the story; instead, sequences from the present refer, either directly or indirectly, to the filmmaker’s memory (Piedras 189).

By the turn of the century, a great many documentaries began avoiding monumental tales that seek to convey a single truth in their exploration of memory.

Experimenting with the forms and resources of fiction has thus become a common way of

narrating personal experience in documentaries, in what has often been called “performative documentary.”

3.5 Performative Documentary and the Construction of Memory

A performative documentary does more than simply offer a first-person account of the events at the center of the narrative. Instead, techniques from a range of disciplines—music, animation, poetry, theater, etc.—can be employed. As Halbwachs has shown, performative documentary is about incorporating one’s personal experience into a historical experience shared by others, the point where collective and personal memory converge. At the same time, performative documentary challenges the traditional mainstream documentary and blurs the line between fiction and fact (Nichols 139). *Los rubios*, like other documentaries filmed toward the end of the 1990s in Argentina, is definitively performative, using a range of strategies to mediate between experiences and recollections in her first-person account. In the words of Lidia Acuña, “By making a film about the making of a film—because *Los rubios* is also about that—the film reveals the artifice (the building mechanisms) and plays on three levels: reality, fiction, and documentary” (5).

Although the use of the first person in documentary filmmaking began in Europe and the United States two or three decades earlier, “Some of the most noteworthy examples come [...] after the revolution of direct cinema, which set out for a less controlled, equipment-heavy approach to reality” (Piedras 65). Art in its myriad forms has strived to undo categories like fiction, autobiography, and testimony—as well as archive and witness productions. The now firmly established tradition of the “subjective turn” in social, historical, philosophical, and critical studies also figures into this: “The

narration of one's own experience, the openness to personal details, and the willingness to reveal one's subjectivity were all incorporated into the discourses and practices of artistic and intellectual spheres" (Piedras 111).

Documentary filmmaking was particularly impacted by these changes, perhaps because its origins lay at the intersection between art and science, not to mention the reduction in the costs of filmmaking toward the end of the twentieth century. One particularly interesting change in this regard has to do with the documentary voiceover, traditionally a neutral, omniscient, and unquestionable narrator. It spoke "the truth." The switch from this supposedly objective voice to that of an auteur—and, in the case of *Los Rubios*, that of a lesbian woman seeking state funding for a testimonial film as the daughter of disappeared parents—is noteworthy. Especially because it flew in the face of all official and even outlying versions at that time.

Along with other novel traits of New Argentine Cinema, Piedras has noted how "I director"—the emergence of narratives that express the filmmaker's subjectivity through the use of the first person—became prominent in both fiction and documentary filmmaking at the turn of the century. Suddenly, reports of injustice could be as creative as fiction, combining autobiographical exploration with the performative strength of the testimony. In the case of *Los rubios*, voices absent and present oscillate between what can and cannot be said, hinting at the still urgent need to disassemble the monument of memory, bring it up to the moment of utterance, and render it an insurgent practice.

Bearing in mind that the first-person documentary boom coincides with the emergence of New Argentine Cinema in the 1990s, it is interesting to examine the connection between the two. The fiction filmmakers of new Argentine cinema, as shall be

seen in the chapters to come, created new poetics and styles that refashioned the figure of the director-auteur, building different ties between aesthetics and politics than directors had maintained in the past. In other cases, documentary makers consolidated their identity as creators by incorporating the first person.

(...) The filmmaker's integration to the film text has aesthetic, political, and ethical ramifications for the notion of "authorship" in documentary film, a genre previously dedicated to explaining the conditions of production and laying bare the identity of those telling the story. (Piedras 237)

In an essay about autobiography, Andrés Di Tella notes that "what makes the autobiography interesting is that it allows you to see yourself as someone else: as someone writing and recounting the life of the person who lived it." (250). Di Tella continues:

The author's identity is no longer the point of origin; instead, the autobiography becomes an experience that allows an identity to be sketched, dots to be connected. Identity here is contingent and necessarily incomplete, permanently shifting with experience, which provides it with different possibilities. (250).

Michael Renov notes how the incorporation of autobiographical forms to the system of documentary film was a true revolution in its narrative and aesthetic structures and its world conceptions. In Renov's view, politics influences and, indeed, is part of autobiography, giving the documentary a certain degree of skepticism and subjective uncertainty: "autobiographical documentary gives documentary access to non-fictional private truths and inner realities" (42). For Amado, the relationship between "politics—public affairs and the weighty historical and cultural definitions these entail—and aesthetics, which is its representation at the symbolic level" (24) is even stronger. Politics and aesthetics are intertwined and cannot be fully understood in isolation from one another.

Beyond the political side of things, the documentary has become a medium not only for self-representation, but also for performance of the self. Any depiction of history now requires subjects to establish their position. This represents a break in the epistemological framework of the classic-modern documentary; born in the social sciences, it draws on the transparency of recording devices and their capacity to capture the action impartially. In his discussion of the “universal I,” Renov argues that “autobiographical documentary gives documentary access to non-fictional private truths and inner realities” (41-42). This can be connected to “the personal is political,” a feminist slogan that Carri turns on its head in *Los rubios*. After all, the political is also eminently personal: Carri is not interested in the political or theoretical circumstances leading to her parents’ disappearance, but the personal, family backdrop of the story. In *Los rubios*, however, the integration of this “I, the director,” is even more complex.

An actor says she is playing Carri, who at the same time appears in the images as the filmmaker but without ever saying her name. The “I” of the self-portrait has been shifted and twisted, laying bare the use of the mise-en-scene as the duplicate matrix of a reality impossible to depict. (Amado 187)

In the view of Bakhtin, identity is a social construction, the result of a complex relationship of being with oneself and with the other. Carri treats filmmaking as an affirmation of her identity, a space of her own in the eyes of others. By breaking away from the naturalization of the “male gaze” described by Laura Mulvey, *Los rubios* can be seen as a profoundly feminist work. Carri sets out to unravel the mechanism of the gaze as it is assembled in film. She does so by employing masks. The fact that Carri chooses an actor to play her and conduct the interviews with witnesses is no ruse; in fact, shortly after appearing on screen, Couceyro announces that she is there to play Albertina. The “illusion” that film traditionally sets out to sustain is immediately undermined. Carri thus

informs the viewer that all gazes—and all roles—are constructed, whether or not the individual takes responsibility for this or not.

Los rubios is a film that addresses the issue of identity, and talking about identity necessarily involves its shortcomings and its construction. It is a documentary where reality depends on hiding and/or disguising true identities. This is how Carri described it in an interview with María Moreno for the cultural supplement of the paper *Página/12*:

I wanted to prevent the different elements—the testimonies, the photographs, the letters—from giving the spectator a sense of ease, a “Got it, I understand Roberto and Ana María now and I can go home.” What I propose here is that we are not going to understand them; any reconstruction is impossible. They cannot be understood because they are gone. (Moreno)

In this type of films, where memory operates like a story that takes shape as it is told, allowing contradictions to come up as it twists and turns, archive images are used to produce recollections and also question them. In *Los rubios*, Carri questions her parents’ commitment to revolution and, more broadly, society’s memories of state terrorism. In contrast, the archive images in *Un muro de silencio* are used to trigger the fictional director’s questions for Bruno. In this case, the archive provides access to the past, while in *Los rubios*, it only reiterates its inaccessibility.

Yet besides the integration of the director-subject as part of the diegesis, common in the first-person documentaries that begin to proliferate in Argentina toward the end of the 1990s, the film production materials and their influence are rendered visible. Recording devices (cameras, mics, etc.) are visible and montage effects reveal the director’s hand in post-production. These strategies for laying bare the metafiction go hand-in-hand with the fictional exploration of personal subjectivity and the (de)construction of the figure of the documentary director-auteur.

3.6 *Los rubios*: A Performative Documentary

Like other works from those years, *Los rubios* tests the boundaries between the most common genres and the overarching consensus surrounding meanings in the twentieth century. Testimony, fiction, and autobiography are combined in performative hybrids that set forth new ways of interpreting and seeing. Albertina Carri selects the events and organizes the stories she tells in such a way that the attempt to link them together ultimately fails. “Between documentary, fiction, and the animated images, [Carri] brings in resources that build memory from a way of seeing and a way of saying” (Amado 188). Using these strategies, Carri suggests that the only way to depict and mobilize memory is from a distance, using different layers to mediate between the subject, experience, and memory. “The text on screen offers reflections on what is seen in the image sequences. (...) The on-screen text is a subtle imprint of the narrating subjects that evokes written autobiographies” (Piedras 82).

The meticulous sound editing makes a profound impact on the narrative not only by putting it into context, building an atmosphere, and accompanying the images, but also by contributing to the multiple layers of meaning. Carri sets out to show that depicting memory is impossible. There is no organized story—no exposition, rising action, or denouement—in the film, only constant gaps between the image on screen and what is being said. This inconsistency has an impact on the film, making the whole thing unstable. If guiding the audience’s eyes is the key to the spatial layout and narrative of a film, the fact that *Los rubios* offers no such guidance denotes the impossibility of the task. In one scene,

...the film crew headed by Albertina Carri arrives to the neighborhood of Hurlingham, where Roberto Carri and Ana María Caruso were kidnapped, and

approaches the house of a former neighbor. (...) An older woman comes to the door and the conversation occurs from a distance: the camera remains positioned behind the gate across the front yard. There are several scenes where this woman appears behind bars or framed in a window. (Piedras 209)

Carri could have spoken to this woman beforehand and asked her to appear on camera; the neighbor, in that case, might have invited them in. Instead, the film director simply rings her bell and informs her she is working on a university project, taking the woman by surprise. The older woman is neither pleasant nor straightforward, as if the director had planned it out so she would appear reluctant to speak and dodge questions, making these images appear “stolen.” “The representation of the other in *Los rubios* is more of a deliberate construction than a dialogue with reality (Piedras 210).

This somewhat hostile approach toward others—generally, on the part of the former neighbors of the Carris—has a twist that gives the film its title. A woman in this poor neighborhood, where Albertina’s parents had moved for political reasons, announces that the main concern of the locals at that time was laying low; simply owning a typewriter could cause eyebrows to raise, as typewriters were associated with political activism (Aguilar 179). This woman gives the film its name when she refers to the Carri family as *los rubios*. In a neighborhood where most residents have darker skin (and hail from other provinces within Argentina), the Carri children were *rubios* even though they were not actually blond: the term is a way of identifying them as others, outsiders.

Besides exploring how to depict memories, and how to use those memories to narrate the past, through techniques that reveal memory to be fragmentary and wayward path, *Los rubios* questions the family as an institution. As Carri was forced by circumstance to spend her childhood in the countryside without her parents, cattle are easier to bring into the scene than her parents. Carri, as a daughter, cannot stop

questioning and wondering about the decisions her parents made—decisions that led to such a decisive impact on her life. Though Carri’s life story is unique in many ways, parents’ decisions often impact their children in unexpected ways. Yet in the context of dictatorship and disappeared parents, the questions a daughter poses take on other nuances. Carri asks herself why her mother did not leave the country, “why she left her in the world of the living.”

According to Amado, in lieu of the family, Albertina Carri forms “...a close-knit community made up of her small film crew. As opposed to blood ties as a sign of their connection, the blond wigs they all wear is a sign of belonging” (192). In addition, the wigs bring up a period of living in hiding and the dangers of drawing other people’s attention.

This type of performative documentary centers the viewer’s attention on the subject herself. In contrast, traditional documentaries typically maintain a pretense of objectivity, with the film director having no voice. *Los rubios*, then, makes a fundamental break—a nearly epistemological one—with the language of the documentary, in which the old idea of objectivity falls to the wayside, suddenly appearing naïve once the director asserts her subjective identity within the film.

3.7 Tensions between History, Memory, and Reconstruction

Political documentary film today does not set out to build fictions; instead, it provides a close-up look at the fictions (i.e. the lies) that lay the groundwork for real-life politics. The testimonial trend coincides here with the boom of the documentary film with its discourses, testimonies, and archives: memory here is a laboratory of representation (Amado). Although remembering is an individual act, it sometimes becomes a collective

one, given that remembering requires the active involvement of others. Even when there is a consensus on history and memory, the question regarding the relationship between them persists, unresolved.

According to Pierre Nora, memory is affective, emotional, and collective by nature, even though it can be psychologically experienced as an individual phenomenon; history, in contrast, is a construction of remnants, based on an explanatory, argument-based discourse that is strongly critical and intellectual (Piedras 154). Memory can thus be thought of as a vehicle that allows history to take shape—a history unquestionably rooted in the personal and the collective. In every period, certain narratives are accepted as valid, at the expense of others. The role of government in this process is inevitable. What was happening at the government level in 2002, then, as Albertina Carri was making *Los rubios*?

When the National Film and Visual Arts Institute refused to grant funding for her film, Carri decided to make the rejection letter a core part of *Los rubios*, staging a scene of a group debate questioning the institute's decision. This *mise-en-scène* challenges deontic readings and a sanctimonious rhetoric that expressed disregard for new voices, belittling any expression that contradicted the “memories of activism” so common at the time. The INCAA here is positioned as the institution, the regulator of discourse that attempts to set the rules. The letter lays out the “film that is needed” by one generation, that of mothers and fathers disappeared. The main issue discussed during the debate is the use of testimonial interviews, how these should be conducted, who should speak, and what should be the tone. As noted in the INCAA letter sent to Carri in October 2002:

We believe this is a valuable project and merits a more rigorous treatment as a documentary. As currently laid out, the proposal to fictionalize one's own

experience involves the risk of allowing pain to guide the film's reading of agonizing events. Although the main character's focus on her parents' absence is the crux of the film, this requires a more comprehensive search for relevant testimonies, like those of other militants who knew her parents, with all their similarities and differences. Roberto Carri and Ana María Caruso were two committed intellectuals in the 1970s and their story—and tragic destiny—deserve to be told. (INCAA)

The letter reveals that at that point in time, Argentina's Film Institute was looking for stories that, though their details differed, painted a similar picture of the recent yet still painful past. Testimonies here are authoritative, serving as cases or examples that come together as a collage. When combined with the meticulous gaze of social analysis—a key aspect, in Sarlo's view—testimonies allowed a story to be configured for future generations.

The heir to a long tradition in political documentary film in Argentina, *Los rubios* engages by breaking with the classic techniques employed in this genre: it incorporates elements of fiction to underscore that the difference between documentary and fiction is a question of degree, not essence. According to Ana Amado, Albertina Carri does away with “the contemporary film scene depicting stories from the past,” or what she refers to as “History with a capital H-”: “In this undoing, Albertina Carri aims not to break with the past but to break with ways of breaking with the past” (Amado 194). *Los rubios* wrangles with the father figure (film-documentary-testimonial father, militant-political-state father) in order to convey the idea that no isolated testimony—and no matter how many fellow activists of Carri's parents describe them—captures what their absence has meant for the director at the inner, personal level. Instead, the film sets out to depict precisely this absence.

The testimonial interviews and the photographs shared in *Los rubios*—photographs shown on a TV screen or in the hands of the actor playing Carri—are the

very fabric of the story. Through them, the documentary unveils the artifice of language, memory, and the limits of the genres and discourses that attempt to grasp the complexities of lived experience, History, testimony, autobiography, the past, and remnants of the past in the moment of utterance.

During the first years after democracy was restored in the 1980s, history was a common topic among Argentine filmmakers. As analyzed in the first chapter dedicated to *Camila*, Argentine directors in those years reflected on both the history of filmmaking and the country's history, often through allegory and with hints of melodrama. By the end of the century, however, historical consciousness within film became about creating a conscious image of oneself. The crisis of the historical experience and generational transmission became part of the topic and a range of narrative and visual techniques were employed to show that no effective reconstruction was possible.

The main objective of memory practices in the 1980s was to reveal the “truth” behind events, contributing evidence that allowed those guilty of horrific crimes and the systematic violations of human rights to be brought to justice. At the same time, the emphasis was on the victimhood of the disappeared—not their militancy—as analyzed in previous chapters. By the 1990s, the courts had laid bare the “open secret” of state terrorism under the military junta. The public confessions of sorrowful military officers in full-color magazine spreads and television interviews helped make this knowledge *vox populi*, allowing individual experiences of state terrorism and personal stories of leftist activism in the 1970s to come forward. This can be seen in the shift from all-encompassing documentaries like Miguel Pérez's *La república perdida* (1983) and Luis Brunati's *DNI* (1989) to subjective perspectives like that of the Andrés Di Tella film

Montoneros, una historia (1994). This documentary underlines the conflictive relationship between personal and collective memories, revealing how the hegemonic versions of political history tend to unravel during years of terror.

According to Jens Andermann, there is “a displacement from historical reconstruction to the act of remembrance” (178). Undoubtedly, *Los rubios* is “lost” in the act of remembering, in the paths of memory, in what Gilles Deleuze referred to as the time-image. “In the conflictive bond between history and fiction, literature and theater employ words to eliminate any distance with their topics, yet film finds it difficult to abandon the act of showing” (Amado 34).

In her book *Los rubios, cartografía de una película*, Carri shares the script and script notes along with reflections on the different scenes filmed and how proximity and distance were critical to the film. In this book, as Amado notes, “Carri relays her fixation with the past and her need to recover that which makes her who she is from this past. She is aware of the necessary exclusion but also of how History left her exposed” (197).

“The scarce use of archive material is a deliberate decision that breaks with any type of ‘proof’ or trace of evidence with regard to the past.” (Piedras 189). *Los rubios* systematically avoids incorporating any images from the past to the narrative and in the few moments when it does (family photos from the 1970s), actor Analía Couceyro is holding them.

From the personal perspective and the subjective gaze, postmemory interferes in the construction of collective or historical memory, the shared memory of society. In several different interviews, Albertina Carri has said she did not want to make a documentary about her parents: instead, *Los rubios* aimed to explore the fictional side of

memory. In fact, viewers who watch the film are left without a clear idea of who her parents were, their work as intellectuals, or even precisely what they looked like. Carri shot this film because, after growing up an orphan and hoping for years her parents might return someday, she did not feel represented by any of the existing films about the disappeared and their children. The focus of those films was, in Carri's view, to the disappeared, their struggles, their personal stories, their ideologies and, in the case of *Un muro de silencio*, society's complicity in the repression. During the 1980s, the Argentine media widely covered testimonies of survivors of the clandestine detention centers and the relatives of the detained-disappeared. Their efforts helped bring to justice the leaders of the military juntas that ruled during those years. During the 1990s, the focus of the discourse shifted to memories of activism, recovering parts of the history that the public had avoided during the previous decade. Now the lives of these activists, their ideals, and their revolutionary struggles were emphasized, recovering the image of the "heroes" whose lives were cut short by the regime.

Yet Carri's film does not address the topics in this way. In her film, she shows that memory is an unreliable resource when attempting to discover what occurred. Unlike the films that had been made to date about the disappeared, her film offers viewers no answers. Instead, it poses more disturbing questions. Besides challenging the established narrative of the disappeared, *Los rubios* is directed by a woman who must make use of a language (that of film) historically dominated by men. Here Claire Johnston's notion of "counter-cinema" (1973) becomes relevant; film, according to Johnston, was a visual order coded to perpetuate gender stereotypes and a new type of film was needed to break free.

Carri felt excluded from what History had to say about her story. This disconnect from any institution, as demonstrated in the INCAA rejection letter, and from any existing norms, extends to every aspect of her life. Because Carri is not only a daughter of the disappeared: she is a woman, a lesbian, a feminist, and a South American. A filmmaker who uses both fiction and the documentary to call attention to what lies on the margins in a disruptive voice.

Los rubios seems to be more of a catharsis, a personal or subjective documentary that seeks a “way out of the mourning” (Aguilar 177). Like other films by directors of the same generation, including *M* (Nicolás Prividera, 2002), this movie manifests the need to reconstruct the memory of the disappeared. The viewer is faced with a past and present that coexist, and recollections both far and near. Though the film conveys that it is possible to reconstruct memory, it is clear that no approach to what really happened is possible.

The song at the end of *Los rubios*, “Influencia” by Charly García, perfectly captures the idea of the search: “I can see and say and feel it: something has changed... I am not going to run or escape my destiny... A part of me says stop... You went so far.” As the song plays, Albertina and the film crew walk off into the countryside, the place where the director grew up. All are wearing blond wigs, forming a unit, a family.

CHAPTER 4

BEYOND THE SUBJECTIVE TURN

4.1 Introduction

As seen in the previous chapter, some directors of New Argentine Cinema wrestled with the question of representation: how could the horror of dictatorship be captured in a sufficiently conclusive, profound, and complex narrative, one meaningful enough to convey what the regime signified for Argentine society then and now? While Albertina Carri opted for metafiction in *Los rubios*, *La mujer sin cabeza*, directed by Lucrecia Martel in 2008, takes a freer and more roundabout approach to the topic. Martel is not interested in a historic reconstruction nor does she want to send a “message” about dictatorship or the state’s inability to serve justice at all levels. As will be seen in this chapter, however, the denial of a critical event that may or may not have happened in the film can be read as a metaphor for society’s conscious denial of the crimes the regime committed. Thus, as in Carri’s film, *La mujer sin cabeza* acknowledges how historical and individual memories fuse into personalized versions of events. In the case of Martel’s film, though, the historical facts are not addressed directly.

The troubling narrative of *La mujer sin cabeza* starts with an innocuous phone call: an upper-class woman from Salta is driving down the road when her cell phone rings. When Verónica or Vero, played by María Onetto, looks down at the phone, she hits something or someone. Glancing into the rearview mirror, she then lifts her hand as if to open the door; hesitating, she reconsiders and, after donning sunglasses, drives off, without looking back.

From this point on, she is lost: she becomes the headless woman of the title. Like a sleepwalker, she wanders, almost unable to recognize anyone or anything in her life. She stops and stays at a hotel, unsure why, coming down for breakfast at dawn. She slips away when she spots her husband, sits down in the waiting room in her own dentist's office, and doesn't recognize her daughter's name when her husband mentions her. The story obsessively follows a character that the viewer cannot come to know outside this unfortunate accident. At the same time, despite the realism of the film, the perception of time and place is twisted through a wandering character, narrative gaps, and visual details, like the imprint of hands on the windows of Vero's car (Tacetta 7). This main character is trapped in limbo; her perception of reality does not seem to coincide with that of others. Desperate, Verónica strives to fit in to everyday life but finds the practices of her friends and family strange, and is thus estranged from them. By constructing the character this way, Martel invites the viewer to visualize the cracks in any representation, sparking questions as to what is real.

In keeping with Zarco's proposal of "vindication and criticism," certain works of New Argentina Cinema depict a blurry, ambiguous present in which the Argentine people and the past both seem inaccessible (Bernhard 242). In this regard, Jens Andermann notes that, in recent Argentine films,

... "reality" is never directly and naively "encountered" in recent Argentine films; but [...] different strategies of refraction and staging are at work in order to acknowledge the filmic image's difference and deferral with respect to contemporary reality. (12)

From this new perspective, working with memory can bring the past to bear on new questions regarding a community's destiny. As David Lowenthal has pointed out, "All present awareness is grounded on past perceptions and acts" (185). In myriad ways,

the New Argentine Cinema conveys the weight of a heavy past and its many facets. Yet, as noted first by Sergio Wolf and later echoed by several critics, the young directors who began filming at the end of the 1990s firmly root their narratives in the here-and-now. Wolf argues that this reflects a new generation's need to say something about the times. "When it comes to the question about what Argentina is today, and what we can say about it, new directors respond with histories and systems of representation that are rooted in the purely contemporary" (33). Later, he adds, "The contemporary is about wagering on a narrative of Argentina and the characters today, leaving out any flashbacks or recollections of times past from almost all fiction films of the new generation" (192-93).

4.2 Lucrecia Martel: Woman, Dissident, *Salteña*

Besides forging a path in the still male-dominated film industry, Lucrecia Martel was born and raised in the Salta province, far from the country's capital. Martel wanted to tell stories in settings generally overlooked in both hegemonic and even independent film. As a woman and out and proud lesbian, she was already a dissident with new perspectives who told stories about fragments of the world largely overlooked in national film. Before making movies, Martel directed for television programs, including a documentary about the writer Silvina Ocampo. This could explain certain nuances of her audiovisual language.

In Martel's film, experience is structured in a certain way. Scenes from her different films are connected through viewpoint, the sensibilities of the characters, and the way they communicate with one another. In a universe where the everyday appears, at times, apocryphal, the politics of these characters is structured in terms of their setting

and family (Gomez 54). *La mujer sin cabeza* is a film that presents an alternative to hegemonic cinema by screening all the complexities of women's desire.

In her first three films—*La ciénaga* (The Swamp, 2001), *La niña santa* (The Holy Girl, 2004), and *La mujer sin cabeza* (The Headless Woman, 2008)—Lucrecia Martel tells stories from the urban landscapes of the provincial capital of Salta, marking a departure from Buenos Aires as the urban setting of Argentine films par excellence. Unlike other well-known filmmakers of the New Argentine Cinema, her stories about the decadence of middle- and upper-class life focus on this peripheral region to the northwest. Far from the metropolis, Salta's upper classes wallow in decay and hypocrisy. Martel explores the intimate lives of her characters, without overlooking the public world in which they (and also the viewer) are immersed.

All set in the north of Argentina, her films capture nature, sounds, pace, jargon, and languages that configure a way of thinking about society by zooming in on a detail and then expanding outward. They also capture people. As Gómez has noted, "Lucrecia Martel sets up a camera in her home province of Salta and uses it to construct a moribund middle class with upper class airs that allows us to think more broadly about society" (11). In all her films, but particularly in *La mujer sin cabeza*, there is a clear division between who serves and who is served, the haves and have-nots, those who may be punished for a transgression and those out of justice's reach. The filmmaker makes the smallest forms of societal domination both visible and audible. In this way, and others to be noted further on, the film stages that which a society does not want to see of itself now, just as it didn't in the past.

La mujer sin cabeza rests on two cornerstones: the first is Salta (the beliefs and contradictions of its people, and its current-day and history) and the second is film itself (the moving image, references, types of constructions). Martel's film does not serve as a stage for human thought but instead creates tools to elaborate thoughts and capture a world of her own. She renders visible what cannot always be seen at a glimpse.

La mujer sin cabeza returns to several of the themes Martel took on in her two previous films, *La ciénaga* and *La niña santa*, including family ties among the well-to-do in northern Argentina, and the relationships between members of this class and those whom they see as below them. The real focus, however, is how a viewpoint is constructed to configure "reality" (Verardi). In *Los rubios*, other serves to allow the main character to obtain information about herself, information that she needs to build her identity and her otherness. The individual here is entirely tied to the collective. In contrast, *La mujer sin cabeza* sets the perfect scene for analyzing trauma in relation to memory. The main character, Verónica, is clearly traumatized. As Anne Whitehead has noted, trauma fiction proposes putting on hold a causal logic brimming with displaced revelations that rewrite narrative meaning retrospectively (83).

The film opens on a parking lot where Verónica is chatting about makeup and hair dye with a few girlfriends, family members, and their children. All are about to drive off. One of them tells Verónica how good she looks with blond hair. Verónica, however, appears uncomfortable, as if she were unable to get used to the color: she's constantly pulling back her hair and touching her head.

4.3 Martel's Renegade Films

Making reality sinister is a tool Martel uses to awaken viewers' awareness and draw attention to the connection to their own universe. The social and natural landscape are the narrative; the biological and critical life of culture are a crucial point of reference in her films. In *La mujer sin cabeza*, the everyday is constructed through a viewpoint; the film is about understanding that viewpoint and visualizing what it reflects of reality, interrogating the world through image (Gomez 48).

The main character, Vero, has suddenly found herself estranged from her familiar, everyday universe, an estrangement already hinted at in her discomfort as a blond. An ominous climate and a constant though invisible threat looms over seemingly humdrum scenes, evoking generic terrors such as death, castration, murder, and especially, non-normative sexuality: "women's active, liberated sexuality, child and teen sexuality, incest, homosexuality, and lesbianism," (Rubino 72). As in Martel's previous films, family relations here unfold within a cloud of eroticism in which Vero is the object of her brother's, her cousin's, and her niece's desire. For instance, Veronica's niece Candita (Inés Efrón) explicitly reveals her desire. Yet she also suffers from a debilitating hepatitis, meaning she must stay at home, often in bed, and cannot eat certain foods. Her mother, who operates as a moral voice, is constantly noting when Candita comes up short, reminding her not to eat this or that, helicoptering to keep her daughter healthy. However, erotic scenes in which Candita runs cream through Vero's hair or tries to kiss her reveal Candita "suffers" from a dissident desire for a blood relative that disregards the laws of the (hetero)patriarchy, age, and family ties.

In the second scene, when Vero drives away after the accident, an object is seen in the background. It could be a dog but could also be a child, one of the ones seen playing on the road at the start of the film. Next to the road is a canal where someone could have also fallen. From this moment on, Vero appears to feel as if she were living someone else's life. "The appearance of a corpse leads to the other's disappearance, staging how difficult—or impossible—it is for these two worlds to meet" (Verardi 11). Vero's no longer herself and as viewers, we are plagued by the same doubts when others move to cover up what could have been manslaughter.

The opening scene of the accident, which ends when the film's title appears, is put together as a parallel montage, a classic film technique, where the action cuts back and forth between two storylines until they converge. In this case, Vero is saying her goodbyes after a social gathering and getting ready to drive home and, in parallel, a group of kids is playing on the side of the road. When Vero hits something on the road, the viewer assumes she has hit one of the kids (and the two storylines have converged). Yet Martel breaks with tradition by not clarifying what the car has hit, sowing the seed of the conflict.

4.4 The Traces of Viewpoint

In *La mujer sin cabeza*, the main character's day-to-day universe is skewed by the accident, making her hyperaware of her own actions, while also estranging her from them. It is as if she were thinking about them from someone else's head. Her perception is altered while the other characters press on lethargically, totally—yet not blissfully—unaware (Gomez 5).

Each scene can be broken down into different layers of meaning, an effect the director creates through superimposed sounds; the off-screen as part of the action; fragmented, asymmetrical focuses; and a montage that rarely emphasizes cause-effect. In an interview with the writer Mariana Enríquez in 2008, Martel explained that she set out to communicate an experience all her own, using different film techniques to forge a subjectivity that exceeds one's perception of the outer world.

One such technique is how the film stays with Vero even when zooming out and altering the depth of field. The viewpoint remains fixed, never examining the surroundings unless she is present; wider shots progressively narrow, leading to constant close-ups. Vero comes into the scene in pieces and the way space is constructed aligns with her inner world: the break within her is exteriorized in fragmented shots. The film unravels in the (non) head of the main character without any first-person shots. Focus, or lack thereof, is a prime resource: things that Vero does not understand are blurred, giving the impression that she is living in a fog. The contrasts between the in-focus and the out-of-focus are extreme and by shooting against the light, the director distorts and disguises all that which Vero cannot perceive (Christofoletti Barrenha 647).

By framing the film in a certain way, Martel literally renders Vero headless. When the character pulls over to the side of the road at the beginning of the film, for example, the camera remains within the car, watching her walk without seeing her head. In another scene, upon locking herself in the bathroom to avoid her husband's question, her reflection appears, headless, in the mirror; in yet another, she is at the gym and an employee splashes some water on the back of her neck.

Horror seeps into every corner of the film, bringing to mind B films from the 1960s: the characters are like the walking dead, zombies, ghosts sliding from room to room. The character Onetto plays is almost a zombie herself, wandering the streets with seemingly little awareness of where she is. From the murmuring at the pool, it is clear that a storm draws near. According to critic Leonardo D'Espósito, *La mujer sin cabeza* may be “the first Argentine film about terror” (51). This idea of terror—that underlying threat that permeates the film—goes beyond Vero losing her head: her consciousness itself becomes permeable. It is as if, by abandoning her body, she allows others to inhabit it.

The screen is split in two during almost every shot following the accident in which “la Vero,” as the other characters refer to her, appears on screen with others. She watches from one side of a door or other divider and the characters present but outside the frame have an entirely different viewpoint. Something similar is achieved in the sound layering. These techniques allow the character’s vision to emerge while leaving traces of Martel’s own vision as the director, inviting the viewer to engage in the same process. As in her earlier films, the director appears to be conveying her own estrangement from day-to-day life (Gomez 133-34).

As Vero meanders, Martel maps out the character’s day-to-day world. There is a hospital; a downtown hotel where everyone stops in; Vero’s home and its servants; a husband who shows up late; dead animals on the counter; a dentist’s office; the house of her sister whose daughter suffers from hepatitis; humdrum streets, routines, and faces of family and friends.

The director homes in on the cracks of representation. The out-of-focus shots, the fade-ins, the dissociated images and sounds, a framing that intentionally omits, fragmented bodies, dull and hesitant gazes, gestures, and words: these are the establishing shots in *La mujer sin cabeza*. Close-ups are accentuated by frequent geometrical riffs on the infinite (gazes, windows, mirrors, doors, etc.), constant reminders of the distance between what one glimpses and what one observes. “Through techniques such as these, Martel configures an intense sensory universe anchored in the figure of Verónica (María Onetto), where the main focus is on the camera” (Quintana 1-2).

In this film, the desire to discover and understand what is happening in Vero’s surroundings flies in the face of the push to cover up any evidence that could reveal the truth about Vero’s accident. Brother, husband, and brother-in-law all appear intent on protecting her, that is, doing away with any clues that would give her insight into who she is. In this regard, they also hope to restore the status quo and with it, Vero’s class privileges. Ultimately, Verónica collaborates and dies her hair back to its original brunette. She rejoins the elite at a soirée, reaffixing her head in the suffocating yet comforting world of Salta’s upper class, mingling among her people.

4.5 Memory and Denial

Memory is one of the core themes of the film. The question of the loss of memory is intrinsic to trauma, yet Vero is not suffering from amnesia. As noted, she loses the connection between words and things. Etymologically, the word “trauma” (in both English and Spanish) refers to a physical wound (Hirsch 114). Martel wounds her main character in such a way that she “loses” her head. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth states that when we talk about trauma, we are not only referring to the

commotion an event causes, but also—and fundamentally—to the traces it leaves and to all that which the person who experienced the traumatic event cannot understand. Vero is unable to take inventory of what she did or how she behaved. She didn't even get out of the car to see the repercussions of her actions. Instead, she opted to push forward, refusing to acknowledge what occurred. Yet the force of the incident overcomes her willpower. As with the disappeared under dictatorship—the bodies that showed up floating in the river—society preferred to turn a blind eye, just as Vero decided to sacrifice her head (her soul, her conscience) to go on living. This is because “the past haunts us, like a ghost, persistent, refusing to disappear, erupting in our drab present” (Mandolessi 56).

Caruth also defines trauma as a paradox. First off, the traumatic event cannot be understood or interwoven into a narrative when it occurs; later, after a period of dormancy, the traumatic event returns in the form of “repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event” (Caruth 4). In the introduction to *Trauma Fiction*, Whitehead suggests that the most experimental narrative forms within postmodernism successfully convey “unreality” (that is, the displaced temporality) of trauma while also relaying historic events (87).

There will thus be no account of what really happened when Vero struck something on the road; instead, we will be treated to a version that favors certain characters. Vero's car is sent to a mechanic in the next town to be repaired; the front fender is cleaned of any signs of the accident and Vero's hospital report and hotel registration are erased (Christofolletti 648). Vero initially appears interested in figuring out if she has committed a crime. However, as the evidence is gradually erased, she

withdraws, sinking into the ennui of those around her. In her social milieu, individual responsibility dissolves and no one is accountable for what happens around them. As Natalia Taccetta argues, “The film reveals how someone can disappear without any trace of responsibility and with no legal remedy available” (7). Though it is not clear whether Vero has killed someone, the film is categorical about the way in which she and her family deal with that possibility. In this way, it makes a clear connection between conscious forgetting and the denial of state-sponsored horror under Argentina’s last dictatorship (1976-83). Argentine film has utilized a range of discursive strategies to depict the extreme violence society experienced during the last military dictatorship. Metaphors, ellipses, and allegory have been used to tell the tale in film, staging the conflicts at the narrative and semantic levels (Zarco 97).

These mechanisms have evolved in the present day: people simply turn away from poverty to eschew any responsibility. The mutual understanding and solidarity among the rich, the film suggests, is one such mechanism. Although *La mujer sin cabeza* makes no direct comparison between the disappeared and those currently living on society’s margins, the film does draw attention to the echoes of these mechanisms of silence and oblivion to show precisely how denial works (Taccetta 5-6).

At one point in *La mujer sin cabeza*, in a sudden flare-up, Vero confesses: “I killed someone on the road. I think I ran someone over.” Her husband reassures her, insisting it was a dog, but a body that “could be a person or a calf” is stuck in the canal. When Vero decides to retrace her steps, there is no record of what has occurred: her hospital report has disappeared, as have the X-rays she took. The hotel has no record of her stay in room 818. There are not even any marks on her car, which was whisked away

to another city for repairs. And it is the men, all of whom are involved in politics—there are hints suggesting that certain family members are in Congress—have taken it upon themselves to erase any trace of the incident. As Quintana notes, “It is as if she [Verónica] embodied a sort of collective soul or conscience, as if, in fact, she were purging the crimes carried out by the collective body” (3-4)

Once Vero has confirmed that there is no trace of what has occurred, thus opting to believe in her “innocence,” she dyes her hair back to brown—her cousin has mentioned her being a brunette—marking a return to the status quo. Veronica reads in the paper that a little boy has fallen into the canal just as she discovers that the hotel has no record of her stay there on the night of the accident. Her mood changes and she comes back to life, getting more actively involved in social events and work. Martel thus draws attention to the types of violence—like those associated with class confrontations—to which we have grown so accustomed that we cease to be aware of them.

The only way of conceiving of the world as constructed in Martel’s films is through this profound awareness of culture in historical terms. The generations overlap in the director’s films, though the diegesis does not include flashbacks or any direct interference with a time prior to the story at hand. Therefore, Martel builds a setting in which the interpretations and meanings of real are multiple, emphasizing how human beings decide how to act at any time. “The Martel method consists in unveiling the past in the present by finding its place in the plot,” (Gomez Lia 194).

During the interview with Mariana Enriquez, Martel had this to say about *La mujer sin cabeza*:

Deep down, this entire film was a personal exploration about something that I can find no explanation for in our history of dictatorship, which is the denial. How

those who were not directly involved either in the repression or in political activism denied what was happening. This is more surprising to me than the torture. I find wickedness, death, and violence easier to understand than the rest of society pretending not to know, or avoiding the knowledge of what was happening. (...) The inequalities inherent to society require a daily exercise of denial, an exercise that requires skill and creativity; far from boorish, this mechanism is delicate and sophisticated. (...) In my view, the terror that struck those who were not political activists or part of the repression is the terror of admitting to what they already knew: that they were in fact accomplices. That they let it happen. (Martel)

4.6 Taking Responsibility vs. Being an Accomplice

Taking responsibility for the past in order to imagine a future appears to be a tenet of not only personal life but also collective and political life. Argentine society must take responsibility for the crimes of dictatorship. That means acknowledging what Argentines knew and refused to admit at the time, as well as that which remains unknown. Though the hope of finding new documents has diminished over the years, activists continue in to search for information about the disappeared and the stolen children who continue to live under assumed identities. Taking responsibility is one of the narrative pillars of *La mujer sin cabeza*, whose main character is relegated to the position of a defenseless minor.

When Vero visits the hospital where she went after the accident to ask for her X-rays, she is told, "There's nothing here. We have no record of you coming in." When she heads to the radiology department and waits to talk to someone, she overhears the X-ray technician tell a patient, "I'm going to shoot now, so please stay still. Don't breathe." The terms "shoot" and "still" hark back to the first scene in which a policewoman escorts a prisoner through the hospital. The idea of shooting and the woman in uniform both evoke the police, the institution that would intervene in the case of a hit-and-run accident. Upon hearing the X-ray technician, Vero rises and leaves without asking about the X-rays. A few moments later, she runs into her brother in the hospital parking lot. He asks, "Vero, what are you doing here?" "I came for the X-rays," she says. "I already picked them up. I took care of it. Don't you worry. Go home," is his response. The brother's presence at the hospital reveals the mission already underway to erase any evidence of what happened on the road. The three men (her husband, brother, and lover) have decided on what actions to take in relation to an event that directly involves her. Vero is excluded from the decision but included in this

set of actions and practices through the tacit acceptance she provides by remaining silent. (Verardi 11)

Through her silence and acquiescence as the others (all men) resolve her conflicts, Vero not only refuses to take responsibility but also becomes an accomplice in the cover-up that prevents truth, memory, or justice. In the interview, Martel had this to say about responsibility:

Yes, she [Vero] is an accomplice. If you let others act on your behalf, you're an accomplice. (...) Letting others do things for you is terrifying; it lets their beliefs stand in for your own. As we speak, our language is filled with denials, obliterations, things we cover up. (Martel)

La mujer sin cabeza is a profound visual reflection that leverages many of the possibilities film has to offer: its creative potential, its ability to convey multiple meanings. As one of the most cited films of New Argentine Cinema, it uses memory to shed light on little explored aspects of social relations and class struggle within a country still tending to the wounds of dictatorship.

CONCLUSION

This thesis delves into the relationship between personal and historical memory in Argentina after dictatorship, using a corpus of four films directed by and starring women.

By choosing this corpus, I sought to trace a timeline that highlights the issues of the period and the ties between art, society, and the construction of both collective and individual memory.

Although film as a genre has incorporated dissident viewpoints in recent years, their narratives are still often male-dominated. Bringing a gender perspective to film analysis reveals certain nuances, yielding another way of thinking about the ideas, tensions, and connections between personal and social memories.

As feminist theory spread across the world in the 1970s, the gender perspective began to be applied to criticism of Hollywood film by scholars hailing from different disciplines. Film scholars in Argentina also made an initial approach to the connection between Argentine film and women, studying the professional careers and personal lives of the female actors, the individual styles of directors, and the analysis of women characters in conservative, melodrama narratives. In this regard, the field of gender studies and Argentine film continues to evolve. Yet in this work, the goal was to focus on films about women and directed by women as a way to think about perspectives on otherness.

The idea of film as mirror is a nuanced one, a reflection (albeit distorted) of screen gazers (Benjamin). In this regard, as Ana Amado has argued, *Los rubios* is not only a particular aesthetic-political project that does away with the scenes so characteristic of both film and historic tale: it also fosters gestures that necessarily involve the viewer.

Transforming events lived into experience through art not only reconstructs the cadence of voices but also serves as a vital community act, bringing debates surrounding meanings and disputed memories into the present-day.

The first of the films discussed in my work, *Camila*, premiered just as democracy was being restored in Argentina. It sheds light on the recent past through a true story from 19th-century Argentina that serves as an allegory for thinking about the late 20th century.

The Lita Stantic film *Un muro de silencio* can be seen as a bridge between the previous generation and that which came of age around 2001, a pivotal moment in terms of thinking about politics and art.

Albertina Carri's *Los Rubios* was one of several films by the generations whose activist parents had been kidnapped, disappeared, and murdered during the military dictatorship, a film in which memory is articulated with artistic explorations.

Besides the traces of a traumatic past, Lucrecia Martel's *La mujer sin cabeza* reveals the underside of the eminently patriarchal, conservative upper class of Salta province.

The need to reconstruct the memory of a traumatic past, and the challenge this entails, is addressed by each of the films examined here. Others have noted the importance of bringing a gender perspective to bear on certain core issues of memory. In her book *Women Mobilizing Memory*, Marianne Hirsch notes that women have traditionally been the ones to transmit memory and therefore, memory practices are gendered, since women's traditional role has been to preserve that memory. In Argentina, the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, which continue to be a bastion of

activism and memory, are indicative of this.

Elizabeth Jelin establishes three fundamental premises for analyzing the past that shed light on the relationships between history and memory: The first is that memories need to be understood as subjective processes, anchored in experiences and in symbolic and material markers. Recognizing that memories are the object of disputes, conflicts and struggles is the second, in an aim to bring attention to participants' active role in producing meaning in these struggles, which are framed within power relations. The third is historicizing memories, acknowledging the historical changes to meanings of the past and the place memories are assigned in different societies, cultural climates, and political and ideological struggles.

In the media and in public, Argentina was flooded in the 1980s by testimonies of survivors of the clandestine detention centers and the relatives of the detained-disappeared. Their efforts helped bring to justice the leaders of the military juntas that ruled during those years.

During the 1990s, the focus of the discourse shifted to memories of activism, recovering parts of the history that the public had avoided during the previous decade. Now the lives of these activists, their ideals, and their revolutionary struggles became an emphasis in representations of the period, recovering the image of a "heroic feat" thwarted by the repressive machinery of dictatorship.

On March 24, 2004—the anniversary of the 1976 coup—Argentine President Nestor Kirchner took down the portraits of dictators Jorge Rafael Videla and Roberto Bignone still hanging at the military academy and asked for forgiveness on behalf of the Argentine state. This simple yet symbolic act freed artists from the responsibility of

denouncing the crimes of recent history and reiterating society's demands for state acknowledgment, allowing both film and literature to take on new styles, tones, and creative forms.

La mujer sin cabeza and *Los rubios* both belong to this generation of new Argentine cinema. Each film approaches certain aspects of Argentina's recent history in totally different ways, nourishing personal memory with historical memory and thus yielding a personal version of events.

Although *Camila* predates the new Argentine cinema by over a decade, and *Muro de Silencio* is somewhere in between the two, both hint at a certain gloom that will later pervade Argentine cinematography. This pessimism responds to a way of seeing the world that is closely linked to the history of Argentina.

This thesis explores how art--in this case, film--can contribute to women's struggle against the patriarchy, and how remembrance and the struggle against oblivion must often be waged against whomever holds the power.

In her book *Treinta años de cine, política y memoria en la Argentina*, Julieta Zarco uses the term "moments of memory" to refer to the "space assigned to state violence in the 1970s." The first of these moments (1983-1989) is the return to democracy. The end to dictatorship enables room for discussion on state violence and human rights violations during those dark years. In 1983, President Raúl Alfonsín's administration issued a call for "truth and justice" and introduced state policies to foster memory. The formation of the National Commission on the Disappeared (CONADEP), the publication of the *Nunca Más* report, and the subsequent trial of the military junta are three salient examples.

Directed by María Luisa Bemberg and produced by Lita Stantic, *Camila* premiered in 1984. Together, Bemberg and Stantic founded the production studio GEA, and for Bemberg's first film, *Momentos* (1980), they put together a production team comprised almost entirely of women. Beyond wardrobe and makeup, it was rare in those days for women to hold other crew jobs.

Camila was boldly feminist and entirely innovative at the time it premiered, as Argentine scholar Julia Kratje has argued in an article that examines desire, politics, and feminism in *Camila*. In Kratje's words, "This is a "period" film in which set design, locations, wardrobe, and rituals emphasize the constructed artifice of femininity, in which the scripts undergoes a political intervention on the part of the director. By rebelling against the rigid norms of sexuality and daily life, the main character is elevated to the status of heroin."

Opportunities for reflecting on memory, truth, and justice opened up when democracy returned to Argentina. Suddenly, analyzing and attempting to understand the past became essential. Many dedicated themselves to keeping memory alive to defend human rights in the past and present. Some of the first questions that came up in this work are, how is memory kept alive? When we say memory, what does it refer to and how is it transformed? What is the role of women in film in relation to memory?

In a discussion in which he distinguished between lived and communicable experience, Walter Benjamin brings up how the trauma of war leaves soldiers unable to speak. Marianne Hirsch coined the term "post-memory" to refer to the visions of the new generations and traces that trauma leaves on the social fabric. Although Hirsch's analysis focused on the Holocaust and its repercussions over time, the authors posit that the term

“post-memory” can be used more broadly to explain the experience of the second generations, who have not lived the incident itself but are still impacted by it.

In 1983, when the regime ceded power, society had to confront the demands of those directly impacted by dictatorship: 30,000 disappeared and hundreds of thousands who had suffered the military repression that began in 1976 in one form or another: prison, exile, torture, death, or the kidnapping of newborns and children given to other families.

Camila, a film that narrates a personal tragedy but also depicts an era and a social fabric, is laser-focused on the feelings of its main characters. In contrast, as noted here, *Un muro de silencio* is a film about women victims; in fact, it could be the first Argentine movie about a victim of the last military dictatorship. When it premiered, the transition to democracy had finished. Unlike Alfonsín, President Carlos Menem took a completely different approach to memory, one characterized by “reconciliation and forgiveness.” Pardons were granted to the military officers who had been imprisoned for crimes under dictatorship. XXX This is the moment in which *Un muro de silencio* premieres, a film about civilian complicity with dictatorship and silence in response to crimes.

A new cohort of directors both male and female with academic studies in filmmaking came of age right around 2001, a year in which a social crisis that had been brewing since the 1990s erupted into widespread protests. The period from 1996 to 2013, which Julieta Zarco has referred to as “vindication and criticism [...] emerges in conjunction with a new generation that forms the organization HIJOS and expresses a growing interest in the search for truth and justice.” These new up-and-coming directors also came of age at this time.

HIJOS, a collective focused on the generational transmission of experiences of dictatorship, had formed on the twentieth anniversary of the 1976 coup.

This thesis also focuses on the connections between documentary and fiction film. When talking about how memories are reconstructed on screen, especially those related to a traumatic past, the question of capturing reality on film soon appeared.

Los Rubios is directed by Albertina Carri, one of many young filmmakers who studied at Universidad del Cine (Buenos Aires) in the 1990s. Her first film, a documentary, draws on many fiction techniques. This dialectic between fiction and reality is not about fictionalizing within documentary, but about looking closely at the fictions that politics relies on. In addition, the films made by the sons and daughters of the disappeared have something unique: coming to terms with one's own identity through the making of a documentary.

Bearing in mind that the peak of the first-person documentary coincides with the emergence of new Argentine cinema in the 1990s, it is interesting to examine the connection between the two. The fiction filmmakers of new Argentine cinema created new poetics and styles that refashioned the figure of the director-auteur, building different ties between aesthetics and politics than directors had in the 1980s. In other others, documentary makers consolidated their identity as creators by incorporating the first person.

Like Carri, Lucrecia Martel studied to be a filmmaker. She attended ENERC, the film school of Argentina's National Film and Audiovisual Arts Institute.

Martel wanted her stories to unfold in settings generally overlooked in hegemonic (even independent) film. As a woman, and an out-and-proud lesbian, she becomes a

figure for dissidence, enabling new perspectives and telling stories about corners of the world. Both simple and complex, her scenes unfold in the urban landscapes not of Buenos Aires but of her native province of Salta.

Lucrecia Martel's film can be read, to borrow the term used by Claire Johnston, as counter-cinema. The use of "counter" here refers to an alternative to hegemonic cinema, one that screens the complexity of women's desire.

A question that comes up throughout this thesis is how artistic practice can shed light on the past. *La mujer sin cabeza* explores the complexities of memory, inquiring into whether mourning is possible in a society in which work, politics, and family relations are bound by fixed, stereotyped social and gender roles.

The connection between the mechanism for forgetting and the procedural denial surrounding state-sponsored horror under Argentina's last dictatorship (1976-83) is clear, along with the way these have evolved in the present day, as people overlook poverty in order to eschew any responsibility for it. In this way, Martel draws attention to types of violence--like those associated with class confrontations--to which we have grown so accustomed we don't even notice them.

As opposed to showing military violence under dictatorship, *La mujer sin cabeza* focuses instead on the mutual understanding and complicity of the upper-middle class. Although there is no direct comparison between the disappeared and those on society's margins today, the film does address the echoes of these mechanisms of silence and oblivion in its depiction of denial.

In the New Argentine Film, movies about past activism make up complex narratives, often with several parallel stories that articulate different points of view about

the past.

The glorification of subjectivity began in the 1990s and took root during the 2001 crisis. This entails a shift away from an objective point of view for another that emphasizes the relationship between subjectivity and the events being depicted. As part of this trend, testimony plays a key role as a narrative resource and as a way to legitimize the events evoked and their interpretation.

These films explore memory while presenting vital and performative experiences of remembrance: they are discourses on experience, on the present-day of the speaker in the dialogue. Finally, they engage in debate with the aesthetic and political traditions of both their own generation and the ones that preceded them.

The films in this corpus, as shown throughout this work, delve deep into history and family, fostering a delayed rereading of a traumatic past without directly engaging it. In order to achieve this, it uses a range of strategies: subjective concealment and generation-to-generation confrontation, the forms in which demands and testimonies are formulated in the artistic discourses after dictatorship. These films reveal a push to mend identities disfigured by state terrorism. At the same time, in a horizontal challenge to the generations that preceded them, family, social, and cultural structures are called into question in their narratives.

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