

FROM MOURNING TO RECONSTRUCTION:  
ARGENTINE POSTDICTATORIAL FICTIONS OF THE  
1980S–2000S

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## **Abstract**

This thesis proposes to read Argentine postdictatorship fictions of the 1980s–2000s not, as has frequently been the case, from the point of view of mourning, memory and defeat but from a more positive perspective oriented towards the reconstruction of a fuller national history and identity. As in Borges’s “Pierre Menard”, the argument is essentially a critical hermeneutic one: it is based on a dynamic rather than static thinking of history and textuality that seeks to open up the reading of texts to the present rather than leave their interpretation statically closed off in the past. The social, political, and economic crisis known as “the Argentinazo” (December 2001), the annulment of the Amnesty Laws in August 2003, and the politics of memory and human rights that ensued thereafter provide in this thesis a distinct historical context from which to rethink both “early” (1980s/1990s) and “new” (post–2001) postdictatorial literature. My suggestion all along is that the linkage of literature, artistic and activist cultural politics, including a politicised reading of literature, will necessarily have as its aim the formation of a popular or collective critical consciousness. Overall the main contributions of this thesis are twofold. Firstly, the interpretation of postdictatorial fictions from a pedagogico-political perspective makes the textual analysis of these fictions new and original in their own right. And secondly, this research demonstrates that postdictatorial fictions constitute a cultural reservoir or a cultural archive of historical resistance, dissent, and human rights struggles from which it is hoped present and future generations can learn to live more democratically.

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Los dolores que quedan son las libertades que faltan.

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Manifiesto Liminar de la Reforma Universitaria de 1918  
FEDERACIÓN UNIVERSITARIA DE CÓRDOBA

# Part I

## Reconstruction and the politics of memory



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# The task of reconstruction

## 1.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the starting point of my thesis, a three-year full-time research project aimed at studying Argentine postdictatorship narrative fictions from a more positive or hopeful interpretative perspective than the dominant one of mourning and defeat. Firstly, the general objectives of the research are identified, together with the reasons for studying narrative fictions within postdictatorial cultural and artistic production. Secondly, the main research questions are stated, and the methodological approach is outlined in order to specify the guiding spirit of this thesis.

## 1.2 Research objectives

This study takes as its starting point the notion that the postdictatorial literature produced in Argentina for the past three decades (roughly from the 1980s to the year 2008) has become a much more complex and nuanced cultural formation than has so far been described by the term “literature of mourning, memory and defeat”. In effect, the literary production under scrutiny far exceeds in its complexity the three broad approaches by which it has been studied so far. Neither “historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon 1988), nor post-*boom* literature (Martin 1989; Shaw 1998; Swanson 1990, 1995, 2003), nor what some Latin American cultural critics such as Beatriz Sarlo (1987), Idelber Avelar (1999) and Néstor García Canclini (2004) have termed the allegories of mourning and defeat, describe the same phenomenon and, even within these categories, there are more nuances and differences than seem apparent at first sight. Therefore, the overall aim of this research is to provide an in-depth textual critical analysis of postdictatorial Argentine narratives written since the 1980s, foregrounding a more positive or pedagogic function for these nov-

els. That is, this thesis proposes an alternative approach to the reading and interpretation of postdictatorial novels which does not “freeze” them in the past of their original context of publication and reception—back in the 1980s and early 1990s when the sense of defeat and mourning were absolute—but opens them to the social and historical tensions of the present where a more hopeful attitude towards national identity and history has begun to be envisioned in the past few years.

### 1.3 Research questions: why postdictatorship fiction?

The continued influence of the Process of National Reorganization in the social, political and economic present of Argentina has become *more* rather than less pronounced in recent years. If this “Process” is understood to cover (as it is in this thesis) not only the military dictatorship of the 1970s, but also the *continued* economic and social transformation of Argentina that reached breakpoint in the economic default of 2001, then the continuities between the dictatorship and the postdictatorship democratic periods must be fully acknowledged and a “fuller” notion of history with explicit links and connections between past and present is needed. Furthermore, the annulment of the Full Stop and Due Obedience Laws supported by President Kirchner and passed by the National Congress in August 2003, and the possibility of bringing the military and police repressors to justice has meant not only the beginning of some sort of historical and judicial “vindication” for the surviving victims of state terrorism and their families but also, and more importantly, a renewed and pervasive interest in publicly debating the legacy of state terrorism, censorship and trauma today. Between 2003 and August 2008, “paradigmatic” repressors like Antonio Domingo Bussi, Luciano Benjamín Menéndez, Miguel Etchecolatz, Julio Simon, Cristian Von Wernich, and Cristino Nicolaides were convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for committing crimes against humanity, whilst other trials over the illegal appropriation of disappeared persons’ babies and over the Fatima and Trelew massacres have brought public attention not only to dictatorship repression but also to the years immediately preceding it. Hundreds of trials wait to proceed at present, including crimes committed by the para-military Triple A mercenaries prior to the junta’s coup. News about these trials is a daily feature not only of the main newspapers of Argentina such as *Clarín* and *Página/12* and *La Nación* but also of TV and radio stations.

In addition to the considerable national and international media attention the repressors’ trials have commanded, much else has been done, especially since 1999, to counteract

the legal impunity and historical and cultural amnesia enforced by President Menem's "Process of National Reconciliation" in the 1990s. In 1999, for example, *Memoria Abierta* (Open Memory) inaugurated an active politics of memory involving the joint and coordinated action of human rights organizations such as the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights (APDH), the Center for Social and Legal Studies (CELS), the Argentine Historical and Social Memory Foundation, Mothers of Plaza de Mayo —Founding Line, and the Peace and Justice Service (SERPAJ). Ever since, these organizations have worked to raise social awareness and knowledge about state terrorism in order to enrich Argentina's democratic culture. This coalition of human rights groups works to promote a social conscience that values active memory and contributes to the intergenerational transmission of social and historical memory. Their work has focused on four major projects: the Documentary Heritage Project, the Oral Archive, the Photographic Archive, and the Topography of Memory, which aim at making accessible all possible documentation regarding the last military dictatorship for the purposes of justice, research, and the education of future generations. This nationwide coalition also coordinates international activities with the International Coalition of Historic Sites of Conscience, organizes seminars, congresses, training courses, and workshops and develops educational tools, such as DVDs, CDs and textbooks. Another major project these collectives share is *Espacio de la Memoria* (A Space for Memory), a memory museum located in ESMA (Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada or Navy Mechanics School), one of the most emblematic centres of illegal detention (see Fig. 1.1). Since 2004, when President Kirchner and the Mayor of Buenos Aires formally announced ESMA would become a site of active memory, several projects for the different buildings in the site have been designed.

It is, therefore, in the context of all these activities in the public sphere regarding state terrorism and its present legacy that the question of studying postdictatorial fiction emerges as a question about the role of culture in these national developments. What and how can culture, and more specifically, a wealth of literary narratives, contribute to this restoration of history and collective memory? The answer is quite simple: the wager of this thesis is that postdictatorial narratives form a cultural reservoir or critical archive of the histories of the oppressed and of oppressed histories, and of the struggles both for human rights and for social justice that are so evident in the social and political spheres. This rethinking of postdictatorial fictions as a rich cultural reservoir of a past tradition of resistance demands that postdictatorial fictions be read no longer only and exclusively as painful testimonies and allegories of mourning and defeat, but also, and increasingly, as



Figure 1.1: “El Pueblo entra a la ESMA” (The Argentine People enter the Navy Mechanics School). Photograph by Vanina Wiman. Prensa APDH La Plata, Archivo Fotográfico. March 2004. <http://www.apdhlaplata.org.ar/fotos21.htm>. Last accessed 11 April 2008.

potentially gaining a new and more positive role as contributing to a fuller reconstruction of Argentine identity and history, especially for the young and upcoming generations. The project of this thesis rests, therefore, on the belief that these two realms, the sociopolitical on the one hand, and the artistic-cultural on the other, remain distinct and yet in mutual dialogue in the shared hope of creating a more democratic Argentine society that *learns* from the past.

This view of art and culture as being more than marginally related to sociopolitical events and experience is based on Adorno’s view in *Aesthetic Theory* that aesthetic experience is an essential part of all aspects of human life (Sherrat 2002, p. 17), and therefore, that art and culture play a critical role in the formation of knowledge about national identity and national history. In her book *Adorno’s Positive Dialectics*, Yvonne Sherrat says:

Adorno regards the aesthetic as an essential part of relationships, social, economic and political activity, ethics, all kinds of sensory engagement with the external world, and indeed, to gaining knowledge and to the very process of

reasoning itself. Adorno is therefore critical of many philosophers, including those by whom he is most influenced, namely Kant, Hegel, and Marx, all of whom concur with the enlightenment view of the aesthetic as marginal. (2002, p. 17)

This incorporation of aesthetic experience into all the foundational dimensions of human life, including reason itself, is the utopian or positive dimension that Sherrat finds in Adorno's philosophical thought. Moreover, according to Sherrat, for Adorno, aesthetic knowledge acquisition stands in a dialectical relationship with instrumental knowledge acquisition (Sherrat 2002, p. 190), that is, aesthetic knowledge, or the acquisition of knowledge that comes from the contemplation and experiencing of a work of art is a form of knowledge in its own right, neither more nor less important than the forms of conceptualization that come from instrumental knowledge acquisition. In the present thesis, this means that it is not enough for citizens, and in particular, for the new generations to learn about the past and to understand their present through the acquisition of instrumental knowledge through the concepts provided by history, sociology, politics, the news, etc., but that this knowledge needs to be accompanied and complemented by its intellectual counterpart, aesthetic and cultural knowledge. But as is well known, in Adorno the art that counts dissents from the status quo—which is more than instrumental knowledge. That is, it is not that art provides “more” information about a topic/subject but that it changes or modifies our perception of the commonplace, the clichéd, the banal.

It is in this sense, that, throughout this thesis, the realms of the social and the political, on the one hand, and of the cultural and the aesthetic, on the other, will be seen as engaged in a mutual dialogue even if they remain relatively autonomous spheres. Hence the importance also of a pedagogic interpretation of postdictatorial texts orientated towards reconstructing Argentine identity. Recent interpretations of postdictatorial fictions, however, differ. In “Sujetos y tecnologías: La novela después de la historia” (Subjects and Technologies: the Novel after History) (2006), renowned Argentine critic, Beatriz Sarlo argues that the literature of the past two decades no longer bears upon its shoulders the “dangerous task” of speaking of the unspeakable, since with the derogation of the amnesty laws literature has ceased to be the only medium that defies repression and censorship, or that holds the last line of resistance in a social climate of impunity and oblivion. Since the history of the disappeared has been given considerable attention in the media for the past few years, literature no longer has, for Sarlo, a compensatory function in defying silence as it used to have in the past, when certain “truths” could only be narrated allegorically.

In Sarlo's words

En los ochenta faltaba discurso social. Hoy se difunde en todos los géneros imaginables. Por lo tanto la ficción no llena un vacío sobre el que ahora se vuelcan otros discursos y ya no puede sentir el imperativo de ser la primera (la única), cuando los desaparecidos son tema de los *hits* de la telenovela, de la historia profesional, del periodismo o de decenas de exhibiciones de fotografías y objetos de la memoria ... El lugar de la literatura ha pasado a ser otro. Si el pasado reciente obsesionó a los ochenta, el presente es el tiempo de la literatura que se está escribiendo hoy ... Leyendo la literatura hoy lo que impacta es el peso del presente no como enigma a resolver sino como escenario a representar. Si la novela de los ochenta fue “interpretativa”, una línea visible de la novela actual es “etnográfica”. (2006, p. 2)

In the eighties social discourses were scarce. Today, these discourses are propagated through every imaginable genre. Consequently, fiction no longer can assume its duty to be the primary discourse (the only one) to fill this gap, when other discourses are pouring in and the disappeared are the topic of many a soap opera, of professionally written history books, of journalism and of dozens of photography exhibitions ... The place of literature has changed. If the recent past was obsessed by the eighties, the present is the time of the literature written today ... In reading today's literature, the weight the present has is striking, not as a riddle to be solved but as a scenario to be represented. If the eighties novel was “interpretative”, then a visible strand of the novel at present is ethnographic. (My translation)

I quote this passage at length because in its condensation of the past and present of Argentine literature of the past three decades it directly addresses the main research questions of my thesis. I agree with Sarlo that a visible strand of today's fictions is “social” or “ethnographic”, and her four examples, Cesar Aira's *La villa* and *Las noches de Flores*, Washington Cucurto's *Cosas de negros* and *La ansiedad* by Daniel Link certainly illustrate this tendency very well. I also concur with Sarlo that recently written fictions about the military repression cannot fulfil today the same function as they did in the 1980s, when the repression was still in full force and allegory was perhaps the only means of expression and denunciation that escaped censorship. But what is less persuasive in Sarlo's argument is the suggestion that postdictatorship novels (or films or other postdictatorial cultural

production for that matter) no longer fulfil *any* function. I understand Sarlo's objections, however, as a reaction to two possible "dangers": firstly, an excess of memory may run the risk of exhausting and then potentially banalizing the repression years. That is, one may wonder, after a time, how many more novels/films/books will need to be published about this subject before it becomes devoid of all content or meaning. This objection has been theoretically raised as well by the philosopher Tzvetan Todorov in his essay "The Abuses of Memory" (1996), where he warns us that there is the risk of effacing memory through too much remembering.<sup>1</sup> In Argentina this may be so especially now when postdictatorial productions are no longer created in an oppositional conjuncture. A second danger Sarlo may be anticipating concerns the future developments of art and culture in terms of evolution of form: what will happen to Argentine literature/culture in, say, ten years? Will Argentines still be talking about the traumatic past of the *Proceso*? If not, then, what are or will be the literary and cultural debates to come? Sarlo seems to suggest that the ethnographic novel that deals with the present will be at the centre of the "new". This may well be so or it may also be that this is not clear at all and that Sarlo is perhaps trying to open up a new canon or scene of artistic productions. An enriched cultural scene obviously needs a plurality of forms and artistic productions and, in this sense, in the same way Argentines may feel they cannot *not* talk about the disappeared, they may also wish to avoid the assumption that state terrorism is all there is. In this sense, Sarlo may be cleverly anticipating a moment of crisis in literary production and criticism in the debates to come. The fact that after 30 years her magazine *Punto de Vista* has closed is, I think, perhaps an early symptom of this crisis.<sup>2</sup>

In any case, this thesis's argument is not directly concerned with this debate to come, but rather with the change of function that postdictatorial novels/cultural productions have necessarily suffered for the past few years. It is true, as Sarlo says, that back in the 1980s "la literatura podía proponerse una forma narrativa de justicia que hoy carecería de cualquier sentido" [literature enacted in narrative a form of justice that today would

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<sup>1</sup>I develop Todorov's argument more in full in section 2.3 in connection to exemplary memory.

<sup>2</sup> The last magazine number came out in April/May 2008, and in its editorial Sarlo explained that the magazine had come to a point of progressive decline. In Sarlo's own words: "Se puede hacer una revista con diferentes grados de inclusión, pero el deseo de revista es indispensable. Ese impulso tenía un fondo colectivo que hoy percibo debilitado, distraído ... Algo ha comenzado a fallar y es mejor reconocerlo ahora, cuando no se ven consecuencias, que en un capítulo decadente ... Por eso el número 90 es el último." [One can make a magazine with different degrees of participation, but the wish to want to make this magazine is essential. That wish responded in the past to a collective will that today seems to me to be more distracted and dying away ... Something is not quite the way it was and it is better to admit it now, before the consequences become obvious, than to move on to a decadent phase. This is why number 90 is the last magazine]. Beatriz Sarlo (2008). "Final". In: *Punto de Vista* 90 (Apr. 2008), pp. 1–3.

be irrelevant] (2006, p. 2), but this does not imply that these fictions should now be sent to the museum of dead objects because they are no longer oppositional. My argument is that these fictions have acquired another function, a different one from those they had two decades ago when reconciliation and amnesia were the order of the day; and that function is the active preservation of historical memory through the cultural archive and the pedagogic development of an aesthetic critical reflexivity. In the same way as historical archives and memory archives are being urgently collected and preserved in Argentina, oppositional (post)dictatorial cultural productions may also provide a way into truth, memory and justice. Although it is true that they no longer compensate for silence, it is also true, as this thesis seeks to demonstrate, that these fictions are not dead objects and that they are at present being used (by Memory Museums, for example) to actively preserve cultural memory, to restore a sense of affect/sympathy/empathy not only for the victims of state terrorism but also for those who suffer social injustice in Argentina at present, and to counteract the historical/cultural amnesia that Argentines have suffered for the past 30 years. The difference with Sarlo's argument is that rather than being merely oppositional, this literature/cultural production has become (re)constructive, that is, it has found a more positive mission or vocation.

Hence, based on these assumptions, this thesis asks the following research questions: What do "early" postdictatorial fictions articulate at present? And how do "new" or "post-default" postdictatorial fictions contribute to offer different perspectives or interpretations of the past? In what way are these "new" postdictatorship fictions different from their early antecedents of the 1980s and 1990s? Has the change in "structure of feeling" of Argentines for the past few years also changed the interpretation of 1980s and early 1990s allegories of defeat? In what ways can postdictatorship artistic productions be seen to accompany in the socio-political sphere the current active rethinking and reconstruction of the past? These and other related questions are the guiding threads throughout my literary analyses in this study.

As mentioned before, Sarlo's claims that the "ethnographic" novels that register the social present of Argentina can be read as "the new" in Argentine literature today are based mostly on a concern for what is experimental either in form or in theme rather than in the context of reception—hence her support of Cesar Aira's novels, for example. And this leads Sarlo to claim that novels which deal with the Argentine "recent" historical past "no longer constitute the main axis of Argentine fiction" (2006, p. 2).<sup>3</sup> Recent post-default

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<sup>3</sup>Sarlo writes: "Como sea, todavía hoy algunas novelas vuelven hacia los años setenta y mencionaría



works like Martín Kohan's *Dos veces junio* (2005), *Museo de la Revolución* (2006) and *Ciencias morales* (2007), and Carlos Gamerro's *Las islas* (1999), *El sueño del señor juez* (2000), *El secreto y las voces* (2002), *La aventura de los bustos de Eva* (2004), and *El libro de los afectos raros* (2005), Laura Alcoba's *La casa de los conejos* (2007), Andrés Rivera's *Cría de asesinos* (2004) and *Esto por ahora* (2005), Guillermo Saccomanno's *La lengua del malón* (2003) and *El amor argentino* (2004), and Martín Caparrós's *A quien corresponda* (2008) to mention just a few outstanding representative examples only in literature (there are countless others in film and theatre) all seem to offer evidence to the contrary. Sarlo also mentions Kohan's and Gamerro's novels, as well as Sergio Chejfec's *Los planetas* (1999) and Juan José Saer's *La grande* (2005), as examples of fictions that still review the legacy of the seventies through the lens of *original* or *unexplored* positions. But there is a risk that this appraisal of Argentine fiction is still mostly based on the criterion of a formal or thematic originality, and ignores the critical potential of the new postdictatorial novels, which is central to the argument in this thesis. Perhaps a more balanced claim to make is that both history (and its repressed voices, its silences, etc.) as well as the "present" of the ethnographic novels occupy the centre or are the main axes of Argentine literary production.

On the other hand, I do not intend my research questions to suggest that the postdictatorial novels written in the eighties and early nineties have become pedagogic manuals or textbooks of the past from which young readers can instructively learn. As Sarlo says, there are enough social and historical books on the dictatorship being published at the moment, and, as I have argued above with regard to Theodor Adorno, art and culture provide a different kind of knowledge to that provided by instrumental reason. It is rather that the *continued* reading of those novels (in schools, universities, literary workshops, cultural projects, memory museums, etc.) still finds in the current social and cultural spheres a context of relevance, legitimated through an increasingly active politics of memory. Also, as Noé Jitrik has said, "la literatura ve bastante más lejos de lo que ve la política, la sociología y el periodismo" [literature can see over and above politics, sociology and journalism]<sup>4</sup>, that

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sólo las que más me interesan: *Los planetas* de Sergio Chejfec, *Dos veces junio* de Martín Kohan, *La grande* de Saer... Aunque, como lo indican las menciones, la pregunta sobre la historia no se ha borrado, es imposible afirmar que hoy ella es un eje de la ficción argentina" [Nonetheless some novels today continue to go back to the 1970s and I will mention just a few examples that interest me most: *The Planets* by Sergio Chejfec, *Two Times June* by Martín Kohan, *La grande* by Saer. Although, as these names show, the interest in history has not waned, it is impossible to assert that history is today the axis of Argentine literature] (2006:1–2).

<sup>4</sup>Noé Jitrik (2008). "Lo que se viene y lo que se va". In: *Página/12* (22nd July 2008). URL: <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/contratapa/index-2008-07-22.html> (visited on 20/12/2008)

is, literature can provide insights and make certain claims to history, identity and truth that neither science, nor politics, nor journalism can make. As Gadamer also claims from a critical hermeneutic perspective:

[Literature] does not present us with only a stock of memorials and signs. Rather, literature has acquired its own contemporaneity with every present. To understand it does not mean primarily to reason one's way back into the past, but to have a present involvement in what is said. It is not really a relationship between persons, between the reader and the author . . . but about sharing in what the text shares with us. (2004, p. 393).

Thus, for Gadamer texts are not dead museum pieces of the past, but rather living objects that embody the very continuity of memory, the will to hand things down or to make memory last. In fact, the historical life of a (literary) tradition depends precisely on being constantly assimilated and interpreted by upcoming generations. To understand literature means to have a present involvement in what is said. That is, as Gadamer stresses in *Truth and Method* every interpretation has to adapt itself to the hermeneutical situation or present conjuncture to which it belongs. Thus, the current politics of memory in Argentina has been indissociably linked not only to the struggles of Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, HIJOS (Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio—Children for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence), and CELS (Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales—Centre for Legal and Social Studies), but also to the strong emergence of social movements of resistance and protest (*piqueteros*, workers-run factories, popular libraries and assemblies among others) that resist a rampant neoliberalism in Argentina originally rooted in Martínez de Hoz's economic plan during the military repression and brought to completion during Menem's and De La Rúa's presidencies. Because these social and political struggles of the present are directly linked to the military junta's undermining of trade unions and the left, and its economic interventions, human rights protests have long gone hand in hand in Argentina with social protest as two sides of the same coin as the banner (Fig. 1.2) from Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo and HIJOS in the XXII March of the Resistance on 5<sup>th</sup> Dec 2002 in La Plata shows.

The banner reads: state terrorism/impunity/neoliberalism = selling off national resources and assets/hunger and unemployment. Now and then the struggle is the same. XXII March of the Resistance. 30,000 detainees-disappeared present! The banner was

shown and paraded at this march organised by Mothers of Plaza de Mayo–Founding Line to give support to the social collectives that were demonstrating at the time against the default and what many commentators termed “the social genocide” of over a decade of neoliberalism. Indeed the banner makes clear that it was the repression and disappearance of the workers, unions, and of the left in general, in the 1970s, that created the conditions of possibility for the brutal neoliberalism of the 1990s. Neoliberalism in Argentina meant not only massive unemployment, the lowest possible levels of health and education, and the highest levels of poverty the country had had since its inception, but also a mounting sense of impotence and frustration, all of which finally exploded in the December 2001 riots.



Figure 1.2: XXII Marcha de la Resistencia. 5 December 2002. Photo by Francisco Martínez and Betty Ojeda. Prensa APDH La Plata, Archivo Fotográfico. <http://www.apdhlaplata.org.ar/fotos13.htm>. Last accessed 11 April 2008.

In its invocation of the “now” and “then” of a shared struggle across times and fronts of socio-political participants, the banner makes explicit the historical link between state terrorism and human rights abuses in the past, and the political and economic legacy of repression and social injustice in the present that led to the “Argentinazo”. In a previous march (5th/6th December 2001), the Mothers had said: “Ayer resistimos contra la dictadura genocida. Hoy resistimos contra el genocidio económico. Nuestra lucha: Memoria,

Verdad y Justicia y ningún hogar pobre en la Argentina, porque la lucha contra la pobreza y la injusticia fue un compromiso de nuestros 30.000 detenidos-desaparecidos” [In the past we resisted a genocidal dictatorship. Today we resist an economic genocide. Our struggle: Memory, Truth and Justice. We will fight until there are no more poor homes in Argentina, because the struggle against poverty and social injustice was what the 30,000 detainees-disappeared died for].<sup>5</sup> So, what this banner makes clear, then, is that unlike other human rights NGOs in Europe or the USA, which tend to offer humanist aid to poor countries or peoples, the human rights groups in Argentina are clearly fighting a social and a political battle. Their struggle is as much about judicial compensation (i.e. to bring the repressors and torturers to trial) as it is about historical truth and social justice.

To understand the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo’s outrage, it might be useful to briefly recall some of the most important political and economic events of the past few years. Néstor Kirchner came to power in 2003, in the wake of a deep economic crisis that had severely shaken the foundations of Argentine society. Thanks to the policy of peso-dollar convertibility adopted under President Carlos Menem (1989–1995, 1995–1999), the downturn on Wall Street after 2000 had an immediate and magnified impact on Argentina; capital flight intensified and the deficit grew, until by late 2001 default loomed. When President De la Rúa (1999–2001) insisted on sticking to convertibility, and had his Finance Minister block withdrawals from savings accounts by imposing the *corralito*—“little fence”—protests rapidly escalated. At the end of December 2001, President De la Rúa was forced to flee the Casa Rosada [the Government House or Presidential Palace] by helicopter, to be succeeded by four interim presidents in the space of twelve days. The tasks of abandoning convertibility and defaulting on Argentina’s debt—the largest sovereign default in history—were left to the caretaker government of Eduardo Duhalde, the Peronist candidate defeated in 1999. The devaluation and default caused GDP to fall by 16 per cent in the first quarter of 2002; unemployment reached a peak of 23 per cent and real wages shrank by 24 per cent (Svampa 2008, p. 81). Before the year was out, poverty levels had risen to 54 per cent in the *villas miseria* [shanty towns] of the Gran Buenos Aires conurbation, and conditions worsened still further in already depressed provinces such as Tucumán, where the poverty rate was 71 per cent (Svampa 2008, p. 81). This was a devastating collapse for what had formerly been one of South America’s most prosperous countries. The roots of this collapse can be traced back to Martínez de Hoz’s “reforma financiera” of 1977 [a financial

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<sup>5</sup>See Madres de Plaza de Mayo—Línea Fundadora (2008). *Marcha de la Resistencia—Cronología Histórica*. 13th Nov. 2008. URL: <http://www.madresfundadoras.org.ar/pagina/marchadelaresistenciacionologahistorica/47> (visited on 29/12/2008).

reform that deregulated the financial market and allowed short term financial speculation to flourish], the “tablita” of 1978 [a schedule which slowly depreciated the peso against the dollar and allowed imported goods to become much cheaper than national ones, thereby destroying the national industry while benefiting agrarian exports], the 35 million dollars of foreign debt amassed during the dictatorship and the destruction of unions, industrial employment and social welfare.

Hyperinflation during Alfonsín’s government, and Juan Domingo Cavallo’s disastrous Convertibility Plan during Menem’s presidency finished the task begun by the dictatorship. In the ten years Menem was president (1989–1999), state assets and utilities and over 200 state enterprises (including water, gas, electricity, the state oil monopoly YPF, telecommunications, Aerolíneas [the Argentine premier airline], and the railroads to mention just a few) were privatised at rock bottom prices amid rumors of financial scandal and corruption. Municipal and provincial banks were sold to financial giants abroad and the mandatory state pensions system was opened to choice through the authorization of private pension schemes. By 2001, staggering unemployment figures, the country’s growing risk, a massive foreign debt, the weak government of Fernando De La Rúa, several months of economic recession, and a massive capital flight in November 2001 brought about the explosive and unprecedented social unrest that came to be known as the “Argentinazo”.

During Kirchner’s presidency (2003–2007), however, social protest diminished because of the expansion of clientelistic relations, which went hand in hand with a massive roll-out of welfare. Duhalde’s provisional government of 2002–2003 had instituted the Unemployed Heads of Household Plan (PJJHD), which vastly expanded unemployment benefits, the number of beneficiaries soaring from 700,000 to 2 million (Svampa 2008, p. 83). The compensatory value of the benefits—the equivalent of \$50 per month—obviously declined as inflation rose. But Kirchner nonetheless increased the number of welfare programmes, widening the spread of recipients: by 2007, the total receiving one or other form of assistance was 2.6 million. The impulse behind this was to enable Peronism to recover the territory it had lost to new social forces at grass-roots level—most notably the *piqueteros*. These mass organizations of the unemployed had first emerged in 1996–1997 in the oil-producing states of Neuquén and Salta, as well as in areas of Gran Buenos Aires hardest hit by unemployment. Their principal activities were direct action, in the form of road-blocks or pickets; community organizing; and the establishment of popular assemblies at neighbourhood and other levels. Their numbers were swelled dramatically by the crisis of 2002. By the following year, it was estimated that there were around 30 piquetero

groups, with some 150,000 members; today there may be as many as 200, though it is hard to evaluate the precise impact of recent tendencies towards fragmentation (Svampa 2008, p. 84).

However, on the positive side, in 2003, Kirchner adopted an entirely new policy towards the military, replacing its top ranks and unequivocally condemning the atrocities committed by the dictatorship of 1976–1983. This sharply distinguished him from Alfonsín and from Menem, who in 1989 had granted presidential pardons to those charged with crimes against humanity. Kirchner went so far as to beg society’s forgiveness, in the name of the Argentine state, for the two decades of impunity sanctioned by civilian governments. On the economic front, too, Kirchner seemed to chalk up considerable successes—most notably paying off the country’s IMF loans, totalling \$9.5bn, in 2005, and renegotiating much of its outstanding debt with private creditors. While foreign debt stood at 138 per cent of GDP in 2002, by 2006 it was 59.4 per cent (Svampa 2008, p. 86). The main enabling factors in this were high rates of economic growth—GDP expanding by 9 per cent per annum over 2003–2007—and a fiscal surplus of between 3 and 4 per cent every year. These in turn came largely thanks to the recovery of industry after the devaluation, which brought unemployment down from 17.3 per cent in 2003 to 8.5 per cent in 2007, as well as high profits from agribusiness, amid buoyant global commodities prices (Svampa 2008, p. 86).

In line with his anti-neoliberal rhetoric (and a general “turn” to the left in many South American countries like Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Brazil), Kirchner also mounted attacks against certain privatized companies. Public services that had been sold off in the 1990s were in some cases called to account for failing to fulfil contract terms, and even re-nationalized: for example, the water and sewage company, formerly run by French multinational Suez, the postal service and the San Martín railway, and more recently, under his wife’s presidency (Cristina Fernández de Kirchner), the pensions system has been re-stated and Aerolíneas Argentinas expropriated from the Spanish private group Marsans. But beyond these progressive moves, the reality is still one of substantial support for the private sector (Svampa 2008, p. 90).

However, and without going into further detail on these political and economic changes, it bears repeating that this “resistance” that the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo’s banner expresses is as much socio-political and economic as it is intellectual, artistic and cultural, insofar as it concerns a struggle for more democracy, freedom and human rights, but also for a change in society after years of rampant individualism. The continuity between past and present struggles that the Mothers and Grandmothers see is

not only that of social injustice, hunger and unemployment, but also of social apathy or indifference, and of an individualistic, fragmented society.

This destruction of social networks and the increased fragmentation of society began in 1976 and affected all levels of society. As Beatriz Sarlo argues, in the 1960s and early 1970s, “el modelo de intelectual vinculado con los sectores populares contribuyó a producir un sistema de relaciones capilares que comunicaba al campo cultural con espacios del mundo plebeyo. Fue esta trama, rica y también conflictiva, la que destruyó la dictadura militar implantada en 1976” [the model of the intellectual in close connection with the popular sectors of society contributed to forming a network that linked the cultural sphere with the social spaces of the popular. It was this rich but also conflictive web of relations that was destroyed by the military dictatorship] (1988, p. 100). The year 1976, then, marks the beginning of the end of a long and rich connection between Argentine intellectuals and the popular sectors through cultural initiatives like the *cine de liberación* [liberation cinema] of Solanas and Getino (*La Hora de los Hornos* being its most outstanding example), the work of theatre companies in shanty towns, artistic installations like “Tucumán Arde”, the radical critical newspaper of the CGT directed by Rodolfo Walsh, and dozens of other artistic and cultural projects that made up the artistic vanguard of the 1960s and early 1970s.

After the 1976 coup, however, intellectuals were driven out of the “public” sphere and censorship severed the links and networks that before had connected the schools and universities with the community centres, the factories, the workshops, and the neighbourhoods. As Sarlo says “Hasta 1975, por lo menos, los intelectuales habíamos tenido la sensación y la experiencia de que podíamos mirar y hablar más allá de los límites de nuestro campo, que podíamos salir de la universidad y cruzar las puertas de algunos sindicatos, que se podían escribir libros pero también periódicos populares, discursos, volantes, manifestos” [Up until 1975, we, intellectuals, had the feeling and the experience that we could speak beyond the limits of our field, that we could go out of the university into the union offices, that we could write books, but also popular newspapers, manifestos, speeches, and political pronouncements] (1988, p. 101). But in 1976, these links became totally severed by the repression, and many intellectuals either left in exile or had to retreat to the self-enclosed space of the university classroom and go through the worst kind of censorship—the self-imposed one—to survive.

Repression and censorship made sure that any social links were severely fractured and the junta’s stress on individualism and family rather than collective or community values

did the rest. As Sarlo points out “el rasgo principal del período ... podría caracterizarse como el de la despolitización en todos los niveles” [The most prominent feature of the period ... could be summarised as one of utter depoliticization of all spheres] (1988, p. 103). The previous politicization of the utopian moment of the 1960s was then replaced by the moral values of the Christian Western family that the junta promoted and by fear and widespread mistrust and suspicion. The “privatization” of the public sphere, the depoliticization of social life, the promotion of social behavior that only admitted of individual or family life and that despised collective forms of interaction, and the fostering of an individualistic and competitive spirit were all part of the legacy that the dictatorship left. As Sarlo says, “la dictadura militar cortó el tejido social que había hecho posible la circulación de ideas y la comunicación con otros espacios. Quizás uno de los problemas que enfrentemos los intelectuales argentinos en los próximos años sea la reconstrucción de esta doble fractura” [The military dictatorship frayed the social fabric in which the spread of ideas and the opening to other social spaces had taken place. It might be that one of the problems Argentine intellectuals will face in future is precisely how to reconstruct this doubly fractured social dimension] (1988, p. 101).

In cultural terms, then, this thesis is concerned with this reconstruction and with how postdictatorial fiction engages with this social legacy of the dictatorship at present. Both “early” and “new” postdictatorial fictions are seen in this thesis as providing points of entry through which new generations can critically learn about the historical struggles represented in these narratives in ways that are specific to art and culture. One of the functions of art this thesis wishes to accentuate, therefore, is the idea that art can help, potentially, to develop not only a critical understanding of what happened in the past, but also to recover, in the present, a sense of collective affect that has become lost or has weakened in the past few decades. How can these texts help? For Gadamer, “to understand a text always means to apply it to ourselves and to know that, even if it must always be understood in different ways, it is still the same text presenting itself to us in these different ways” (2004, p. 399). That is to say, postdictatorial fictions of the 1980s and 1990s are no longer oppositional, as Sarlo argues (2006, p. 2), but they may find a new function today that is more reconstructive and pedagogic. It is in this sense then, as Gadamer says, that the text remains the same, but is understood in different ways. Applying the text to ourselves, to our national situation in Argentina today, requires taking memory as a form of truth and justice as the Mothers and Grandmothers do, and to encourage a more reconstructive dimension to history that acts as the dialectical “other” of mourning and



defeat.

Nonetheless, this rethinking of postdictatorial fiction through a more positive lens than in the past does not amount to some naive optimism in the future, but rather to acknowledging that a few changes, some small and discrete, others more historically powerful, have taken place in the past few years, and that the struggle for social justice needs to continue across all fronts despite any actual and/or possible defeat(s). And these fronts include art and culture. It is this historicising of a text's interpretation that Borges's famous short story "Pierre Menard" illustrates so well and that lies at the centre of this research's critical literary inquiry. In Borges's short story, Menard's fragmentary *Quixote* is line-for-line identical to the original text written by Cervantes. And yet, Menard's *Quixote* is thought to be much richer than Cervantes's "original" work, because Menard's work must be considered in light of world events since 1602, and thus as being richer in allusion.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, this thesis sustains that postdictatorial fictions read today are richer in their meaning and interpretations than they were in the past, when they were originally written. This is so because their reading today has gained from a new context of reception that treasures the past (especially its repressed and silenced aspects) as part of a fuller identity. In this sense, postdictatorial fictions cannot today be read only and exclusively as allegories of mourning and defeat. As Gadamer claims, "a hermeneutics that regarded understanding as reconstructing the original would be no more than handing on a dead meaning" (2004, p. 160). Only in the process of understanding texts in their new contexts of reception is the dead trace of the meaning transformed back into living meaning. Or, as Gadamer again more figuratively puts it, works "do not stand motionless on the shore of the stream of history, but are borne along with it" (2004, p. 150).

Since the judicial demands of the human rights organizations grouped under Memoria Abierta were met through the derogation of the Amnesty Laws in 2003, for the first time in 30 years it is possible to affirm that a new "structure of feeling" has emerged in which the actual possibility of redeeming the past through a more positive social and cultural project can be envisioned. This is mainly due to the two reasons mentioned before: firstly, the judicial compensation to the victims of state terrorism and, as a consequence, the rethinking

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<sup>6</sup>"Those who have insinuated that Menard dedicated his life to writing a contemporary *Quixote* calumniate his illustrious memory. He did not want to compose another *Quixote*—which is easy—but the *Quixote* itself. Needless to say, he never contemplated a mechanical transcription of the original; he did not propose to copy it. His admirable intention was to produce a few pages which would coincide word for word and line for line with those of Miguel de Cervantes". Jorge Luis Borges (2000a). "Pierre Menard: Author of the Quixote". In: *Labyrinths, Selected Stories and Other Writings*. Ed. by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby. Penguin Modern Classics, pp. 65–66.

of their repressed historical truth, and secondly, the current politics of memory that slowly but surely is beginning to reverse the effects of over a decade of oblivion imposed through Menem's "reconciliation". These shifts in the social sphere "open up" the conditions of possibility for a positive reinterpretation of the past, especially in its connections with the tasks of the present (in Argentina: social justice, historical truth, a stronger democracy). As Gadamer puts it:

Every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of a tension between the text and the present. The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation of the two but in consciously bringing it out . . . Historical consciousness is aware of its own otherness and hence foregrounds the horizon of the past from its own. (2004, p. 305)

The main research goal of this thesis, then, will be to bring out the postdictatorial texts' difference from the present. To do so, I make a double reading of the novels: from their context of production and initial reception, and from the perspective of the present. In the following section, then, I introduce some of the methodological approaches I use in this thesis to uncover and highlight those historical tensions between the early postdictatorial past and the post-amnesty-laws present.

## 1.4 Methodology

In the previous section I suggested that we would benefit from a broader and less pessimistic view of postdictatorship literature today—one that refuses to see in the dictatorship "the end of history" for Argentina; especially because the memory of the past without hope for the present and future means unredeemable trauma and paralysis as Mark Seltzer argues (1997).<sup>7</sup> This renewal of hope through a critical reflexivity in culture would seek first of all, as one of its primary objectives, to achieve a (re)constructive re-appropriation of the cultural literary heritage of the 1980s and 1990s. In this thesis, this entails approaching the texts from the interpretative horizon of a pedagogic political culture. A first source of this critical approach is provided by psychoanalyst and historian Hugo Vezzetti and his arguments about the proposals of human rights organizations for transforming ESMA (Navy Mechanics School) into a space of memory:

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<sup>7</sup> I take up this point and develop it in full in chapter 4.

¿Cómo debe recordar una ciudad o una nación los acontecimientos que han marcado su historia presente y perduran como núcleos duros en la elaboración del pasado? ¿Cómo tratar ese pasado y quiénes deberían ser sus agentes y sus destinatarios? ¿Cómo proyectar la duración de esa memoria hacia el futuro? Estas son las cuestiones básicas, si se trata de impulsar una memoria histórica y una deliberación pública sobre el terrorismo de Estado. (2006, p. 37)

How should a city or a nation remember the events that have made an impact on its present history and that remain as core nodes of symbolic meaning in the reconstruction of its past? How can we deal with that past and who should be its agents and addressees? How can we project the duration of this memory into the future? These are the basic questions that arise when trying to foster a public debate on historical memory and state terrorism. (My translation)

Vezzetti shows how we need to project *in culture* the reconstruction and duration of this memory of the past into the present and future. Posing this question for the analysis of literary texts is one of the main goals of this thesis. I will therefore review Vezzetti's arguments for the Memory Museum at ESMA in order to argue how his account could be extrapolated into culture through a renewed reading of previous (1980s and 1990s) and "new" (post-default or post-2001) postdictatorial fictions.

My starting point is that for Vezzetti, the political debate on the dictatorship should not focus exclusively on the denunciation of the human rights crimes (something that, according to Sarlo, postdictatorial fiction compensated for in the 1980s and 1990s); and that despite the current relevance and visibility the trials and the commemorative acts have brought, "what is missing", says Vezzetti, "is a *plural* platform of debates from which to discuss this past, admit the legacy it imposes and try and understand it in relation to the treatment of the issues of the present" (2006, p. 38, emphasis and translation mine).<sup>8</sup> For Vezzetti, as in what follows, this plural platform involves not only concrete socio-political actions by human rights groups but also contributions from art, culture and theory. It is precisely this opening to the present and future in the form of a social, political, cultural/artistic, and theoretical/intellectual project that for Vezzetti is the cornerstone of a true politics of memory, "without which the actions about the past are reduced to the expression of groups,

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<sup>8</sup> "Ausente un marco político de deliberación, que no puede limitarse a la denuncia de los crímenes ... lo que se extraña es una base plural de debates capaz de discutir ese pasado, admitir la herencia que impone y procurar entenderlo en el tratamiento de los temas del presente" (2006, p. 38).

to a withdrawn and self-referential fragmentation” (2006, p. 38).<sup>9</sup> Vezzetti also argues that the proposals for transforming ESMA into a space of memory should not turn this place into a horror museum exclusively occupied by the testimonies of the survivors and families of the disappeared. What should be avoided, then, is the memorialisation of horror for horror’s sake. That is to say, mourning without redemption or without some sort of positive or reconstructive project runs the risk of remaining trapped in the immutability of the past. By the same token, Vezzetti’s argument suggests reconsidering the role of postdictatorial allegorical fictions as going beyond the silence and horror of the dictatorship and as telling readers something about their present struggles in and for democracy. And this is the perspective adopted here.

A further aspect Vezzetti considers is the architectural debates on ESMA’s buildings,<sup>10</sup> which have centred around three main questions: a) whether all or part of the buildings should be used for the memorial-museum (including the “Casino de Oficiales”, the building within ESMA where over 5,000 people were detained, tortured and disappeared); b) whether these buildings should remain as they are, empty and “frozen” in time as material remainders of the horror, or whether, on the contrary, some of its buildings at least (though not the Casino de Oficiales), should house Memoria Abierta, a memory museum, a national archive on state terrorism, and other cultural initiatives; and c) whether thematically, the museum should represent only what happened within ESMA or, contrariwise, offer a nationwide account of the repression. Naturally, these issues have generated some controversy among the participating human rights groups as some of them, like the Asociación de Ex-Detenidos Desaparecidos (AEDD, Association of Ex-Detainees and Disappeared), have proposed to focus exclusively on the testimonies of the survivors and on replicating the conditions of torture and death detainees suffered; thereby turning ESMA into a preservation site for the material (rather than solely symbolic) remains of the genocide. This group does not wish to see ESMA turned into a memory cultural centre, but rather prefers to keep the building as a “frozen” and monstrous ruin of the past.

In contrast, other organizations like the Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS, Centre of Legal and Social Studies) wish to see in ESMA a space for democratic reflexivity and education where human rights in general can be discussed and defended (even if the rooms where people were illegally detained and tortured remain intact). Although

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<sup>9</sup> “Esa apertura hacia el futuro es el fundamento de una política de la memoria, sin el cual las acciones sobre el pasado quedan reducidas a la expresión de grupos, a una fragmentación replegada y autoreferencial” (2006, p. 38).

<sup>10</sup> All proposals for ESMA Memory Museum are detailed at <http://www.derhuman.jus.gov.ar/espacioparalamemoria>.

the thematic focus of their project is state terrorism, their proposal also includes “its antecedents and consequences” with the aim of developing “a critical reflexivity and an intergenerational dialogue about human rights violations in the past and at present” (CELS 2004, translation mine)

This thesis obviously prefers the CELS approach to memory, and so this suggests two functions for the cultural project proposed in this study. Firstly, this thesis wishes to accentuate the possibility of recovering the past to foster an “intergenerational dialogue”, which underlines the pedagogic or exemplary function of the recovery of memory (and therefore of postdictatorial cultural and artistic productions). This suggests the democratic inclusion of different perspectives and voices and the preservation or “handing down” of memory and culture, which could be done, for example, through a revaluation of the literary/cultural archive. The second function implied in CELS’s proposal is the need to develop a critical reflexivity that will foster a socially and politically participative or active community. This emphasises the political and critical aspect or dimension of the pedagogic project of the recovery of memory. In this thesis this is pursued through an advocacy of a critical aesthetic reflexivity, that is, an advocacy of a politicised (or a socially and politically relevant) art and culture that critiques forms and ideologies of domination or abusive power.

Another aspect of the CELS proposal for ESMA that needs to be extrapolated into this study is their commitment to enriching democracy. In fact, this aim is for CELS one of the main goals the ESMA Memory Museum should pursue through “the creation of a democratic political culture and a consolidation of people’s fundamental human rights” (CELS 2004). That is to say, in addition to being a site of truth and justice for the victims of state repression, for CELS, ESMA must be part of a more general and officially supported national policy that aims at consolidating democracy and supporting a reflexive and emancipatory critique. CELS also highlights the role that educational institutions like universities can play when it comes to linking academic knowledge and reflexivity with the museum’s activities (for example, by organizing discussion forums and debates, workshops and open dialogue sessions).<sup>11</sup> Critical theory, sociology, history and trauma and memory studies, then, can be used pedagogically to create a space of critical reflexivity. In this sense, postdictatorial fictions become exemplary cultural “sites” through which this

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<sup>11</sup> “El Museo de la Memoria debe trascender a las víctimas directas, los familiares de las víctimas y las organizaciones de derechos humanos, sustentándose en toda la sociedad ... Es fundamental el involucramiento de las instituciones educativas, universidades, etc. de manera de vincular el conocimiento y la reflexión académica a la gestión”. (CELS 2004)

reflexivity can potentially be developed.

One of the approaches this thesis explores in order to bring out what is exemplary in postdictatorial fictions is Linda Hutcheon's "five directions of reference" in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988). There Hutcheon describes how postmodernist "historiographic metafiction" seem to contain very complex referential frameworks, which are sorted out into five reference systems or "routes": the intra-textual reference, self-reference, the intertextual reference, the textualised extra-textual, and the "hermeneutic" (1988, p. 154). The first one, the intra-textual reference, points to the fact that the intended framework of fiction is fiction: a novel does not aspire to the condition of truth, scientificity, or empirical validation of other discursive fields like history or sociology, for example, but sets itself out as a work of the imagination. This level of reference is important in this thesis to set the specific difference between work carried out by historians and sociologists, for example, and the imaginative reworking of historical materials by fiction. Hutcheon's second system of reference refers to auto-representation and to metafictional strategies and techniques that foreground the mechanisms of writing as a construct. This level of reference is perhaps most evident in writers like Eloy Martínez and Fresán, who tend to subvert verisimilitude through the use of fantasy (Eloy Martínez) or through self-conscious authorial comments that lay bare the fictional device (Fresán). The third type of reference, the intertextual, points to a specific intertext either at the level of word or of structure. This function is the strongest in writers like Rodrigo Fresán, for example, who tend to weave in very intricate intertextual references which parody and rewrite, in postmodern register, very prestigious modernist texts.

Hutcheon's fourth category, the extra-textual reference, foregrounds history itself as intertext, by taking historiography as the presentation of fact or as the textualised tracing of brute historical events. It is here, according to Hutcheon, that history allows some access to what semioticians call "external fields of reference", while all the while acknowledging that historiography itself is a form of selecting, reshuffling, reforming, and mediating the past. This reference function is the strongest in a writer like Ricardo Piglia, who incorporates real dates, names and events as condensed nuclei of signification into his fictions, or in a writer like Eloy Martínez who incorporates journalistic reports and historical documentary information. Finally, the fifth category refers to the hermeneutic process of reading and interpretation. It is this last category that allows us to incorporate what Vezzetti calls the pedagogic or formative function of the past since the hermeneutic reference includes the discursive situation of the reader, and as a consequence, it points to the interaction of

the fictive world with the actual present world of the reader. As a reading operation, the hermeneutic dimension ensures that the fictional words hook onto the real world—at one level, at least—through the interpretative action of the reader. It is with this reference system that “the ideological critique, the demystifying of the “natural” and the “given” can operate” (Hutcheon 1988, p. 156). Moreover, for Hutcheon, “any ideologically radical possibility for change—in a Brechtian sense—would be tied up directly with this kind of hermeneutic reference” (Hutcheon 1988, p. 156).

In addition to Hutcheon’s routes for the analysis of texts, this thesis is also informed by the insights of politics, sociology and critical theory. This hybrid and multidisciplinary approach coincides with two further aspects of the CELS proposals for ESMA which I wish to accentuate. Firstly, CELS proposes the inclusion of cultural initiatives through education as well as the incorporation of a variety of cultural agents and experts into their program of actions and activities. This clearly implies an active role for culture and criticism, especially for “professional intellectuals”, who prepare the discussion workshops and forums and other pedagogic materials for schools and for the Memory Museums’ Cultural Centres. Secondly, CELS’s project aspires to create state-supported cultural policies that *endure* and *last* in the future, for example by introducing changes into the school and university curricula through an Educational Reform that will make obligatory the teaching of repressed histories through a human rights and democracy perspective.<sup>12</sup> This latter approach, says Vezzetti, foregrounds the museum as “*a space of learning*,” a cultural artefact designed to “rethink the past in its *exemplary* function” and in its consequences and effects in the present (2006, p. 42, translation and emphasis mine).<sup>13</sup> Vezzetti also forcefully asserts that this space would privilege the *pedagogic* since “it is not enough to show the crimes and the criminals or much less so the images of the genocide, when the purpose of the site is to explain its conditions of possibility and the role played by the nation’s institutions and society as a whole” (Vezzetti 2006, p. 42, my translation).

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<sup>12</sup>Proposals for such a Reform for secondary schools and university levels is currently being discussed in school committees, university councils and among Congress representatives. Nora Veira (2008). “El consenso académico”. Interview with Juan Carlos Tedesco. In: *Página/12* (28th July 2008). URL: <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/subnotas/108605-34273-2008-07-28.html> (visited on 20/12/2008).

<sup>13</sup> “Al afirmar, en cambio, la idea del museo “histórico” o del espacio de conocimiento, enseñanza e investigación, queda destacado el trabajo de los especialistas, historiadores y museólogos . . . El problema queda situado de otro modo si se piensa en conjunto la exhibición y el museo como un espacio de enseñanza, un artefacto para pensar el pasado en un sentido “ejemplar”, es decir, que tenga efectos duraderos en el presente. La función de enseñanza destaca ya no las imágenes crudas sino las bases: documentos, hipótesis históricas, debates, interrogantes abiertos . . . El museo debe ser un espacio de formación, comunicado con la investigación intelectual y académica, no puede dejar de ofrecer un marco, una agenda de los temas y las cuestiones abiertas al debate público.” (Vezzetti 2006, p. 42)

Explaining the role of the institutions and of the conditions of possibility of the repression and the involvement of society as a whole are, for example, some of the aspects analysed in the “new” postdictatorial fictions of Martín Kohan, which will be explored in chapter 9. In effect, the new post-default postdictatorial novels are studied as symptomatic of an ongoing debate on the traces of the dictatorship, the legacy of the social movements of resistance of the 1970s, and the connection of these with the struggles, tensions and conflicts of the present.

One of the most moving accounts of this shift in “structure of feeling” or affect manifest in the new postdictatorial novels appears in the opening paragraph of Laura Alcoba’s *La casa de los conejos* (The Rabbit House) (2008), which begins, precisely, with the narrator’s personal “discovery” that the moment to speak up has come:

Te preguntarás Diana, por qué dejé pasar tanto tiempo sin contar esta historia ... Había llegado a creer que lo mejor sería esperar... esperar para atreverme a evocar ese breve retazo de infancia argentina sin temor de sus miradas, y de cierta incompreensión que creía inevitable. Y luego un día ya no pude tolerar la idea. De pronto, ya no quise esperar a estar tan sola, ni a ser tan vieja. Como si no me quedara tiempo. Ese día, estoy convencida, se corresponde con un viaje que hice a la Argentina, en compañía de mi hija, a fines del año 2003. En los mismos lugares yo investigué, encontré gente. Empecé a recordar con mucha más precisión que antes, cuando sólo contaba con la ayuda del pasado ... a partir de entonces, narrar se volvió imperioso.

Aquí estoy.

Voy a evocar al fin toda aquella locura argentina, todos aquellos seres arrebatados por la violencia. Me he decidido, porque muy a menudo pienso en los muertos, pero también porque ahora sé que no hay que olvidarse de los vivos. Más aún: estoy convencida de que es imprescindible pensar en ellos. Esforzarse por hacerles también a ellos un lugar. Esto es lo que he tardado tanto en comprender, Diana. Sin duda por eso he demorado tanto. (2008, pp. 11–12)

I’m sure you’d ask yourself, Diana, why I waited so long to tell this story ... I thought it was better to wait ... to wait to have the courage and strength to evoke the remnants of my childhood in Argentina without being afraid of their gaze, and of a certain incomprehension that I thought was inevitable from them. But then, one day, the thought of waiting became unbearable. I felt I



could no longer wait to be alone or to grow old. In fact, it was as if I had run out of time. That day, I'm fully aware, coincided with a trip I made with my daughter to Argentina, at the end of 2003. In those same places where I had lived before, I met with people and asked them questions. I began to remember with greater clarity and sharper precision, better than before when I only had the past to look to . . . from then on, the need I felt to narrate became impossible to ignore.

And here I am.

At last I am going to evoke those insane years in Argentina, all those beings torn away by violence. I am determined now because as often as I think of the dead, I also know now that we must not forget the living. Moreover, I am convinced it is essential to think of them. To try and make space for them too. This is what I have taken so long to understand, Diana. And no doubt, the reason why I have waited all this time. (My translation)

This passage from her novel introduces in a few words some of that “structure of feeling” that began to emerge from 2003 onwards as the passage itself identifies. References to a vital drive to evoke the past not anymore from the perspective of the dead and the buried in memory but of the living are representative of the politics of memory invoked in Argentina today. To refuse this connection with the living present by foreclosing postdictatorial narratives in the mournful past would amount to a paralysing traumatic or nostalgic view of that past; one that acknowledges a deeper defeat through the impossibility of change and that denies that opening onto the future that Vezzetti envisions for the memory museums and for the whole of Argentine society. Furthermore, as Vezzetti claims, what is at stake in this vision of the future is the very notion of democratic citizenship in Argentina.<sup>14</sup> This brings me back, consequently, to Gadamer's view of the interpretation of texts in *Truth and Method*:

In fact, the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be

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<sup>14</sup> “Lo que está en juego es justamente la capacidad de edificar allí un artefacto de formación ciudadana que recupere algunos marcos básicos de acuerdo respecto de lo que debe ser evocado y discutido y cómo debe hacerse.” (2006, p. 41).

formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. *Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.* (2004, p. 305)

In what follows, then, after setting out the critical aspects of this study, I will explore through a detailed analysis of three selected case studies of postdictatorial fictions what insights a more hopeful and reconstructive understanding of Argentina's past and present collective history and identity can produce. Below, I provide a brief outline of the content of the following chapters with their intended research aims and objectives.

## 1.5 Thesis structure

Having introduced the main theoretical and methodological perspectives in chapter 1, chapter 2 now focuses firstly on Fredric Jameson's notion of "cognitive mapping" to set out an outline of what a pedagogic political culture may aspire to in Argentina. This is then connected to Idelber Avelar's interpretation of postdictatorial fictions as allegories of mourning and defeat that cognitively map the repressed histories of the 1970s–1990s. Avelar's interpretation is then rethought from the perspective of a more positive reading of postdictatorial fictions that cognitively maps the links with the present. Chapter 3 provides an overview of contemporary Argentine fiction, which sets the case studies of this thesis in context, that is, it positions postdictatorial fictions within the rich Argentine literary tradition. This chapter concludes with an account of the impact of globalization on the "new" narratives and adds to the national context of the reconstruction of memory the two global factors of hybridity and deterritorialization as the dominant cultural conditions of the present. As a whole, Part I, therefore, in addition to providing a literature review, sets the analyses of the corpus in Part II in a critical national/transnational cultural context.

**Part II** of this thesis presents three different but exemplary case studies where the theoretical concepts of Part I are used as critical tools for exploring the research questions formulated in chapter 1. Chapters 4 and 5 introduce the first case study and explore the aesthetic of mourning, memory and defeat in Rodrigo Fresán's novels and his progressive shift from repressed national histories and memories to a more apolitical, nomadic and "hollow" cosmopolitanism. In contrast, the second case study focuses on those postdictatorial narratives that remain firmly grounded in the narratives of the nation from a historical and geographical point of view. I examine Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial* and *La*

*ciudad ausente* in chapters 6 and 7, and Eloy Martínez's *La novela de Perón* in chapter 8 as paradigmatic representatives of this tendency. Chapter 9 introduces my third case study which tackles recently written (i.e. post-default and post-amnesty laws) postdictatorial fictions like those of Martín Kohan, which are studied as paradigmatic examples of novels that incorporate in their narrative structure a re-evaluation of the 1970s and of society's role in the dictatorship.

Finally, **Part III** of the thesis brings together the various findings from the different case study chapters and highlights the main contributions of the thesis by offering some answers to my research questions. The thesis concludes by suggesting some possible paths for future research based on my internship at the Rosario Memory Museum in September 2008.

# From mourning and defeat to exemplary memory

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter develops Fredric Jameson's notion of "cognitive mapping", which Jameson argues is necessary to develop a pedagogic political culture at present. I connect this concept with Idelber Avelar's notion of postdictatorial fictions as allegories of mourning and defeat to suggest that they may be viewed as "cognitively mapping" the Argentine past of the dictatorship period. Avelar's interpretation is then rethought from a more positive project of national reconstruction.

## 2.2 Fredric Jameson's "cognitive mapping"

For postmodern geographer Edward W. Soja, it is not that the "historical imagination" has died but rather that it has intersected in recent decades with the current privilege given to space and to the spatialisation of thought and experience (1989, pp. 10–11). In fact, according to Soja, the spatiality of social experience sees the categories of being and becoming as creatively located not only in the making of history, but also in the construction of human geographies; that is, in the construction of both social space *and* time (1989, pp. 10–11). The predominance of spatial categories typical of the postmodern is a symptom, as Jameson and Soja have long argued, of the hegemony of global multinational capitalism, which manifests itself through a new and unprecedented round of "time-space" compression (Harvey 1990). And, as Jameson has claimed, "every position on postmodernism in culture—whether apologia or stigmatization—is also at one and the same time, and *necessarily*, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today" (1991*b*, p. 3). The Marxist critique of global or late capitalism, then, is of fundamental importance in this thesis insofar as it provides an international framework

for explaining what the postdictatorship narratives articulate at a local level: the shift from State to Market capitalism at a global level, and the defeat of the Peronist “third way” of a Socialist and capitalist State and its substitution by a neoliberal global market at a national level. This transition, which took place during the 1980s and the 1990s in Argentina, gave rise to deep feelings of disillusionment and pessimism and defeat in all those who have politically stood against it. Thus an analysis of postdictatorship culture in Argentina today cannot be separated from an analysis of late capitalism in this specific national or local situation. What is more, if spatial categories have tended to dominate over time categories in this new phase of capital development, the question arises as to how this is to be understood and studied in cultural terms. Jameson has proposed the term “cognitive mapping” to theorize the ways in which our experience of the local is inextricably hooked up with the global. As Jameson argues, we are hooked up to multinational capitalism but uncomprehendingly. Cognitive mapping therefore describes how we may come to a productive understanding of this relationship since the present moment is characterised by

(...) the loss of our ability to *position ourselves within this space and cognitively map it*. This is then projected back on the emergence of a global multinational culture which is decentred and cannot be visualized, a culture in which one cannot position oneself. (1989, p. 48, emphasis in the original)

The cultural model that Jameson proposes to regain this capacity foregrounds the “*cognitive and pedagogical dimensions of political art and culture*” (1991b, p. 50, emphasis mine) in an attempt to “enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole” (1991b, p. 51). Despite the all-pervasive presence of economic global capitalism(s) and of a hegemonic cultural postmodernism, Jameson has also made it clear that this unmappable postmodern space is not homogeneous since it must compete with emergent and oppositional enclaves of resistance, that is, it must measure itself against forces which, despite being inside the system, are nonetheless defined against it (1989, p. 48). One of the ways in which enclaves of cultural resistance can be detected and developed is through such strategies of cognitive mapping. These involve, first of all, as Jameson (1989, pp. 52–83) has argued, a *dialectical view of postmodernism*, that is to say, one that neither simply celebrates it as pluralistic and emancipatory nor simply condemns it as immoral and frivolous; and secondly, a *historicizing of space*, that is, attending to the

historical and geographical specificity of a particular place or terrain, while at the same time using this knowledge “to get a mental grasp of something else [multinational capitalism] which one cannot represent or imagine” (Jameson and Stephanson 1989, p. 63, bracketed addition mine). What we need, then, according to Jameson, are cultural productions or symbolic figurations that can make us aware of the gap between the local positioning of the individual subject (always located in *this* context, *this* national situation) and the totality of [global] class structures in which s/he is situated.

The aim of cognitive mapping, therefore, is to grasp, by means of conscious and unconscious representations, some hitherto unrepresentable or imaginary global social totality or reality inaccessible to individuals. More importantly still for this thesis is the notion that cognitive mapping supports or enables for Jameson “an essentially pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system” (1991*b*, p. 54). But in the specific case of Argentina, it is not only the *individual* who must regain this capacity but society as a whole since, as we saw in chapter one, one of the accomplished aims of the military dictatorship was to suppress collective action and to fracture the political and social spheres. Reverting this process implies regaining the capacity for a *collective* cognitive mapping and therefore the thesis advanced in this study that a new and better democratic society needs to regain some sense of a collective project —and culture has a fundamental role to play in this.

The dialectical view of postmodernism proposed by Jameson is also part of an incomplete agenda. In fact, the possibility of seeking a political postmodernism has worried cultural critics since the 1960s when the postmodernism debates began. It has been taken for granted by Hutcheon, Jameson and others that a critical politics of postmodernism would stand in dialectical opposition to its other politics which is neoconservative and right wing. Although the question of agency remains problematic (because undeveloped), Jameson does give us some examples from artistic practice which are closer to a version of the modernism position—that art can effect social change. This implies, in effect, turning culture into an inspirational driving force for social action, and connected with this, drawing a line between postmodern artifacts created for mindless, light entertainment and consumerism, and postmodern cultural devices that are critically reflexive and potentially emancipatory.

In terms of my argument, a postmodern critical art and culture also implies linking (artistic) cultural activity with (activist) cultural work and campaigns: art and activism, the studio and gallery with the street, etc. This implies not only creating radical art

but actually extending the concept of cognitive mapping into the real world of political action. Much of what is envisioned in this thesis theoretically, in fact, has already been happening in practice through the cultural initiatives and programmes of the Rosario Memory Museum and Memoria Abierta in Argentina. The Museo de la Memoria de Rosario [Rosario Memory Museum], for example, was the first memory museum to be created in Argentina, and since it started work in 2001, its cultural agents have engaged in designing diverse artistic exhibitions and cultural workshops for schools (at all levels) and for all kinds of visitors. The workshops and activities they organise not only work with history books, newspaper cuts, archival sources and testimonies, but also with (post)dictatorship film, literature, theatre, music, and art. The activities aim at engaging the participants' involvement (both affective and cognitive) in order to persuade them to debate and reflect on the past and present consequences of state terrorism. Book presentations, film festivals, "Teatro x la Identidad",<sup>1</sup> commemorative acts, new memorials in neighbourhoods, joint workshops and activities with popular libraries (like Biblioteca Popular "Pocho" Lepratti), and a variety of specialised talks are some of the cultural activities that take place month after month throughout the year. This helps not only open up the museum to the wider community (rather than, say, solely to the state terrorism victims and families) but also to achieve that connection between (activist) cultural work and art/culture and human rights and social campaigns that was mentioned before and that this thesis wishes to accentuate.

Thus, if the aesthetic of mourning and defeat was felt to be oppositional to the 1990s "reconciliation and amnesia", now the times seem to have changed again and memory has become part of official projects and discourses since 2003. This has meant that postdictatorial cultural productions have necessarily lost that oppositional character they had in 1980s and 1990s and have become more openly pedagogic and formative. Such a change of consciousness, I wager, with all that this entails, is necessary in order to give currency to a reflexive critique of the present and past, and thus, in the longer term, to an active cognitive mapping and the capacity to act politically.

My suggestion all along is, therefore, that the linkage of literature, artistic and activist cultural politics, including a politicised reading of literature (i.e. intellectual work based on culture) which is already being carried out by institutions like Memoria Abierta, popular libraries, Memory Museums, Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, universities and other organisms and groups, will necessarily have as its aim the formation of a popular

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<sup>1</sup> "Teatro x la Identidad" are theatre plays organised by Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo and supported by national, provincial and municipal Secretaries of Culture. The project began in the year 2000 in an attempt to recover the identities of the expropriated babies stolen during the dictatorship.

or collective critical consciousness.

In the next section, then, I will review Idelber Avelar's interpretation of postdictatorial fictions as allegories of mourning and defeat and will then move on to my own argument for a more restorative or reconstructive memory work.

## 2.3 Rethinking the task of mourning as the imperative for postdictatorial fiction

Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping offers a platform from which to draw the connections between a shift from State to the global Market not only in Argentina but also worldwide, and to explore these as they became manifest or articulated in the specific histories of particular cultures. One of the most compelling arguments for postdictatorial literary productions so far has been Idelber Avelar's *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning* (1999). As the title indicates, for Avelar, literature is still the quintessential way in which the cultural mood is to be expressed and allegory is the best figurative medium for such an enterprise. For Avelar, "the imperative to mourn is the postdictatorial imperative par excellence" (1999, p. 3) for "whereas the hegemonic political discourses in Latin America would like to "put a final stop" to "the fixation in the past", the vanquished, those who were defeated so that today's market could be implemented, cannot afford to have their tradition relegated to oblivion" (1999, p. 2). The implicit reference to Argentina's Full Stop law suggests very clearly "a structure of feeling" marked by the dominant climate of impunity. In the context of the late 1980s and early 1990s, according to Avelar, literature sought to engage in a sustained mournful memory of the victims of dictatorship(s) who found no redemption in justice or truth beyond the *Nunca Más* and the *Juicio a las Juntas* [Trial of the military juntas in 1985], which despite condemning the Generals was later on neutralised by the amnesty laws.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in the absence of justice or even of a widespread public debate beyond what has been termed "el show del horror" [the horror show], the postdictatorial texts of the 1980s and 1990s "remind the present that it is the product of a past catastrophe" and carry, for Avelar, "the seeds of a messianic energy, which like the Benjaminian angel of history, looks

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<sup>2</sup>Most of the top officers who were tried were sentenced to life imprisonment: Jorge Rafael Videla, Emilio Eduardo Massera, Roberto Eduardo Viola, Armando Lambruschini, Raúl Agosti, Rubén Graffigna, Leopoldo Galtieri, Jorge Anaya and Basilio Lami Dozo. They were later pardoned by president Carlos Menem in 1989–1990.



back at the pile of debris, ruins, and defeats of the past in an effort to redeem them” (1999, p. 3).

This definition of postdictatorial mourning then is the starting point for analysing what has changed since Avelar’s account. The creation of Memoria Abierta in 1999, of Memory Museums and sites and of archive and truth commissions in the provinces, the social struggles of 2001–2002, the revocation of the Amnesty laws in 2003, and the trials that have effectively ensued since then have all begun to bring about some sort of compensation in the form of legal justice and of voicing/debating repressed versions of the past in the public sphere.

For Avelar, the salvific or redemptive relation with the lost object in the 1980s and 1990s was best expressed through allegory, which, as Avelar argues, elevated the disappeared corpses to the status of epochal emblems. It was thus that individual death (the subject to be redeemed) became the emblem of collective or national mourning. Furthermore, allegory was considered a suitable medium of representation since its fundamental trope, the ruin or the fragment, was an essentially *temporal* category which worked as a narrative figuration or remainder of a past irrevocably lost. The ruins (or fragments) thus worked as indexes of what could not be restored and still lingered on as a residue of memory at present. For Avelar: “It is due to that insistence of memory, of the survival of the past as a ruin in the present that mourning displays a necessarily allegorical structure” (1999, p. 5). In his account, therefore, the term “postdictatorship” alludes not only to the texts’ posteriority in relation to the military regimes but also to their reflexive incorporation of the irrevocable sense of defeat into their systems of representation.

However, the limitation of this interpretation is twofold. Firstly, there is a risk of petrifying or reifying the past into a paralysing and traumatic sense of loss insurmountable by any other positive project located in the present or future. Avelar’s account indeed assumes the “end of history”, implicitly acknowledged in the account’s total sense of loss or defeat. This is, as I have explained, understandable in the context of the 1990s, but no longer valid for the past few years. Secondly, the historical events listed above (the annulment of the amnesty laws, the first trials of paradigmatic repressors and Triple A mercenaries, a historical revisionism of both “sides” that does not attempt to equate the violence of the state with that of leftist political groups like Montoneros, etc.) have transferred the “salvific” or redemptive mission of literature to state justice and to work in the public sphere through human rights groups. This leads us to ask what added function(s) in addition to unredeemable mourning postdictatorial art and culture may have today. And the

answer I have rehearsed so far is that these postdictatorial narratives have perhaps become an essential cultural archive or cultural reservoir of repressed histories and voices, and of revolutionary and alternative socio-political energies that may help the newer generations to critically reconstruct Argentine history and identity.

Perhaps the first point that needs to be argued, however, is that, as Avelar claims, the work of mourning will always continue due to that irreducible *material* remainder (the corpses, the lost object) that cannot be restored. In this sense defeat is total and complete. History has happened and is irreversible. But, at the same time, the changes Argentines have witnessed since 2003 also suggest that something other than mourning is in place. If the goal of a successful mourning work is an act of substitution in its own right, that is, the finding of a surrogate object on which the libido can invest its energies anew, then the new socio-political context that has opened up in Argentina in the past ten years seems to suggest that those libidinal energies could be redirected firstly towards maintaining an active memory that *learns* from the past in its *exemplary* form; and secondly towards forming the “new” generations (those born after the late 1970s) who did not live the history of the country before the dictatorship but who are nonetheless living through its present consequences. Understanding a fuller notion of history and its consequences at present is a first and important step towards achieving that cognitive mapping Jameson says we need today. In sum, a successful mourning work would aim at creating a pedagogical political culture where citizens can cognitively steer their course in the midst of the social confusion of the present stage of multinational capital in Argentina.

Thus, with a fuller and accordingly less defeatist sense of history (and the relation of past to present) there is reason to see a break from this particular allegorical mode to one which can remobilise these fictions, in league with other activities and potential, to see signs of the making of a pedagogic political culture. In this sense, Jameson’s “cognitive mapping”, which refers strictly to the comprehension of one’s place in the world system, remains seriously under- or un- developed as a concept. It is precisely the relation between the individual and the totality which can be newly articulated, but this is unlikely to happen without major changes in all the intervening realms: cultural, political, social.

Thus, a pedagogic political culture that rethinks the 1970s–1990s period from the changed context of the present in Argentina would first of all seek to rethink the connections between the failed socialist revolutions of the 1960s and early 1970s, the terror and increased economic dependency of the dictatorship, the failed Menemist promises of a “productive revolution” and finally, all the economic, social and political measures that led

to the default, whilst projecting onto this local or national dimensions more “global” events like the failure of the socialist revolutions in the metropolises, the Condor Plan for South America, the global expansion of capitalism in the West, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet bloc, the increased dependency on IMF and World Bank economic plans in Third World Countries and the permanent state of war or “war on terror”. Because the multiple connections between the local and the international dimensions are not immediately obvious (especially for younger generations since this is indeed the very state or condition of postmodernity), and because the process of national reconciliation in the 1980s and 1990s has led, at least in Argentina, to an increasing depoliticization of the public sphere, the formative or pedagogic dimension of recovering the past acquires a new importance and urgency in the Argentine case.

In the next section, then, the concept of a formative or exemplary memory and the politics of memory it implies are reviewed by drawing on Tzvetan Todorov’s distinction between literal and exemplary memory.

## 2.4 Exemplary memory: building democracy

The last military dictatorship had the tremendous power to change in an unprecedented and catastrophic way how Argentines understood living in a society. Although Argentina had suffered several coups before 1976, military political and social repression had never before reached such levels of efficacy and cruelty. The authoritarian state became in the 1970s the criminal state. This is why in *Pasado y Presente: Guerra, Dictadura y Sociedad en la Argentina* [Past and Present: War, Dictatorship and Society in Argentina], Hugo Vezzetti claims that the issue of the disappeared lies at the heart of Argentina’s construction of a democratic culture (2003, p. 11). Similarly, for García Canclini, in the 1970s and early part of the 1980s, Latin American dictatorships “suspended political parties, unions, and other mechanisms of grouping and collective cooperation” and attempted to “reshape public space by reducing social participation to the insertion of each individual in the benefits of consumption and financial speculation” (1995, p. 211). Hence the tremendous importance of a *collective* mapping and of a pedagogic political culture that may help bring about not only an individual’s active participation in society but also the social activism of groups and movements.

In this process of recovering the collective dimension of a society, one of the functions of postdictatorial cultural productions may be said to aid the construction of a collective

memory that fulfils a certain exemplary function or role. Vezzetti claims as much in his book as he recalls the distinction between *literal* and *exemplary* memory drawn by Todorov in his famous article “The abuses of memory” (1996). Here is how Todorov defined “literal memory”:

Suppose an event—let us posit a painful segment of my past or of a group to which I belong—is preserved literally (which does not mean truly); it remains an intransitive fact, leading nowhere beyond itself. The associations that connect themselves to it are contiguous to it: I restore the causes and consequences of the event, I discover all the people anyone could conceivably associate to the initial author of my suffering and I condemn them in turn. I also establish continuity between the being I was and the one I am now, or between the past and the present of my group, and I extend the consequences of the initial trauma to each moment of my existence. (1996, p. 14)

The central feature of literal memory is focus on the individual or group engaged in remembering an event that happened to themselves. In the case of state terrorism, for example, literal memory would only focus on the victims and survivors of the repression and on their relatives, families and anyone associated with the victims’ suffering and the crimes committed. In literal memory, then, the subject or group seek to remember in order to construct a plausible narrative of a wrong they have suffered and, through it, to recover psychic or social health and stabilize identity.

In contrast, exemplary memory pushes us beyond the concern for our own well-being by helping us learn lessons from the past so as to apply them in new situations. Todorov describes exemplary memory in this way:

Or suppose, without denying the singularity of the [traumatic] event itself, I decide to use it, once recovered, as one instance among others of a more general category, and I use it as if it were a model to understand new situations with different agents. The operation is dual: on the one hand, as in the work of psychoanalysis or of mourning, I diffuse the pain caused by the memory by domesticating and marginalizing it; but, on the other hand,—and this is where our behaviour ceases to be purely private and enters into the public sphere—I open this memory to analogy and generalization. I make of it an *exemplum* and I extract a lesson from it; *the past thus becomes a principle of action for the present*. (1996, p. 14, final italics mine)

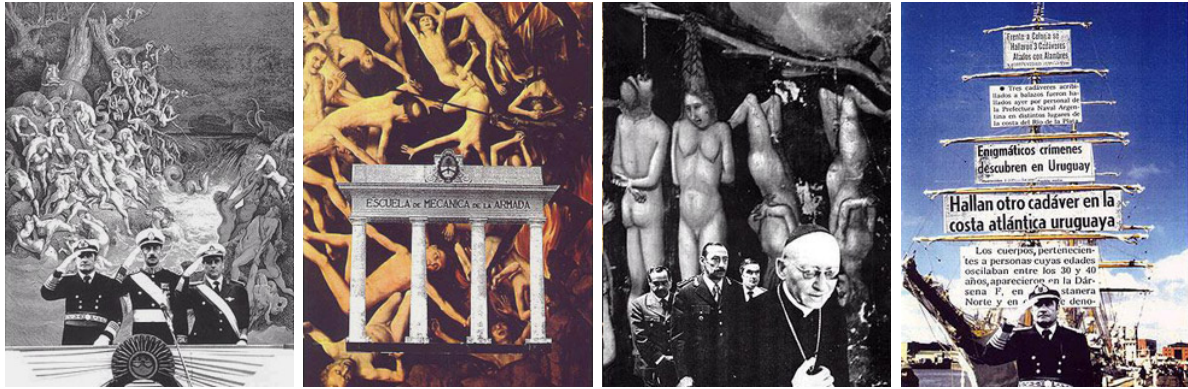


Figure 2.1: Illustrations for *Nunca Más* by plastic artist León Ferrari exhibited in December 2006 at the Rosario Memory Museum.

Thus, in exemplary memory we pursue our own well-being but we also seek to benefit others by extrapolating a lesson that can be applied to similar new situations affecting other people. That is, exemplary memory works on the principle of analogy. Memory of wrongs suffered are not just traces of the troubling past in need of healing and forgetting but catalysts for doing justice and for changing the present. Instead of “nourishing his resentment against those who have committed against him an indelible offence”, writes Todorov (1996, p. 19), a person engaged in the exemplary use of memory will “make use of lessons of injustice undergone in the past to fight injustices taking their course today” (1996, p. 14). In the case of state terrorism in Argentina this means first and foremost building a democratic culture as Vezzetti correctly points out.

Democracy needs to be reconstructed as a *collective* project in Argentina precisely because the state terrorism of the 1970s was not, as has long been held, the isolated work of a group of deranged military who for a while took over power, but rather a catastrophic event that required the silent involvement and, in some cases even complicity, of large portions of the population. Argentine plastic artist León Ferrari’s drawings for the *Nunca Más* illustrate this very well as Fig.2.1 shows. No authoritarian regime emerges on its own, out of thin air, or manages to stay on in power unless there are effective conditions that help sustain it. In the Argentine case, this support to the regime came from diverse political, economic, trade unionist, religious and mass media sectors that contributed to keeping it in power. In fact, many politicians from traditional parties supported the military government. In 1979, for example, 310 mayors came from the UCR [Radical Civic Union], 169 from the Justicialist (Peronist) party, 23 were Neo-Peronists, 109 came from the Democracia Peronista [Peronist Democracy], 94 from the Movimiento de Integración y

Desarrollo (MID) [Movement of Integration and Development], 78 from Fuerza Federalista Popular [Federalist Popular Forces], 16 from Democracia Cristiana [Christian Democracy] and four from the Partido Intransigente [Intransigent Party] (Heinz and Frühling 1999, p. 708). Despite this, Argentine society—like most post-genocide societies—has preferred to put the blame for those years exclusively on the army, eschewing their own complicit participation in what was a military-civic coup and avoiding the charge that it was in fact the civilian population who, for example, took up key positions in the junta’s administration. This has meant that the representation, widely accepted on return to democracy, of a “victim” society in the grip of a despotic power is only one side of the picture.

However, the notion of exemplary memory is not without limitations as theologian Miroslav Volf (2006, pp. 85–93) has pointed out. Firstly, its efficacy depends on identifying the correct situations in which to apply the lesson of a particular memory, and secondly, on the fact that the exemplary memories chosen may themselves be contested memories or may even contain antagonistic or conflicting lessons. These limitations are particularly pertinent to the Argentine case since for a long time the notion of the disappeared as “innocent victim” has remained a largely questioned one. In the first years of democracy, in fact, the militant identity of some of the disappeared (especially of those who had belonged to Montoneros, the ERP [Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo—People’s Revolutionary Army] or the FAR [Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias —Armed Revolutionary Forces]) had to be played down or consciously glossed over—as was the case in the *Nunca Más*—for fear that the victims’ political filiations would somehow justify their deaths or else simply broadly reinforce the “two demons theory”. A further limitation of the concept, also pointed out by Volf, is that there are no guarantees that exemplary memories will prevent traumatic events from happening again. If we take the example of the Holocaust, Volf argues, it becomes obvious that the lessons learnt from the Holocaust have not prevented other social genocides around the globe. (León Ferrari’s drawing of Hitler’s face in the background of the Casa Rosada [Government House] is very suggestive of this, as Fig.2.2 shows).<sup>3</sup> But it might also be that to put it this way is to be too pessimistic, because, on the other hand, aberrant events like the Holocaust have helped produce new international legislation on human rights that have become essential in condemning such crimes. In addition, it would perhaps be too optimistic to expect other societies to behave in a civilised manner on account only of

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<sup>3</sup> Jews were disproportionately affected by the repression. With a Jewish community of 265,000 and a strong anti-semitic tradition, especially in the army, Jews had a particularly difficult time. Although they formed less than one percent of the Argentine population, almost ten per cent of those who were disappeared were Jewish. Factors explaining this are their strong urban presence, high educational level, and a strong interest in liberal and left-wing organizations. (Heinz and Frühling 1999, p. 650).

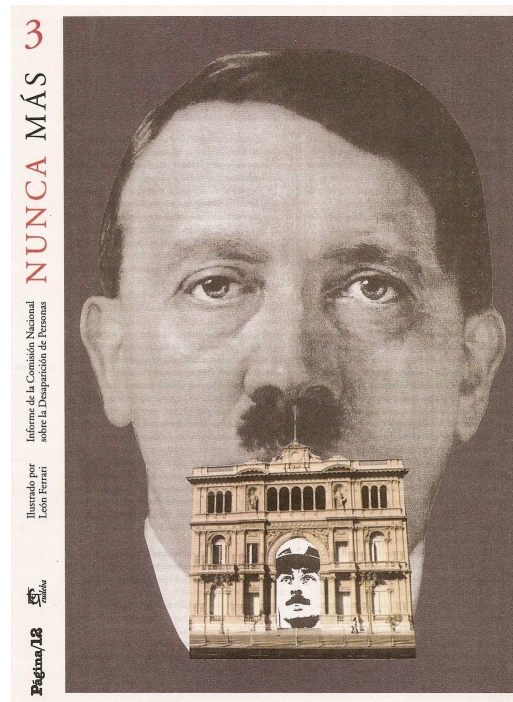


Figure 2.2: León Ferrari’s illustration for the *Nunca Más* suggests a parallel between the Holocaust and the *Proceso*.

what happened in Germany. Each nation fights its own local or national wars and, in any case, lessons are always learnt within those same national situations first and foremost. In any case, Volf’s criticisms remind us that lessons are not universal and cannot be easily analogically transferred from one national situation to the other. Each country/society has traumas and demons of their own, so to speak.

In the Argentine case, however, one of the main challenges of exemplary memory is to be able to generate in the civilian population a desire for, and a strong belief in, democracy. And it is clear that extracting from traumatic memories an exemplary value can become pertinent only when memory has been turned into a project. That is, if the trauma refers to the past, the exemplary value is always directed towards the future.

For French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, too, when extracting the exemplary value from traumatic memories, “it is justice that turns memory into a project; and it is this same project of justice that gives the form of the future and of the imperative to the duty of memory” (2004, p. 88). Thus, “the duty of memory” is, for Ricoeur, “the duty to do justice, through memories, to an other than the self” (2004, p. 89). This concept is inseparable in Ricoeur from the notion of intergenerational debt involved in the notion of heritage.

We are indebted, says Ricoeur, to all those who have gone before us for part of what we are.<sup>4</sup> The duty of memory is thus not restricted to preserving the material trace, whether scriptural or other, of past events, but maintains the feeling of being obligated with respect to these others that were. This also implies that one does not remember alone and that one is always situated in this or that tradition, even if the individual's positions may shift and identities may become flexible.

Interestingly, this memory of a tradition and of intergenerational debt requires, according to Ricoeur, external support (2004, p. 121). That is, when we no longer belong to the group in the memory of which a given recollection is preserved—say all the state terrorism victims and perpetrators are long gone and dead—our own memory is weakened for lack of external support, and so, it is our duty, as intellectuals, teachers, critics, but also as common citizens, to preserve and recall common or collective memories. This is possibly one of the roles or functions that postdictatorial cultural and artistic productions may be seen as having at present: no longer subverting the censorship or silence of past times, but rather working as a cultural reservoir or archive of a past tradition that needs to be passed on to the new generations.

In effect, a fuller knowledge of the past and the means of its transmission are in fact two of the tasks still left to do today. In 1983, when the dictatorship ended, society devoted its first democratic years to what many have called *the horror show*. Television stations and the press, who barely a few months before had saluted the existence of the military regime, began to broadcast interviews and documentary material that revealed in the eyes of society what it had denied for seven years. Evidence of the concentration camps came to be known to the last detail sometimes, and the system of torture and disappearance of the detainees became a permanent topic in sensationalist press reports, especially during the period of the *Juicio a la Juntas*. For Vezzetti (Vezzetti 2003, p. 12), the *Juicio* is a moment of revelation for Argentine society in that for the first time they are forced to admit that state terrorism could only happen in a country where violence and barbarism were the order of the day. It is in this context that many postdictatorial fictions emerge, therefore, towards the late 1980s as explanatory representations of the conditions of possibility of an extreme condition that was not external to the country, but that, on the contrary, had nestled within its institutions and within society as whole. This is certainly the case with

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<sup>4</sup> Ricoeur's notion of heritage can be interestingly extrapolated in literature into Piglia's use of *la tradición* in his narratives. From Macedonio Fernández, to Borges, Arlt and Lugones to countless other writers, the Argentine writer is, for Piglia, heir to both, a political and a literary tradition of antagonisms and struggles. I develop this topic in full in my analysis of Piglia's novels in chapters 6 and 7.



the fictions of Eloy Martínez and Piglia, where violence, barbarism, and the multiple social and political tensions of a contradictory Argentine society are represented through key historical moments or events prior to the 1976 coup.

In 1985, as the trial of the military junta brought public visibility to the voice of the survivors, their testimonies of the horror—up until then denied or deemed suspect, especially if the survivor belonged to a political faction—revealed in the eyes of society the map of an even worse tragedy than had been imagined up until then by many. If the testimonies in court denounced the pillaging of homes, the kidnappings in broad daylight, the clandestine centres of detention located at the very heart of the main cities, the question was self-evident: how could society not know? It is precisely this need to denounce the crimes and to give voice to the hidden, silenced and repressed that postdictatorial fiction like Piglia's *The Absent City* comes allegorically to represent. Although it is true that life under stern, authoritarian regimes leads society to live in the grip of a paralysing fear, it is also true that the power of denial is a common phenomenon to many societies. And this is a problem that emerges under authoritarian regimes as well as in the very heart of democratic societies where less tragic events take place. It is only that under authoritarian conditions this tendency to denial becomes exacerbated by a series of mechanisms specifically devised by those in power to that effect.

Thus, postdictatorial fictions at present could help develop a certain sensitivity in the younger generations to the idea that the horror must never be naturalised. Although in terms of calendar time the dictatorship did not last too long, especially in comparison to the one in Chile or Paraguay, within seven years, the Argentine authoritarian regime managed to create an unprecedented and widespread public consensus about the importance of cultural censorship, political repression, surveillance in private life and the right of the state to imprison people without charge. That is, the imposition of the sum total of all of these repressive measures issued in public documents did not take decades but rather scarcely seven years without encountering any important objections from civil society. On the contrary, more often than not, repressive measures were actually welcomed as concrete actions that tended to *clean up* the general state of public disorder and chaos into which the country had fallen in the years and months prior to the coup.

Thus, to think of this wider and more complex dimension of the repressive apparatus makes it difficult to see the dictatorship as something external to the social tissue. This is why one of the primary goals of reconstructing a social and collective memory of the repression must necessarily touch the symbolic imaginaries lived and created at the time.

Notions like “we didn’t know this was happening”, or “they must have done something” were not the exception but the rule on the return to democracy. Postdictatorial fictions play an important role, therefore, not only in bringing the falsehood of these claims out but also in making of the new generations a more aware and responsible society. It is in this sense that for me postdictatorial fictions constitute a reservoir or archive of the symbolic encoding of social dissidence and of struggles that have marked our identity as a nation. And it is in this sense that these fictions can become exemplary as well: postdictatorial fictions can teach younger generations the underside of a culture of fear, denial and selfishness.

On the other hand, the history of authoritarian regimes throughout the twentieth century proves that civil societies seldom act as a homogenous group in the face of authoritarian regimes and that these societies always find fissures or cracks through which dissent and resistance to authoritarianism emerge. If these cracks or fissures exist, they should make manifest the fact that there will always be those who, despite the ominous weight of political propaganda and the structure of fear, can see beyond what is allowed others to see. This has been clearly the role of the intellectuals and writers who stayed in the country (as well as of those who had to go into exile, of course). The question arises, however, as to what sorts of mechanisms are put to work to make communities consent to situations that contradict the most basic principles of the human condition. The postdictatorial fictions that I explore in this thesis sometimes provide answers to this question and sometimes not. There is a feeling on reading these novels that sometimes one explanation takes the lead over others (for example, the inner contradictions of Peronism, or the revolutionary ideas of the 1960s and 1970s, or the role of the Church and the army) but in most cases there is also the sense that the whole affair was an absurd tragicomedy of greed and power. This is certainly the vision afforded by Rodrigo Fresán’s narratives, for example.

In broad terms, then, postdictatorial fictions pose the following question: what images of the dictatorship, or of the years preceding state terrorism do Argentines have? The question evokes different answers according to different moments. In 1983, when the horror was publicly revealed, public support for the dictatorship reached its lowest levels ever. And yet, but a year before, in 1982, when the military dictatorship took over the Malvinas/Falklands, beginning one of the most absurd wars in recent times, the squares and streets all over the country crowded with people saluting the absurd military venture. Two months later, admitting defeat against Great Britain, the collective mood changed again, and today few would want to remember why this cruel and unnecessary war was fought in the South Atlantic. It escapes nobody, of course, that this war was possible

because the large majority of Argentine society had actively supported the vindication of this nationalist dream. The press and television archives today give us clear evidence of how the military government reached levels of support it had never had before from the majority of society, even from sectors like trade unions and left parties, and even from left parties whose members had been murdered by that same dictatorship or were imprisoned in their clandestine centres of detention. The evidence of this fact throws an image of Argentina that forces us to see a society that sometimes actively contributed to and supported actions that later on it would contradictorily reject or condemn as external to its moral principles. Here, once again, fiction and culture in general can help ask and answer fundamental questions that have to do with the Argentine collective symbolic imaginary and with the reconstruction of a contradictory collective memory full of antagonisms and conflict.

One of the main points of rethinking postdictatorial fictions today, then, is precisely the way these narratives can help put at stake the issue of civic responsibility. Throughout the years, Argentine society has tried to find ways of purging its guilt and diluting its degree of involvement in violent historical events. If we are all responsible, then, in a way, no one is. But here, perhaps, it might be useful to evoke, as Vezzetti does (2003, p. 41), Karl Jasper's distinction between three types of moral responsibility in the face of collective atrocious events: criminal, moral and political. Criminal responsibility, says Jaspers, always falls on those who perpetrate the crimes, that is, those responsible for the genocide and extermination. The other two kinds of responsibility, the moral and the political ones, always fall on the institutions of that society, on its accepted behaviours, discourses, and on the way in which that society has built, through the ages, the conditions of possibility for such criminality to take place or be accepted. These two kinds of responsibilities are, in postdictatorial times, the most difficult to judge. It is only now, even, that the first kind of responsibility, the judicial one, has begun to take place. What lies ahead, therefore, in the long-term future, is the work of the other two responsibilities: the moral and the political. Both of these remain for the most part still largely unexamined. It is here, one feels, that culture and art may have a stronger say than ever, because they have the power not only to tell stories and give voice to what was silenced and repressed, as has been the case so far, but also to generate affect and foster emotional involvement. For a society like Argentina that went through the experience of state terrorism, the main task, then, is no longer mourning, but how to reconstruct a new and fully democratic identity.

The difficulty of the task is enormous. After a society has sunk to the deepest levels of

barbarism and suffered the most extreme forms of cruelty through torture, what remains of the civilized image this very society had of itself? Facing this challenge means putting at stake not only understanding the past but also the possibility of building a new future when this same society will be capable of seeing itself as a major actor in what happened and not as a mere witness of the events. Fiction, again, has a role to play here insofar as the stories literature tells involve armed groups, subversives or extremists, but also ordinary people who were part of the social tissue at the time. It is here, then, that fiction can help move citizens to ask questions, to develop a critical spirit, and to doubt hegemonic or monologic accounts of history.

But here as well emerge new questions that concern not only the problem of responsibility but also the efficacy of memory as a means of preventing similar traumas in future. In the past few decades, and like never before, in fact, in Argentina, the task of preserving memory has become central in educational programs and the political agenda. However, that this should be saluted and acknowledged is not enough. The memory of the horror cannot work, in itself, as an antidote immunizing us against its happening again unless there is some sort of a deeper introspective work being done by this memory work that forces us to ask ourselves what our own responsibility was in terms of making such horror possible. This kind of memory work cannot be of the easy comfortable kind, learnt in school textbooks, and aimed only at giving us peace of mind, whilst at the same time closing off the possibility of debating or of questioning the traces of this past in the present. On the contrary, it has become extremely important for postdictatorial Latin American communities to turn our dictatorial experience into a site of constant memory as well as of intense questioning, broadening the discussion to the causes and effects of this traumatic past, and facing the question of the responsibility society has had in supporting those repressive structures.

Postdictatorial fictions, then, can help bring about those discussions and they can also provide a cultural site or archive where the democratic potential of that collective imaginary is tapped. The “social collective” that has been lost through individualism and a culture of fear during the times of the repression could thus be slowly regained. Literature has a role in this recovery in two senses. Firstly, as a means to recover affect, empathy and some degree of identification with the “lost” causes, the histories of the oppressed and of those marginalized in and by history. This is a function that can be clearly fulfilled by the narratives of defeat that “document” that past. And secondly, literature can also function as a reservoir of values and ideals for the new generations; that is, cultural expressions

that represent the ideals and struggles of the past may still provide inspiration for present struggles and ideals. It is here, then, that the narratives of defeat become narratives of hope with a critical emancipatory potential.<sup>5</sup>

After having explained, then, the social and cultural relevance and possibility of rethinking the past from a more positive and reconstructive project for the present, I will now move on to chart, in the next chapter, some of the lines of development that Argentine literature has followed for the past few decades in order to situate postdictatorial narratives within the Argentine cultural and literary tradition.

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<sup>5</sup> I develop this notion of hope as unfulfilled potential in full in Chapter 8 when I look at Eloy Martínez's *The Perón Novel*.

# The historical and the geographical imagination in contemporary Argentine fictions

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with an overview of contemporary Argentine fiction from the 1970s up to the 2000s by focusing on the representation of the historical and the geographical imagination in literature; and finishes with the connections between the literary traditions described and the impact of globalization cultural processes on the “new” (post-2000) narratives. The overall aim of the chapter is to situate the case studies that are explored in Part II of this thesis.

## 3.2 The historical and geographical imagination in the Argentine literary tradition

Both Linda Hutcheon and Fredric Jameson agree with the view that postmodernism is a “homeopathic” cultural form: both inside and outside the system it attempts to critique, its poison and cure simultaneously.<sup>1</sup> As Hutcheon claims, postmodernism uses the reappropriated forms of the past to speak to a society *from within* the values and history of that society, while still questioning it (1988). Similarly, the one outstanding feature of global capitalism for Jameson is that there is no outside from which to position ourselves and so a critical art must necessarily work from inside the very system it attempts to criticise. Other cultural critics, like Peter Osborne (1999, p. 36), find a glimpse of hope in postmodernism’s plurality: if different oppositional or competing versions of history and experience

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<sup>1</sup> (Jameson and Stephanson 1989)

can be articulated, then the simple possibility that things might proceed otherwise has to be contemplated.

However, as useful as Linda Hutcheon's notion of postmodernist historiographic metafiction may be, there are some limitations to this term that need to be contemplated when applied to the Argentine case. One of the problems with her account of historiographic metafiction in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) is that it does not explain the concrete forms those historical and political relations and apparatuses take in the particular case of Latin America. This criticism has already been convincingly voiced by Santiago Colás in *Postmodernity in Latin America: the Argentine Paradigm* (1994), where Colás argues that when it comes to Latin America, Hutcheon omits the concrete ways in which the texts chosen (mostly from the Latin American *boom* and therefore largely written between the 1960s and early 1970s) were connected to wider political and socio-cultural processes such as the Cuban revolution and the processes of modernization in the Latin American countries. The body of Latin American works Hutcheon discusses is limited to Argentines Julio Cortázar and Manuel Puig, the Colombian García Márquez, the Cuban Alejo Carpentier and the Mexican Carlos Fuentes, whose *boom* novels are all cited under the general umbrella term "historiographic metafiction", whilst dictatorial or postdictatorial novels like Ricardo Piglia's *Artificial Respiration* (1980) are excluded from her account despite being obviously postmodernist and historical. Although Hutcheon's account is useful to see the critical edge of postmodernist art, in the specific case of Latin American fiction, "historiographic metafiction" glosses over, for example, the difference between two distinct moments in Latin American fiction: the moment of "the aesthetic of utopia" (1950s–early 1970s) and the moment of "the aesthetic of memory and defeat" (1970s–late 1990s) (García Canclini 2004, p. 13; Avelar 1999). In terms of periodization, also, Hutcheon's account is too general to distinguish between the period of the *boom* (roughly between 1950s and 1970s) and post-*boom* novels (after the late 1970s) in Latin America as theorized mostly by Gerald Martin (1989), Donald Shaw (1998) and Philip Swanson (1990, 1995, 2003).

A more useful periodization criteria for postdictatorial fiction followed in this thesis is that outlined by García Canclini in "Aesthetic Moments of Latin Americanism" (2004). In this essay, Canclini historicizes the changes in Latin American art by identifying three aesthetic moments in the past few decades: a first moment, in the 1960s, when some Latin American art (mostly what came to be known as the *boom*) worked as "a herald of utopia" and of the possibility of change; a second moment, in the 1980s and 1990s, when what prevailed was "a memory of the defeat", in which fiction persisted in "evoking the dead

and the losses, the exiles and the hopelessness” (2004, p. 13); and a third moment (from the 2000s onwards) when art became characterized by the “immediateness of the present”. For Canclini the difference between these aesthetic moments is clear enough. In the 1960s, says Canclini, “the issue of what was Latin America was reformulated from the internationalizing projects and the vanguards that redesigned artistic and literary fields” (2004, p. 14). In literature, the cosmopolitan formal innovations in technique (such as the multiple disruptions of the time scheme, the blurring of the division between high literature and popular genres, and the problematization of the canonic definitions of the short-story and the novel) were combined, in many cases, with an interest in the utopian insurrectionist movements that had sprung up either in the writers’ own countries or in other Latin American nations.

In Argentina, the renewal of the cultural languages was associated with an economic modernization as material conditions were created to allow an alliance between artistic innovation and the internationalization of culture. Various institutions such as the Di Tella foundation in Buenos Aires sponsored the new vanguard artists and critics, who during the 1950s and 1960s travelled to the main capital cities of the artistic market (mostly to New York and Paris) in search of recognition and fame. One case in point (which Hutcheon mentions) is Julio Cortázar, for example, who incorporated into *Rayuela* (1963) (*Hopscotch*) and *Libro de Manuel* (1973) (*A Manual for Manuel*) many of the experimental techniques of the metropolitan vanguardist fictions whilst at the same time politically supporting the Cuban revolution, Allende’s Chile and Sandinista Nicaragua. The particular conjuncture that made these literary-political practices possible has been described and explained as a cultural crossing between a national (or Latin American) process of modernization and a renewal of cultural languages from the international revolutionary movements (García Canclini 1995, 2004).

By the end of the 1960s, however, the national revolutionary projects of Latin America ended up in state terrorism and dictatorship whilst the metropolitan uprisings were quelled in the 1968 violent repressions of students’ and workers’ riots (Harvey 1990, p. 38; Best and Kellner 1991, pp. 17–23). In Latin America, the exaltation of the revolutionary premises of the 1960s gradually gave way to the political repression of the 1970s, and after the 1964 coup in Brazil, other military interventions in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay followed, and in many cases, the extermination not only of the Left but also of any kind of oppositional action considered rebellious or “subversive” meant that many artists and cultural agents became exiled and remained so for most of the 1970s. By the 1980s, democratic conditions



were gradually restored to those Latin American countries, and the truth about the human rights violations of the dictatorships became publicly known. The frustration, pain and bereavement felt at the loss of family members, friends and colleagues and the legal impunity granted to those who were responsible gave rise to the aesthetic of mourning, memory and defeat of the 1980s and 1990s. In this period, many artists responded to the events of the 1970s either by creating art, literature and film that spoke of the disappearances, tortures and deaths or by approaching history through allegory or as an absurd tragicomedy as García Canclini explains (2004:16). In Argentine literature, for instance, some writers resorted to farce, irony and absurdity to portray the Malvinas/Falklands war as a grotesque fight with no real victories or heroes. Rodolfo Fogwill's *Los pichy-cyegos* (1983) and Rodrigo Fresán's *Historia argentina* (1991) and Carlos Gamerro's *Las islas* (1998) are three of the most illustrative examples of this absurd dimension within the aesthetic of mourning and defeat which, as Canclini defines it, "simultaneously plays with both the dramatic and the farcical" (2004, p. 17).

Despite having been published in 2004, Canclini's paper intriguingly makes no reference at all to the annulment of the amnesty laws in Argentina in 2003, or to the Argentine uprising of 2001 and the spate of social movements of resistance it generated. Neither does Canclini mention the key role that notions of political and social resistance have played in the past few years in response to neoliberalism. This might be so because, as the essay title indicates, Canclini is thinking of the wider Latin American context (despite the fact that his examples for the first two "moments" are from Argentina). Thus, his third moment of "Latin Americanism" is defined in general terms as "the aesthetic of the instant" concerned only with the eternity of the present. However, it is symptomatic that in order to define the "aesthetic of the instant" Canclini shifts from an analysis of literature to the plastic/performative arts. The obvious question then emerges: what has happened to literature in this "third" moment? This shift in media (from literature to visual art) in Canclini's argument suggests either that there has been no change in literature at all; that is, that there is a lack of a third moment and, by extension, an expansion of the second moment of mourning and defeat that extends to the present; or else, it suggests that the "aesthetic of the instant" in literature is what Beatriz Sarlo (2006) has defined as the "new" ethnographic novel solely concerned with the representation of the present.

In fact, the conceptualization of this third moment has proved quite elusive. In the wider Latin American context, for example, critics like Gerald Martin, Donald Shaw, and Philip Swanson have preferred to speak of the post-*boom* fictions created by writers like

the Chileans Isabel Allende and Antonio Skármeta, Argentinean Luisa Valenzuela, Puerto Rican Rosario Ferré, and Mexican Gustavo Sainz, whose novels are characterized by the three P's of post-*boom* narratives: parody, poetry and pop (Shaw 1998, p. 17). However, the post-*boom* criteria for analyzing fictions from this perspective is extremely useful when considering fictions from several Latin American countries all at once, but it is perhaps less convincing when dealing with nation-specific postdictatorial traumatic narratives. On the other hand, a second broad tendency identified mostly by Latin American cultural critics has focused on the relationship between politics and a writing of resistance connected to the emergence of testimonial narratives that have ranged from biographies and autobiographies (such as Rigoberta Menchú's *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1983) and Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School* (1986)) to documentary sources and truth reports like the Argentine *Nunca Más* (Never Again, 1984), Brazil's *Nunca Mais* (1985) and *The Right to Memory and Truth* (2007), Chile's *Rettig Report* (1991), and Uruguay's *Nunca Más* (1992). These accounts, however, are non-fictional and therefore not directly connected to the role of art as a transformative practice, which I wish to explore here.

To historicize the relation between politics and historical narratives in Argentina, another starting point is to turn to an Argentine-produced account of Argentine fictions of the past few decades. In her introduction to *Historia Crítica de la Literatura Argentina* (2000), Elsa Drucaroff distinguishes two dominant trends in Argentinian historical fiction since the 1950s: a first trend that looks back at the past of the nineteenth century in search of clues that may help explain or understand the present; and a second one that questions the processes and nature of writing itself by problematizing the relations between "real" events and their representation in language (2000, pp. 7–15). Drucaroff also points out that these two broad tendencies continued uninterruptedly even during the period from 1975 to 1983, when many Argentinian writers became exiled in Europe. Drucaroff's introduction to *Historia Crítica* is then followed by a series of expert essays that deal with a number of authors thematically grouped according to categories like "narratives of exile", "narratives of defeat", "beyond regionalism", etc. The different essays compiled by Drucaroff map out most of the specificities of the Argentine literary field after the 1950s and although there is not enough space here to summarise the wealth of names and works mentioned in Drucaroff's book, a few essays will be highlighted that develop some of the criteria that best situate the postdictatorial works studied in this thesis.

Thus, in *Historia Crítica*, according to Argentine critics Román and Santamarina, two writers that are representative of a tendency to explore the limits of representation between

reality and fiction and between history and politics are Tomás Eloy Martínez (b.1934) and Osvaldo Soriano (1943–1996). Most of their work deals with political and social themes, which these writers fictionalize in order to denounce, condemn or problematize. One of the main themes throughout Soriano’s novels, for instance, is the persistence of the sense of utopia that impregnated the 1960s and the 1970s. In the novels he wrote in the 1980s and 1990s, there is a certain sense of disenchantment and nostalgia for utopia, as his novels move to the aesthetic of defeat. Examples of this latter type of narrative are *No habrá más penas ni olvido* (1980) (trans. *Funny Dirty Little War*), in which he paints a dark portrait of the violence of the 1970s and the collapse of Peronism before the military dictatorship; *Cuarteles de invierno* (trans. *Winter Quarters*) (1983), set in the 1978 Football World Cup with the military dictatorship in the background; *A sus plantas rendido un león*, which deals with the Malvinas/Falklands War; and *El ojo de la patria*, which depicts the era of corruption of the Menemist government. Defeat is felt here as complete and absolute and so this lends support to Canclini’s periodization for his second moment.

In two of the novels by Tomás Eloy Martínez, *La novela de Perón* (1985) (analysed in depth in chapter 8) and *Santa Evita* (1995) the political dimension is as predominant as an interest in the novel as a mode of writing “true fiction”.<sup>2</sup> In both novels there is an attempt at representing a multiplicity of voices and registers, and a mixing of different genres ranging from newspaper fragments, personal letters and diaries to official documents and elements of pure fiction. There is a constant break in the linearity of events, which is only given order by the common thematic nucleus of the Peronist universe. The fantastic elements of Martínez’s novels build in an element of irrationality to the journalistic search for empirical evidence that will explain the turning points in Argentina history. In fact, for Román and Santamarina, the incorporation of fantasy into Martínez’s novels fulfills two basic functions: on the one hand, fantasy sets limits to the “realist” form of representation typical of documentary journalism, thereby setting the novel at a certain distance from documentary realism; and secondly, the fantastic elements give voice to the repressed “other” of official history. These comprise the “irrational” popular accounts of the myths of Evita and Perón, and the harmful influence that absurd and unbelievable figures like the esoteric López Rega have had in our history.<sup>3</sup>

In another essay in Drucaroff’s *Historia Crítica*, María Cristina Pons suggests a different line to those of Martínez and Soriano, by taking writers like Ricardo Piglia and Juan José

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<sup>2</sup> See Tomás Eloy Martínez (1999). “Myth, History and Fiction in Latin America”. Lecture given at Encuentros No 32. The Cultural Center of the Inter-American Development Bank. May 1999.

<sup>3</sup> I analyse the myths of Evita and Perón in chapters 7 and 8.

Saer. With *Artificial Respiration* (1980), Pons argues, Piglia marked the beginning of a very strong tendency for the Argentine historical narrative to go in search of clues to the nineteenth century so as to make better sense of the repressed present of the dictatorship. *Artificial Respiration* puts on the agenda the question of the representation of memory and the past in connection with the issues of tradition—both literary and political. Thus, Piglia narrates with an eye on the historical and political past of the nineteenth century and its continuities at present whilst his narrators also ask questions about writing and the literary tradition.

This debate on the status of writing as a cultural but also a political activity and on the role of the committed writer is closely linked to the controversy introduced in the 1960s by Rodolfo Walsh's journalistic report *Operación Masacre* [Operation Massacre] (1957). In 1955, General Francisco Lonardi led a military coup that ended Perón's second presidency. The coup's leaders called their action the "Revolución Libertadora" [Liberating Revolution] and Perón "the tyrant". In 1956 a sector of the military loyal to Perón attempted to overthrow the new government and regain power. This counterrevolution failure was followed by indiscriminate acts of repression against Peronist militants. After meeting a survivor, Rodolfo Walsh investigated the illegal detention and execution of several workers. The outcome of his inquiries was *Operación Masacre*. After writing this report, Walsh felt that in Argentina reality itself was like a noir novel, full of conspiracies and uncovered real political crimes, and so there was no need for a writer to write "fiction". At that time, then, Walsh pushed the debate of the socially committed writer to an extreme by declaring that whoever wanted to have an active role in politics necessarily had to abandon literature. In fact, in his prologue to *Operación Masacre* Walsh writes: "Mi relación con la literatura se da en dos etapas: de sobrevaloración y mitificación hasta 1967 . . . y de desvalorización y paulatino rechazo a partir de 1968, cuando la tarea política ya se vuelve una alternativa" [My relationship with fiction undergoes two phases: one, of overestimation and mystification up until 1967; and a second one of progressive depreciation and final rejection from 1968 onwards, when the political action becomes a clear alternative] (Walsh 1988). Walsh famously went on to become an investigative reporter and in 1973 he joined Montoneros but was murdered four years later in a military ambush and his body remains disappeared to this day. His Open Letter to the military junta in 1977 remains one of the most powerful documents denouncing the military of toppling a democratically elected government, banning political parties, hampering trade unions, gagging the press, and brutally torturing and executing thousands of political prisoners.

However, Walsh's shift from literature to investigative journalism led Piglia and other writers of his generation to interpret this division between direct intervention in politics and culture as dangerous and Manichean and preferred, instead, to create art and fiction that imaginatively constructed effective ways of opposing the violence of the military regimes. Thus, Piglia's narrator in *La ciudad ausente*, for example, is an investigative reporter/writer modeled on the figure of both literary writer, journalist and inventor Roberto Arlt and the politically committed journalist Rodolfo Walsh.

In addition to Piglia and Martínez, other writers who continue to create politically relevant fiction are David Viñas, Andrés Rivera, and Martín Caparrós, to mention just three representative names. In "La narrativa argentina, entre la innovación y el Mercado (1983–2003)", Sylvia Saítta (2004) argues that on return to democracy, the debate among cultural producers centred initially on marking a difference between the writers who "stayed" and those who became exiled in the 1970s. Luis Gregorich's article "La Literatura Dividida" published in *Clarín* in 1981, initiated this debate whereby the literature produced "inside" the country at the time of the dictatorship was valued over and above the narrative produced "outside". Parallel to this debate, many writers like Osvaldo Soriano, Osvaldo Bayer and Miguel Bonasso began to wonder whether a politicized culture was still possible after years of censorship and the failure of the 1970s revolutionary aesthetic. According to Saítta, the main consequence of this debate is that it eventually displaced Cortázar from the centre of the Argentine canon, placing Borges, Macedonio, Arlt and Piglia in its place. That is, the 1980s saw a clear shift in the canon from a combative or revolutionary 1970s aesthetic that subordinated literature to politics, to a cosmopolitan, multicultural and pluralistic aesthetic centred in Borges and that confirmed parody, quotation, irony, paradox, intertextuality and the apocryphal as the preferred modes of still politically committed writing. In fact, Piglia and critics like Beatriz Sarlo, Carlos Altamirano, and María Teresa Gramuglio, who at the time wrote for the cultural magazines *Contorno* and *Punto de Vista*, carried out this poetic and theoretical reorganization of the canon throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. According to Saítta "Al retirar a la literatura de la política—concebida como en los años setenta—, reafirman el carácter político de la función de la literatura pero en su especificidad literaria" [By removing literature from the field of revolutionary politics—as it was conceived in the 1970s—[these critics] reassert the political nature of the function of literature but in its literary specificity] (2004, p. 245).

For Saítta, however, a second phase or moment on the return to democracy begins with the emergence of two groups of "new" writers: on the one hand, the "experimen-

talists” of *Babel: Revista de Libros* (1988) directed by Martín Caparrós and Jorge Dorio, where Guillermo Saavedra, Daniel Guebel, Luis Chitarroni, Alan Pauls, Sergio Chejfec and Matilde Sanchez write, and, on the other hand, the “narrativists” like Juan Forn, Guillermo Saccomanno, Marcelo Figueras and Rodrigo Fresán, who are published in the “Biblioteca del Sur” collection by Planeta. Of the two groups, the “narrativistas” or “Planetarios”, like Rodrigo Fresán, are the most relevant for this thesis insofar as they raise questions not only about the market and literary form in the era of globalization, but also about how to represent the political and social history of the country in the current context of neoliberalism.

In addition to history and politics, the representation of space also determines to a very high degree the imaginary coordinates of the Argentine nation. Argentine fiction has shown from its very beginnings a contradictory tendency to root its narratives in the nation, and, at the same time, to make itself more “cosmopolitan” and European and so avoid any local colour regionalism or false sense of the “autochthonous”. This break with any local colour regionalism began with the Romantic Movement in the late nineteenth century at a time when Argentina was launching its first mass-scale European immigration plan and continued with the Modernist movement early in the twentieth century when industrialization was well under way. Unlike what happened in other Latin American countries, according to Argentine critics Foffani and Mancini (2000, pp. 261–262), during this period, regionalist novels not only began to question a nativist support of tradition as the guarantor of national identity but also explored other forms to replace it. What these critics have termed “la transformación gradual del paisaje” [the gradual transformation of the landscape] in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is an antecedent of the extreme spatial deterritorialization to be found in more contemporary fiction under the coordinates of globalization. The Romantic period is seen by these critics as the starting point of a geographical tension in the Argentine imaginary which, on the one hand, legitimizes gauchesco poetry, the nativist or indigenist novel, and the novel of local customs and manners as what is properly “Argentinean”, whilst on the other hand, it pulls in the opposite direction as more cosmopolitan writers like Borges and the *Sur* writers adapt European and North American modes of writing to local themes or settings.

But a decisive step in the reformulation of regionalism took place mostly in the first half of the twentieth century as the geographical imagination became situated, once and for all, in the big cities and the European metropolises. Modernity (technological, industrial, educational, and cultural) brought about a more universal dimension to the depiction of

the landscape henceforward much less impregnated with local colour and with the picturesque than other Latin American countries. This transformation became nowhere better expressed than in Jorge Luis Borges's essay "El escritor argentino y la tradición" [The Argentine Writer and Tradition] (2000*b*), where Borges argued that the idea that Argentine writing should abound in differential Argentine traits and Argentine local colour was mistaken. Borges's argument is well-known: the gauchesco poetry of the *Martín Fierro*, canonized by Leopoldo Lugones and Ricardo Rojas, for example, should not be considered the natural expression of the gauchos, but rather a poetic genre like any other, which sometimes takes as its subject-matter the life of the gaucho and at other times is concerned with great philosophical and universal issues such as time, space, death, memory, courage, etc. The fact that the poem affects a local voice or is sung from the point of view of the gaucho does not make the poem any less artificially contrived than an English poem or Shakespearean play that deals with Greek or Latin themes. Though Borges is building a case here for a universal tradition of literature of which he wants Argentina (and his own fiction) to be a part, he is well aware of the cultural difference that gave rise to the creation of gauchesco poetry. In another essay in *Discusión*, for example, entitled "La poesía gauchesca", Borges outlines the historical context that gave birth to this poetry: on the one hand, the legends and stories of the *pampas* [Argentine grasslands] and of the *cuchilleros* [knife-men] and, on the other, the processes of urbanization of big metropolitan cities like Buenos Aires and Montevideo, where the gauchos and the educated people who wrote the poems about them made mutual acquaintance.

However, Borges refuses to be limited to narrowly local or national themes and characters, but instead borrows from all periods of history and all cultures. "Our patrimony is the universe", he asserts (2000*b*, p. 219). The essay thus claims for the Argentine writer the right and indeed the privilege to draw inspiration from any culture s/he chooses, a declaration that flew in the face of the nationalistic politics of literature at that time in Perón's Argentina.<sup>4</sup> Originally given as a lecture in 1951, the essay is also Borges's response to criticism that demonized him as a foreigner, a "European", indifferent to and ignorant of the local reality—attacks which came from both sides of the political spectrum all his life. In contrast to these accusations, Borges argues that the Argentine writer's marginal status with respect to the Western tradition is what paradoxically enables him to play freely with

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<sup>4</sup>Borges had incurred Perón's anger after signing pro-democracy protest flyers while he was the Director of the National Library in Buenos Aires. In retaliation for his lack of political support, in 1946 Perón infamously dismissed him from the Library and "promoted" Borges to Poultry Inspector of the Buenos Aires municipal market, a position that Borges obviously declined.

all world literature: “I believe that we Argentines, we South Americans in general . . . can handle all European themes, handle them without superstition, with an irreverence which can have, and already does have, fortunate consequences” (Borges 2000*b*, p. 218).

Borges also dismissed any direct link with Spanish literature not only because Argentine history was marked by a war of independence against Spain but also because the literatures written in French, German and English have historically been much more influential than the literature produced in Spain (*Don Quixote* notwithstanding). Borges’s conclusion weighs like a dictum on the brains of Argentine writers: since Argentines are heir to the whole of Western culture, Argentine writers can handle all European themes and forms, not only without superstition, but with irreverence. This dimension becomes extremely important in a writer like Rodrigo Fresán, for example, who will take Borges’s cosmopolitanism to an extreme, and in a writer like Ricardo Piglia, whose cosmopolitanism is based on a notion of creating a precursor tradition and whose texts bring, as Francine Masiello has said, “the discussion of translated literature in confrontation with the objectives of the state” (2001, p. 163). For Masiello, in fact, writers like Ricardo Piglia show that “marginal literatures have their possibilities of irreverence” and that therein lies “their chance of transforming art from the periphery” (2001, p. 163).

Other famous essays by Borges also promote cosmopolitanism. In “Kafka and His Precursors”, literary influence is derived backwards. “Every writer *creates* his precursors”, Borges says (2000*b*, p. 236). This often-quoted line of the essay focuses on the reception of literary works rather than the production, the reader rather than the writer, a fact which effectively argues for a retrospective cosmopolitan component in reading and writing. In the essay, in the reader’s eyes, Zeno’s paradox against movement anticipates Kafka’s infinity paradox in *The Castle*, the tone of Han Yu’s description of the unicorn, in the ninth-century and Kierkegaard’s philosophical writings, also become legitimate precursors of Kafka’s texts. Because the act of reading makes time reversible—so that Han Yu’s description of the unicorn reminds a late twentieth-century reader of Kafka—it also disregards spatial and cultural boundaries: “If I am not mistaken, concludes Borges, the heterogeneous pieces I have enumerated resemble Kafka; if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other . . . In each of these texts we find Kafka’s idiosyncrasy to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had never written a line, we would not perceive this quality” (2000*b*, p. 236). Thus, Borges draws our attention to the fact that a writer’s work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future. A concept which is extremely important in a writer like Ricardo Piglia who works with the literary tradition, as will be seen in chapters



6 and 7.

These essays by Borges, then, “The Argentine Writer and Tradition” and “Kafka and his precursors”, convey an optimistic view of cosmopolitanism that stands opposed to a false *criollismo* or a narrow-minded nationalism. Borges’s arguments, however, have often been misinterpreted as justifying the idea that a writer can handle *any* theme with total legitimacy, a position which is quite controversial. It is difficult to say whether any writer would be able to write a historical novel about the Holocaust experience, for example, with the same legitimacy as a witness or a survivor would. Or, contrariwise, it might be argued that the value is not to be found in the writer, but in the account itself (its literary quality, its formal stylistic devices, etc.) notwithstanding whether the narrative is a faithful rendering of an event or not (which, in any case, historiography has taught us is quite impossible since writing cannot escape selection and the limits of representation through language). But it is one thing to rework universal cultural referents, images, and symbols, as Borges argues in “Kafka and his precursors”, and it is quite another to write a whole novel on a topic the writer may know little or nothing much about. Here the risks of superficiality are enormous.

But when it comes to representing life in other countries or societies, for example, more often than not, a non-native account runs the risk of being shallow or even clichéd. This bears little resemblance to Borges’s argument that a writer—any writer, no matter his/her nationality—can write about universal themes like death, solitude, love, vengeance, etc., and can choose his/her literary precursors in stylistic terms as well as use images from universal literary sources. But it is no coincidence that Borges’s short stories are for the most part, in actual fact, philosophical imaginative creations (rather than realist representations). James Joyce, for example, whom no one would deny is one of the greatest writers in the *universal* literary tradition, wrote *Ulysses* based on his native Dublin. Along the same line, no one would deny that Shakespeare is the greatest universal playwright and yet at the same time the most British one. The debate becomes particularly complex when one considers fictions that attempt to write realist accounts of social realities or historical experiences that are completely *foreign* to the writer. That is to say, to imply that a writer can write about any theme and that literature is a universal tradition does not, in my view, amount to saying that anything goes. As will be seen, this is a very rich and controversial debate which will be explored in further detail in chapter 4 and 5 when the issue of cosmopolitanism is brought to bear on traumatic national narratives like those of Fresán’s.

But Borges is not the only writer in the Argentine tradition to generate these debates between the local and the cosmopolitan. The notion of a geographical tension at the heart of literary writing in Argentina also finds expression in writers like Juan José Saer and Héctor Tizón, who have permanently worked with the confrontation between the regional and the cosmopolitan, giving rise to what Beatriz Sarlo has termed a “non-nativist regionalism” (1995). It is a kind of writing that, despite being anchored in a recognizably local space, moves away from the folklorist, nativist or picturesque attributes typical of regionalist literature and closer to the “universal” categories predicated by Borges. Space thus acquires an emblematic or allegorical significance that is either marked by the “border” tensions between the local/regional and the foreign/universal, or by the experience of exile as it impinges upon autobiographical narratives. These geographical tensions, then, become accentuated in the second half of the twentieth century when writers like Piglia, Eloy Martínez and Fresán confront the themes of literary tradition and of exile. As Eloy Martínez has said: “we are eclectic, and in this geographical vacillation, we will find our own geography; in this invented history we will find a good deal of our authentic history” (1999, p. 11). It is this hybridity or this eclecticism, then, that is one of the salient features of Argentine literature.

In fact, in the postdictatorship period, the theme of exile becomes extremely important as it gave rise to the peculiar situation of writers who live in and write from an ambivalent position with regard to Europe and Argentina, in a mixture of geographical distance and intellectual proximity. Saer reflected upon this condition in his essay “La Perspectiva Exterior: Gombrowicz en la Argentina” [The External Perspective: Gombrowicz in Argentina] (1996) on the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz who lived as an exile in Argentina during the Second World War. In this essay, Saer compares Borges, Gombrowicz, and his own writing according to what he terms “the external perspective”, where the word “external” refers as much to the external perspective in the narrative point of view as to the world view “from abroad” of an exile. Saer argues that whereas Borges hybridizes his native language by crossing it with English and French, whilst at the same time making use of the philosophical heritage and the literary tradition of the West at large, Gombrowicz deterritorializes his body and native language by moving from Poland to Buenos Aires and adopting Rioplatense Spanish to write his stories. Saer, in contrast, remains true to his native language, that is to say, he goes on writing in Rioplatense Spanish, but writes from the perspective afforded by geographical distance as an exile living in Paris.

Saer’s best known novels, such as *El Entenado* (1983) [trans. by Margaret Jull Costa

as *The Witness* in 1990], and *El limonero real* (1974) [The Royal Lemon Tree], show some of Saer's fidelity to the sense of place, especially the river as an allegorical cosmos, but at the same time are given a metaphysical and anthropological universal dimension that saves them from any simple regionalism. Saer's novels are in fact cohesively linked together by what he and his critics have termed and theorised as the *zona* [zone, area]. The *zona* corresponds to the area in and around the Argentine city of Santa Fé (although this is never acknowledged, thus avoiding regionalism) where Saer lived and worked for many years before moving to France in 1968. Saer was very much influenced by Borges from whom he learnt to combine fiction with philosophy, literary theory and, in Saer's case, also psychology. From universal literature, for example, Saer takes much from the objectivist tradition of the French new novel (notably *El Limonero Real* and *Nadie, Nada, Nunca* (1980) [trans. by Helen Lane as *Nobody, Nothing, Never*], but his characters (such as Tomatis, Wenceslao, el Ladeado and El Gato) migrate from novel to novel and are clearly all *santafesinos* (from the province of Santa Fe, in Argentina, where Saer was born). One of the influences from Saer that will be explored in connection with the writers analysed in this thesis is his preoccupation with memory and language, and the limits of perception, especially the borders between reality and hallucination. These themes are very important in Rodrigo Fresán and in Ricardo Piglia and are analysed in their respective chapters. However, Saer's fictions are not analysed in detail in this thesis because his representation of the military repression is extremely oblique (in the 1986 novel *Glosa*, for example). But his influence in the Argentine literary canon of the postdictatorship period is nonetheless undeniable and cannot be ignored.

In addition to exile, the postdictatorship period also sees changes in terms of the influence of the information technologies and the mass media as well as in terms of the effects of globalization and of cultural hybridity. In the following section, then, I will discuss how the ambivalent affects of border crossings between region and world that have characteristically permeated Argentine literature become further complicated by the processes of economic and cultural globalization.

### 3.3 The impact of globalization on the “new” Argentine writers

Borges's early modernist dictum of a cosmopolitan yet all-Argentine writing eventually had a more conflictive or less celebratory side or dimension in the fiction of writers who

experienced political exile, geographical marginality and existential anguish in the 1970s. In the 1990s, the geographical imagination undergoes yet another transformation as the forces of globalization begin to impact upon the “new” generation of writers (i.e. those born after 1960). As discussed in the previous section, Rodrigo Fresán is of particular interest among this group because he illustrates the modes of writing the task of mourning took at a time when the forces of globalization became impossible to ignore, and film, music and other popular and mass-mediated forms of culture renewed the symbolic imaginaries that were incorporated into the works of literature. In the past few decades this has generated a tension with best seller culture that is not comparable to the influence of mass media or “popular” culture in canonical writers like Manuel Puig, for example. Together with Fresán, others who belong to the so-called “new generation of young writers” (Kurlat Ares 2003; Mora 2003) are Daniel Guebel, Juan Forn, Alan Pauls, Matilde Sánchez, Martín Caparrós, and César Aira, to mention just a few. Born during or after the 1960s, these writers became acutely aware of the postmodern splintering of the subject, the loss of a teleological centre, the end of “national history” and, in some cases, the abandonment of a socially committed literature as it was understood by the *boom* writers (Kurlat Ares 2003). In addition, these writers have, in different ways, explicitly distanced themselves from the *boom*’s magical realism as a mode of writing and have incorporated in the very structure of their writing the renewal of cultural languages that García Canclini identifies for Latin America at large. This has meant the incorporation of a heterogeneous symbolic imaginary that mixes the local with the foreign, the national with the transnational, the popular with high culture, and the traditional with the contemporary and the postmodern.

In interviews and book presentations Fresán has often stated that he does not write magic realist novels. In the context of Argentina’s literary tradition, however, it makes little or no sense to explicitly announce this since Argentina has never developed a magic realist tradition. It has developed a strong tradition in the *género fantástico* (Borges, Cortázar, Bioy Casares, Quiroga, etc.) and even in science fiction, but magical realism has never been part of its canon or repertoire. What, then, is the ultimate aim of such statements if not to position the writer in the global market? The “I am-not-a-magic-realist” statement, then, is aimed at the way great publishing conglomerates cater for what is commonly conceived to be the prescribed specific difference of Latin American writing—magical realism. Although as Mora (2003) and Kurlat Ares (2003) argue, the “new” Argentine writers do not systematically share a literary agenda—with the notable exception of Juan Forn and Rodrigo Fresán who contributed short stories for the publishing

project known as *McOndo*—, these writers have focused on the urban realities of the River Plate region and have tended to reject beforehand any local colour or nativist representation of a *rural* Latin America prescribed by the international market.

What's more, for Mora (2003, p. 65), Daniel Guebel, Juan Forn and Rodrigo Fresán incorporate the Argentine and Latin American literary tradition in their works either through stylistic parody or else by paying homage or tribute to the “great masters” (especially to Borges, Cortázar and Puig, but also to Juan Rulfo and Roberto Bolaño and North American writers like Kurt Vonnegut, William S. Burroughs and Thomas Pynchon). Guebel and Fresán, for example, have both written stories in which the Malvinas/Falklands conflict is approached with a satirical sense of humour in a devastating critique of national jingoism: Guebel's “Impresiones de un natural nacionalista” [Impressions of a Natural Nationalist] and “El amor de Inglaterra” [Love of England] (short stories included in *El ser querido* [The beloved] and Fresán's “La soberanía nacional” [National Sovereignty] (included in *Historia argentina*) are some representative examples. Secondly, foreign (usually American) writers like Francis Scott Fitzgerald, J.D. Salinger, Kurt Vonnegut and Raymond Cheever have been explicitly acknowledged influences in their stories and novels, so that instead of legitimizing their writing through a Latin American style conceived as magical realism for the markets, they consciously adopt trends in a hybrid North American/Latin American/Argentine tradition. It is this “adaptation” to the international market demands that separates Fresán's postdictatorial writing from that of writers like Piglia or Tomás Eloy Martínez. Also, in the “new” or “pop” writers like Fresán, films and music not only provide new symbolic referents but also give structure to some of their narratives. A case in point is Fresán's story “El aprendiz de brujo” [The Sorcerer's Apprentice] (in *Historia argentina*), where the film *Fantasia* and the cartoon character Mickey Mouse are reworked as complex farcical allegories for power relations in the Malvinas/Falklands conflict.<sup>5</sup>

Other innovations of these new writers are typically postmodernist. Daniel Guebel's *El Ser Querido* (The Beloved) (1992), for example, subverts the brevity traditionally attributed to the short-story form by ramifying the narrative into multiple lateral digressions. Fresán does something similar in his collection of interlocking fictions *Historia argentina* through the repetition of echoes, names, characters and motifs which seem to “migrate” from one story to the next. Also, Fresán's novels *Vidas de santos* (1993), *Trabajos manuales* (1994), *Esperanto* (1995/7), and *La velocidad de las cosas* (1998) have all continued in the same postgeneric or experimental vein of *Historia argentina* and have proved in-

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<sup>5</sup> I analyse this in detail in chapter 4.

creasingly difficult to classify not only in terms of the traditional genres of the novel and short-story forms, but also in their mixing of discourse types and generic conventions that range from the speculative essay, metafictional self-reflexivity and textual self-recycling, biography and autobiography, to the historical chronicle and the language of journalism. Narrative digressions, ramifications and sudden or unexpected turns are the order of the day in all of these books as is textual and generic hybridity. However, Fresán's later works increasingly evince a tendency towards a purely textual and apolitical cosmopolitanism as I show in chapter 5, which is why Fresán's narratives provide an interesting "counterexample" to the fictions of other postdictatorial writers studied in the thesis such as Piglia, Eloy Martínez and Kohan. My point here is that not all postdictatorial fiction is "good" literature or oriented towards potentially developing a reflexive critique in the same way.

This implication has also been explored by Carlos Gamerro in his essay "La coartada de la ficción" [The alibi of fiction] where he refers to "las licencias que la ficción puede—o no—tomarse en la representación de hechos traumáticos del pasado reciente" [The poetic licenses that fiction can take—or not—when attempting to represent traumatic events in our recent past] (2008). When the poetic license taken is offensive because clichéd, inaccurate or stereotyped, then fiction loses much of its aesthetic impact, Gamerro argues. In fact, Gamerro terms these literary or poetic blunders "la imaginación irresponsable" [the irresponsible imagination] in that instead of further exploring the imaginative but nonetheless verisimilar possibilities of a traumatic historical event or moment in society, the writer trivialises or banalises that reality, turning it into "unbearable" pastiche or mockery.

Gamerro presented these views at the Jornadas de Historia y Ficción [Fiction and History Literary Workshop], at the Centro Cultural de la Memoria Histórica Haroldo Conti [Haroldo Conti Cultural Centre in ESMA] (09–16 August 2008) in Buenos Aires. In his paper Gamerro discussed the lack of logical verisimilitude in "bad" postdictatorial fictions written by three English-speaking writers: *Imagining Argentina* by Lawrence Thornton, *The Story of the Night* by Colm Tóibín and *The Ministry of Special Cases* by Nathan Englander, which recreate stereotyped, clichéd, one-dimensional accounts of the dictatorship and the disappeared. One of the most incisive questions Gamerro asks, but is nonetheless unable to answer himself, is why these writers took up this subject matter producing such ill-informed imaginative accounts. Even as fiction, Gamerro says, these accounts are an unbearable failure. Questions like to what extent a "foreigner" can imaginatively represent all the nuances of another culture and the complexities of another nation's history without

taking liberties with verisimilitude, or giving a clichéd account of experience emerge here with great force and are connected to the debates discussed in the previous section with regard to Borges and the cosmopolitan imagination. I take up in more detail some of these important points in the chapters that follow and provide some concrete answers to it in chapter 5 of this thesis as I discuss Fresán's latest two novels.

As a counter example to postdictatorial fictions that can potentially produce an emancipatory critique of the past, Rodrigo Fresán's novels allow us to observe in one and the same writer a progressive shift from the historically and geographically rooted postdictatorial stories of *Historia argentina* to the increasingly deterritorialized but also more increasingly cosmopolitan and "hollow" narratives of his latter books where the bricolage between low, high, and mass media forms of culture loses to a large extent its radical potential for critique. Thus, as my analysis in Chapter 5 will show, I take a less celebratory view of Fresán's narrative innovations in his latter novels than Kurlat Ares does, and explore cultural critic Mark Millington's notion that textual hybridity as style is not per se a guarantor of an emancipatory critique (2007). From another angle, another reason for choosing Fresán as a counterexample writer (to Piglia and Eloy Martínez and Kohan) is that his participation in the *McOndo* debate over Latin American identity provides ample material to explore the reformulations of Latin American and Argentine identity from a globalisation perspective. It has become obvious at this point to say that the globalization debates have become as unavoidable as the postmodernism debates were in the 1980s and early 1990s.

In fact, from the 1990s onwards, it is possible to trace in some of the new Argentine narratives a tendency to narrate the "dissolution" of national space through the processes of globalization most clearly expressed in a deterritorialization of national space that abandons "locality" in order to embark on endless journeys, travelling experiences and an overall nomadism (including, figuratively, a nomadism of the narrative voice). The impulse to leave, travel, and move away from Argentina not only refers to travelling abroad, but also to a restless and temporary reterritorialisation of the nomadic narrators in cities, hotels, malls, highways and other "non-places" of global modernity (Augé 1995) that replace the previously meaning-laden and "fixed" national space (as was the case of Saer's *zona*, for example). In this thesis, this nomadic writing procedure will be explored in most detail in Rodrigo Fresán's narratives in chapters 4 and 5, but it is by no means solely restricted to his name, as I argued before. Moreover, this movement towards a deterritorialized geographical imagination has found cultural expression in other countries of Latin America as

the *McOndo* debate has shown. In the cultures of the “centre” (i.e. USA, Britain), deterritorialized narratives have emerged in close association with a related social phenomenon: a rising interest in cosmopolitanism and exile (Beck and Sznaider 2006; Walkowitz 2006) as seen in the cultural works of “international” writers like W.G. Sebald, Salman Rushdie and Kazuo Ishiguro, for example.

In historical terms, on the other hand, this tendency emerges in connection with the dominance of multinational capitalism, and in peripheral countries like Argentina, with neoliberalism as well. In Argentina, because prior to 2001 the Argentine peso was pegged to the American dollar, any fluctuations or periodic crisis in the international Markets tended to periodically shatter the country with catastrophic financial results, such as the 2001 default crisis. It is in terms of these series of historico-economic crises and of fought and lost social battles that a sense of national identity has become both eroded and fragmented but at the same time defended and reconstructed through social resistance movements in the past few decades. These changes are also explored in this thesis since they have had tremendous impact not only in the themes of the new narratives after 2001, but also potentially in the way precursor narratives may be read.

Furthermore, in the aftermath of these political and economic crises, cultural producers since 2001 have once again been confronted with the choice of economic exile or of staying and weathering the financial storm. Many Argentineans became migrants, such as Rodrigo Fresán, who moved to Barcelona in 1999, and coinciding with this period of travelling and moving, his narratives became increasingly deterritorialised and “lifted” from the Argentine locality. In fact, his last two novels, *Mantra* (2001) and *Kensington Gardens* (2003) are mostly set abroad: in Distrito Federal, Mexico, the former, and in London the latter. The opposite tendency to this abandonment of the Argentine locality and of “anything Argentinean”, has been represented by writers like Tomás Eloy Martínez and Ricardo Piglia, who continue to imaginatively locate their fictions in the historical and geographical coordinates of Argentina in an attempt to imagine a better future. As Eloy Martínez has said: “Whether they are strident or silent, novels don’t move a single hair on the head of reality. But they are written to build up the riverbanks for the navigators to come, to situate the future in a wished-for place” (Martínez 1999, p. 12). In opposition to this tendency to root the narratives of the nation in the nation, the globalised narratives of a writer like Fresán represent first and foremost the changes in social experience brought about by globalization, hybridity, deterritorialization and the spread of mass media forms of communication. The lack of a “fixed” national space in culture is analogous to the so-



cial phenomenon known as “time-space compression” identified by postmodern geographer David Harvey (1990). The way capitalism has been experienced since the 1970s, says Harvey, has had “a disorientating and disruptive impact upon political-economic practices, the balance of class power, as well as upon cultural and social life” (1990, p. 284). This sense of disorientation is important in this study since it is intimately connected to the strategies of cognitive mapping that Fredric Jameson proposes for an effective pedagogic political culture as I explained in chapter 2.

The prosperity of the postwar boom (out of which the United States, Britain and Japan greatly benefited), which rested upon a massive expansion of world trade and international investment flows, culminated in the formation of global mass markets. In a peripheral country like Argentina, the period of capitalist expansion was speeded up through the violent repression of the workers’ movements and extreme left guerrilla groups such as Montoneros, Tupamaros, and the ERP [Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo—People’s Revolutionary Army] and the junta’s totally criminal and indiscriminate “war on the Marxist subversion”. As Saúl Sosnowsky (1988) argues, in the 1970s, the economic plan led by the Minister of Economy José Alfredo Martínez de Hoz and supported by the Jimmy Carter administration through the Condor Plan for South America was the real political goal of the military intervention. The military junta imposed 1,783 national laws and 18,146 decrees on varied aspects of national life, from regulations to salaries, trade union activity, religion and immigration, to a Broadcasting Law and new taxes.<sup>6</sup> The economic decrees that Martínez de Hoz introduced made Argentina comply with the international demands that were favourable to a small but very powerful group of top financiers with multinational business interests such as Sociedad Rural Argentina, Rotary Club de Buenos Aires, Consejo Empresario Argentino, Centro de Exportadores de Cereales, Consejo Publicitario Argentino, etc.<sup>7</sup> Inflation and uncontrolled financial speculation were two determining factors that provided an excuse for the military to take over the chaotic government of Isabel Martínez de Perón in 1976. A drastic reduction in salaries, (45% less in 1976 than in 1974), the concentration of capital in the hands of a powerful few, the incorporation of privileges and a set of economic and financial measures mostly favourable to the landowning oligarchy but detrimental to the national industry (which at the time accounted for

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<sup>6</sup> See also Claudio Savoia (2006). “Doce militares impusieron 1.800 leyes”. In: *Clarín* (24th Mar. 2006). URL: <http://www.clarin.com/suplementos/especiales/2006/03/24/1-01164121.htm> (visited on 20/12/2008)

<sup>7</sup> See Ismael Bermúdez (2006). “El derrumbe de salarios y la plata dulce”. In: *Clarín* (24th Mar. 2006). URL: <http://www.clarin.com/suplementos/especiales/2006/03/24/1-01164108.htm> (visited on 20/12/2008)

most of the employable workforce) were all part of the measures Martínez de Hoz and other Economics ministers of the *Proceso* incorporated (Peralta Ramos 1988, pp. 49–73). It is no coincidence that after the coup 30.2% of those who were “disappeared” were factory workers, 21% were students, 17.9% were waged labourers, 10% were professionals, 5.7% were academics and 1.6% journalists (figures taken from the *Nunca Más* report, 1984).

As Harvey (2006) argues, since the late 1980s, “the fundamental mission of the neo-liberal state has been to create a “good business climate” and therefore to optimize conditions for capital accumulation no matter what the consequences for employment or well-being”. And so, the neoliberal state in Argentina during Menem’s two presidencies was particularly assiduous in seeking the privatization of assets as a means to open up the fresh fields for capitalist accumulation. In *Spaces of Global Capitalism* (2006), Harvey also points out that the neo-liberal state is profoundly anti-democratic since governance by elites and by a strong executive order is favoured over and above parliamentary decision-making. Contentious social movements of opposition and resistance are always a threat, since the neo-liberal view equates mass democracy with mob-rule (2006, p. 27). If necessary, the state will resort to coercive legislation and policing tactics (anti-picketing rules, for example, or simply police repression) to disperse or repress collective forms of action.<sup>8</sup>

It is in this context, then, that in this thesis social movements of resistance, social collective action, and contentious mobilization are taken as indissociable from a democratic cultural project within the economic conditions of globalization. Although I am fully aware, as Harvey argues (2006, p. 28), that NGOs, human rights organizations, and grassroots mobilization remain very limited and rather reformist in their potential to introduce change, they have nonetheless, at least in Argentina, been important sources of oppositional strategies and have collaborated on a number of fronts with other institutions like Memory Museums and Human Rights Organizations. We must not confuse, however, the humanitarian aid of NGOs in other countries, which provide food, medicines, supplies, etc. to areas hit by catastrophe, but which are nonetheless powerless to make long term political or social changes, with the kind of political interventions human rights groups do in Argentina. Although the former obviously mean well, their charity work is to a certain extent unwillingly complicit with the very system whose evils they attempt to “cure”. Whenever and wherever capitalism produces disease, famine and social injustice, these charities help perpetuate the system by bringing in food and supplies rather than by overthrowing, changing or deeply criticising the very system that created those problems

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<sup>8</sup> See David Harvey’s *Spaces of Global Capitalism* (2006), *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), and *The New Imperialism* (2003).

in the first place (notwithstanding the good they do in the short term, of course). In contrast, human rights groups in Argentina like Memoria Abierta are not charities, they do not provide aid or focus on short term goals, and instead, their work is focused on a *politics* of memory that seeks truth and justice, especially at a time when political parties and politicians have fallen into disrepute.

In the realm of culture, and notably since the late 1950s, postmodern fragmentation, the loss of historicity or time-space compression, the amnesiac or schizophrenic subject, and the commodification of culture have begun to dominate over previous modernism categories like anxiety and alienation, the depth model, the collective ideals of an artistic or political vanguard or avant-garde, and a critique of the commodity (Jameson 1991*b*, pp. 1–54). Although Jameson’s view of postmodernism is a dialectical or homeopathic one, as I argued in chapter two, he nonetheless warns us that this new round of time-space compression has symptomatically meant in culture the loss of historicity and the waning of affect, the advent of a “nostalgia mode” and of postmodern simultaneity, that is, the feeling that “all is in the present”. But as both Fredric Jameson and Raymond Williams claim, the “cultural dominant” is necessarily accompanied by alternative and oppositional and emergent tendencies such as non-nostalgic cultural forms that are concerned with the recovery of redemptive (rather than “nostalgic”) memory and history. Fictions, films and music that engage with trauma and memory and that raise issues of politics, ethics and aesthetics have been seen to oppose the neoliberal tendencies to social fragmentation, individualism and to an ahistorical, depoliticised present. It is in this sense, then, that one must be wary, perhaps, of celebrating a shallow cosmopolitanism in culture, especially in peripheral countries like Argentina, since one of the affects Argentines need to regain is precisely this lost sense of historicity, and of a more cohesive and less individualistic society. The social tissue, in short, that the dictatorship and a decade of neoliberalism have succeeded in fragmenting and severing.

Rodrigo Fresán’s narratives are more deeply cynical than this. They seek increasingly to “escape” trauma through a more deterritorialised, “cosmopolitan” narrative and find it impossible to believe in the rebirth of a collective project. In contrast to this response, other case studies like the novels of Piglia, Eloy Martínez and Kohan firmly root their experiences of memory and defeat but also of future hope in a recognizably national history and geography. Whereas globalization has meant for the former response a progressive “erasure” of the national landscape and a view of national history as exhausted, for the latter group of writers globalization is not in itself an issue, since the discourse of social resistance and

of future hope still responds to an incomplete or unfulfilled national project in search of democracy and social justice. In fact, it is only in the first response, that of Fresán's, that cultural hybridity becomes completely depoliticized and that deterritorialization eventually implies a total abandonment of the nation as the imaginary site of a collective political project with no other European or Western cosmopolitan plan to replace it.

In the next section, then, the term hybridity will be explained because it has become, to a large extent, one of the main features of our globalized contemporary culture.

### 3.4 Hybridity and deterritorialization as key features of contemporary culture

Although hybridity is quite a contested term in cultural studies, in this thesis I use it to refer mostly to diverse intercultural mixtures—rather than merely racial or ethnic—, where the symbolic imaginaries of different communities cross and intermingle through different mass media (written and audiovisual) (García Canclini 1995). From this perspective, the term refers to the increasing symbolic exchange between cultures that the globalization process has brought about and that has been accompanied by two other related phenomena: deterritorialisation or the dissolution of any “natural” links between culture and place and reterritorialisation or the intermingling of those disembedded cultural practices that produces new complex hybrid forms of culture (Tomlinson 1999). This use of the term goes a step beyond Homi Bhabha's theorization of the postcolonial identity as a site of ambivalence that forecloses any claims to “pure” or “authentic” cultures, since it introduces the impact that the globalization of the media has had on postcolonial cultures in the west. On the other hand, Bhabha's notion of the cultural hybrid as a *potentially* subversive strategy insofar as it destabilizes binary oppositions and any notions of authority based on essences needs to be retained and borne in mind all along. Both Bhabha and García Canclini, therefore, see hybridity as the process whereby cultural differences come into contact and conflict and unsettle any prior stable identities built upon primordial polarities. The difference is that whereas Bhabha focuses more on the “hybridization” of discourses (especially the discourse of cultural postcolonialism) as the primary site of a struggle for power, Canclini stresses other sociocultural processes and phenomena such as the influence of the mass media and of cultural modernism and economic modernization in Latin America.

It would perhaps be too optimistic or even naïve, however, to claim that all discursive

and cultural hybridity is subversive or that it is subversive in the same way, since much depends on the specific cultural and historical context in which this socio-cultural hybridity takes place. But a claim can be made, nonetheless, for the *potential* ungrounding power of hybridity best manifested in the cultural histories and social struggles of Latin American societies. Here, as in much else, Argentina tends to be a case apart because its cultural hybridity cannot be described by another related term much used in Latin American cultural studies—transculturation. Originally introduced by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, transculturation refers to the process of transit from one culture to another more powerful one and its social effects. In *Contrapunteo Cubano* (1940), Ortiz described the transmutations of the Africans and Spanish cultures that went to Cuba where the cultures of the Africans were largely assimilated into the more dominant cultures of the Spaniards. This is different, I believe, from cultural processes in Argentina where the native, indigenous population was either largely exterminated or else swept into marginality and invisibility, and where there was less an assimilation of one weaker (indigenous) culture into another more dominant one (Hispanic), than a Creole culture of Spanish descendants, further complicated by a later *aggregate* of European cultures since the 1880s that formed several layers of cultural hybridity (Rioplatense Spanish being one concrete consequence of the mixing of Spanish, Italian, French, etc.).

Hence, the main implications of this historical development is that the processes of hybridity in Argentina cannot easily be accommodated to the way this term has been theorised in postcolonial studies, where the term hybrid is usually (though not exclusively) historicised in terms of race (Fanon 1967) or of the discursive construction of the other (Bhabha 1994), or, more recently, in terms of the transnational movements of migrants from the colonies to the European centres or to other peripheral countries. This specific difference within Latin America suggests, as Mark Millington argues, that when speaking of hybridity there is always a need “for precise work on specific case studies” since “frequently the discussions of transculturation and hybridization are so general that key local factors and differentiations fail to be considered” (2007, p. 260). Hybridity and deterritorialization, then, are also very much connected to the development of different postmodernisms in Latin America, although these cannot be explained in exactly the same terms as in the metropolitan European centers either, since, according to García Canclini, the Latin American countries did not modernise at the same rate or with the same degree of achievement as in Western Europe.

The four basic movements that García Canclini identifies for Latin American moder-

nity—emancipation, expansion, innovation and democratization—developed unevenly and among unresolved conflicts and tensions in most Latin American societies (García Canclini 1995, p. 12). Although it is true that, as García Canclini argues, most Latin American countries failed to fulfil an economic modernization and that “economic expansion [became] probably the most stagnant aspect of our development” (García Canclini 1995, p. 266), this process should not be read as one of simple backwardness but as the result of a conflictive dynamic between a progressive oligarchy that dominated the political scene until the first decades of the twentieth century, and the expansion of capitalism. These interacted, at the same time, with the democratizing ascent of the middle classes and liberalism from the 1920s onwards, and the industrialization, urban growth and development of the new cultural industries. The specific case of Argentina, however, should be set apart in that Argentina did modernise at quite a fast pace and with a high degree of achievement, but this modernization took place mostly in the Buenos Aires and littoral parts of the country from the 1880s onwards, while it was slower and less perfectly achieved in the “interior” provinces. García Canclini, however, remains optimistic when it comes to postmodern hybridity since for him “defending heterogeneity and the possibility of multiple hybridizations is a first political move in an effort to keep the world from falling prisoner to the homogenizing logic with which finance capital tends to level markets in order to facilitate profits” (García Canclini 1995, p. xii).

Thus, although on the positive side Canclini seems to grant cultural hybridity the *potential* at least to resist the homogenizing tendency of late capitalism, he also admits that globalization has meant for the past few years asymmetrical power relations as well as the gradual loss of the national projects in the Latin American countries and a fierce neoliberal economic policy (as we saw in the previous sections). This seems to explain at a broad socio-political level this thesis’s intuition that the two main responses in Argentine postdictatorial culture to the global market would tend either to enhance the deterritorializing processes and the ensuing political apathy of a global but narrowly construed cosmopolitanism, or else fall back into the narratives of the nation and of social and political struggles fought across a diverse but united front against neoliberalism (including art and culture). Culture, therefore, is not only responsive to these processes but can also offer imaginative ways or paths in and out of or against this homogenizing global order.

In this thesis, therefore, art and literature are seen as having a potentially emancipatory role in encouraging the resurgence of mass movements voicing egalitarian political demands and understanding their own conditions of possibility, while at the same time, seeking to

resist the individualism, banalization and trivialization of everyday life that the entertainment industry and celebrity culture foster in the more privileged regions/countries/classes. Hence the importance of a critical recovery of historical memory and of strategies of cognitive mapping and of a deeper understanding not only of local/global cultures to be able to better and actively participate. Secondly, a cultural project based on these ideas would seek in postdictatorship cultural productions not merely methods of “correcting” official history, or of countering the discourse of power, but also, as this thesis wants to emphasize, of pointing the way ahead in terms of imagining a different future. This view is in fact shared by Eloy Martínez, who has said:

One of the most original aspects of historical fiction is its attempt to recuperate a community’s myths, without invalidating or idealizing them, but by acknowledging them as tradition, as a force that has left its sediments in the collective imagination. Every myth ultimately expresses communal desire. And nothing so clearly belongs to the future as desire. (Martínez 1999, p. 12)

In what follows then, I will explore the issues I have just put forward in the first case study—Rodrigo Fresán’s *Historia argentina* and the narratives of trauma and tragicomic defeat.

# Part II

## Case Studies



Case Study 1:  
From traumatic mourning to an  
apolitical cosmopolitanism

# The aesthetic of mourning, memory and defeat in Rodrigo Fresán's *Historia argentina*

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores how the feelings of disillusionment with the policy of silence, oblivion and impunity of the first decade of democracy after the dictatorship, far from producing a “reconciled” society, brought about further trauma and an overwhelming sense of impotence and defeat. Fresán’s first novel, *Historia argentina*, is presented as a paradigmatic case of the collapse of the narratives of nation under the weight of unredeemed trauma.

## 4.2 *Historia argentina* as absurd tragicomedy

As I argued in the previous chapter, in the 1970s, political corruption and the expansion of US capitalism to Third World countries converged with the weak civilian government of Isabel Martínez de Perón (July 1974–March 1976), deep internal divisions within Peronism, escalating political violence, widespread strikes, and bouts of inflation and economic crises. The traumas and the sense of defeat that pervaded the country since the second half of the 1970s mark much of the historical literature produced in the 1980s and 1990s when frustration reached unprecedented levels. In addition to the disappearances and the violence of the *Proceso*, the country had to face hyperinflation and the increasingly neoliberal policies of the so-called Menemato as well as extreme economic demands imposed by the IMF and the World Bank. As has been widely argued, the dictatorships created the necessary conditions to effect a change from the modern national state to the transnational post-state market (Avelar 1999; Sosnowsky 1988). Whereas the military interventions in Brazil and Chile, for example, ensured that the transition from State to Market took place during the dictatorships themselves, in Argentina, the *Proceso* did not manage to effect

this change completely and, in 1983, the state was still responsible for a large portion of Argentine economy. Gas, oil, health, water service, telecommunications, transport and the state universities were still managed by the state by the time Alfonsín was elected president. What the *Proceso* had successfully managed to do was to carry out several agrarian reforms favourable to the big landowning families, to open the markets to imports, and weaken or dismantle union resistance, the political thrust of Peronism—especially its more radical fractions, ERP and Montoneros—, and the progressive intellectual activity of universities and of some leftist journals like *Contorno* [Contour] and *Presente y Futuro* [Present and Future] which in the late 1960s had reinterpreted Peronism from the progressive left as an alternative to liberalism and international capital (Avelar 1999, pp. 48–49).

Unlike Brazil and Chile, the working class in Argentina had enjoyed a degree of organization and unionization that had been unparalleled in the continent, not least due to the influence of Perón himself. Thus, the actual transition to Market capitalism was much more difficult to accomplish than in the other neighbouring countries. This transition, however, was fully achieved by the end of President Menem’s running presidencies (1989–1995/1995–1999) when the state-owned companies were sold to foreign capitals amid rumours of political corruption and mismanagement of public funds. For most Argentines, therefore, “transition to democracy” meant little more than the juridical-electoral legitimization of economic freedom for capital as Idelber Avelar argues (1999, p. 59).

Thus, although there is a current insistence on defending and preserving institutional democracy as a value in itself, the feeling of defeat and disenchantment continued during the 1980s and 1990s due to the brutality of the Market economy that had been imposed since redemocratization began in 1983. In addition, feelings of disillusionment and anxiety were further deepened by the systematic policy of silence, oblivion and impunity of the amnesty laws. Although these political decisions were seen by many at the time as part and parcel of a difficult transition to democracy due to the military *carapintada* [Painted Faces] uprisings of Semana Santa (April 1987), Monte Caseros (January 1988) and Villa Martelli (December 1988),<sup>1</sup> their ultimate effect has been to perpetuate the conditions that made the transition to international market capitalism possible. The gradual disillusionment

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<sup>1</sup>The *carapintadas*, led by Lieutenant Colonel Aldo Rico (Semana Santa, Monte Caseros), and by Mohamed Alí Seineldín (Villa Martelli), staged a series of barrack uprisings to demand that the trials of those not exempted under the Full Stop Law, passed by Alfonsín in December 1986, be aborted. This eventually brought about the passing of the clause known as Due Obedience giving amnesty to any military men that ranked lower than a colonel. After further uprisings, on October 1989 Carlos Menem signed pardons for all the most important people convicted for misdeeds during the *Proceso* and for 164 *carapintadas*.

has been mostly with the dreams of social progress encouraged in the first half of the twentieth century when the so-called “third way” politics of Peronism promised a mid-way between capitalism and socialism. After the 1970s, far from accomplishing this third position, the dream of a Western, progressive middle-class nation gave way to the reality of a country devastated by political corruption, insecurity, high unemployment and economic stagnation. This means that the cultural productions created in the aftermath of the dictatorship confronted not only the need to come to terms with past catastrophes such as the disappearances but also the need to redefine a position with regard to global capitalism.

However, the underside to this overwhelming sense of defeat has been the politics of memory since, as Nouzeilles and Montaldo point out, “for those who refuse to forget, the act of remembering is vital for the duration of a true democracy” (2002, p. 507). The politics of memory, therefore, should not be narrowly interpreted as a mere painful recollection of the past and a merely pessimistic or even resentful stance in the face of past adversity, but rather more positively, as the necessary condition for democracy in such a country to subsist. It seeks to instil a strong commitment to democracy (a pluralistic, active participation of the Argentine people as a civil society within the framework of a constitutional government) by remembering what went wrong when these objectives were not commonly sought or defended. Unlike the work of memory involved in other cultural settings, such as the Jewish Holocaust and Great Wars memorials, cultural memory in Argentina is therefore more closely related to either an explicit or implicit defence of democracy and thus it is intensely political in its scope. However, the task of mourning the past is, to a great extent, to restore the dream of economic and social modernization and progress within the context of social justice and democratic representativity, as we saw with the banner of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in chapter one. In this sense the state of mourning cannot achieve closure until social justice is restored as well.

From a more global perspective, the reappropriation of the individual and collective past with a special focus on trauma became a transnational tendency in Western societies in the 1980s and 1990s as cultural theorist Andreas Huyssen has argued (2003). Issues of memory and forgetting emerged as dominant concerns in postcommunist countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union; in Rwanda and Nigeria and in post-apartheid South Africa with its Truth and Reconciliation Commission and in Australia around the issue of the “stolen generation”. Similar concerns weighed heavily in the relationship between Japan, China and Korea where memory and trauma lead the debates on the violations to human rights during the military repressions and interventions, as in Argentina, Chile and

other Latin American societies like Nicaragua, Guatemala and Peru. For Huyssen (2003), the Holocaust, in particular, became a universal trope for genocide and unspeakable horror as several museums, films and memorials were created in Europe and in the United States. War memorials, also, dominated public discourse as one of the means by which nations could create or honour their chosen heroes and martyrs and around which national identity became either forged or reinforced. Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington and Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin are two often-cited illustrative cases, which, according to cultural anthropologist Michael Rowlands, "are a part of a monumentalising discourse of the political and emotional construction of national identities through the remembrance of acts of sacrifice and the redemption of those who survive" (1996, p. 10). Cultural identity, national pride or pride of belonging, and self-respect became materially embodied in parks and urban memorial sites.

In the particular case of Argentina, the sense of bitter defeat and frustration that has enveloped the country since the military intervention has no doubt radically reconfigured the artistic production from the 1980s onwards. The kind of "memorialising" that the reader encounters in Rodrigo Fresán's collection of interlocking short stories, *Historia argentina* [1991, from now on *Argentine History*], is differently inflected from Holocaust narratives. Neither the dictatorship, nor the Malvinas/Falklands War, yielded any heroes or martyrs through which national pride could be reasserted. Both conflicts are represented in Fresán's novel as absurd, cruel and murderous. Unlike the forms of memory mentioned above, there is a total lack of heroism or nationalistic patriotism or triumphalism in Fresán's reconstructions. Death and war are seen as the result of political corruption and strong economic interests rather than as acts of human sacrifice and redemption. Thus, whereas in Holocaust memorials, the form of the memorial is essentially a reminder of death on a massive scale of lives that are felt not to have been wasted but which are felt to be constitutive of a collective sense of community, the emphasis in Fresán's *Historia argentina* is on the individuality and wastefulness of each death. Thus, for Rowlands

A successful ... war memorial must achieve resolution of mourning, loss and grief through the healing aspects of triumphalism and heroism ... [whereas] a wasted, destroyed life that has proved to be of no importance is humiliating to the living. For a life not to have been in vain, it had to have been sacrificed for a set of values that transcends the individual (1996, p. 14).

In Argentina neither the revolutionary cause for social justice of the 1960s nor the claims

over the Malvinas/Falklands territories yielded any positive results, and as a consequence, death was not redeemed in the accomplishment of a transcendental goal or ideal.<sup>2</sup> Because of this, the deaths that populate Fresán's books are not recorded (or recreated) as so many casualties in a glorious cause but as the fragmented waste or debris of a catastrophic past. The death of the individual (be it during the dictatorship or in the Malvinas/Falklands) is not transcended by a "nationalist" cause or a stronger sense of community because the very notion or idea of nation is now under question. In the novel, the stories' representation of past events is always partial and fragmented, and yet part of what Andreas Huyssen calls *productive remembering* (2003, p. 29), that is, a notion of memory that is active, alive and embodied in the social sphere and whose purpose in Argentina is to represent but also counteract the 1980s and 1990s amnesia accentuated by the post-state transnational market and the process of national reconciliation.

One example of how the memory of a past catastrophe is incorporated into the narrative is the second short story in *Historia argentina*, "El Aprendiz de Brujo" [The Sorcerer's Apprentice], in which Walt Disney's film *Fantasia* serves as the allegorical starting point for a complex cultural dialogue between the narrator's personal life, the *Proceso*, and the Malvinas/Falklands war. The story also weaves in elements of the historical chronicle incorporating the Malvinas/Falklands war and the story of the "disappeared" Laura Feijóo Pearson, as the following extract shows:

Lo del restaurante se le ocurrió a mi madre . . . El plan es que vuelva curado a Buenos Aires y que abra mi propio restaurante . . . y que me case con Leticia, con la Leticia que mi madre—y el resto del mundo—conoce desde el día que nació, no con la Leticia que sólo yo conozco, la *verdadera* Leticia.

La verdadera Leticia se rió a carcajadas todo el camino al aeropuerto y no paraba de hablarme de Laurita, Laurita querida, su hermana mayor muerta. Me acuerdo: Leticia me grita en el oído algo así como que Laurita no se ahogó en Punta del Este. Esa es otra de las tantas versiones oficiales que caracterizan a nuestra ilustre casta, me dice Leticia. Laura, la perfecta Laurita Feijóo Pearson, está desaparecida, entendés, se mezcló con el hijo único de Daniel Chevieux, el socio de papá en el estudio de abogacía, ¿te acordás? Y parece que se los chuparon a los dos, que aparecieron ahogados, es cierto, pero en el Río de la

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<sup>2</sup> Argentina's absurd war against Britain does not overrule in this thesis the view that Argentina has a historically legitimate claim over the islands, which should be *peacefully* negotiated on the grounds of national and territorial sovereignty.

Plata y no en Punta del Este. Los tiraron desde un avión. Hace cinco años. Desaparecidos y todo eso.

Yo dije no entiendo nada ... Así es la historia, y la verdad es que extraño un poco a Letitia. Hay momentos en que todo el tema me desborda y es como si me viese desde afuera. Toda mi vida, quiero decir. La veo como si fuese la de otra persona ... desde que ví *Fantasía* por primera vez, y lo que veo en momentos así hace que estos veinticinco años de edad no tengan demasiado sentido. Como si le faltaran partes importantes a la historia ... Cuando ocurre esto, nada mejor que ponerse a pensar en *El aprendiz de brujo*. Escobas y baldes fuera de control ante la mirada perpleja de un ratón que acaba de alterar el orden del universo. (1991, pp. 27–29)<sup>3</sup>

The restaurant was my mother's idea ... Once *cured* I'm supposed to fly back to Buenos Aires and start my own business ... and get married to Letitia, the Letitia that my mother—and the rest of the world—know since the day she was born, not the Letitia that only I know, the *true* Letitia.

The true Letitia laughed out loud on the way to the airport and would keep on talking about Laura, dear little Laura, her dead sister. I remember: Letitia shouts in my ear something about Laura not drowning in Punta del Este. That is just one of the many official stories made up by our illustrious caste, she tells me. Laura, the perfect Laura Feijóo Pearson, is disappeared, you see, she got involved with Daniel Chevieux's only son, daddy's partner in the law firm. Remember? And it seems that they were both kidnapped, and that they drowned, true, but in the River Plate and not in Punta del Este. Thrown from a plane. Five years ago. Disappeared and all that, you know?

No, I don't know, I tell her ... But this is how the story goes and truth to tell I miss Letitia a little bit. There are times when I feel overwhelmed and it is as if I was seeing myself from the outside. My whole life I mean. I see it as if it was another person's ... ever since I saw *Fantasia* for the first time ... what I see in moments like this makes these twenty five years seem rather absurd. As if important bits and pieces of the story were missing ... When

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<sup>3</sup>All Spanish quotations are from Rodrigo Fresán's *Historia argentina*, Fabula Tusquets Editores, 1999 [1991]. All translations into English are my own.

this happens, I think of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*—brooms and pails out of control as a mesmerised mouse alters the laws of the universe.

The passage quoted above illustrates how the autobiographical elements of the narrative form a bricolage with intertextual references to *Fantasia* and *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* and with collective “rumours” of the disappeared. Here we see Linda Hutcheon’s three levels of reference: an intra-textual one, reminding us that this is a story, expressed in phrases like “this is how the story/history goes”; an intertextual one, which articulates an allegory of power relations through *Fantasia* and *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*; and an extra-textual one represented through references to the disappeared and the Argentine navy’s “death flights” [whereby tortured detainees were drugged and thrown from planes onto the River Plate while still alive].<sup>4</sup> The narrator’s feelings of confusion and anxiety alert us to Hutcheon’s fifth reference, the hermeneutic, insofar as the narrator’s “cognitive mapping” of those years is characterised by confusion or ignorance of the facts. Both narrator and reader need to fill in the gaps in the story: such as why people disappeared or what their fate was (the missing bits and pieces of the story and the lies manufactured by our illustrious caste). In order to remember the bits and pieces, the silences and the gaps that were officially “deleted” not only during the dictatorship but also during Menem’s process of reconciliation, one must procure some other sources of information: rumours, stories, letters, diaries and other non-official sources that provide some sort of an “external [i.e. non-official] perspective”.

The narrator’s reference to “seeing myself from the outside” also acquires a strong autobiographical overtone if one bears in mind that at the beginning of the 1970s Fresán was kidnapped by two members of the death squad Triple A and exchanged for his mother, an active leftist supporter, who was then illegally detained for weeks. Eventually his mother was released alive but the whole family moved to Venezuela, where they lived from 1974 until 1979. The “external perspective”, thus, also allegorically suggests the view or position

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<sup>4</sup>On 2 March 1995, investigative reporter Horacio Verbitsky revealed information on operations at ESMA that he had gathered in secret interviews with Adolfo Scilingo, a retired naval officer. Scilingo claimed that by his estimate, between 1,500 and 2,000 people had been dropped alive into the Atlantic in weekly death flights for two years. Furthermore, in order to ensure a silence pact among officers, flight duty was rotated among all of them. The “Scilingo effect” spurred other television confessions, most notably one by a former army sergeant, Víctor Ibáñez, who had served at the Campo de Mayo base. He indicated that the army had also used death flights to dispose of some 2,300 persons, and he even named some of the victims. Scilingo’s testimony not only broke the pact of silence among the military, but also brought human rights issues back to the forefront after several years of marginalization during Menem’s presidency. See Thomas C. Wright (2007). *State Terrorism in Latin America: Chile, Argentina, and International Human Rights*. USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, pp. 160–161.



afforded by exile, since living abroad at the time of the dictatorship perhaps meant access to alternative information to that spread by the junta. But in any case, this perspective could not, however, have afforded much of a fully coherent picture of what was going on in Argentina since the reports of missing people and human rights abuse still circulated in fragments, both at home and abroad, and were systematically denied by the junta and gagged in the press.

The passage also illustrates the ambiguity of memory and identity as the narrator points to the fact that there are two Letitias: a “public” or “social” one, known by her family and friends, and a “private” one only known by the narrator. As we follow this duplicity throughout the story, we understand that the “true” Letitia tells the narrator the true story of her sister’s death. This splitting of the subjectivity into the private and the public may also allegorically suggest a split society that knew, in private, but pretended not to know in public, what was happening. In fact, for literary critic Carmen de Mora, the allegorical dimension of the text conveys both political and literary meanings: “El texto es una alegoría donde los personajes no son exactamente de carne y hueso sino más bien vehículos de ideas, opiniones y comportamientos. Esa dimensión alegórica nos permite entender la cocina del ‘Savoy Fair’ a modo de un microcosmos con doble implicación: político-social y poética” [The text is an allegory where the characters are not exactly made of flesh and bone but are rather vehicles for ideas, opinions and forms of behaviour. This allegorical dimension allows us to interpret the kitchen of the ‘Savoy Fair’ as a microcosm with a double meaning: socio-political and poetic] (2003, p. 79). Thus, as Letitia reveals to the narrator that her sister was disappeared together with her boyfriend five years before (the date is probably around 1977, five years before Britain and Argentina went to war which is the main narrative time of the story), the allegorical implication is that both, Letitia’s family, but also the nation as a whole, have lied, since the phrase “just one of the many official stories made up by *our illustrious caste*” [my italics] is ambiguous enough to convey both “our family” and “our kind”, “our people”, “our nation”. In fact, the sense of guilty complicity of the middle and upper classes is a recurrent theme in most of Fresán’s works and it is further explored below in chapter 9 in a discussion of Martín Kohan’s *Dos veces junio* (Two Times June) and *Ciencias morales* (Moral Sciences) in connection to the revolutionary violence of the 1970s.

The implication that during the *Proceso* there were two dimensions to living experience: a public or officially sanctioned one, on the one hand, and a private but more real or “true” one, on the other, suggests a split and paranoid sense of reality, which is also conveyed

in Ricardo Piglia's novels examined here in chapters 6 and 7. Also, if for the narrator "important bits and pieces of the story are missing", then the disappearance of people would, at an allegorical level, also imply the disappearance of a dialectical history where the side of the defeated and the silenced has been repressed through press censorship and terror but also, at times, through a self-imposed silence. At the time of the *Proceso*, it would seem obvious that the narrator would not understand Letitia's revelations since the repression was carried out in relative secrecy and clandestinity. The condition of being disappeared and the lack of evidence meant those who went missing became a mystery to be deciphered (and sometimes fiction, national rock, and the theatre [especially Teatro Abierto—Open Theatre] had a fundamental role in denouncing this in this period).

But, Hutcheon's hermeneutic dimension of reference also requires that the reader interrogate the present conditions of such interpretation. Thus, we are brought to ask what it meant to recreate these stories in 1991, when the book first appeared and democracy was well under way. Perhaps the task deemed to be essential back in 1991 was to recover some or any sense of identity at all, if "these twenty five years [are not to] seem rather absurd". In 1991, in the public social and political sphere, the recuperation of this collective memory and identity that had begun with the *Juicio a las Juntas* was nonetheless stalled through "reconciliation" and the pardon laws [Full Stop law, 12 Dec 1986, and Due Obedience law, 4 June 1987, both under Alfonsín's government, and Menem's pardons, 1989–1990]. For Beatriz Sarlo these events mark Argentina from both a juridical and cultural point of view:

The trial and conviction of those responsible for unleashing the most ferocious repression that Argentina has ever known was a tremendously important moment in the restoration of an ideal of justice, and in the construction of a public memory of the events of the dictatorship. But the abrupt interruption of the hundreds of trials and, above all, the pardon of military officers who had been convicted and were in jail, placed the subject of human rights violations in a past that Menem wanted to put behind him. He thus initiated an operation of "forgetting" which benefited the military. On the one hand, this closure imposed by the government—which broke with any idea of justice—helped solve the problem of instability in military-state relations. But, on the other, it dulled the memory of what had occurred in the last decade. The military pardon closed a subject that is not only juridical or political, but that is decisively moral and cultural. (Sarlo 1994, p. 33)

This suggests that fiction emerges here with a double status: firstly, as a “correction” or “reworking” of a previously erased collective memory (no matter how precarious or fragmented) and secondly, as a material (textual) trace of what was erased, forgotten or deleted from official discourse but keeps coming back as so many forms of the repressed (dealt with through farce or allegory).

In the following section, I turn from the analysis of memory in historical terms, to an analysis of memory in space. I review the changes that neoliberalism carved in the geographical landscape of Buenos Aires and how these transformations began to be incorporated and represented in postdictatorial fiction.

### 4.3 Urban space and neoliberalism

From another angle, Fresán’s *Argentine History* also comments upon the spatial or geographical changes brought about by multinational capital. In the course of the 1990s, neoliberalism penetrated Latin America right across the political spectrum. The neoliberal programme was originally implemented by the far right in Pinochet’s Chile. It found other right-wing adepts—such as Alberto Fujimori in Peru—but also absorbed forces that had historically been associated with nationalism: the PRI [Institutional Revolutionary party] in Mexico; Peronism in Argentina under Carlos Menem; and in Bolivia, the Nationalist Revolutionary Movement. After this, neoliberalism moved on to social democracy, gaining the adherence of the Chilean Socialist Party, Venezuela’s Acción Democrática, and the Brazilian Social-Democratic Party. It became a hegemonic system across almost the entire territory of Latin America. However, by the 2000s, the neoliberal model brought about by Clinton’s NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) failed to consolidate the social forces necessary for its stabilization, resulting in the early onset of crises that would check its course. The three largest Latin American economies that were its main laboratory in the 1990s became towards the end of the decade the theatre for its most dramatic crises: Mexico in 1994, Brazil in 1999 and Argentina in 2002; the programme crumbled in all three without delivering on its promises. The ravages of hyper-inflation were checked, but this was only achieved at tremendous cost. For a decade or more, economic development was paralysed, the concentration of wealth grew greater than ever before, public deficits spiralled and the mass of the population had their rights expropriated, most notably in the domain of employment and labour relations. On top of this, national debt expanded exponentially and regional economies became highly vulnerable, helplessly exposed to attack

from speculators, as these three countries each discovered to their cost.

In socio-geographical terms, the two most often cited urban pathologies inherited from this brutal neoliberalism have been an atomizing or fragmented pluralism and forms of survivalist alienation (Buchanan 1997), best exemplified in the emergence of ghettos (including upper middle-class private real estates developments or “countries” as they are called in Argentina) and shanty towns alongside massive shopping malls and entertainment “cities” (Filc 2003). From this perspective, the quick changes that took place during the transition to the neoliberal Market are reflected in the way urban space is portrayed in some of the short stories of *Historia argentina*. The city of Buenos Aires, in particular, becomes charged and responsive first to the events that led to the military coup and then to the progressive introduction of a deregulated market. Thus, in the following extract from another story in the book, “La formación científica” [henceforth The Scientific Formation], Buenos Aires becomes an uncanny place, the site of change and confusion:

Aeropuertos y hospitales, Arrivals & Departures, pacientes y viajeros ... Su inevitable condición de ambientes controlados, asepsia y frío impersonal. Gente en suspenso para la que el mundo exterior es, apenas, otro planeta ... no entiendo lo que ahora ocurre en el aeroparque. Porque algo ocurre. Me aferro a mi maletín y floto en un mar surcado por hombres de uniforme y gente civil que los insulta.

– Estos milicos nos están tratando como perros. ¿No vamos a resistir? ¿Vamos a soportar mansamente esta humillación?—grita un hombre joven con una mochila en la espalda.

– ¡Viva la democracia! ¡Viva la patria!—exige una mujer embarazada.

Varias azafatas feas lloran y uno de los uniformados se para sobre los mostradores y dispara al aire a la vez que aúlla proclamas incomprensibles, palabras que son sólo abstracciones ... La gente se arroja contra el militar, lo reducen no sin esfuerzo ... En la salida un grupo comando se trepa a una camioneta que arranca en contramano y embiste a varios vehículos. Finalmente consigo subir a un taxi. Le pregunto qué es lo que está pasando al conductor pero no me escucha. Tiene la radio a todo volumen y no para de hacer girar el dial ... frenamos delante de la verja de la casa de mi madre ... camino por el sendero arbolado. Pero los árboles de lo que fue mi casa no alcanzan para

ocultar del todo la furia de neón de un shopping center nuevo en la vereda de enfrente. (1991, pp. 66–73)

Airports and hospitals, Arrivals & Departures, patients and travellers . . . With their inevitable condition of controlled environments, asepsis and impersonal coldness. People suspended for whom the outside world is almost another planet . . . I don't understand what is happening now at the airport. Because something's the matter. I grab my suitcase and wade down a sea of uniformed men and outraged civilians insulting them.

– The military are treating us like dogs. Aren't we going to resist? Are we going to put up meekly with this humiliation?—yells a young man with a rucksack.

– Long live democracy! Long live the homeland!—pleads a pregnant woman.

Some awful air-stewardesses cry and one of the uniformed men standing on top of the check-in desk fires into the air whilst loudly clamoring some incomprehensible words . . . People hurl themselves at the military and fight him down . . . On the way out, a commando unit gets on a van and drives against the traffic charging against several cars on its way. Eventually, I manage to get into a taxi. I ask the driver what's going on, but he can't hear me. The radio is full up and he keeps spinning the dial . . . We stop in front of my mother's house . . . I make my way down the tree-lined path to the house. But the trees of my childhood home fail now to tower over the neon fury of a new shopping mall opposite the house.

In the story, the narrator is an exiled scientist who has returned to Buenos Aires to wait at his dying mother's bedside. The violent events he witnesses at the airport suggest a montage of several historical events of which the Ezeiza airport is a key geographical reference. Although Ezeiza is usually associated with Perón's return and the massacre that took place at the airport, we cannot be sure that the main event at the airport is a reference to this. The civilians are turning on the military (which they wouldn't have done in 1973), who are on the defensive. And there's a World Cup on and there are elections. There is also a returned subversive (Sweater Peruano) who thinks it's not worth whipping up revolutionary fervour ten years on from his exile. There's also the time expressed as "9.34" through what seems to be a digital watch, which would place the narrative time in the mid-1980s. It could be that historical moments are deliberately confused, but 1982 could be one of the main times guiding the story line. This would include references to the

defeat in Malvinas (14 June 1982, which may also explain the civilians turning on military) plus the defeat by Belgium in the World Cup on 13 June 1982. However, not everything is explained by that date: there will be no elections until 1983, for example, and the sense of political bewilderment or denial the narrator has suggests that he's taken shelter from the worst of the country's politics (*the guerra sucia* [the dirty war]).

In addition to these rather chaotic temporal and spatial coordinates, a general climate of violence is conveyed in the passage through a geographical sense of confusion accentuated through the narrator's awareness of changes in the urban landscape and in people's behaviour. The reference to the "neon fury" of the shopping mall in the passage above, for example, works as a geographical *anticipation* of what is to come in Buenos Aires with the advent of multinational capitalism. Moreover, the detail of the shopping mall would move the time of the story fast forward to 1987, the year when Soleil Factory, the first mall in Argentina, opened. Thus, this calculated dislocation of space and time operates as a symptomatic anticipation of the beginnings of multinational capitalism and global modernity with its consumerism, fragmentation and shopping mall culture. The novel thus calls here for a particularly astute and informed "cognitive mapping", as it requires an alert reader capable of drawing the connections between the social and military violence of the early 1980s and the changes in urban landscape with the advent of mall consumerism in the late 1980s and early 1990s (along with the time montage).

The cold asepsis of the airport also points to a dehumanization of the landscape as relationships become impersonal and the environment alienating. Thus, the description of the airport also represents the sense of terror and isolation felt in the "controlled environment" of the repression years. The incorporation of airports, malls and highways into the cityscape of the narrative becomes inseparable from the process of deterritorialization of global modernity. The places of global modernity such as the highway, the airport and the shopping mall add an element of the uncanny or of the "phantasmagoric" to the changing local cityscape "as the comforting, familiar character of the cultural setting we routinely move amongst conceals the influences of distant social forces and processes" (Giddens 1990, p. 141), whilst the disjointed or out of time reference to the shopping mall in the story reveals how (state) violence was put to the service of international capital interests. It is precisely this reconfiguration of the city on the basis of exclusion and inequality that puts pressure on notions of national identity. The perception of change and of deterritorialised locales is thus incorporated by Fresán as something inescapable in postmodern life but also as reflecting on the violence brought on by these social and political changes.

Further ensembles of time and space can be read in the last story of *Argentine History*, “La vocación literaria” (The Literary Vocation), where the violence of the 1970s is mixed with an autobiographical narrative. The story is structured on the basis of interweaving sequences or assemblages that interlace the narrator’s first person biographical sequences in adult life with his third person but nonetheless biographical childhood narration. [Here we see the external perspective again, as the third person narrative voice is used to recount what is in fact a first person autobiographical narrative]. The mixture at the level of narrative voice and point of view is not random as it allows Fresán to juxtapose the private trauma of the individual with the allegorical account of the nation’s collective trauma. The story’s first sequence introduces an experienced writer [a parody of Fresán himself since we must remember this was his first book] addressing an audience of students, in “The Foundation”, in the imaginary town of Sad Songs on the outskirts of Iowa, where he teaches creative writing. (The geographical reference to the creative writing course in Iowa is, of course, not random since it was here that the *McOndo* project was born as I discuss in the next chapter).

[...] aquí, en mi clase en la Fundación ..., donde me miran y me leen y me preguntan cómo es que decidí ser un escritor allá lejos y hace tiempo, en un país que ya no existe ... Tiempos en los cuales podía ocurrir cualquier cosa, cosas espantosas ... El escritor tenía en aquel entonces una dura competencia. El escritor competía contra la realidad, contra las terribles tramas propuestas por lo cotidiano. Y a nadie le importaban demasiado nuestros problemas, claro. Me acuerdo; fue por aquel entonces que me compré una edición especial de la revista de historietas *Superman* ... Me acuerdo; yo tenía diez años, era 1975, y el repentino sinsentido de una historieta no me impresionaba demasiado. Lo de antes: imposible competir con lo que pasaba en el mundo real o, si se prefiere, en mi hoy inexistente país de origen.

Uno a menudo descubre—¿dónde leí eso?—que los escritores son aquellas personas que durante su infancia aprenden, en tiempos terribles, a refugiarse en sus propias fantasías o en la acción; en la voz de algún piadoso narrador, en lugar de las voces de los seres reales que lo rodean. (1991, pp. 238–239)

[...] here, in my class at the Foundation ... where my books are read and I am observed and asked why I decided to become a writer far and long ago, in a country that doesn’t exist anymore ... Long ago when anything could

happen, horrible things ... A writer had, in those days, tough competition. He competed with reality, with the terrible plots devised day by day. And of course no one cared too much about our problems. I remember; it was around then that I bought a special edition of the *Superman* comic book ... I remember I was ten years old; it was 1975, and I wasn't too impressed by the absurdities of the comic. Same as before: it could never compete with what happened in the real world, or, if you prefer, in my now nonexistent country.

It has been said—where did I read that?—that writers are people who learn in their childhood, especially when they have been through terrible times, to shelter themselves in their own fantasies or in an action-packed adventure; or in the voice of some merciful narrator, rather than in the voices of the real people around them.

Some of Fresán's main autobiographical themes are introduced in this fragment: 1975, the year when his family was forced to go into exile; the trauma of erasure or non-existence and the need to find a refuge from reality by escaping into fiction, which then becomes, in Fresán's and in the protagonist's case, a literary vocation. These extra-textual references to his biography are then mixed with intertextual pop cultural references to the comic book *Superman*, and the need to make art out of the unspeakable horror, which here works as a sort of pop Freudian "talking cure" through fiction. The irony of the technique in this fragment is that Fresán is telling a true autobiographical anecdote through the fictionalised voice of the professor. Here we see Hutcheon's notion of multiple and overdetermined systems of reference since the narrative juxtaposes three levels of understanding in the same story: the level of the real world/life of Fresán (in autobiographical register), a second fictional level where the autobiographical is narrated in the first person through the professor/narrator (purely textual or fictional), and a third level, more properly metafictional, in which the fictional narrator masks his own autobiographical story by telling it as if it had happened to someone else (the external perspective). These three levels (real/fictional/metafictional) convey a somewhat schizophrenic montage of multiple voices and subject positions (shifting from first person to third person) that conveys a "migratory" attitude in the narrative voice.

This would seem to have interesting implications for the way individual and collective trauma are usually incorporated into the public sphere. According to Mark Seltzer, the fictional repetitions of scenes of violence may be read as a relocation in the public sphere of the shared and reproducible spectacles of pathological public violence (1997, p. 4). Thus,



for Seltzer, “the pathological public sphere is everywhere crossed by the vague and shifting lines between the singularity and privacy of the subject, on the one side, and collective forms of representation, exhibition, and witnessing, on the other. Along these lines, the trauma has surfaced as a sort of crossing-point of the psycho-social” (1997). Seltzer’s notion of an associative/dissociative tension between the individual subject and the public sphere in trauma thus presents an interesting perspective from which to understand Fresán’s contradictions: while, on the one hand, he obsessively returns to the theme of the nation, the collective tragedy, the memory and the personal pain of the repression years; at the same time, and contradictorily, he pulls his narratives in the opposite direction, denying that he cares about his country or a national project or identity (through farce), or else attempting to actually move away and leave it behind, or “delete” it from memory.

The following sequence can be used to demonstrate this. Here as two absurd but nonetheless historically plausible characters [nicknamed in the story Loose Wire and Shiny Black Shoe] kidnap a child (Fresán himself), and the interface between an individual and a social dimension of trauma emerges more clearly:

- ¿Dónde está tu mamá, nene?—preguntó Cable Pelado . . .
- No sé—contestó el hijo que quería ser escritor cuando fuera grande. . .
- “Buenas noticias, nene. Te venís con nosotros a dar una vueltita. ¿Necesitás llevar algo?”

Buena pregunta. El hijo que quería ser escritor cuando fuera grande corrió a su habitación, buscó y encontró el cuaderno *Rivadavia* donde estaba reunida toda su obra literaria hasta esa fecha, agarró una lapicera *Parker* modelo escolar y el resto es historia.

Después de todo, quizás un escritor no sea más que un producto de las circunstancias. Un mecanismo de defensa con nombre y apellido. Entonces Cable Pelado, Mocasín y el hijo que quería ser escritor cuando fuera grande se fueron a dar una vueltita. [. . .]

El hijo que cuando fuera grande quería ser escritor no tenía la menor idea acerca del paradero de su madre y jamás había visto un partido de fútbol en su vida . . .

- ¡No! No puede ser que nunca hayas ido a la cancha de Boca—se retorció las manos Mocasín – Estás mintiendo, enano. [. . .]

– No te imaginás lo que es eso, pibe. Es un espectáculo único en el mundo. Es, cómo te explico, es... , es...

– Es un acontecimiento histórico—concluyó Cable Pelado... Y, aunque les parezca improbable, estas dos almas sensibles y deportivas acabaron con la vida de, aproximadamente, unas trescientas personas a lo largo de un período de cinco años. Los métodos utilizados para llevar a cabo semejante acontecimiento histórico eran bastante variados pero por lo general implicaban el uso de la energía eléctrica—de ahí el apodo Cable Pelado—sobre diferentes zonas del cuerpo humano y la posterior precipitación al vacío del cuerpo en cuestión desde aviones especialmente destinados a este fin.

Cable Pelado y Mocasín fueron “dados de baja” cuando, sin previa consulta, se extralimitaron en sus funciones con la persona de una señorita llamada Laura Feijóo Pearson, hija dilecta de la alta sociedad local y compañera del famoso subversivo Lucas Chevieux [...]. (Fresán 1991, pp. 244–250)

“Where is your mother, kid?” asked Loose Wire...

“I don’t know” answered the child who wanted to be a writer when he grew up...

“Here’s the news, kid: you are coming with us for a little ride. Need to take anything?”

Good question. The child who wanted to be a writer when he grew up ran to his room, took his *Rivadavia* school notebook where all his literary work to date had been written down, grabbed his school Parker pen and then the rest is history. After all, maybe, a writer is little more than a product of the circumstances. A defence mechanism with a first and last name. And so, Loose Wire, Shiny Black Shoe and the child who wanted to be a writer went out for a little ride.

[...]

The child that wanted to be a writer when he grew up did not have the slightest idea about the whereabouts of his mother and he had never seen a football match in his life...

“No! I can’t believe you’ve never been to Boca Juniors stadium” wriggled Shiny Black Shoe. “You are lying, dwarf.” [...]

“You can’t imagine what it is like, kid. It’s a unique show in the world. It’s ... how can I put it... it’s... it’s...”

“It’s a historical event” concluded Loose Wire ... And, incredible as it may sound, these two sensitive and sporting souls crushed the lives of about three hundred people within five years. The methods used to accomplish such a historical event were varied enough but in general they involved the use of the electric pod on bits and pieces of the human body and hurling bodies from planes, which were of course specially flown only for this purpose.

Loose Wire and Shiny Black Shoe were eventually “discharged” when, without permission, they overstepped the mark with the body of Laura Feijóo Pearson, a socialite and the partner of the famous subversive Lucas Chevieux ... (250)

As this passage shows, the notion of trauma (as lived by the little child) has come to function, as Seltzer puts it, “as a switch point between individual and collective, private and public orders of things” (1997, p. 5). Thus, from the scene in the car and the conversation between the child and the Triple A kidnappers, the narrative moves on to a generalisation of experience in the last two paragraphs where the historical truth of the three hundred tortured and disappeared intercepts the narrative as an “extra-textual” piece of information the narrator may have learned later on in life when he was an adult. Extra-textual facts (both autobiographical and known from the historical chronicle) and a purely intratextual level of fiction (the fact that this is a story told by the Professor at the Fundación) mix in this interface between the names of characters (Laura Feijóo Pearson and Lucas Chevieux; Loose Wire and Shiny Black Shoe, the kid) and the historical truth of illegal detentions, brutal torture and the death flights plus Fresán’s own kidnapping in 1974. But, at the same time that these events are reconstructed and handed down through fiction, in the final fragment of the story, as we encounter the narrator in the first person, trauma leads to a destructive rejection of national history and identity:

Me gustaba observar los rostros en la pantalla de mi computadora. Superponerlos en busca de algún patrón, de algún rasgo definitivo que explique el por qué todos ellos habían llegado—desde los bordes más irreconciliables del planeta—a un lugar del que, paradójicamente, todos querían irse. Primero los rostros anónimos. Las multitudes descendiendo de barcos tan inmensos y sagrados como las más prestigiosas catedrales. Procesiones ilusionadas con la idea de haber llegado para escribir la historia de un país en blanco ... Todas esas historias

... Por eso los releo y los descarto. Viejas historias y viejos conocidos ... Los corrijo y tal vez los mejore ... entonces apreté Delete y eso es todo ... Argentina, leí. Delete, obedeció la tecla. La vi desaparecer ante mis ojos cansados ... Nada más. *End of file*. Fin de la transmisión. Suspiré aliviado, apagué todas las máquinas y me dormí tranquilo y cobarde y feliz. (1991, pp. 267–272)

I enjoyed watching their faces in the screen of my computer. To juxtapose them to seek a pattern, some definitive feature that would explain why they had all come—from the remotest corners of the planet—to a place, from where, paradoxically, they all now wanted to leave. First the anonymous faces. Multitudes descending from vast sacred ships like the most prestigious cathedrals. Processions excited with the idea that they had come to write the history of a country from scratch ... All those stories ... That is why I read and re read them and then I get rid of them. Old stories and old friends ... I edit them and maybe even make them better ... but then I press Delete and that's it ... Argentina, I read. Delete, the key obeyed. I saw it disappear in front of my tired eyes ... That's all. *End of file*. End of transmission. I sighed with relief, I switched off the computer, and fell asleep peacefully and like a coward but happy.

The relief found in destructive forgetting as the narrator deletes the computer file of his novel provides temporary relief from trauma but increases the sense of guilt at erasing a social truth always already intuitively known and collectively shared. This need to write and at the same time erase what has happened articulates in fiction the always unavoidable return of the repressed. Writing and deleting history at will works well as an analogy for deleting the real, material, living memory of the nation commanded by Presidential decree through the Full Stop and Due Obedience Laws and the general state of silence and impunity in the press. To a certain extent, the fragmentation of Fresán's stories in 1991 can be traced back to the many conflicting narratives and counter-narratives that began to circulate in the media after 1982 and with the return to democracy. It is the very possibility of reconstructing a fuller history, with narratives and counter-narratives that is at stake and that is also symptomatic of the generation who grew up during the 1970s and 1980s in Argentina.

The voice and narrative montage of this story, then, fulfills a very important function: to allow alternative versions of history to emerge in between the pieces and fragments and

through the interstices of the story. And this is, perhaps, the closest that fragmentation and discontinuity can get to an effectively politicised ethical postmodernism. Secondly, for the storyteller of multiple (hi)stories (here told in an interface of autobiographical and fictional narratives), it is that “slow piling one of top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings” (Benjamin 1999, p. 92). That is, multiplicity and the simultaneity of retellings (from different angles, narrative voices, and points of view) prevents the narrative from flowing into only *one* denouement, *one* ending, *one* (hi)story. The implication being that history is complex and many-sided and is, by that token, alterable or open to change.

Fresán’s later narratives, however, increasingly reject and deny this collective dimension of trauma and progressively escape into a more narrowly understood textual and apolitical cosmopolitanism. And I explore this development in the following chapter.

## Trauma, nomadism and global narratives—“delete” Argentina

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses Fresán’s progressive shift from the narratives of national history and identity of *Historia argentina* to more globalized forms of hybrid identity. I explore how this developed through his early involvement with the *McOndo* literary project and became expressed in his later narratives through an increasingly “hollow” cosmopolitanism and a more purely textual/intertextual notion of fiction. I view Fresán’s narratives as examples of postdictatorial fictions which are incapable of overcoming trauma and defeat and which eventually escape into an anti-nationalist or blandly-understood cosmopolitan stance. In this sense, then, Fresán’s later fictions would provide the least useful or fertile narrative resources for a pedagogic reconstruction of a fuller national history and identity except as symptoms of what globalization has come to mean in terms of narratives of national identity.

### 5.2 From national histories to McOndo

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how Fresán’s *Historia argentina* fused moments of an absurd and bleak sense of humour with the allegorical reworking of pop and mass media culture references, which in turn, were informed by the historical chronicle and autobiographical details. The result was a rethinking of national history from multiple perspectives and subject positions and an opening of the private to the public sphere through trauma which still befitted postdictatorial narratives. In this chapter, on the other hand, I focus on Fresán’s later works as his narrative becomes increasingly deterritorialized (and globalized) and the aesthetic of memory and defeat gives way to a more cosmopolitan

but at the same time less political mode of writing no longer exclusively concerned with national history and identity. This shift coincided, to a certain extent, with the emergence of *McOndo* (1996), a literary anthology of short stories compiled by Chileans Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez, who advocated incorporating into literature elements of North and Latin American popular and mass culture but without falling into “best-sellerism” and writing a kind of fiction that was explicitly removed from the *boom*’s magic-realist aesthetic.

*McOndo* was not the first project of its kind, since, in the late 1960s, several urban and popular culture representations had made very impressive appearances in Latin American literature with the Mexican movement called “La Onda” (José Agustín and Gustavo Sainz) and the experimental techniques displayed in famous novels by renowned writers like Manuel Puig, Mario Vargas Llosa, or Julio Cortázar. These novels experimented with a discursive montage of high/low culture whilst incorporating and thematising the impact of radio and film in the cultural imaginaries of Latin Americans. However, and despite the recognition that these novels gained at the time, it was the magical realism practised during the 1960s and 1970s by the *boom* writers (García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa and Alejo Carpentier among others) that became canonised during the 1970s by the United States and European academics as the representative paradigm of Latin American literature.

In the 1990s, the Latin American writers who participated in *McOndo* rejected magical realism as a commercial stereotype *for export* and chose instead to set their stories in urban cityscapes that incorporated the mass-mediated codes and pop references whilst retaining a certain degree of technical difficulty. The rejection of the magical realist aesthetic dates back to 1994, when, while attending an International Writer’s Workshop at the University of Iowa, Alberto Fuguet submitted a short-story to the *Iowa Review*. The short-story was rejected by the editor on the grounds that “it wasn’t Latin American enough”, that is to say, it did not contain any fantastical or magical realist elements in it that made it publishable in the United States and so, as the editor later remarked, “the story could easily have taken place right here, in [North] America” (Fuguet 1997). According to Fuguet, the *latino* topics the publishers expected were either stories about the underdeveloped or the exotic, sagas of suffering farm labourers or magic realist worlds. In 1996, Fuguet decided to publish *McOndo*, inviting young writers from Latin America and Spain to contribute their short stories. Most of these writers had started their literary careers in the 1990s, thereby suggesting some sort of a generational identity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *McOndo* included the stories of Juan Forn, Rodrigo Fresán and Martín Rejtman, from Argentina;

As the introductory manifesto in the anthology explained, “McOndo” was intended to connote the other Latin America full of McDonald’s, Macintosh computers and condominiums, in direct opposition to the exotic mysticism of García Márquez’s magical place Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Their short-stories were a response not only to a world where literature had lost its status as a privileged means of expression, but also where the transnational cultural crossings that characterised the turn of the twenty-first century became thematised in the plots themselves. In fact, Fuguet’s own narrative contribution to *McOndo*, “Verdad or Consecuencia”, is characterized by a United States/Tex-Mex/Chilean/Argentine hybridity, with constant cross-references to the respective popular cultures of those nations. The prologue to the book also outlines the cultural profile of the McOndian writer: it is a young Latin American writer who rejects magical realism as a literary mode which has served to “exoticise” representations of Latin America. The continent the McOndian writer sees, especially since the beginning of the 1990s, is a Latin America of shopping malls, cable television, suburbs and pollution which is the exact opposite of García Márquez’s idyllic country.

The representations of the new subjectivities these writers explore are no doubt tied to the historic moment of cultural and economic globalization, to the erosion of the frontiers of the nation-state and a local sense of identity crossed by transnational networks of communication that García Canclini (1995, 1999) has persistently identified as the specific reality of many Latin American countries today. But the *McOndo* anthology also came to function as a criticism of the rules of international market capitalism which prescribed the sort of cultural difference of Latin America to be consumed abroad. As Fuguet argues:

In the past, Latin American writers felt compelled to leave their home countries to be able to write about them. Not only were they seeking political freedom, but cultural nutrition. As expatriates they idealised their countries to the point that they created a world that never really existed. I feel very comfortable at my desk in Santiago, writing about the world around me. A world that comes to me through television, radio, the Internet and movies, which I send back through my fiction. My Latin American fiction. (1997)

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Santiago Gamboa, from Colombia; Rodrigo Soto, from Costa Rica; Edmundo Paz Soldán, from Bolivia; Leonardo Valencia, from Ecuador; the Spanish writers Ray Loriga, José Ángel Mañas and Martín Casariego; the Mexicans Jordi Soler, Naief Yehja and David Toscana; Peruvian Jaime Bayley and the Uruguayan Gustavo Escanlar. The Argentine stories were: Juan Forn’s “El vértigo horizontal”, Rodrigo Fresán’s “Señales captadas en el corazón de una fiesta”, and Martín Rejtman’s “Mi estado físico”.



Although Fuguet's statement clearly generalises and oversimplifies the Latin American fiction of the *boom* period (from the late 1950s to the early 1970s), his views may be recontextualised in the frame of the debates going on in anthropology and sociology in Latin America since the 1950s. Those debates, as García Canclini has pointed out in his essay "Los Estudios Culturales de los 80 a los 90: Perspectivas Antropológicas y Sociológicas en América Latina" [Cultural Studies from the 1980s to the 1990s: Anthropological and Sociological Perspectives in Latin America] (1991), have revolved around the effects of modernity in the continent with cultural anthropologists, on the one hand, who in extreme cases, have studied Latin America from the perspective of a romantic nativism intent on preserving its pre-modern traditions, and sociologists and media experts on the other, who have critiqued Latin American modernity as somehow belated, and only narrowly achieved in comparison to the industrialised models of Western European countries and of the United States. Whereas the first group would celebrate García Márquez's representation of Macondo as representative of the authentic pre-modern Latin American spirit, the second group would see the *McOndo* writers as selling out to or simply imitating North American pop culture. But neither of these extreme positions is satisfactory when trying to describe and explain Latin American cultural hybridity. Fuguet suggests that the *boom* writers "created a world that never really existed", but Latin America may be better understood by avoiding such extreme Manichean positions. As García Canclini argues:

In a continent where 70% of the population lives in cities, made up mostly by recent migrants ... and where capitalist economic relations, electronic culture and sometimes tourism are common experiences for those who still live in rural areas, the traditional and the modern can no longer be conceived as independent entities. If both hegemonic and folk cultures are now hybrid cultures, if, in this sense, it is undeniable that we live in a postmodern era, a time of *bricolage* where diverse cultures, previously apart, now cross and intermingle, the task of the scholar is understanding why, in Latin America, we are this mixture of heterogeneous memories and truncated innovations. (1991, p. 49, my translation)

For García Canclini, then, any study of culture in Latin America from the 1980s onwards requires awareness of a broader social context and of frontier or transnational cultural exchanges that cannot be reduced to the old dualisms local/foreign, popular/high culture. The formation of these new hybrid identities in Latin America have also resulted from

the neoliberal policies that swept the continent in the 1980s and 1990s, with transnational corporations owning most of the media, so that indeed, although it is true to say that “the world comes to [us] through television, radio, the Internet and movies” as Fuguet puts it, one still wonders which world, and whether this does not implicitly amount to a wholesale “Americanization” of culture and to the reproduction of clichéd and exoticised versions of anything not fitting this pattern. This has also meant that the debates in social and anthropological studies on globalization, identity politics, hybridization and deterritorialization have found symptomatic expression in artistic works set in fluid dialogue with these issues and expressed aesthetically through a discursive and cultural *bricolage*.

It is puzzling, though, that despite his diatribe against the US academia’s notions of the Latin American canon and the market prescription of the *latino* difference, Fuguet feels he is not involved in any political agenda. In effect, he has stated that “in a continent that was once ultra-politicised, young, *apolitical* writers like myself are now writing without an overt agenda about their experiences” (1997, italics mine). Although the statement strikes one as rather naïve, his perception of politics is no doubt far removed from the more explicit agendas of other Latin American times like the Argentine 1880s generation when the political project of the modern nation-state was at stake, or the militant literature of Cortázar in the 1960s and 1970s when the utopian and revolutionary projects of the left took centre-stage. Thus, although Fuguet is aware of an explicit distance from these two great political moments of Latin American political history (the formation of a strong national identity through state capitalism and the revolutionary utopias of the 1960s), his book nevertheless engages with the debates on the politics of identity and globalization that theorists like John Tomlinson (1999, 2003) and García Canclini (1995, 1999) have identified are at the core of cultural studies and political sociology today. In fact, Fuguet himself has stated that globalization and its impact on the individual are a fundamental part of his literary agenda:

I feel the great literary theme of Latin American identity (who are we?) must now take a back seat to the theme of personal identity (Who am I?). The McOndo writers . . . base their stories on individual lives, instead of collective epics. This new genre may be one of the byproducts of a free market economy and the privatization craze that has swept South America . . . I don’t deny that there exists a colourful, exotic aspect to Latin America, but in my opinion, life on this continent is far too complex to be so simply categorised. It is an injustice to reduce the essence of Latin America to men in *ponchos* and *sombreros*, gun-

toting drug lords and sensual salsa-swinging *señoritas*. (1997)

In an interview with Rodrigo Fresán, Fuguet reiterated his supposedly apolitical approach to literature: “Si bien no creo que mi bandera sea McOndo ... sí comulgo con algunas de sus ideas básicas: la globalización como un hecho, la bastardización, el agotamiento del folklorismo y del realismo mágico, la posibilidad de no estar comprometido, etc.” [Although I don’t believe McOndo is my flag, I do agree with some of its basic ideas: globalization as an inescapable fact, mongrelization, the exhaustion of folklorism and of magical realism, the possibility of not being politically committed, etc.].<sup>2</sup> No doubt globalization is differently experienced and imagined according to the reality one lives as García Canclini suggests, since it is also true that words like “free market economy” and “the privatization craze” are far from being politically innocent as was discussed in chapter 3. In fact, the central social and political issue today, for García Canclini, is not either to defend a local/national identity (Is there *one*?) or else to become globalised but to find ways of understanding heterogeneity, difference and inequality when the old local certainties have lost their prominent role, stereotypes have broken down, and people have access to other cultural imaginaries (1999, p. 30). Still, we might say that this is not enough. For we must also ask where such cultural heterogeneity leads. Does it lead us only to “political correctness” and multicultural tolerance, or does it lead us to more democratic forms of governance where the social and political demands of all are heard and given voice to? How, in other words, does multicultural heterogeneity translate into social justice and fairer societies? And how can literary and cultural texts as forms of critique instruct us in this?

For Andreas Huyssen, although it is true that the stable links between national traditions (and their historical pasts) and their geographic and political groundings have become weaker due to the processes of cultural globalization, those links have not been completely written over, erased or forgotten. On the contrary, they have been renegotiated in the clash between globalizing forces and new productions and practices of local cultures (Huyssen 2003, p. 4). The affirmation of the local, therefore, is not an obstacle to or a denial of the global but it poses the question of what it means to enter globalization in different ways than through the mere “Macdonaldization” of the world. There are, as Canclini argues, many other intermediary positions between McDonald’s and García Márquez’s Macondo (1999, pp. 51–52).

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<sup>2</sup>From Rodrigo Fresán (2002). “Alberto Fuguet: Fuguet The Movie”. Interview with Alberto Fuguet. In: *Revista Paula* (June 2002). URL: <http://www.lettras5.com/af161204.htm> (visited on 15/06/2006).

In Argentina, at least, from the 1980s onwards the debate has largely revolved around the convergence of a narrowly understood “entertainment” or celebrity culture with the interests of large media corporations and thus the main issue is whether to produce and consume cultural goods which are more critical and politically committed or light, mass-produced and profitable entertainment as García Canclini argues in *La Globalización Imaginada* (1999, p. 196). This view is shared by Andreas Huyssen who also insists on a fundamental difference between a type of commodified cultural memory that is produced and marketed for “a media and consumer society that increasingly voids temporality and collapses space” (2003, p. 4), and those which use memory as an essential way to re-imagine the future and to regain a strong temporal and spatial grounding of life and the imagination. For Canclini, the most interesting cultural goods today are those that foreground the tensions between economic globalization and the politics of interculturality and those initiatives that seek to discuss, in culture, the dramas of *real* individuals such as migrants and those who live at the margins of global development (including confrontations between different ethnic communities, religious groups, sexual preferences and gender) (1999, pp. 34–35).

Again, Canclini’s notion of the dramas of real individuals appears more politically and socially committed to the fate of collectives than Fuguet’s notion of the theme of personal identity. The unemployed workers’ social movements of Argentina are a good example of this. They are not the 1960s/70s proletariat but nor are they individuals divorced of epic political struggles. This recalls in fact, Harvey’s warning that “the first lesson we must learn is that if it looks like class struggle and acts like class struggle then we have to name it for what it is” (2006, p. 65). That is, shifting the burden of the discussion to the individual does not do away with collectively-shared problems, even if we now know perfectly well that class struggle here does not mean a simple nostalgic conception of the proletariat as the primary agent of social transformation, but social movements in this or that specific local/regional/national situation. If anything, Fuguet’s narrowly-construed individual needs to become reconfigured and adapted to the current neoliberal condition since it is only from a comfortable upper-middle class position that individuals have individual choice. The jobless, the poor, the exploited, and the indigenous communities who fight for their land are far from being individuals without commonly shared epic struggles.

But we must agree with Fuguet that Latin America is much more than men with *ponchos*. Like Fuguet and the other writers of the *McOndo* group, Fresán’s *Historia argentina*

is quite far removed from any magical realist or Macondian stereotypical representation of Latin America as underdeveloped, rural or exotic. This is not surprising in view of the Argentine preference for fantasy and modernist surrealism rather than magical realism and for the avant-garde experimental writing of writers like Borges, Arlt, Cortázar, Puig, Piglia and Saer. Nonetheless, instead of turning to fantasy or allegory, some of the books that Fresán wrote after *Historia argentina*, such as *Esperanto* (1995) and *La velocidad de las cosas* (1998) (The Speed of Things), became increasingly impossible to categorize in terms of genre, and increasingly deterritorialized as the usually first person narrators were located less and less in the urban settings of Buenos Aires than in other, non-specified, “non-places” (Augé 1995) of global modernity. Whereas in *Historia argentina* the stories were spun from the extra-textual remnants of past historical catastrophes, in the later books the concern is less with those specific remnants of history and more with writing and the *theme* of memory disembodied of any actual or real experience. We are presented in these later novels with history as pastiche or nostalgia, as Jameson would say (1991*b*). Thus, what before was the trace or fragment of a concrete autobiographical or extra-textual memory, now becomes a self-reflexive, purely intertextual pseudo-philosophical rumination on the nature of memory itself as an *abstract* theme. This is as close to the “international style” in literature as can be imagined. Although Argentine identity is still an important theme in the books that follow *Historia argentina*, this theme is explored in an increasingly transnational world where national identity becomes more and more a matter of stereotypes and clichés devoid of a real sense of history/place.

In the following section, then, Fresán’s two latest novels to date are explored in order to highlight how this shift from a firmly grounded national representation migrates to a clichéd transnational representation more typical of a globalised “textual” poetics.

### 5.3 The DNA of a globalised writer

Fresán’s latest two novels, *Mantra* (2001) and *Jardines de Kensington* [Kensington Gardens] (Spanish edition 2004; English translation by Natasha Wimmer 2005) move closer to the kind of apolitical textuality typical of some postmodernist fictions that Fredric Jameson has defined as pastiche (1991*b*). *Mantra* is divided into three main sections: “Before: The Mexican Friend”; “During: The Dead of the Days”; and “After: The Quake”. The first part is a fictional autobiographical account of the narrator’s traumatic childhood as he grew up in Argentina in the 1970s amid a dysfunctional family of middle-class Montonero

revolutionaries (again there is much that is truly autobiographical for Fresán here). The second part radically moves the setting to Mexico D.F. in the late 1990s and in addition to a parodic rewriting of Juan Rulfo's masterpiece, *Pedro Páramo*, it also pays intertextual homage to William Burroughs "cut-up" technique through a highly fragmented, montaged ensemble of various artists' and historical personages' impressions of Mexico D.F. which are then combined with the narrator's own story in this city. The third part offers a futuristic and apocalyptic rewriting of *Pedro Páramo*'s Comala a la Philip K. Dick as the narrator becomes the only surviving android after a quake has destroyed Mexico city. The novel finishes with the usual acknowledgements to the book's various intertextual sources, that is to say, the many books, textbooks, and reference books on which Fresán based himself to write *Mantra*.

Geographically, then, *Mantra* moves from the narrator's childhood in Buenos Aires to his death in Mexico City, and spans three decades, from the 1970s in Argentina to the end of the millennium in Mexico. The story begins when the anonymous first-person narrator meets his new fifth grade partner, Máximo Mantra, a Mexican child, at Gervasio Cabrera elementary school in Buenos Aires. The date is somewhere around 1974, and here is how the narrator presents his extremely "dysfunctional" Montonero parents:

Mis padres . . . pertenecían a un comando guerrillero-intelectual . . . y un tanto amateur de un movimiento paradójicamente católico y marxista, que—después de que yo les contara lo que había aprendido en el colegio—había decidido por unanimidad bautizarse como Comando General Cabrera. Mis padres rara vez estaban en casa porque se la pasaban bombardeando supermercados capitalistas y redactando curiosos manifiestos en casas de fin de semana con piscina y asado para todos. (2001, p. 50)<sup>3</sup>

My parents . . . belonged to an amateur, intellectual guerrilla group . . . a youth movement that, paradoxically, was both Catholic and Marxist, and which—after I had told them what I had learnt at school—unanimously decided to christen themselves General Cabrera Commando Unit. Only rarely were my parents at home because they were busy planting bombs in capitalist supermarkets and writing up manifestoes in the comfort of their own weekend houses with swimming pools and free-for-all barbecues.

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<sup>3</sup> From now on all references are to Rodrigo Fresán's *Mantra* (Barcelona:Mondadori, 2001). All translations from this book are my own.

As this passage shows the critique of the narrator's family is also, figuratively, a critique of certain sectors of the Argentine middle-class who, in 1969, joined massive student and workers' protests such as the famous *Cordobazo* and *Rosariazo*.<sup>4</sup> The Argentine university students first mobilized against Onganía's dictatorship (1966–1970), when he started his campaign against liberal and Marxist influences with a move against the country's public universities in August 1966 restricting political activism and revising the university's curriculum (D. K. Lewis 2001, pp. 128–132). Between 1970 and 1973, some of the student movements became even more radicalized and joined armed resistance groups (like the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo and Montoneros) which, in turn, joined forces with the militant leaders of trade union movements.

The narrator's class-conscious critique targets his parents for being well-off middle class people who could afford the luxury of a house with a swimming pool but, at the same time, and contradictorily for him, fought state oppression and corporate capitalism. This middle-class and mostly student-led movement was sympathetic to the industrial proletariat and quickly became involved in grassroots agitation and protests. As Paul Lewis puts it: "being a revolutionary presupposed a total commitment: a complete sacrifice of one's private life to the cause. Friends, family, job—all had to be expendable" (P. H. Lewis 2001, p. 33). The participation of middle class students in such political activism is explained through the "active" role intellectuals at last felt they had in the "liberation" of people and the nation. As Paul Lewis explains: "the violent deed turned out to be [equally] liberating for the formerly frustrated intellectual who felt cut off from the real world of doers. He now ceased to be an impotent, irresolute critic or spectator and became an actor at the center stage of history" (2001, p. 33).

Also, in 1944, at the University of La Plata, Perón gave a lecture which he entitled "Significado de la Defensa Nacional desde el punto de vista militar" [On the Meaning of National Defense from a Military Perspective], where he asserted his three basic principles of national action: firstly, war is an inevitable social phenomenon; secondly, peaceful nations, like Argentina, if they want peace will have to fight [against foreign domination]; and thirdly, the National Defense of the homeland is an integral overarching problem affecting all aspects of life (Feinmann 2007, p. 35). For José Pablo Feinmann, this conference

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<sup>4</sup> The so-called *Cordobazo* was a set of violent riots that shook the city of Córdoba in May 1969. For several days radicalised union workers, university students, and practitioners of liberation theology demonstrated against the damaging economic programmes and the repressive policies carried out during General Juan Carlos Onganía's dictatorship (1966–1970). The *Rosariazo* was another protest movement that echoed that of Córdoba and consisted of demonstrations and strikes in Rosario, Santa Fe, between May and September 1969.

marks the beginning of the concept of the “nation in arms”, which stresses the integral or *organic* aspect of armed struggle. Perón will eventually transform this concept into that of “el pueblo en armas” [the people or populace in arms], which involves the active participation in the struggle against domination of all inhabitants, politicians, the military, and comrades. The war here is total because all of society is part of this war. For Feinmann, this explains, at an ideological level at least, why the Peronist left resorted to violence to carry out their revolution from a *Peronist* position (rather than merely following Che Guevara and the Cuban example) (Feinmann 2007, p. 36). “Perón”, Feinmann says, “siempre tuvo una concepción de la política como guerra” [Perón always had a view of politics as war] (Feinmann 2007, p. 37), having learnt and followed, of course, the theories on politics and war of Clausewitz and von der Goltz, at the Colegio Militar [Argentine Military Academy]. The concept of “people in arms” will then be reinvented by the 1970s radicalised generation and mixed with Hegel, Marx, Fanon, liberation theology, Che Guevara, Giap and Perón to produce the Montoneros (Feinmann 2007, p. 37).

This also helps understand why the revolutionary movement of the 1970s wasn’t solely a lower or working class movement, but involved middle and upper-middle class sectors of society as well as intellectuals and artists. It was this wholesale justification of violence as a means of emancipation that gave the Triple A in 1973-1975, and the military junta, later on, the perfect justification to impose their regime of terror. Feinmann mentions many other examples of Perón’s slogans. For instance, Perón quoting Licurgo: “hay un solo delito infamante para el ciudadano: que en la lucha en que se deciden los destinos de Esparta él no esté en ninguno de los dos bandos o esté en los dos” [There is only one infamous crime for the citizen: that in the struggle to free Esparta he will be on neither side of the line or on both sides of the line] (*Conducción Política*, 29.03.1951, quoted by Feinmann 2007, p. 37). Or the famous speech Perón gave on the balcony of the Government House, where he asserts that for every Peronist that falls, five enemies will be brought down. Perón says “a la violencia le hemos de contestar con una violencia mayor” [We will answer military violence with an even greater violence] (31.10.1955, quoted by Feinmann 2007, p. 37)). Phrases like these, however, were said only a few days after the murderous bombing to Plaza de Mayo when the military attempted to oust Perón from government. But when Perón was forced into exile, he continued to ratify this view of politics as a total and indiscriminate war on the enemy. The position followed in this thesis, however, is that violence is not the continuation of politics by other means, but quite to the contrary, is its very negation. Hence the importance of a democratic and pluralistic but also highly



critical society and culture which this thesis wants to accentuate.

But to return to the novel's representation of the Comando Gervasio Cabrera, then, it is not surprising that the narrator's bitterness is based on the irony that the violence his intellectual parents supposedly perpetrated against the capitalist supermarkets ended up blurring the line between the oppressors and the oppressed, leveling the violence of one against the other. This not only resulted in personal and family trauma, (as was Fresán's own case in real life) but also, as the narrator seems to suggest, provided the Argentine army and the extreme political right with a perfect excuse to suspend democracy and suppress political dissidence in the name of public law and order. The novel conveys a very clear sense of guilt and blame, therefore, held against at least some of the Argentine middle-class first for their willingness to engage in violence (bombing supermarkets and defending "the cause"), and secondly, for their later "complicit" silence when the junta's dictatorship began its fight against subversion. The equation between state and guerrilla violence, nonetheless, rests upon a rather trite and Manichean argument in that it assumes an equal deployment of violence on both sides, a point that has already been amply demonstrated to be erroneous by many historians (see Heinz and Frühling 1999; D. K. Lewis 2001).

Nonetheless, the trauma of not having had a "normal" family and an average childhood, admitted by Fresán in many interviews, is portrayed fictionally in the sarcastic resentment the narrator of *Mantra* feels not only towards his family, but also eventually, towards the nation as a whole:

Estoy seguro que fue gracias a Gervasio Vicario Cabrera ... que comencé a entender y sentir a México como mi verdadera y lejana patria. Tenía que haber un error: yo no podía haber nacido en *este* país y ser hijo de *estos* padres. (2001, p. 47)

I am quite positive that it was because of Gervasio Vicario Cabrera ... that I began to understand and to feel Mexico as my true but far away homeland. There had to be a mistake: I couldn't possibly have been born in *this* country and from *these* parents.

The rejection of what was a painful experience, both in the private and public spheres, leads the narrator to feel contempt for his home and homeland and to adopt Mexico as a new foster nationality. Extra-textually, it would be quite difficult to miss how obviously autobiographical this passage is. In fact, in an interview carried out in April 2006, Fresán confessed that he and his (Mexican) wife decided not to live either in Argentina or in

Mexico but to move to a “neutral” place like Barcelona in 1999 in order to escape a difficult relationship with both their parents.<sup>5</sup> It is also around this time that Fresán began to consciously legitimate his profile as a cosmopolitan writer, drawing on a rich tradition of Argentine writers like Cortázar, Puig and Borges and finding theoretical justification in Borges’s essay “The Argentine Writer and Tradition”. In a recent interview Fresán reasserted his view that “A writer’s real homeland, or, his DNA, is his library”.<sup>6</sup> It is somewhat contradictory, however, that Fresán should invoke notions of nationality as far as a literary tradition is concerned (he never once hesitates to situate himself in the prestigious *Argentine* literary tradition of Borges and Cortázar) but, at the same time, radically deny and reject his national identity understood not only as a literary genealogy but also as a sociopolitical and historically-informed cultural identity. Fresán is content to repeat the cliché that “we are a very new country . . . all our forefathers came from Europe” (as if there was nothing at all problematic about this) and that our cultural identity is cosmopolitan because “our roots are in the world, and the world is where the library is” (Lethem and Fresán 2006). However, he is less happy when it comes to admitting that he is Argentinean in more ways than this suggests.

Unlike Borges’s ironic dismantling of the nationalist canon of Lugones’s consciously crafted clichéd naturalism and local colour, and his strategic defence of the modernist, cosmopolitan impulses of *Sur*, Fresán dismantles an Argentine cultural identity materially situated in the country’s social, political and economic history of the past 30 years, and his strategic defence is for a cosmopolitanism thinly understood as the cross-pollination of literary legacies and, within capitalism, as the “globalization” of the literary market through what is known as the international style. Fresán does not necessarily write for an Argentine audience anymore, nor does he care to reconstruct the Argentine experience to the foreign reader. This is clearly *not* a writer who, like Salman Rushdie on revisiting Bombay after many years, wants “to restore the past to himself” and is gripped by the firm conviction that he has “a city and a history to reclaim” (1991, p. 10), but quite its opposite; he is one pulled apart by two opposing but equally obsessive impulses: to remember a past that returns like a haunting ghost in the form of childhood trauma, and at the same time to delete and deny this past as a traumatic remainder of less happy times. For Fresán the

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Lethem and Rodrigo Fresán (2006). *Writers in Conversation*. Benetton Talk Young Writers Series. MP3 interview. PEN American Center. 29th Apr. 2006. URL: <http://www.pen.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/898/prmID/1064> (visited on 20/11/2007)

<sup>6</sup> Javier Moreno and Rodrigo Fresán (2007). “Escritor por naturaleza: conversación con Rodrigo Fresán”. Interview by Javier Moreno. In: *Pie de Página* (11th Apr. 2007). URL: <http://www.piedepagina.com/numero11/html/contenido.htm> (visited on 04/02/2008)

situation in Argentina is like “a poorly-written crime novel: no sooner does it start than you already know straight away who the murderer is. As a writer, I am outraged at how badly written and predictable it is” (*La Jornada* 2002).<sup>7</sup> Fresán’s position can again be contrasted with Salman Rushdie’s, who in his essay “Imaginary Homelands”, points out that writers in his position—exiles, migrants, or expatriates—are haunted not only by a sense of loss but also by an impulse to recover and reconstruct that past. As Rushdie puts it, writers

[A]re haunted by a sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation . . . almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands. (1991, p. 10)

Rushdie’s words suggest a useful distinction, therefore, between the exiled writer haunted by a sense of loss, and an exiled writer like Fresán who is haunted by childhood trauma. While the first writer is driven to “reconstruct” and “reclaim” the past, or else, to write about his lost homeland as something newly found (as a new identity as yet to be partly reclaimed, partly imagined); the second is driven first to cynically acknowledge the past as a source of trauma, and secondly, to try and delete the memory of that trauma—however impossible or irreversible that task may seem, since the trace of the trauma has already been “fixed” (and at the same time repressed) in the writing itself. Furthermore, when, in the first case, the writer tries to reconstruct his homeland from outside the country, “he is obliged”, says Rushdie, “to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost” (1991, p. 11). But fragmentation takes on a positive value here, insofar as it establishes a paradox, for “the broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed” (1991, p. 11). The paradox is explained by the fact that it is precisely the partial nature of those memories, their fragmentation but at the same time their vividness, that makes them so evocative. As Rushdie more poetically puts it, when he was remembering Bombay, “the shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*; fragmentations made trivial things seem

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<sup>7</sup>Ericka Montaña Garfías (2002). “México y su capital “anulan el sentido de lo verosímil”, opina Rodrigo Fresán”. Interview with Rodrigo Fresán. In: *La Jornada* (19th Sept. 2002). URL: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2002/09/19/05an1cul.php?origen=cultura.html> (visited on 24/05/2008)

like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities” (1991, p. 12). In contrast, for the traumatised narrator of *Mantra*:

Las infancias con libros se recuerdan siempre como más felices que las infancias sin libros: uno puede haber tenido una niñez terrible, pero si leyó a la luz de grandes libros durante su oscuridad, a la hora de hacer memoria, se puede optar por el consuelo de recordar la alegría de las ficciones y no las tristezas de una realidad mal escrita. (2001, p. 126)

A childhood with books is always remembered as happier than a childhood without books: one may have had a horrible childhood, but if one read under the light of great books during the darkness of those days, when the time to remember comes, it is possible to opt for the comfort and happiness of those fictions and not for the sorrows of a poorly written reality.

That is to say, unlike Rushdie, for the narrator of *Mantra* (and it is safe to assume for Fresán himself) the “ugly” fragments of reality are to be discarded and replaced by other—improved/edited—fragments, those of fiction and/or culture at large. Fiction is here to help us forget the world, not better understand it. This reminds us of the “sanitized” products ready for cultural consumption typical of globalization. The problem comes when those fragments are not only not an improvement on reality but little more than dehistoricised clichés. The difference between Fresán and writers like Piglia and Eloy Martínez, as it will be shown in chapters 6, 7 and 8, lies in that the latter see in literature more of a “transformative” function for society than a compensatory or escapist solution for life’s traumas. As Rushdie puts it “the broken glass is not merely a mirror of nostalgia. It is also, I believe, a useful tool with which to work in the present” (1991, p. 12). In effect, this raises once again the question of the political function of art and the extent to which literature can, or perhaps must, as Rushdie says, “give the lie to official facts” (1991, p. 14). Thus, for Rushdie:

[...] redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it. And particularly at times when the state takes reality into its own hands, and sets about distorting it, altering the past to fit its present needs, then the making of the alternative realities of art, including the novel of memory, becomes politicized. “The struggle of man against power”, Milan Kundera has written, “is the

struggle of memory against forgetting” . . . And the novel is one way of denying the official, politician’s version of truth. (1991, p. 14)

The struggle of memory against forgetting through the reconstructive work of fiction is precisely what, as we shall see, Piglia and Eloy Martínez and Kohan do, but what Fresán seems increasingly unwilling to do. Although, to a certain extent, the first section of *Mantra* may be said to work as a critique of the revolutionary dreams of the Argentine middle-class (fictionalised through a critique of the narrator’s family), this critique is not maintained when it comes to the last two sections of the novel which deal only with Mexico. In effect, the issue of how clichéd his reconstruction of Mexican identity was, emerged in a press interview Fresán gave on account of Mondadori’s launching of Colección Año 0 (of which *Mantra* is part). When asked why he had preferred to portray such a stereotypical version of Mexico, Fresán replied:

Eso es lo que me interesaba. No pretendía que el libro estuviera narrado por un mexicano, porque me habría obligado a una cantidad de trabajo extra; habría incurrido en millones de errores seguramente. Quería preservar esa visión extranjera sobre esta ciudad. Los tres narradores de *Mantra* son una especie de extranjeros extremos: uno es un tumor, otro es un robot y el otro es un muerto, que me parecían las formas más bestiales del ser extranjero. (Montaño Garfias 2002)

That was precisely what I wanted to write. I didn’t want to narrate the book from the perspective of a Mexican, because that would have meant a lot of hard work and research, and I still would have made millions of errors no matter what. My intention was to preserve this foreigner’s view of the city. And this is what the three narrators of *Mantra* somehow are: extreme forms of the foreign—one is a tumor, another is a robot and the third one is dead. Are these not beastliest forms of foreignness?

Isn’t it striking that Fresán would admit that writing a better account of Mexico would have implied too much effort and research? Are these not the shallowest forms of globalised narrative? The review of the novel published in the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* clearly states that “the main character [of *Mantra*] is Mexico city with *all the clichés that a foreigner can use* to address this city and, in general, to whatever is Mexican: wrestling, soap operas, patriotic love for the motherland and old love songs” (italics mine). So, why should

we care to read this novel at all? Hutcheon has argued that historiographic metafictional novels either acknowledge that they are a *fiction* from beginning to end; or else, and more radically, they problematize the very act of trying to write a fictional/historical account of an entity that actually exists in reality. Hutcheon states that postmodernism welcomes and celebrates a plural, multiple, or heterogeneous identity, but one is left to wonder, after reading *Mantra*, how this identity is to be understood: as a plurally “lived” or “experienced” one or as mere simulacra, reproduced as so many accounts of an imagined but ultimately trite and hackneyed “reality”? Furthermore, could a superficially-conceived cosmopolitanism be reduced to something as vacuous as writing about *any* theme in literature with exactly the *same* kind of legitimacy (and not taking the trouble, as Fresán puts it, of even carrying out research)? This returns us to Carlos Gamerro’s and my own argument in chapter 3. To what extent is an uninformed foreigner’s view a valid, legitimate view?

For literature to have some sort of a transformative function, or for the literary imagination to encourage some sort of a “politicized reflexive aesthetics”, as Brooker argues (Brooker 2002, p. 23), perhaps something more is needed than mere textual skill. In the same way as we need to eschew the dangers of a “ghetto mentality” (Rushdie 1991, p. 19) and look beyond the local community to the larger world outside, we need to distrust a superficially-conceived cosmopolitanism or a cultural imperialism that takes whatever it needs from the cultural supermarket as if it was its own. Perhaps the main point to be made about Fresán is that textual hybridity (including parody, pastiche and montage) *by itself* may or may not be politically contestatory. Memory may or may not be reduced to clichéd versions of the past. Again, what matters, as Brooker puts it, is whether this collage of fragments is “a socially relevant bricolage” (2002, p. 28). Is it a contestatory bricolage that sets all the multiple fragments in tension with each other? Does this textual hybridity “give the lie to official facts” as Rushdie hopes, or else, does it contest, question, subvert all the clichés by which identities are perpetually (re)constructed through a globalised media? Or does it help, on the contrary, only to reaffirm and perpetuate those clichés?

It is difficult not to see Fresán’s *Mantra*, in this sense, as symptomatic of how clichéd or simulacra versions of reality, of national and cultural identity are reified and sanitized by consumer capitalism. No doubt, both memory and hybridity lose their potential for radical political questioning when they degenerate into mere pastiche and a showcasing of styles as Jameson has convincingly argued (1991*b*). On the other hand, memory and textual and cultural hybridity can be employed to radical cultural and political ends when they are used to critique and defamiliarise received perceptions and assumptions, as it is argued below

Piglia, Eloy Martínez and Kohan seek to do. In *Mantra*, the myriad intertextual references to other fiction writers and works (both canonical and marginal figures), and a cross-pollination of fiction and non-fiction (letters, travel and personal diary fragments, quotes from travelling guides, pseudo-scientific handbooks) hybridize the discourse, opening it up to a multiplicity of voices, but these do not amount to a plural platform from which to criticise received perceptions of Mexico. This is the cityscape of McOndo indeed but at its worst.

A final aspect of the novel worth considering is its intertextual connections to Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955), which structures about two thirds of the book. Unlike Rulfo's textually inscribed politics about a premodern Mexico "being traversed by secular modernity" (Sharman 2006, p. 143); Fresán's *Mantra* seems to engage in endless schizophrenic ramblings for 539 pages that mix the monologic voice of the narrator, with the quoted fragments from other historical figures and personages like William Burroughs, Sergei Eisenstein, Joan Vollmer, Aldous Huxley, etc. The orchestrated polyphony of *Pedro Páramo*'s underworld is thus reworked into a postmodernist register through schizophrenic montage. However, the "new" version "translates" or updates the technique but not its politics: that is, it does not "translate" into a postmodern register Rulfo's *critique* of the *caciquismo* of Mexico's quasi-feudal social order during its shift to modernity. As Sharman argues, in Rulfo, the *cacique* "operates at the point where the premodern intersects with the rational-legal-bureaucratic order of modernity, epitomized by the system of law" (2006, p. 143) and as such, it is a figure of the utmost importance in *Pedro Páramo* insofar as Comala is destroyed not only by the depredations of capitalism, and the selling off of communal lands, but also by the will of one man, as Sharman argues. But, when the story gets reworked in the times of global capitalism by Fresán, the question that inevitably arises is whatever happened to the *cacique* today? What has taken its place in this day and age of global capitalism? It is of course the case that nowadays, as García Canclini would put it, "David doesn't know where Goliath is" (1999), that is, global capitalism is everywhere and nowhere, and the *cacique* has become a whole network of invisible forces, and so, to a certain extent, this justifies and explains Fresán's schizophrenic narrative. And yet nowhere in the novel does one feel any sort of *explicit*, reflexive critique, as Brooker (2002) would have it, being directed at it.

Here it is worth asserting that it's not just a matter of creating verisimilitude or of returning to a naïve realism or naturalism, but rather of remembering that the one redeeming quality of postmodernist fiction is, as Linda Hutcheon early on argued, its capacity for a

*critical* revisiting of the past, and thereby, of the present without pretending to be an objective, detached observer. However, in *Mantra*, it is doubtful that the montage of fragments ever amounts to a critique of whatever late capitalism has come to mean at the turn of the millennium for Mexico D.F. Thus, from this perspective, much of the novel is, as Brooker argues for postmodernist narratives, also a symptom of the anonymity and loss of human association modern urban life entails. The metropolitan city of Mexico, in this sense, becomes like any other modern, globalised city: a metropolitan centre “without balance and harmony, a landscape of physical or psychic extremes in which the modern citizen (is) subjected to the mayhem of the city’s ungoverned, shapeless sprawl, or to the tedium of its unrelieved sameness” (Brooker 2002, p. 18).

But we must not think that cosmopolitanism is always directly and simplistically opposed to national histories, since even the most cosmopolitan of writers (and here Borges is a case in point) do not write (however directly or indirectly) about other countries’ histories, cultures and societies but about their own—even when they write about universal themes and mythologies as Beatriz Sarlo has proved in her seminal book *Jorge Luis Borges: A writer on the Edge*. Adam Sharman, too, argues how paradoxical this national/transnational situatedness is in Borges’s well-known story “Funes el memorioso” (Funes, the Memorious). There, says Sharman, “the hinge that links the importance of context to otherwise abstract philosophemes of nominalism is the question of nationalism” (2006, p. 127), and “although the story wears away at any simple idea of national identity, nowhere does it suppress the singularity—certain incurable limitations—of the local. On the contrary, at the same time as it takes its distance from positivistic notions of national identity, the story affirms (a complex) Southern Cone condition” (2006, p. 128). Other short-stories by Borges like “El Fin” (The End), “El Sur” (The South), his collection of poems *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (Passion of Buenos Aires), and a wealth of other writings and essays like *Evaristo Carriego* and *Discusión* bear further witness to this complex dialogue between the local, the national and the cosmopolitan. It is against a naively understood local colour or an exacerbated or excessive nationalism (understood as an empty or clichéd patriotism) that Borges directs his criticism of “national” literature, and sets up instead, his defence of Western culture but with his feet firmly grounded in Argentina. But what in Borges is a virtue, in Fresán seems to be a miss.



## 5.4 A “hollow” cosmopolitanism

I want to conclude this chapter, then, with Fresán’s latest novel, which is a step even further away from a reflexive aesthetic and closer to a “hollow” cosmopolitanism of textual formalism. *Jardines de Kensington* [Kensington Gardens], (Spanish edition 2004; English translation by Natasha Wimmer 2005), is set in London and Scotland as the narratives of Peter Hook and James Matthew Barrie are intertwined in a tale that shifts from contemporary London to Victorian England, to the “swinging sixties”. The change of setting has coincided with Fresán’s first book to be translated into English and with its release both in the UK (Faber and Faber) and in the United States (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux). In the acknowledgements note to *Kensington Gardens* and in an interview with Jonathan Lethem, Fresán has said that the idea for a narrative involving Peter Pan and the life of James Mathew Barrie came to him one day after watching a TV documentary about the life and works of the writer (Fresán 2005, p. 412; Lethem and Fresán 2006). This recalls Fuguet’s claim that today the world comes to us mediated through TV, radio and the internet. The note also makes clear that Fresán has never been to London and that his knowledge of the city only came from books he has read.

Like the places he describes, names and other English cultural references are incorporated into the text through listing and cataloguing without any anchoring in actual experience. The narrative seems bent on proving that a Latin American writer need not write about Latin American topics in order to succeed in the global market as the review blurbs in the UK and the United States demonstrate. Faber & Faber have pitched the novel as a work “told in the torrential prose of a Latin American master”;<sup>8</sup> whereas for Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, this is “Fresán’s dazzling English-language debut”. Other newspaper blurbs praise Fresán as “one of Buenos Aires brightest young novelists” and as “among the most notable of young Latin American writers”, whose prose is “sinuous [and] allusive (*à la* Borges and Calvino)” and whose “astonishing skill . . . weaves various threads into a complex, gripping narrative”.<sup>9</sup> *The Guardian* has seen in *Kensington Gardens* “a curious delight”, with sections that are “really spectacular”. The novel, however, is not flawless as ultimately, “it is unclear what one is to make of it all, and the conclusion simply evaporates”.<sup>10</sup> *The Independent* salutes Fresán’s work as “a generous, rambling novel that *owes*

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<sup>8</sup> *Faber and Faber: Kensington Gardens*. URL: <http://www.faber.co.uk/work/kensington-gardens/9780571222803/> (visited on 21/12/2008).

<sup>9</sup> *Macmillan: Kensington Gardens*. URL: <http://www.macmillanacademic.com/Academic/search/SearchBookDisplay.asp?BookKey=2073331> (visited on 21/12/2008)

<sup>10</sup> Jerome de Groot (2006). “*Kensington Gardens* Review”. In: *The Guardian* (1st Sept. 2006). URL: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/09/01/kensington-gardens-review>

a great deal to the magic realist tradition, with its interlinked stories, improbable events and exaggerated coincidences”, but regrets that “loneliness and death bear down on the novel”. Fresán is, however, all in all, deemed “a brilliant writer” [*italics above mine*].<sup>11</sup> It is interesting that the *Independent* reviewer should associate Fresán with magical realism, the one aesthetic mode Fresán has explicitly and painstakingly distanced himself from in countless interviews and not least through his association with *McOndo*.

The self-indulgent ramblings of the novel are, however, the one feature that links this book to Fresán’s previous ones. It is these ramblings, listings, and cataloguing that usher in the constant digressions from the main narrative as the narrator embarks in a series of abstract “meditations” on the nature of mourning, memory, writing, identity, childhood, and so on. But the biggest change is no doubt with regard to the theme of the Argentine national identity and the historical chronicle, which were still present in the first section of *Mantra*, but which have all but disappeared here in exchange for a kind of book-inspired cosmopolitanism. The novel thus presents a purer level of fabulation and intertextuality than any of his previous works and the themes of death, loss and memory take on a private or very personal overtone but are totally devoid of a larger public/historical context. Much of the swinging sixties episodes seem to be a clichéd or even pastiched reconstruction of the period as they have been wholly taken from Fresán’s readings of other books. His account of London in the Victorian era and in the 1960s is thus wholly *textual* in nature and to a great degree *apolitical* in its total detachment from reality and collective experience or from any sort of social critique.

The previous interface reality/fiction that was seen in his use of the historical chronicle in *Historia argentina* or in the first section of *Mantra* is here replaced by a fiction/fiction relationship that acknowledges other texts as its only reality. Losing the connections between the historical chronicle (Hutcheon’s extra-textual reference) and social experience (Hutcheon’s hermeneutic reference), means that the political significance of the novel (in terms of its representation of the utopian 1960s) is to a great extent lost as well and, as such, does not offer much in the way of a politicised/critical art. In fact, in an interview in 2003, Fresán very explicitly stated what cosmopolitanism has come to mean to him:

[No] critico a los escritores que escriben sobre su ciudad, su barrio... Me parece muy bien que haya este tipo de autores tan territoriales, tan profundamente

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[//www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/jul/01/featuresreviews.guardianreview25](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/jul/01/featuresreviews.guardianreview25) (visited on 29/09/2006)

<sup>11</sup>Michael Eaude (2005). “*Kensington Gardens*, by Rodrigo Fresan (trans Natasha Wimmer)”. In: *The Independent* (1st Sept. 2005). URL: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/kensington-gardens-by-rodrigo-fresan-trans-natasha-wimmer-505054.html> (visited on 21/12/2008).

nacionales. No es mi caso ... Tal vez lo que ocurre es que yo tengo 40 años y estos últimos 40 años en Argentina lo único que han demostrado es un país atomizado. Si yo me siento hijo de alguna tradición argentina ésa sería la cosmopolita. (Fernández 2003)

I don't criticise those who write about their city, their neighbourhood ... I think it's all right that there should be such territorially minded authors, so deeply national. But this is not my case ... Maybe it's because I am 40 years old and these past 40 years in Argentina have only shown me an atomised country. If I feel heir to an Argentine tradition, no doubt it's to a cosmopolitan one. (My translation)

Again, Borges's defence of cosmopolitanism in "The Argentine Writer and Tradition" is here "translated" into contemporary register, but if interpreted in the light of Fresán's most recent novels, his cosmopolitanism couldn't be further from Borges's since Borges's avant-garde art sought to contribute to creatively deconstruct, criticise and reinterpret key aspects of culture. This is the opposite of the textual reproduction of clichés and stereotypes even if the structure of the novel is the cut-up technique. That is, even if the novel uses avant-garde techniques (like bricolage, cut-up, montage, etc.), this does not make the novel automatically avant-garde in *function* and *effect* (even if it is so in *form*). This merely confirms Jameson's argument that postmodernism at its worst does little more than nostalgically recycle the avant-gardes with none of the latter's capacity for creative and/or emancipatory critique.

Fresán has declared that although he was born an Argentine, he hopes to die a writer since a writer's true homeland is his library ["Nací Argentino y espero morir escritor. La verdadera patria es la propia biblioteca"].<sup>12</sup> This is surely the utmost reduction of experience to the merely textual, but to the point where the connection between real life experience and reading and writing is made redundant as the texts become little more than fabulating artifices lacking the kinds of links between fiction and life of *Historia argentina*. To conclude, for Fresán, globalization has meant a superficial identification of the Argentine writer with the whole of Western culture at large, and a total deterritorialization of the narrative from the geographical and historical locations of Argentina; and on the evidence of *Kensington Gardens*, no alternative "reterritorialization" in a European/Western history

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<sup>12</sup>Pablo Montanaro (2005). "Rodrigo Fresán: epifanías de un narrador". In: *Río Negro* (9th Apr. 2005). URL: [http://rionegro.com.ar/suple\\_cultura/05-04-09/nota1.php](http://rionegro.com.ar/suple_cultura/05-04-09/nota1.php) (visited on 20/02/2008).

beyond the hand-me-down. The “exile” has tended to write about the homeland; the “cosmopolitan” is said to be at home in many countries, but Fresán seems rather to be “homeless”. Perhaps, not much more can be said except that this novel is a symptom of what the loss of a historical anchorage, or more pointedly of political intent, comes to mean in one version of postmodernism. It is after all a “product” of its historical moment.

In the next case studies I will explore opposing responses to the collective trauma of the dictatorship in the fictions of two of the most politically committed fiction writers of Argentina: Ricardo Piglia and Tomás Eloy Martínez. Unlike Fresán’s narratives (with the notable exception of *Historia argentina*), their fictions are seen as exemplary case studies for the reconstruction of a fuller history in Argentina and for the development of a reflexive aesthetic. Hutcheon’s five-reference model is explored in full with the aim of bringing out the pedagogic political potential of these novels in contrast to Fresán’s most recent fictions.

Case Study 2:  
Reconstructing history: narratives of  
utopia and defeat

## (Mis)reading tradition in Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial*

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the textual and cultural strategies employed by Ricardo Piglia to subvert the silence and oppression of military violence and to bring to light repressed versions of Argentine history and identity through allegory, parody and quotation. Above all, quotation is proved in this chapter to be a textual strategy par excellence to critically bring the past into the present by resuscitating the tradition or history of the oppressed and setting it in tension with other officially-sanctioned histories.

### 6.2 Subverting silence through quotation

During the last few years of the dictatorship, under conditions of censorship, Argentine cultural production was sustained by two different but ultimately related groups: on the one hand, those who, like Ricardo Piglia, remained in the country and attempted to find ways to resist the censorship and terror of the military regime, mostly by writing allegorically; and on the other, those who, like Tomás Eloy Martínez, chose or were forced to choose to work abroad, and who interpreted life under the military violence from the vantage point of the exile who enjoyed more freedom of expression. In any case, writers in both groups engaged in one way or another in a reconstituted reading of Argentine history outside of the confines of dictatorial interpretations.

In general terms, most of Piglia's novels bring to the fore the conjunction of the cultural, historical and political dimensions of Argentine identity. In his *Postmodernity in Latin America: the Argentine Paradigm*, Santiago Colás (1994) has argued that writers like Piglia choose first person narrators/protagonists who, as they go in search of their own

“personal” stories, become inextricably involved in the histories of the collectivity or the nation. One of the effects of combining these public/private dimensions is that it restores voice and body to the absences and silences produced not only by the military’s disappearances, but also by their symbolic appropriation of historical discourse. Textual hybridity is here first and foremost represented through voice polyphony, which brings to the fore the oppositions and clashes between official and unofficial discourses as utterances enter into dialogic (or dialectical) and antagonist or contending relations (Bakhtin 1986). The tense interplay between these discourses brings to the foreground “alternative” or “oppositional” initiatives (Williams 1977, p. 114) made within or against the specific hegemony of the junta’s discourse which at once produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture or counter-narratives.

Thus, the textual diversity perceived not only in the mixing of different poetic and non-poetic genres but also in the polyphony of enunciation is a way of re-staging the events and voices of those who were silenced (in respect of class and political ideas, as well as race, ethnicity or gender). Piglia’s political use of textual bricolage, therefore, unlike Fresán’s, stages the multiple clashes between dominant, alternative, and residual cultural forms of Argentine identity, including “voice” and silence. In practice, hegemony can never be singular since, as Raymond Williams argues, “the reality of any hegemony, in the extended political and cultural sense, is that, while by definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive. At any time forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in society” (1977, p. 113).

During the *Proceso* the fear that anyone at any moment and for no reason could be abducted from the streets by the military death squads, or simply illegally detained from their domiciles and taken to illegal death camps, created a constant sense of fear, suspicion and paranoia. Since the junta systematically denied any reports of illegal abductions and death, and the Church otherwise minimised such reports or submissively accepted the junta’s “two demons” explanation, there was a pervasive sense that those deaths were either isolated cases or else “necessary excesses” in times of “war”. In addition to the presentation of *habeas corpus*, rumours, underground information, and fragmented pieces of information here and there that circulated among people about the horror of the clandestine repression, nothing much was known. Notions of fragmentation and discontinuity acquired in this context a positive rather than a negative value insofar as the fragments or bits of information that circulated surreptitiously revealed some other “reality” than what was being officially acknowledged by the military or the Church. This double or paranoid

reality became represented in Piglia's text by means of discursive strategies such as rumour, gossip, letters, bits and fragments of "coded" information, and personal testimonies and accounts that gave voice to what was being repressed and censored and yet infiltrated official reports. In turn these strategies were further poetically transformed through the use of the literary artifices such as quotation, allusion, plagiarism and generic pastiche that created a "double-coded" language tapestry.

Thus, in the same way as the *Proceso* needed to create an alternative, secret reality in which, on the surface of everyday public life, the government preached the patriotic goals of its process of national reconstruction and moral realignment, but underground, pursued a clandestine paralegal reality of immorality and violence, so Piglia's doubly-layered narrative represented in fiction this double or paranoid reality. As Piglia has explained in his essay "Tesis sobre el cuento":

Un cuento siempre cuenta dos historias. El cuento clásico narra en primer plano la historia 1 y construye en secreto la historia 2. El arte del cuentista consiste en saber cifrar la historia 2 en los intersticios de la historia 1. Un relato visible esconde un relato secreto, narrado de modo elíptico y fragmentario . . . Lo más importante nunca se cuenta. La historia secreta se construye con lo no dicho, con el sobreentendido y la alusión. (1999, pp. 91–100)

A short story always tells two plots. The classical short story narrates in the foreground the main plot (plot 1) and weaves in secret the second (plot 2). The writer's skill lies in how the concealed plot (plot 2) is encoded or encrypted in the interstices of the main story. A visible story thus conceals a less visible secret plot, which is narrated in elliptical and fragmentary form . . . The key parts of the story are never told. The secret story is narrated through what remains unsaid, what is implicit and only alluded to. (My translation)

Following Quiroga, Kafka, Poe, Borges and Hemingway, Piglia claims that the modernist short story tells two stories at the same time: whereas the surface story/plot is the main focus of the narration, the "true" story is developed through the gaps and crevices of the former (Hemingway's iceberg theory). Of the two stories, only the encrypted one is narrated in elliptical and fragmentary form and is tacitly constructed through the artifices of allusion and ellipsis. Piglia has found inspiration for the use of these literary artifices in the narratives of Jorge Luis Borges and Roberto Arlt. As Piglia critic and expert, Jorge Fornet has said: "Piglia ha elogiado en Borges un tipo de construcción que ficcionaliza la



teoría, que trabaja con la posibilidad de conceptualizar a partir de la ficción, mientras que la gran lección de Arlt sería su mezcla de registros, esa hibridez [que] es por otro lado una de las marcas de la gran tradición de la novela argentina” [Piglia admires the way Borges fictionalises philosophical theory and works with the possibility of elaborating concepts through fiction, while the great lesson Piglia learns from Roberto Arlt is his mixing of registers, a certain hybridity, which is also, on the other hand, one of the outstanding characteristics of the great tradition of the Argentine novel] (2007, p. 66).

This construction principle underlies the whole of *Artificial Respiration* as two stories are told at the same time: on the surface, the main plot deals with the Professor, Maggi, who remains disappeared and whose archival work is taken up by his nephew, Renzi. The Professor’s archive contains letters, gossip, newspaper clips, reports, and quoted or reported conversations from the time of Alberdi and Rosas, back in the 1850s, which hybridise the text in a polyphonic orchestration of nineteenth century voices. These voices from the nineteenth century, however, get mixed and re-interpreted by Renzi and other characters from the main narrative time, which we assume to be 1976, so that the historical past, made up of remnants of extra-textual documentary information, is re-interpreted through Renzi’s present. Clues are then scattered through the text that allow for the second story to be narrated elliptically and surreptitiously—that of the persons disappeared by the junta. For Fornet: “el hecho de ocultar la historia que verdaderamente quiere contarse . . . potencia el uso de la digresión, la proliferación de historias menores o secundarias que distraen la atención del lector de lo que, se supone, debe ser el centro del relato” [The fact that the events that make up the true narrative plot of the story are concealed . . . intensifies the use of digression, the proliferation of minor or subsidiary stories that distract the reader’s attention from what is, supposedly, the central interest in the narrative] (2007, p. 22). The archive passed on from Maggi to Renzi, therefore, with all its letters, documents, and personal diaries works as a discursive strategy that allows for these digressions and marginal stories to be coherently incorporated into the narrative and which work as digressions from the “real” story (Maggi’s disappearance and state repression). Thus, polyphony and generic textual hybridity make possible the constant slippage from the personal or private stories (Renzi, the Professor, Tardewsky, etc.) to collective public histories (nineteenth century politics, on the one hand, and the disappeared in the 1970s, on the other,—the latter being deliberately concealed or narrated in encrypted form).

The archival documents, then, which recount nineteenth-century historical events, are incorporated into the fabric of the text as part of what Linda Hutcheon terms the extra-

textual dimension. In the first part of the novel, for example, the reader learns that Marcelo Maggi (also known as the Professor) is the narrator's uncle who has "vanished" whilst trying to re-construct the life of Enrique Ossorio, Rosas's personal secretary, and, for official history, a traitor that participated in the Masa conspiracy to depose Rosas in 1850s. The Professor's reconstruction of Ossorio's life involves collecting a series of documents (especially letters) that the Ossorio family has kept under lock and key for a hundred years, and which, according to Marcelo, are only now being "unlocked" and allowed to tell the "reverse" of official history:

En realidad, me escribía Maggi, trato de usar esos materiales que son como el reverso de la historia y trato de ser fiel a los hechos pero a la vez quisiera hacer ver el carácter ejemplar de la vida de esa especie de Rimbaud que se alejó de las avenidas de la historia para mejor testimoniarla . . . Por de pronto está claro que no se trata para mí de escribir lo que se llama, en sentido clásico, una biografía. Intento más bien mostrar el movimiento histórico que se encierra en esa vida tan excéntrica . . . Hay como un exceso, un resto utópico en su vida. Pero, escribía el mismo Ossorio (me escribe Maggi), ¿qué es el exilio sino una forma de la utopía? El desterrado es el hombre utópico por excelencia, escribía Ossorio, me escribe Maggi, vive en la constante nostalgia del futuro. (2001, p. 26)<sup>1</sup>

Actually, Maggi wrote to me, I try to use those materials to reveal the other side of history, remaining faithful to the facts while at the same time showing the exemplary character of the life of this Rimbaud-like figure who departed from the main avenues of history so as to bear better witness to it . . . First and foremost, it is clear that I do not intend to write what is called, in the classic sense, a Biography. I am instead trying to show the movement of history contained in an essentially eccentric life . . . His life is marked by a kind of excess, a utopian trace. But, as Ossorio himself wrote (Maggi writes to me), what is exile but a form of utopia? The exile is the utopian man par excellence, Ossorio wrote, Maggi writes to me; he lives in a constant state of homesickness for the future. (1994, p. 28)

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<sup>1</sup> All Spanish quotations from Ricardo Piglia (2001). *Respiración artificial*. Colección Biblioteca Argentina, La Nación. Planeta All English quotations from Ricardo Piglia (1994). *Artificial Respiration*. Trans. Daniel Balderston. Duke University Press.

The constant slippage from the past simple (Ossorio wrote) to the present time of the narration (Maggi writes to me) connects past and present also activating what Linda Hutcheon terms the hermeneutic reference. At the same time, the quoted passage works metafictionally as this is what the novel itself has set out to do as well: to tell the underside or the reverse of official present history (that of the junta's repression) through the voices of all its characters. Thus, metafictionally, the "utopian trace of excess" mentioned in the passage consists precisely in defying the silence and censorship of the junta, whilst locating in the future the hope that some day the truth that is the reverse of the official lies will become known. In the passage quoted above, this properly metafictional level can become clearly visible by adding (Piglia writes to us) to the phrase "Ossorio himself wrote (Maggi writes to me)". In the same way as Maggi, a professor of History, is trying to show the movement of history contained in the life of the exiled and historically marginal figure of Enrique Ossorio, so is Piglia, (also a Professor of history and Renzi by his mother's family name) through his novel showing the movement of history through the lives of fictional and real characters: Enrique and Luciano Ossorio, Maggi, and Emilio Renzi but also Rosas, Uriburu, Mitre, Yrigoyen, "the General" (Perón) and many other historical figures that are intertwined with the fictional names in the novel. In this way, a bridge is built between the extra-textual referents from the nineteenth century, and the allusions to the repression operating since 1976.

This temporal montage technique of coding twentieth century events in nineteenth century politics has two important consequences: firstly, quotation helps establish a sort of temporal "filiation" or historical continuity between different times or moments when the nation entered into crisis (Rosas and the Masa conspiracy in the nineteenth century, the professor and the disappeared in the twentieth century). It is in this sense, then, that the Professor warns Renzi (and us) that the novel is not just a biography and is not only about the past, but about the present and future as well, and about collective history rather than about one single individual life. Secondly, the juxtaposition of different historical times allows for counter-histories to emerge as Argentine history is read against the grain. Thus, whereas for official history Enrique Ossorio was a traitor, for the Professor he represents the condition of the political exile and the utopian man par excellence. Stereotypes and received historical notions are thus ex-centrally revisited and deconstructed, challenged and rethought from different angles. It is this capacity to compare against each other two opposing versions of history that is hermeneutically incorporated into the very structure of the novel.

Of all the hermeneutic devices the temporally displaced quotation is the one I take to be the most pedagogic and useful towards achieving historically de-constructive/re-constructive strategies. This is so because the temporal spanning function of the quotation raises the fundamental question of what it means to re-create/re-imagine/resuscitate history in the same but (at the same time) “other” words and therefore times and forms of reception of the message. According to language critic Mary Orr, when considering the function of the quotation “it is not what is repeated, or indeed who repeats, that is intrinsic to quotation, but the how and why of its repetition” (2003, p. 132), that is to say, as in Borges’s “Pierre Menard” the quotation does not merely replicate a message; rather, “the quoted extract draws out the relative paucities of both the old and new quoting contexts” (2003, p. 133). This has the effect of shifting the focus not to the verbatim reproduction of the message itself, which is literally the same in terms of the words used, but to the context of re-production and reception of the message. That is, it pays attention not to the intertextual relation per se, in which one message is transposed from one text to another, but to the text/world interface where a change in the real social context of reception of the message changes the interpretation of the message itself, thereby activating a dialogue across times and addressees.

It might be worth pointing out, however, as Santiago Colás does, that although both, Borges and Piglia critically appropriate the European cultural tradition through a system of *citas*, they do so in radically different ways (1994). Whereas for Borges this critical appropriation took place, says Colás, “within the hermetically sealed, ahistorical or timeless, vacuum of the “universal library”, totally protected from the unsavory aspects of social inequality and violence”, for Piglia, literary practice cannot but be situated in “the social realm, in the collective spaces of discourse and action, even at a time—the seventies—when historic events had pushed cultural practice to the most private places” (Colás 1994, p. 132). The differences with Fresán’s texts are also evident: whereas Fresán’s novels favour the text/text interface, Piglia’s tend towards a text/real world one. In fact, Orr compares this latter use of quotation to a time capsule in which a message is passed on across epochs and which, in the transmission, becomes enriched by the context and conditions of reception, so that the same message is repeated but with a difference; that difference is to be found in the social context of utterance and the changed addressees, thereby entailing both sameness and difference simultaneously.

This notion of the quotation is of course inseparable from a Bakhtinian conception of language as essentially dialogic and his insistence that all linguistic communication

occurs in specific social situations and between specific classes and groups of language-users. Dialogic relationships, according to Bakhtin, are not and cannot be, merely linguistic, they are in fact extralinguistic; although this does not mean that they are separated from the realm of discourse (1984, p. 183). To produce an abstract account of language in which quotation is reduced to a mere explicit and literal form of intertextual relation between texts, as the perception of “a co-presence of one text within another” (Genette 1997, p. 2), is to ignore or to forget that language is utilized by individuals in specific social contexts. This means that a quotation always re-works a message by re-directing it to a specific addressee both inside and outside the novel. Because the external context of reception escapes the text itself (that is the text cannot know who its reader is going to be in the future), utopia (the location of hope in the future) is dependent on the outside recipient of the message, that is, s/he who feels addressed “at present” by this message from the past. This deeply Gadamerian hermeneutic notion of textuality is poetically suggested in the following letter from the novel:

24.7.1850

‘Por qué he podido descubrir que mi romance utópico tiene que ser un relato epistolar? Primero: la correspondencia en sí misma ya es una forma de la utopía. Escribir una carta es enviar un mensaje al futuro; hablar desde el presente con un destinatario que no está ahí, del que no se sabe cómo ha de estar (en qué ánimo, con quién) mientras le escribimos y, sobre todo, después: al leernos. La correspondencia es la forma utópica de la conversación porque anula el presente y hace del futuro el único lugar posible del diálogo. Pero además existe una segunda razón. ¿Qué es el exilio sino una situación que nos obliga a sustituir con palabras escritas la relación entre los amigos más queridos, que están lejos, ausentes, diseminados cada uno en lugares y ciudades distintas? Y además ¿qué relación podemos mantener con el país que hemos perdido, el país que nos han obligado a abandonar, qué otra presencia de ese lugar ausente, sino el testimonio de su existencia que nos traen las cartas (esporádicas, elusivas, triviales) que nos llegan con noticias familiares?’

Entonces bien elegida por mí la forma de esa novela escrita en el exilio y por él. (2001, p. 76)

July 24, 1850

How have I discovered that my utopian novel must be epistolary in form? First: correspondence is already in itself a form of utopia. To write a letter is to send a message to the future; to speak of the present with an addressee who is not there, knowing nothing about how that person is (in what spirits, with whom) while we write and, above all, later: while reading over what we have written.

Correspondence is a utopian form of conversation because it annihilates the present and turns the future into the only possible place for dialogue. But there is also a second reason. What is exile but a situation that forces us to substitute words for the relation among close friends, now far away, absent, scattered in different places and cities? And besides what relation can we maintain with the country we have lost, the country that we have been forced to leave? What other presence can the absent place have besides the testimony that letters (sporadic, elusive, trivial letters) bring us, full of family news? Thus, I have done well in choosing the form of that novel written in exile and by it. (1994, p. 83)

Thus the notion that the future is the only place for dialogue is the most important coded message the letter from Ossorio surreptitiously suggests. The letter, written by Ossorio while in exile in 1850, is part of the Professor's historical archive, which is, in turn, being passed on to Renzi in 1976, and from him to us in the form of this autobiographical novel. Ossorio's letter is reproduced in the novel amid several "coded" allusions to the *Proceso* that refer to Marcelo's whereabouts. Among the most revealing clues are the letters sent to Marcelo by his parents: "Your mother is more and more nervous. At night she barely closes her eyes. She is afraid something might happen to you"; "Since the General died nobody remembers the poor. But just in case better not write about that"; "the oldest of the Weber kids asks after you . . . he is the only one who dares do so"; "in this shithole who can hide? They haunted all of you as if you were rabid dogs: nothing remains of the Leagues". Notice, by the way, the use of pronouns with exaphoric reference such as "they" and "you", which cannot be tied to any names or nouns. The allusion to the "Leagues", in the previous sentence probably refers to the "Liga del Sur" a leftist political movement that was key in the rise to power of Perón. Other phrases include references to the *Proceso* like this: "No one should let himself get squashed. I think: how in the process you are seeing the world". These and many other references work as anxious comments on the ongoing situation in Argentina in 1976.

Thus, the embedding of Ossorio's letters together with the clues just mentioned allow for a juxtaposition of the two main contexts of reference: on the one hand, the historical context that forced Ossorio into exile (1850), and on the other, 1976, which forced the Professor probably into exile as well or at least into hiding, and which, in 1980, the time when the novel was published, forced Piglia as a writer to use the double plot or coded narration to escape censorship. Hermeneutically, then, these historically discontinuous moments are brought together by the token of their connection in a history of silence and repression in Argentina. This juxtaposition of historical times, with the narration of apparently non-related stories or events, also suggests that history needs to be reconstructed in a non-linear way, or on its left foot, as it were, by looking for the traces of history off-center and avoiding official accounts of history. These lines of temporal displacement or historical (dis)continuity are allegorically suggested in this fragment from a conversation that Don Luciano Ossorio and Emilio Renzi have on genealogy and filial relations:

"... Existe", dijo, "una primera definición de la que es preciso partir". Habría que comenzar por ahí, dijo ... Para nosotros, los lazos de sangre, o mejor, la filiación ha sido siempre, antes que nada, económica, y la muerte un modo de hacer fluir la propiedad, un modo de hacerla reproducir y circular". Sabía, dijo, que la cadena de esa sucesión era lo que él, el senador había venido a interrumpir ... "Las genealogías y las filiaciones se declinan sobre el cuerpo de la tierra", dijo el senador, "y para un hijo la herencia es el futuro ... una lengua paterna cuyos verbos es preciso aprender a conjugar. Sobre esas conjugaciones territoriales", dijo, "leguas y leguas de campo abierto que permanecen y duran más allá de los antepasados, sobre esa extensión mortal está erigida la memoria familiar ... ". (2001, pp. 50–51)

"A first definition", he said, "exists, and it is necessary to begin there ... for us blood ties or more precisely filiation have always been economic ties above all else, and death is a way of making property flow, a way to make it reproduce and circulate". He knew, he said, that that chain of succession was what he, the Senator, had come to break ... "Genealogies and filiation are founded on the corpse planted on the ground", said the Senator, "and for a son what is inherited is the future ... a father tongue whose verbs one must learn to conjugate. Upon these territorial conjugations", he said, "miles and miles of open country that

lasts and endures long after one's ancestors, over this deathly expanse, family memory is erected". (1994, p. 55)

The passage suggests that there are two forms of enduring memory: on the one hand, a form of memory which is tied to the family and based on private property and inheritance; and on the other hand, collective memory which is tied to the fate of the nation and concerned not with the history of the landowners but with the history of the dispossessed. Since, for a "son", what is inherited is the future, this suggests two kinds of "sons" and inheritances: one whose future is based on the private property he inherits, and another, the dispossessed son, who inherits a future of resistance and struggle against oppression and social injustice. Which of these two inheritances or traditions speaks to us, as readers in the present, is one of the main questions Piglia seems to pose through the Senator's speech. From a political perspective at the time of the military repression, the analogy works well because the official history told by the military regime proceeded from "father to son", that is to say, it acknowledged its indebtedness first to the nation's "founding fathers" (the Spanish colonizers), and it continued in a straight-forward line to the values upheld by the landowning oligarchy as represented by the 1880s generation (through Roca's genocide of the Indians to dispossess them of their lands), and by all the presidencies supported by military power and the Catholic Church whose economic interests have been historically tied to this landowning oligarchy (hence the name *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*, since the 1880s saw the birth of the *Proceso de Organización Nacional*).

The idea of deciphering a historical line of continuity through the "chain of succession" is, of course, one of many "metafictional" or coded comments that activate the hermeneutic dimension of the novel; since not only will the underside of official history be unraveled by looking askance, as it were, at the life of Enrique Ossorio (Don Luciano's grandfather), but also, by reading the whole novel as the encrypted narration of many others who were "traitors" and exiles (the disappeared and the subversives) in the eyes of the *Proceso*. The juxtaposition of voices, then, becomes a necessary strategy to overcome three obstacles that could make this historical reconstruction of the oppressed flounder: censorship or silence, oblivion and death. As Luciano Ossorio says in his speech:

"... Pero tengo un solo temor", dijo el Senador. "Un solo temor y es éste". Que en la sucesiva atrofia que le iban dejando los años, en un momento determinado, pudiera llegar a perder el uso de la palabra. Ése, dijo, era su temor: "Llegar a concebirla", dijo, "y no poder expresarla". (2001, p. 41)



“But I have just one fear”, said the Senator. “Just one fear and it is this”. That in the successive atrophy of his functions, year after year, at some point he might lose the ability to speak. That, he said, was his fear. “Finally grasping it”, he said, “and being unable to express it”. (1994, p. 45)

The fear of losing the ability to speak is tied to a twofold threat: either being unable to speak due to censorship or death, or, in democracy, to be able to speak but not to be heard due to indifference, apathy or impunity. In the passage quoted, the double quotes are dropped after the demonstrative pronoun “this” [I have one fear and it is this] whose cataphoric reference in the next statement is not enclosed between quotation marks. This subtle change in punctuation allows Piglia, as implied author (through the voice of Emilio Renzi, who is in turn reporting this speech by Luciano Ossorio) to suggest his own fears at present, that is, in 1980. The quotation is successful because, without too much stridency, it allows the juxtaposition of three voices (and thereby of three different temporalities) in only one utterance (Piglia’s in 1980, Emilio’s in 1976 and Luciano’s referring to the times before 1976). This juxtaposition of voices and temporalities is also achieved by keeping throughout the statements the present simple tense as in “But I have just one fear . . . and it is this” and “finally grasping it and being unable to express it”, a tense the narrator can only maintain through direct speech quotation. This use of the present tense also conveys the characters’ utopian hope that it will once again be possible to hold an open, frank dialogue on national issues once democracy and justice are restored. In fact, the whole novel is predicated on this assumption as the following extract from a letter that Marcelo Maggi wrote to Luciano Ossorio shows:

En fin, quería decirle, en estas nuevas circunstancias del país me encuentro un poco desorientado respecto de mi futuro inmediato. Distintas complicaciones se me avecinan y preveo varios cambios de domicilio. Estuve pensando que por el momento lo mejor va a ser pasarle el Archivo (con los documentos y las notas y con los capítulos que ya he redactado), a alguien de mi entera confianza. Esa persona podría, llegado el caso, llevar el trabajo delante, terminar de escribirlo, darle los últimos toques, publicarlo, etc. Para mí se trata antes que nada, de garantizar que estos documentos se conserven porque no sólo han de servir (a cualquiera que sepa leerlos bien) para echar luz sobre el pasado de nuestra desventurada república, sino para entender también algunas cosas que vienen pasando en estos tiempos y no lejos de aquí. (2001, p. 64)

Anyway, what I wanted to tell you is that given the new circumstances in which this country finds itself, I am feeling rather uncertain about my immediate future. Various complications are in store for me and I anticipate a number of changes of address. I was thinking that for the moment the best thing would be to pass on the Archive (with the documents and notes and the chapters that I have already written) to someone in whom I have complete confidence. That person could even, if necessary, carry on with the work, finish writing it, give it the last touches, publish it and so forth. It's a question for me (above all) of guaranteeing that these documents are preserved, not only because they will be useful (to anyone who knows how to read them properly), casting a light on the past of our unfortunate republic, but also in order to understand some things that are happening in our time and not very far from here. (1994, p. 70)

Maggi is thus named in the novel as inheriting the Archive and thereby, implicitly, as inheriting a whole intellectual tradition not based on blood ties and property but on ideological affinity, as was argued before. Santiago Colás has also explored this theme in the novel by opposing or contrasting the “oblique” genealogy of resistance represented by Renzi, Maggi and the Senator, to the oppressive patriarchal lineage of the military history of Argentina, which is based on the model of the traditional Christian family values (1994, p. 129). The resistance inheritance is first and foremost a cultural one, that is, it is a cultural archive or reservoir of a tradition of struggles and political dissidence, marked, more often than not, by exile and death, by counter-hegemonic histories and repressed stories and voices. As Fornet has commented of *Respiración artificial*: “la novela está poblada por personajes marginados de los centros geográficos y culturales . . . Así, algunos de los puntos más recurrentes de la novela —la automarginación y el exilio, la *ostranenie*, la pérdida del lenguaje— no serían sino metáforas o formas de expresar el destierro, la exclusión, lo indecible, la historia heterónoma, etc.” [The novel is populated by characters marginalised from the cultural and geographical centres . . . Thus, some of the most recurring themes of the novel—exile and self-imposed marginality, *ostranenie*, the loss of the mother tongue—are metaphors or images for representing banishment, exclusion, proscription, the heteronomous history, etc.] (2007, p. 73).

Thus, in *Artificial Respiration*, in the face of death, censorship or oblivion and impunity, someone must carry the work forward and the person chosen in the novel is obviously Renzi, and together with him, those readers “who will know how to read this [archive] properly” (1994, p. 70), as Maggi says. The archival preservation of “discarded” or “ec-

centric” historical materials encoded in fiction is therefore part of this rescuing project that needs to be carried on and to endure. Simple linguistic strategies like the use of deixis in this passage (pass on *these* documents to someone, *that* person, not far from *here*, etc.) activate the hermeneutic dimension insofar as these deitics ambiguate time and space enough so that the “new circumstances” alluded to could be in fact, those of 1980, when the frequent changes of address were common for those who were trying to escape torture and death, and the clandestine detention centres were always located “not very far from here”.

But the passage can also thus be read now (in 2008) with the knowledge of what was happening then in 1980, when Piglia wrote it, or in 1976, when “it all began”. On return to democracy, in fact, one of the main battles fought against the legacy of the repression has been the recovery of the documents and records of the illegal centres of detention that confirm the identity and whereabouts of the victims. The destruction of documents which were proof or evidence of the savagery committed by the junta has been recognised by Piglia himself as being at the heart of genocidal practices in Argentina:

Desde las guerras de la Independencia, una de las grandes tradiciones de la literatura argentina ha sido la lucha por el archivo ... Uno de los elementos que prueba el carácter genocida de la dictadura es la destrucción de documentos en el momento de acción, prueba de su doble conciencia y doble legitimidad. Esta lucha por el archivo, el intento de los vencedores de borrar y destruir documentos es un elemento a tener en cuenta [en la relación entre ficción y memoria histórica].<sup>2</sup> (Bracketed addition mine).

Ever since the wars of Independence, one of the greatest traditions of Argentine literature has been the struggle over the archive ... One of the elements that proves the genocidal nature of the dictatorship is the destruction of documents in the moment of action, which proves their double conscience and double legitimacy. This struggle over the archive, the attempt of the victors to wipe away and destroy documents is an element to be borne in mind [when considering the links between fiction and historical memory].

Piglia made this statement at the opening talk for the Jornadas de Memoria y Ficción Histórica which was the inaugural event at the Haroldo Conti Memory Cultural centre

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<sup>2</sup>Juan Manuel Bordón (2008). “La ESMA fue escenario de un debate sobre ficción y memoria”. In: *Clarín* (11th Aug. 2008). URL: <http://www.clarin.com/diario/2008/08/11/sociedad/s-01734815.htm> (visited on 25/08/2008).

in ESMA on 11 August 2008. The statement underlines the power of culture and of the archive to preserve not only the memory of the defeated and of atrocities committed but also the importance of being able to transmit this memory to the coming generations. So, as the analysis of quotation in *Respiración artificial* has shown, montage, polyphony, textual hybridity and other more subtle textual and discursive devices can be effectively used to rethink the Argentine political tradition from a critical perspective that insists on giving the lie to official or received accounts through its records of defeat, exile and utopia.

In the next section, I explore Piglia's destabilizing strategies as he engages in a cosmopolitan dialogue with Europe, which, unlike Fresán's pastiched reconstructions, successfully raise issues of national identity and political and cultural oppression.

### 6.3 The “European” genealogy of Argentine culture

In the previous section I analyzed how the archive works as a structuring artifice in Piglia's novel which requires the active decoding of at least three levels of narration: firstly, the “historical source”, which is made up of letters, documents, records, etc. that constitute the archive; secondly, the role of the “historians/detectives”, that is, the characters who go in search of marginal stories and clues that will allow them to make sense of the archive (Maggi, Renzi), and thirdly, the different “interpreters”, who read and decode those documents from different vantage points (Tardewsky, the reader of the novel). Another deconstructive/reconstructive strategy *Respiración artificial* develops on the surface story is a literary discussion of the sorts of tensions that arise when European culture is “transposed”, “grafted” or “translated” into the social and political coordinates of a peripheral country. Historically, and unlike other post-colonial cases, however, this transposition did not entail a “erasure” of or a “juxtaposition” with a previous archaic or premodern culture, but created a field of cultural forces that had to be contested without making reference to a legitimating “indigenous” past. It is this artificially-created gap or void at the centre of Argentine culture that came to be filled by European culture giving rise to the notion that an Argentine tradition had to be created “from scratch”.

In fact, the conscious adoption and propagandising of European cultural values that Sarmiento carries out in his *Facundo: Civilización o Barbarie en las Pampas Argentinas* [Facundo: Or, Civilization and Barbarism] has been interpreted not simply as an attempt to indoctrinate the masses of “barbarians” but rather as an attempt to establish the 1880s elite's cultural and political legitimacy and supremacy within the emerging and

newly-forming Argentine civil society. In the novel, however, Piglia unsettles any reductive cultural and political opposition between civilization and barbarism by confronting the positive term of the Self/Other antithesis with its own internal contradiction. In the process of establishing this dialectical tension, Argentine culture, politics and identity are read “against the grain” thus showing how all political and cultural hegemonies can be irreverently challenged.

In the following excerpts, a debate over the construction of Argentine identity based on the crossings between national and foreign cultural sources emerges by way of a discussion on literature and history between Renzi and Tardewsky, the Professor’s Polish friend:

Esos europeos, decía el profesor, habían logrado crear el mayor complejo de inferioridad que ninguna cultura nacional hubiera sufrido nunca ... Pedro de Angelis era el primero, decía el profesor, le digo a Renzi ... Frente a él, Echeverría, Alberdi, Sarmiento, parecían copistas desesperados, diletantes corroídos por un saber de segunda mano. Yo era, según Maggi, el último eslabón de esta cadena: un intelectual polaco que había estudiado filosofía en Cambridge con Wittgenstein y que terminaba en Concordia, Entre Ríos, dando clases privadas. En este sentido, le digo, mi situación le parecía al profesor la metáfora más pura del desarrollo y la evolución subterránea del europeísmo como elemento básico en la cultura argentina desde su origen. (2001, pp. 102–103)

Those Europeans, the Professor said, had managed to create the greatest inferiority complex that any national culture has ever suffered ... Pedro de Angelis was the first one, the Professor would say, I tell Renzi ... In comparison to him Echeverría, Alberdi, Sarmiento all seemed like desperate copyists, dilettantes consumed by second-hand knowledge. I was, according to Maggi, the last link in that chain: a Polish intellectual who had studied philosophy in Cambridge with Wittgenstein and who ended up in Concordia, Entre Ríos, giving private lessons. In this sense, I tell him, my situation seemed to the Professor like the purest metaphor of the development and secret evolution of Eurocentrism as the cornerstone of Argentine culture since its inception. (1994, pp. 110–111)

The proper names mentioned in the passage (Pedro de Angelis, Rosas, Echeverría, Alberdi and Sarmiento) form a network of cultural referents not only of the Argentine political and intellectual tradition of the nineteenth century but also of the Europeans

that were incorporated into the social fabric of the country through immigration after the 1880s. The excerpt illustrates the thesis that the European intellectual (a synecdoche for European and Western culture at large), once installed in Argentina, came to incarnate universal, revered knowledge, and to be used politically as an ostentatious mechanism of self-legitimation. This positioning of European culture and modernity at the centre of a national cultural and political debate in a peripheral country like Argentina is what Tardewsky comes to identify as the genealogy of Argentine culture.

In terms of form, the use of indirect speech quotation, in phrases like “the Professor would say, I tell Renzi” and “according to Maggi”, suggests a rejection of any notions of originality and origin (and thereby of legitimating authority) as the speaking voice is constantly being recycled by a proliferation of enunciators (the Professor, Tardewsky and Renzi). As Idelber Avelar has argued, Piglia’s novels tend to this “anonymity” of the voice through a constant recycling of speech because “all anonymity has something utopian about it” (1999, p. 101). That is, the citation of “absent” voices (such as the Professor’s) reintroduces a collective or social dimension into the narrative as cultural projects, ideas, and thoughts are handed down or passed on from one person to another. In this way, previous literary and cultural referents are recuperated as part of a collective palimpsest of social discourses that is also the site of socio-political debate. What is utopian about this discursive strategy is the notion that, first of all, the archive or cultural memory endures, that is, it is passed on to the future, to future speakers and listeners; and secondly, that through this temporal continuity, the act of enunciating—in all its historical and spatial specificity—also changes the message adding new meanings or becoming open and permeated by the present of the utterance. The past, then, is no longer seen as a burden weighing like a nightmare on the brain on the living, but as offering a reservoir, an archive, or a site of potential subversion. Citation thus becomes Piglia’s favourite postmodernist “homeopathic” strategy (Jameson and Stephanson 1989, p. 59) as it turns the central or monologic appropriation of discourse of the cultural and economic elite and of the repressive state at different times in Argentine history against itself as the following analysis shows:

El europeísmo, dijo Renzi ... empieza ya con la primera página del *Facundo*: texto fundador de la literatura argentina. ¿Qué hay ahí? Dice Renzi. Una frase en francés: así empieza. Como si dijéramos la literatura argentina se inicia con una frase escrita en francés ... El gesto político no está en el contenido de la frase, o no está solamente ahí. Está, sobre todo, en el hecho de

escribirla en francés. Los bárbaros llegan, miran esas letras extranjeras escritas por Sarmiento, no las entienden: necesitan que venga alguien y se las traduzca. ¿Y entonces? dijo Renzi. Está claro, dijo, que el corte entre civilización y barbarie pasa por ahí. (2001, p. 119)

Eurocentrism, said Renzi ... starts with the first page of *Facundo* ... foundational text of Argentine literature. What does it consist of? asked Renzi. A phrase in French: that's how it starts ... The political gesture is not in the content of the phrase, or not only in that content. It is, above all, in the fact of writing it in French. The barbarians arrive, look at those foreign words written by Sarmiento, fail to understand them: they have to get someone to come and translate them. And then? asked Renzi. It's clear, he said, that the line between civilization and savagery runs right there. (1994, p. 128)

The passage illustrates a vision of Argentine culture as one that is from its very inception fractured and torn by cultural difference but, at the same time, in permanent dialogue with a dominant tradition of a European high culture from which the Argentine political elite attempts to borrow its legitimacy. Tomás Eloy Martínez also shares this view of Argentine culture. For the writer: "In the founding images [of the Argentine past], civilization and barbarity are interlaced, or alternatively displace each other. The story of Argentina has always moved within the compass of this fatal pendulum, which left no space for a spectrum of greys. Civilization either occupies the whole horizon of the story, or else it cedes its place to barbarity" (1999, p. 3, parenthetical addition mine). Thus, one of the greatest literary achievements of both these writers has been precisely the search and exploration of those greys areas between civilization and barbarism.

In Piglia's passage, for example, Sarmiento's *Facundo* is exposed as repressing its own ideological role in shaping social distinction and class legitimation, between the barbarians who cannot read French and the educated, "lettered" elite who can. The unsettling of the ideologeme of civilization thus makes manifest cracks and fissures and shatters any notion of a singular or pure national identity through ironic intervention. As Homi Bhabha puts it, "the problem [of post-colonial identity] is not simply the "selfhood" of the nation as opposed to the otherness of other nations. We are confronted with the nation split within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population" (1994, p. 148, parenthetical addition mine). Clearly enough, this implies not only the ethnic and cultural heterogeneity of immigration but also the heterogeneous histories of contending political and class factions

within the nation itself. But this is not all. Piglia further deconstructs the barbarism inside Sarmiento's assumed civilization, thereby adding a touch of grey to Sarmiento's black and white distinction:

Pero resulta que esa frase escrita por Sarmiento (Las ideas no se matan, en la escuela), y que ya es de él para nosotros, no es de él, es una cita. Sarmiento escribe entonces en francés una cita que atribuye a Fourtol, si bien Groussac se apresura . . . a hacer notar que Sarmiento se equivoca. La frase no es de Fourtol, es de Volney. O sea, dice Renzi, que la literatura argentina se inicia con una frase escrita en francés, que es una cita falsa, equivocada. Sarmiento cita mal. En el momento en que quiere exhibir y alardear con su manejo fluido de la cultura europea todo se le viene abajo, corroído por la incultura y la barbarie. A partir de ahí podríamos ver cómo proliferan, en Sarmiento, pero también en los que vienen después . . . esa erudición ostentosa y fraudulenta, esa enciclopedia falsificada y bilingüe. (2001, p. 120)

But it turns out that that phrase written by Sarmiento ("Ideas can't be killed," in the school version), and which for us is his own, isn't his at all but a quotation. So Sarmiento writes a quotation in French, attributing it to Fourtol, although Groussac hastens to clarify . . . that Sarmiento is mistaken. The phrase is not by Fourtol but by Volney. So, Renzi says, Argentine literature begins with a phrase written in French, which is a false, mistaken quotation. Sarmiento misquotes. At the moment he wants to show off, to call attention to his familiarity with European culture, everything collapses, undermined by savagery and a lack of culture. And from that moment we could see the proliferation, in Sarmiento but also in those who follow him . . . of an ostentatious fraudulent erudition, a forged bilingual encyclopædia. (1994, pp. 128–129)

As the passage shows, irony works as a powerful destabilising force first to the imposition of a dominant tradition of Europeanised high culture and, secondly, as a form of counter-politics insofar as Sarmiento's misquotation points to whatever is shameful, embarrassing and illicit within a cultural tradition that thinks of itself as the highest truth and the peak of high culture. If, as Piglia says, Sarmiento can be said to have founded the metaphorical field of forces of the Argentine dominant class in the nineteenth century, then displacing Sarmiento out of this central position through paradox and irony amounts to vindicating the tradition of those who were defeated, silenced and subjected by this hegemony. Thus, if



civilization and barbarism are the two coordinates that define the map of Argentine reality, then the gesture of finding a dialectical tension within the ideologeme of civilization itself (that is, of acknowledging the suppressed or repressed Other(s) within the Self) amounts to making possible the utopian gesture of creating discursive spaces of opposition, dissidence and resistance within given dominant representation of reality.

In both passages, Piglia carries out a clever intervention in the Argentine cultural heritage, which exposes, on the one hand, the violence upon which the literary archive, as a cultural institution is formed; and secondly, the impossibility of literature as a totally autonomous cultural practice that remains totally detached from politics. The nation's foundational fictions, Piglia suggests, are as implicated in the country's social reality and politics as are other non-cultural spheres like its legal and political systems. Along the same lines, Piglia's textual ironies and paradoxes also underscore the importance of a materialist critique of canonicity, best summed up in Walter Benjamin's seventh thesis of history: "Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment" (1999, p. 248).

It is this cautious detachment from the Argentine cultural treasures that allows Piglia to carry out a critique of Sarmiento and of other foundational stories. In this sense, perhaps, Piglia could be said to follow Benjamin's seventh thesis as a method of writing, which, at the same time that it "preserves" or carries along the cultural treasures of the past (Sarmiento, Echeverría, Lugones, Alberdi, etc.), he critically views them with a degree of skepticism that seeks to foreground their repressed histories. In this sense, Brecht's influence on Piglia is undeniable since both favour literary forms that intend to move the receiver from "general passive acceptance to a corresponding state of suspicious inquiry" (Brecht 1964, p. 192). Piglia, then, like Brecht before him, employs textual techniques like irony and paradox in a potentially politically progressive manner, rather than as just a formal (or formally evolutionary) textual strategy to shock the reader into "new" perspectives. Thus, certain European modernist tactics (via Benjamin and Brecht) prove to be part of a valued and useful tradition. That is to say, Piglia's is not a blanket rejection of "Eurocentrism" but rather a useful transposition for cultural critique.

From this perspective, the very act of reinterpreting and recycling the literary/cultural archive may be said to become a utopian form of reading. This is so for various reasons. Firstly, because it entails exposing the text to the new field of social forces of the present

in which the narrative is received and so, for Piglia, “corregir un texto es socializarlo, hacerlo entrar en cierto sistema de normas, ideologías, estilísticas, formales, las que usted quiera, que son sociales” [To correct a text is to socialise it, to introduce it into a system of norms, ideologies, stylistic devices, formal elements, what have you, that are social] (2000*a*, p. 18). Secondly, because, in this sense, Piglia may be seen as continuing the tradition of the vanguard understood not only as a mode of writing that is innovative, eclectic and experimental but also as a mode of reading precursor texts. By offering innovative readings of Argentine history, of its main and most controversial political figures and of the literary tradition, he renews the kinds of arguments that are incorporated into the public sphere (and so do intellectuals and literary critics). Reinterpreting tradition, creating alternative or controversial canons therefore amounts to reading the social context in which those traditions and canons emerged in a different light, and thus, dialectically, potentially to reinterpret social reality from a different vantage point, especially one that was repressed or suppressed in the past.

Piglia’s novel, then, provides several built-in strategies, forms of reading precursor texts that seek a utopian transformation in society. As Piglia has argued “political contexts define ways of reading”.<sup>3</sup> And this is the approach adopted in this thesis as well. In this sense, Piglia makes it very clear that the *Proceso* was not the only act of massive violence in Argentine history but only one of its most brutal and systematic cases. This is why it would be deceptive to interpret Piglia’s novels exclusively as allegories of the *Proceso* since their ultimate concerns are not only the deaths of the “disappeared” but also of all those (the indigenous populations, the peasants, the gauchos, the immigrants, and so on) that have since the nineteenth century configured the “graveyard map” of Argentine history—as we will see also in *The Absent City*. It is this way of thinking historically that Maggi represents in the novel. For Maggi “there is no way of being lucid other than thinking in terms of history . . . How could we bear the present . . . if we didn’t know that it was no more than a historical present?” (1994, p. 186).

From this historical perspective, the novel itself works as the last stronghold preserving from oblivion the oppositional or dissident voices which were being physically exterminated in the clandestine repression camps, or forced into exile, or pushed to self-imposed silence. It is for this reason, then, that fictions like Piglia’s can still be read as allegories of past defeats but also as narratives that contain the seeds of collective memory without becoming unbearably traumatic or nostalgic. Fictions like Piglia’s, then, refuse to fall into complicit

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<sup>3</sup> Ricardo Piglia, qtd. Daniel Balderston. Introduction to *Artificial Respiration*, Duke UP: 1994.

silence with the catastrophic past of the repressive forces in Argentina and to seek forms of permanent insurrection through the literary imagination. In the following chapter, these strategies of cultural critique are further achieved and reinvented in Piglia's *La ciudad ausente*.

## Writing and memory in Ricardo Piglia's *La ciudad ausente*

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on two literary strategies: firstly, the multiplicity of stories woven in the novel works as a homeopathic “antidote” to a monologic or hegemonic narrative of history; and secondly, the spatial transformation of the city of Buenos Aires (and of other areas of Argentina) into sites of memory and resistance. The chapter shows how Piglia’s *La ciudad ausente* (1992) postulates a kind of discursive resistance that refuses to fall into complicit silence with state repression and that seeks in fiction permanent forms of insurrection. At the same time, fiction becomes the acquisition of history, a means of cognition *on a par* with history proper, geography, and criticism. Piglia’s novel, then, opposes closed off interpretations of the past and imaginatively opens unforeseen possibilities in Argentina.

### 7.2 Counternarratives and conspiracy as resistance

As discussed in chapter one, Hutcheon’s five directions of reference model includes among its categories the intertextual system of reference. In Fresán’s latest novels this system of reference was less used for a political critique than for establishing mirror-like, surface relations between texts. In Piglia’s *La ciudad ausente* [henceforth *The Absent City*], intertextuality fulfills two basic functions. Firstly, it sets the novel in dialogue with the Argentine and European literary traditions by reworking, as Jorge Fornet (2007, pp. 155–197) has pointed out, not only the poetic devices, ideas, and motifs of Argentine writers like Jorge Luis Borges (especially his ideas on translation), Macedonio Fernández (*Museo de la novela de la Eterna*), Roberto Arlt (*Los siete locos*) and Adolfo Bioy Casares (*La*

*invención de Morel*) but also of European and North American writers like James Joyce (*Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*), Edgar Allan Poe (“William Wilson”), Robert Louis Stevenson (especially his *New Arabian Nights* tales) and George Orwell (especially his *Nineteen Eighty-Four* which finds an echo in the novel’s paranoid representation of the surveillance society/state). In the second place, this culturally hybrid literary intertextuality is employed for political critique as the novel’s embedded micro fictions give voice to the stories of the repressed—both peoples and discourses.

As Fornet has argued, the cybernetic machine in *The Absent City* “recupera la memoria colectiva que intenta ser borrada por la maquinaria del Estado. Esa tensión entre la memoria, de un lado, y el olvido y la muerte, del otro, sustenta la novela y la vincula con un conflicto real de la sociedad argentina” [recovers collective memory at the precise moment when state machinery attempts to erase it. This tension between memory, on the one hand, and death and forgetting, on the other, structures the novel and links it with real conflicts in Argentine society] (2007, p. 155). As Fornet reminds us, the novel is connected to concrete conflicts in Argentina: two years before *The Absent City* was published, for example, President Menem pardoned the military leaders thereby initiating the era of impunity based on reconciliation. In this sense, the machine then recycles fictional (but historically plausible or true) stories to counteract the overwhelming silence and repression not only of the 1970s but also of the 1990s.

Feminist critic Joanna Page has seen in the Scheherazade figure of the story-telling cyborg a relation between fiction and authority, and between narrative and politics. In her article “Writing as Resistance in Ricardo Piglia’s *La ciudad ausente*” (2004), Page argues that Piglia’s works “announce the inseparability of questions of aesthetic organization from the dynamics of authority in political and social contexts, seeking to negotiate a form of resistance from within the all-powerful web of images and texts woven by the modern, paranoid state” (2004, p. 343). This means, for Page, that in postdictatorship Argentina, Piglia’s writing “suggests a new potential in postmodernism for radical social critique” (2004, p. 343). The cyborg machine of the novel, therefore, becomes a strategy for emancipation as feminist Donna Haraway has claimed in her theory about cyborg identity. For Haraway, “cyborg writing is about the power to survive . . . on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other. The tools are often stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities” (1991, p. 175).

The tools that Elena, the cyborg machine in *The Absent City*, seizes are not only those

of a cosmopolitan and Argentinian literary tradition, but also of the representations of “real” (rather than merely literary or fabulated) conflicts in Argentina. With regard to the first one, the literary tradition, Fornet has said that “la máquina funciona como una suerte de alegoría de la literatura argentina, esa que fue armándose a partir de una estrategia de “plagios” y traducciones” [The machine functions as a sort of allegory of Argentine literature, which grew out of plagiarisms and translations] (2007, p. 165). This strategy, which consists of innovative appropriations, is a characteristic of anti-realist writing (since it emphasises fiction as fiction) as well as the opposite of a testimonial approach to writing based on true (i.e. non-fictional) remembrance. As such, then, the machine’s recycling of western cultural tradition is antithetical to its role of uncovering the truths masked by the censorship of the repression years. But, in tension with this, the machine also recycles true names and events, thereby coming close to a fictional representation of reality that, although not mimetic (as in literary realism), is still very serious about its intended truthfulness. Thus, both anti-realist art (fiction as endlessly reproducing fiction) and the truthful (but non-mimetic) representation of real historical persons and events are deemed in the novel as appropriate vehicles to access the truth of experience.

The machine also poses through its multiple stories the tensions and conflicts between the cultured and popular languages by recycling not only the oral stories of the gauchos and peasants (“La Grabación”/“El Gaucho Invisible”) but also reworking well-known high cultural referents (James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake*, for example, in “The Island”). With regard to the “real” (i.e. historical chronicle) conflicts of Argentina, the cyborg can be said to “homoeopathically” recycle, reverse, and displace the official lies manufactured by the junta’s intelligence services. The reverse side of the junta’s story was offered, in the 1970s, by the denunciations and reports of the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, which the junta dismissed as the hallucinated ravings of mad women or else as the work of subversives who, according to the junta, were probably enjoying themselves in Europe while their mothers were crying for them at the Plaza. In the novel, the repressed reality of the clandestine centres of detention is woven into the fictional fabric firstly through the “mad” ravings of strong female characters such as the speech given by “la arrepentida” Julia Gandini, the drug-induced confessions of Elena when she is at Dr. Arana’s clinic (Arana was the name of a clandestine detention centre in Buenos Aires), and the stream-of-consciousness monologue of Elena the cyborg as she stands alone on a beach. Different female characters, then, both literary and historical, like Amalia (main character in José Mármol’s novel), Elena (Macedonio Fernández’s *Museo de la novela de la*

*Eterna*), Eva Perón, Molly Bloom (*Ulysses*), Ana Livia Plurabelle (*Finnegan's Wake*) and Hipólita (Roberto Arlt's *Los Lanzallamas*) are fused with other more "anonymous" voices. Again we see the plurality of voices as a form of resistance to the monologic discourse of the repressive state.

In addition to the multiplicity of voices, the novel also reworks the cultural tradition. "Para un escritor", Piglia has said, "la memoria es la tradición. Una memoria impersonal, hecha de citas, donde se hablan todas las lenguas" [For a writer, memory is tradition. An impersonal memory, made up of *citas*, where all languages are spoken] (1992, p. 62). Las "citas" (with all the meanings this word has in Spanish: quotations/citations/appointments) that are incorporated into the novel are thus both fictional and real and it is the fusion of all these voices that makes up a rich, complex tapestry that is "hybrid" in three senses: first, in its crossing of the real and the fictional as two distinct but interrelated spheres or dimensions; second, in its crossings between popular and high cultural elements; and third, in its crossings between the Argentine literary tradition and the North American and European ones. Unlike Fresán's more purely textual approach, then, Piglia's Argentine/cosmopolitan literary tradition is coupled with references to Argentina's political and social reality, and both dimensions together give substance to what Fornet terms "la poética del complot" [a poetics of conspiracy] (2007, p. 182), where a secret plan and a sense of paranoia become the literary equivalents to the social and political antagonisms and tensions of the repressive modern nation state.

In fact, for Piglia, the theme of conspiracy forms the basis of the Argentine literary tradition. For him, "Los escritores actuales buscamos construir una memoria personal que sirva al mismo tiempo de puente con la tradición perdida. Para nosotros, la literatura nacional tiene la forma de un complot: en secreto, los conspiradores buscan los rastros de la historia olvidada" [We, contemporary writers, seek to reconstruct a memory that, while personal, also acts a bridge with the lost tradition. For us, national literature is shaped like a secret plot: in secret, the conspirators look for the traces of a forgotten history] (1992, p. 66). Fornet has also concluded that *The Absent City* is above all "la historia de un complot múltiple—urdido en sus polos opuestos—tanto por la atroz maquinaria del Estado como por el más insignificante de los ciudadanos, y en el que se disputa el dominio de la memoria" [the history of a multiple conspiracy—conceived at opposite ends—both, by the atrocious state machinery and by the most insignificant of its citizens, and where the dominion over memory is permanently being disputed] (Fornet 2007, p. 201). Thus, memory and conspiracy are the main narrative thematic axes in *The Absent City*, as they allow for

counter-narratives to be created amid the repressive state machinery and, through them, for potential multiple worlds to become possible or at least thinkable. It is in this sense that intertextuality can, potentially at least, help develop an emancipatory critique. Through comparison and contrast, and through narrative and counter-narrative, as a critique of power and repression is structurally built into the novel.

One illustrative example of how this works in the novel is the embedding of the testimonies of real-life repression survivors and witnesses (found for example in the *Nunca Más* report), which get intertextually reworked into the machine's stories. One of the most illustrative examples is the testimony of José Julián Solanille (File No. 1568, *Nunca Más* report), which gets reworked into the fictional narration of Don Monti in "La Grabación". Contrast these two versions with the official lies of Jorge Rafael Videla, and Roberto Viola, heads of the military Junta in 1977 and 1978 respectively:

Testimony of José Julián Solanille—File No 1568 *Nunca Más* report

After the March 1976 coup I went to work as usual as an agricultural labourer in a place beside the La Perla [clandestine concentration] camp called Loma del Torito [El Torito Hill]. Around May that year I saw a pit measuring about 4 metres square and 2 metres deep. One Sunday I saw ten or fifteen cars arriving, including two white Ford Falcons. In one of these I noticed General Menéndez, Commander of the 3rd Army Corps . . . A little later I went out into the fields driving my cattle and on the way I met a neighbour called Giuntolo, who worked a piece of land nearby. He told me that he wanted to find out whether the rumours he had heard were true, that there were ditches there where they buried people . . . We heard loud gunfire. When we saw the cars near the ditch there was a large group of people on its edge who seemed to have their hands tied behind their backs and their eyes blindfolded or covered with glasses painted black. The next day I returned to the place and saw that the pit had been filled in, and that there was a lot of earth left over. I would guess that the number of people shot on this occasion was over fifty. (*Nunca Más (Never Again)* 1986, p. 211)

(Don Monti's voice in "The Recording" in *The Absent City*)

I've seen things that make me want to start life all over again, without any memories . . . But it's no use, if you leave, your memories still go with you.



They killed them like sparrows, running, hooded, what can a person do, their hands tied, they would shoot them from only two metres away and throw them in the pits, then they would come with bulldozers and cover the graves, sometimes they even made the wretches shovel the ditch themselves before killing them ... El Torito Hill, what is known as El Torito Hill ... they did everything at night and in the morning, with the frost, the squares, the white horror ... It was an unmeasurable map of crowded pits in that large prairie, that's what I say. I couldn't tell you how many, but I figure easily over seven hundred, seven hundred and fifty ... this is the map of hell ... The ground was a map ... of unmarked graves. (2000*b*, pp. 31–36)<sup>1</sup>

Jorge Rafael Videla, 22 December 1977, *Gente* magazine.

I categorically deny that there exist in Argentina any concentration camps or prisoners being held in military establishments beyond the time absolutely necessary for the investigation of a person captured in an operation before they are transferred to a penal establishment. (*Nunca Más (Never Again)* 1986, p. 53)

Roberto Viola, 7 September 1978

There are no political prisoners in Argentina, except for a few persons who may have been detained under government emergency legislation and who are really being detained because of their political activity. There are no prisoners being held merely for being political, or because they do not share the ideas held by the government. (*Nunca Más (Never Again)* 1986, p. 53)

As the first two passages show, there is a clear intertextual relation between Piglia's *The Absent City* and this testimony of the *Nunca Más* report, so that the reality of the latter is transferred into the figurative and allegorical language of the former (map of hell, the white horror). Both accounts share the characters (peasants who were in charge of the farm animals and became witnesses of the massacres), the site (el Torito Hill, near the clandestine detention centre of La Perla, in Córdoba), and the pits where the massacred bodies were thrown and then covered with lime (hence the reference to the white horror of the pits). Also, in the same way as the testimonies of the peasants stand, in the novel,

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<sup>1</sup>From now on all quotations in English are from Ricardo Piglia (2000*b*). *The Absent City*. Trans. Sergio Waisman. Durham: Duke University Press.

in blatant contradiction with the words of Dr. Arana and the police (“The White Nodes”), the *Nunca Más* testimonies in real life give the lie to the press statements by Videla and Viola. The *Nunca Más* report also explains how the deaths in “armed confrontation” of many political activists, union delegates, university students’ representatives, and workers were often “staged” by the army.<sup>2</sup> These people were “Montonerised”, that is to say, they were labelled as subversive and evidence against them was manufactured in printing presses operated in clandestine camps such as ESMA and La Perla and later on published in the national press and broadcasted on national TV to give the impression, firstly, that the deaths of those people had been somehow “legally” conducted (that is, that they had died whilst involved in acts of subversion or armed confrontation) and secondly, to convince people that the fight against subversion was carried out on an “equal” footing on both fields.

The section of the novel that is entitled “The White Nodes” presents Dr. Arana’s clinic, the press, and the police as a technocratic police state, where memory and history have been abolished to allow for the free circulation of commodities, and where the populace is controlled through televisual feedback and psychiatrists are the inheritors of the techniques and know-how of erstwhile torturers. This implies a Baudrillardian view of the postmodern, free-market, globalized, capitalist polis as engaged in a ferocious simulation of the real. CCTV camera circuits, TV screens and police patrol are all well allegorised in Elena’s description of the clinic: “Each zone had its own control unit and surveillance system. The small cameras were mounted on the ceilings. Elena imagined the closed-circuit and the control room” (2000*b*, p. 60). Dr. Arana allegorises both, the controlled hallucinations of the populace through a censored media (“The Clinic was the inner city and each person saw what they wanted to. No one seemed to have their personal memories” (Piglia 2000*b*, pp. 60–61)) and the doctors who participated and aided the torturing of detainees in the clandestine centres of repression:

– “It will be necessary to work on your memory”, Arana said ... “It will be necessary to work on your brain” ... They were going to operate on her ... She thought about the Tano, running away from Rosario, saying he belonged to the PRA, the People’s Revolutionary Army, but the PRA no longer existed. She pictured him going in and out of detox clinics, lost in a virtual reality,

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<sup>2</sup> See the section in *Nunca Más* on trade unionists and agrarian labour representatives (1986, pp. 368–385, English version; 2006, pp. 226–250 and pp. 378–393 in Spanish version).

hidden in clandestine houses and getting caught again, evading the controls, living in subways [...]

– “Take it easy”, he said. “If you want to be cured, you have to collaborate with us. The captain will help you remember. He is a specialist in artificial memory”.

– “Madam”, the officer said, “we would like to know who Mac is”. They knew everything. She had to escape ... They seemed to know more than she did. She was lying on an iron bed, she had the sensation of being opened up and felt the freezing air from the fan on her bones [...]

– “We are going to have to use electric shock treatment on her,” Arana said to the doctor with the baby face.

– “Listen”, Elena said, “In the cellars of the Mercado del Plata ... there is an English photographer, Grete Muller. She works for the rebels”.

– “We know”, Arana said, “we want names and addresses”. (Piglia 2000*b*, pp. 62–70)

The passage semiotically condenses many phrases and codes of the repression years. From the notion of “operating theatres” as the torture rooms were called, to the references to the “iron bed” on which detainees were given electric shock or “treatment”. The idea of “collaborating” with the torturers also recalls the detainees who were “broken” and forced to patrol the streets to identify their rebel partners (like Julia Gandini in the novel) or who were forced to work in the clandestine detention centres’ presses. The specific reference to the artificial memory is probably an allusion to this and to the idea that the junta controlled the reality principle insofar as they controlled the press with the help of the police and the silent complicity of many journalists:

The officer smiled. They wanted to control the principle of reality [...] – The police—he said—are completely removed from all fantasies. We are reality. We are constantly obtaining true confessions and revelations. We care only about real events. We are servants of the truth. (Piglia 2000*b*, pp. 78–80)

The manufacturing of lies of the repressive state is allegorically counteracted by the machine’s reproduction of the stories that the state represses like that of Don Monti in “The Recording”. Junior, the investigative reporter/amateur detective, is the one who

obtains the tapes and copies of the machine's stories through a clandestine underground network of resistance, which functions extra-textually as the fictional "other" or reverse of the historically real military clandestine press operations. This intertwining of fictional and real codes, allusions and references thickens the multiply-layered plot of the novel. As Fornet has said "la historia le agrega cuerpo" a la literatura [history gives substance/body to literature], and although fiction and reality cannot be confused, "la ficción no necesita de ésta, pero no puede traicionar a aquella" [fiction does not need reality but cannot do without it] (2007, p. 204).

Piglia has also reinterpreted this connection between the state and art or culture in terms of oppressor and oppressed. As he has said: "el espacio femenino y el espacio político . . . o si ustedes quieren, la Novela y el Estado. Dos espacios irreconciliables y simétricos. En un lugar se dice lo que en el otro lugar se calla. La literatura y la política, dos formas antagónicas de hablar de lo que es posible" [The feminine space and the political space . . . or, if you want, the novel and the state. Two irreconcilable and symmetrical spaces. One says what the other space tries to silence. Literature and politics: two antagonistic forms of speaking about the possible] (2000*a*, p. 129). These ideas of a double and interconnected space, one political, and another artistic or cultural represented by the novel, rehearse this thesis's initial argument in chapter one that both instrumental knowledge and cultural and artistic knowledge are essential to develop self-reflexivity and an emancipatory critique.

Another semiotic dimension running through the novel are all the negative images or images of death (such as the pits, the corpses, the map of hell, the graveyard, etc., in Don Monti's story). These appear as elements of negativity that need avenging in the future, an interpretation that recalls Esther Leslie's description of Benjamin's concept of negativity as redemption:

There is a readiness [in Benjamin] to take illustrations of negativity—death, corpses, destructive characters—as tokens of redemption . . . Benjamin perceives writing about the past as a form of avenging . . . From the ruins other configurations emerge. The losers, not the victors, get their chance to form patterns . . . In cracking open the idea of the pastness of the past, the "once upon a time" attitude, and in wresting the past away from the single ruling-class narrative of history, the construction of a dialectical concept of historical time is made possible . . . This is the moment of transformational possibility. Transforming the interpretation of the past opens the field for the transformation of the future. (2000, pp. 200–201, bracketed addition and italics mine)

The losers, allegorically represented in the novel by the characters in the machine's stories, get their chance to form the patterns, that is, to create and recreate the histories of their oppression and rescue them from the silence and oblivion of the repressive state. Thus, the redemptive transformation of the future rests less on a negatively mournful interpretation of the past than on the very idea of "cracking it open", of giving voice to what has been silenced and repressed through death and terror and of making possible a dialectical concept of historical time. The cyborg's multiple stories of the oppressed, then, not only represent an active cultural memory, but also make a clarion call to "avenge" those deaths through denunciation, justice and truth. Of course, as explained in chapter one, the need for denunciation, justice and truth needs to be read not only in the context of the dictatorship, and of the novel's date of publication, in 1992, when the Amnesty Laws were being promulgated, but also in the more recent context of reception of 2008, when Generals Menéndez and Bussi (in charge of La Perla clandestine detention camp mentioned in Juan Solanille's testimony, for example) have been condemned to life imprisonment.<sup>3</sup> The multiple connections that can be established through different times of reading (the dictatorship, 1992, and 2008) help "crack open" the pastness of the past and form new patterns of meaning in real life as well, specially as we can seek some form of redemption in the current trials to the repressors and the publicising of their crimes in the media.

In the following section I take up this notion of redemption and hope through an analysis of German philosopher Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*.

### 7.3 The untapped emancipatory potential of tradition

To have a hopeful notion of redemption through justice and truth, as we saw in the previous section, recalls Ernst Bloch's theorizing of utopia in *The Principle of Hope* (1986), where he invokes the "not-yet-conscious" [the preconscious dimension in both past and future] as a source of future hope and sees the cultural tradition as containing untapped emancipatory potential. This notion of cultural tradition is not unlike that of Piglia's, for whom "si la política es al arte de lo posible, el arte del punto final, entonces la literatura es su antídoto" [if politics is the art of the possible, the art of the full stop, then literature is its cure] (Piglia 2000a, p. 131). That is, both politics and culture can have emancipatory potential that needs to be released. If a critique of ideology is not merely about unmask-

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<sup>3</sup>See "Prisión perpetua para Bussi y Menéndez" (2008). In: *Página/12* (28th Aug. 2008). URL: <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/ultimas/20-110533-2008-08-28.html> (visited on 18/11/2008).

ing or demystification but also about revealing emancipatory potential, then *The Absent City* makes of the past and of tradition (understood as the tradition of the oppressed) a repository of a potential for change that is teachable and therefore transmissible to future generations. Habermas's words about restoration also come to mind here: "what Bloch wants to preserve for socialism, which subsists on scorning tradition, is the tradition of the scorned" (1969, p. 634). But this tradition, instead of being "monumentalized" or "memorialized" in frozen or reified form as so many tokens of past defeats, is interpreted as a reservoir of latent potential for transforming the future.

Furthermore, from the point of view of time, Bloch's notion of history as a repository of experience is valued by critics and philosophers Douglas Kellner and Harry O' Hara as urging us to grasp the three dimensions of our temporality. As they say: "He offers us a dialectical analysis of the *past* which illuminates the *present* and can direct us to a better *future*" (1976, p. 16, emphasis in original). In effect, in *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch asserts that new meanings and fresh synthetic combinations (allegorically like the machine's stories) can be extracted from the rethinking of the past, precisely because this thinking—like history itself—is not yet finished, and is to be discovered and inherited by each succeeding generation: "only thinking directed towards changing the future and informing the desire to change it does not confront the future (the unclosed space for new development in front of us) as embarrassment and the past as spell" (1986, p. 8). For Bloch, the cultural works of the past may thus be said to contain the premonitory and pre-figurative images of the next stage of society. Something very like this view is shared by Piglia, for whom "la escritura de ficción se instala siempre en el futuro, trabaja con lo que todavía no es. Construye lo nuevo con los restos del presente" [The writing of fiction is always located in the future, working with what as yet does not exist. It builds the new with the remains of the present] (2000a, p. 14). In a sort of open process, succeeding ages "re-function" the material of the past to suit their ideological requirements, and for all progressive thinking a utopian surplus is carried over into the future. Indeed, in Bloch's vision, such a surplus may lie dormant for centuries before new social conditions recall it and extract its new meaning (Bloch 1986, p. 8). This view resonates throughout *The Absent City* insofar as there is a whole revolutionary past (of anarchism and of active political and social protest, of left-wing Peronism, and of other revolutionary forces) that is preserved in the novel through the machine's storytelling. In this sense, the machine does not recycle any stories, but only those of the "tradition of the scorned" as Habermas (1969, p. 634) puts it.

It is important to ask, however, what has been left of this yearning for utopia in this post-2001 present and whether criticism and culture still have a role in this utopian sort of socialism-to-come. In fact, the failure of the so-called “arte combativo” or “arte militante” (combative or militant art) Canclini spoke of in 1975, eventually proved that art and culture could not actually compensate for Latin America’s political shortcomings or offer a retreat from political defeat either. The question remains, however, how and whether art and culture, as repositories of a tradition of dissent, can feed back into the social and political spheres—both through the current social movements of resistance and human rights, through a rebirth of a leftist disposition as Žižek has recently postulated (2006, 2008), or, more broadly, through a new “internationalism of national situations” or a “global Left public sphere” as Jameson (1991*a*) had previously proposed. In *The Absent City*, for example, Russo is the main bearer of this utopian vision of society that seeks in reality “an open option”, since “that is the logic of experience, always what is possible, what is to come” (2000*b*, p. 14). The field of the possible in language, fiction, and history is allegorically represented in the novel through the reshuffling of the machine’s narratives, implying that a repeated idea, as Bloch had stated in his introduction to *The Principle of Hope*, may have learnt something in the meantime (1986, p. 17).<sup>4</sup> Metaphorically, this process of endless recycling of unrealised hopes into newer contexts offers a dynamic view of time whereby history never repeats itself, but always repeats itself with a difference.<sup>5</sup> A new form of “reading” the past is thereby made possible which works like a “correction” (or a (mis)reading, or second chance) of a supposedly complete but in fact incomplete or unfulfilled past, and this is what for Piglia is the utopian act *par excellence* (2000*a*, p. 18).<sup>6</sup>

The function of the machine, thus, as cipher of this condition of permanent reinvention of the unfulfilled past, is to make sure that the residual traces of those revolutionary hopes endure in time until the conditions for advancing or moving forward a new offensive or counter-attack are given again. Hence the cybernetic nature of Elena in the novel: she must endure through death and time as well as resist oblivion and amnesia—even if it means to lie dormant for decades. This poetic vision of time is best represented in the novel when the cyborg machine is in the white basement of the Museum waiting “like

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<sup>4</sup> “An encyclopædia of hopes often contains repetitions, but never overlappings. . . . The repetitions . . . always occur on a new level, [and] have therefore both learnt something in the meantime and may allow the identical thing they are aiming at to be learned anew” (Bloch 1986, p. 17).

<sup>5</sup> In Bloch’s own words: “History does not repeat itself: yet, wherever something did not become history and did not make history, then history will by all means be repeated” (Bloch 1936 “Criticism in the midst of hand to hand combat”, qtd. Negt 1975, p. 3).

<sup>6</sup> “La corrección es una lectura utópica” [misreading or correcting a text is a utopian act] (Piglia 2000*a*, p. 18).

[Evita's] embalmed corpse" (2000*b*, p. 130, bracketed addition mine)

Por eso quieren aislarme, mantenerme bajo control ... como un cadáver embalsamado ... Me acuerdo ... Evita andaba a los cachetazos con los ministros, Evita Perón, sí, le cruzaba la cara de un cachetazo al ministro del Interior no bien el ministro decía algo levemente despectivo respecto de las clases populares, de los pobres grasas, zas, zas, ida y vuelta, con el envión que llevaba la mano, flaquita y brava ... Eva veía la injusticia social aflorar en los mismos ministerios y se defendía a los cachetazos ... así empezó la Resistencia Peronista. Esas historias han circulado desde el principio, de boca en boca, cuando le vaciaron el cuerpo y la embalsamaron ... en un museo ella también ... interminable construyo el recuerdo pero nada más. Estoy llena de historias, no puedo parar ... hay que salir, cruzar ... extraigo los acontecimientos de la memoria viva, la luz de lo real titila, débil, soy la cantora, la que canta, estoy en la arena, cerca de la bahía, en el filo del agua puedo aún recordar las viejas voces perdidas, estoy sola al sol, nadie se acerca, nadie viene, pero voy a seguir, enfrente está el desierto, el sol calcina las piedras, me arrastro a veces pero voy a seguir, hasta el borde del agua, sí. (2003, pp. 158–168)

That is why they want to keep me isolated, under control ... like an embalmed corpse ... I remember ... Evita slapping the ministers around, yes, she would slap the Minister of the Interior on the face the moment he uttered even the slightest derogatory comment about the working classes, about those poor dregs, slap, slap, across one cheek and the other, with her strong little hand, thin and fierce ... Eva saw the social injustice cropping up in the ministers themselves and defended herself by slapping their faces ... that is how the Peronist Resistance began. These stories have circulated from the beginning, from mouth to mouth, when they emptied out her body and embalmed her ... she's also in a museum ... Endless I create memories, but nothing else, I am full of stories, I cannot stop ... We have to get out, go across ... I pull events out of live memories, the light of the real quivers, weakly, I am the singer, the one who sings, I am on the sand, near the bay, I can still remember the old lost voices where the water laps ashore, I am alone in the sun, no one comes near me, no one comes but I will go on, the desert is before me, sometimes I have



to drag myself, but I will go on, to the edge of the water, I will, yes. (2000*b*, pp. 136–139)

The passage develops an analogy between the machine and Evita as ciphers of hope and as defenders of “a tradition of the scorned”. Notions of endurance and persistence against all odds are also represented in words and phrases like “endless”, “I cannot stop”, “I still remember”, “I will go on”. Hope and endurance together are thus articulated in the final “yes”, an affirmation of life itself. As Bloch said “the most important expectant emotion, the most authentic emotion of longing and thus of self, always remains in all of this—hope” (1986, p. 75). It is, Bloch said, the *no* to the bad situation which exists, and the *yes* to the better life that hovers ahead, which in due time may be yet again incorporated by the deprived and the marginalized into emancipatory interest (1986, p. 75). When asked about the choice of a female cyborg, Piglia answered: “buscaba una forma que me permitiera hacer circular historias múltiples. Escribí la novela a partir de la imagen de una máquina de contar historias, escondida en algún lugar de la ciudad. Después esa máquina se convirtió en una mujer y fue, entonces, un mujer máquina, una Eva futura” [I was searching for a literary device that would allow me to disseminate multiple stories. The novel grew out of this image of a story-telling machine, locked in somewhere in the city. The machine eventually became a woman, a female mechanism, a future Eve].<sup>7</sup> Of course the reference is to both, the biblical Eve but also Eva Perón as the passage above illustrates. As Evita perpetuates herself through an unending series of images (Evita the embalmed corpse, Evita the militant “compañera”, the politician slapping the ministers, the wife of Perón, the “whore”, Eva the primeval woman, etc.), so the text renews itself through the proliferation and dissemination of female proper names (in previous passages: Ana Livia Plurabelle, Amalia, Molly Bloom, Hipólita, etc.) and of narrative threads (“stories that have circulated since the beginning”).

As a mythical figure in the Argentine collective imaginary, Eva Perón represents not only the upsetting of male/female hierarchies (*she* slapped the ministers around and at times was a “bigger” figure than Perón), but also whatever is barbarian and unacceptable in Peronism due to her bastard origins, her lack of culture and education, and in the final stages, the abjection of her cancer. In his analysis of the figure of Eva Perón in Eloy Martínez’s *Santa Evita*, Lloyd Hughes Davies argues that “the historical Eva . . . has been

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<sup>7</sup> Edgardo H. Berg and Nancy Fernández (2003). “La transfiguración”. In: *Página/12* (13th July 2003). Interview with Ricardo Piglia. URL: <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/libros/10-646-2003-07-13.html> (visited on 18/11/2008).

subsumed within another timeless, mythical being who represents the myriad longings and recollections of others" (2000, p. 417), which recalls Piglia's words above: "endless I create memories but nothing else". Evita has become, as Davies claims, "the Babel of endlessly proliferating stories seeking to represent her" (2000, p. 417). Her identity has turned into myth, and myth, in turn, becomes important for keeping the spectre of hope alive in the collective imaginary. Eloy Martínez's description of Eva also recalls the Scheherezade quality of her myth endlessly recycling itself in ever flowing stories: "although no one could see the corpse, people imagined it lying there . . . Little by little Evita began to turn into a story that, before it ended, kindled another. She ceased to be what she said and what she did to become what people say she said and what people say she did" (2005, p. 25).

For Davies, also, Eva represents both the tempting whore and the immaculate Virgin; and her cancer becomes a metaphor for whatever is repugnant and low in the masses, the hordes of barbarians that she attracts (2000, p. 418). As Eloy Martínez says in *Santa Evita*: "Argentines who thought of themselves as the depositaries of civilization saw in Evita an obscene resurrection of barbarism . . . as she wafted by, you had to hold your nose" (2005, p. 77). In representing both civilization and hope, but also barbarism and contamination, Evita, like Perón himself and the Peronist Resistance, become limitless texts/signs in constant motion, ever-resistant to closure. It is their capacity to generate ever-moving texts and reinvent hopeful dreams in the nation's collective memory that awakens the discourse of utopia. As Dr. Pedro Ara [Evita's embalmer] tells Doña Juana, Evita's mother: "Oblivion must be countered by many memories, a real story must be covered up by false stories. Alive, your daughter had no equal, but once dead, what difference does it make? Once dead, she can be infinite" (Martínez 2005, p. 61). And "Martínez" himself in the novel says "if a soul has not been recorded, it is as though it had never existed. Against transience, the written word. Against death, the story" (2005, p. 69).

If Evita as myth and the cyborg as female mechanism represent the victory of memory and of the letter over death and oblivion, then, fundamentally as well, the cyborg in the quoted passage above poses the question of how to extrapolate the machine's recycling of stories and myth into concrete social and political action (or, in the novel, how to take the machine out of the museum where it is kept locked). There is a sense in which the machine can only create stories, but nothing else, and so, in terms of agency, the machine still requires someone (a collective subject supposedly) to do political work with and on

the stories themselves. It is unlikely that the machine, as such, be seen as the “motor” of a revision of the past in the present. Something else is needed to bring agency to the machine. This implies to think of resistance as something more than text, or better still, to find in reality what the text(s) keep alive in the letter and in the collective imagination.

In the context of postdictatorship Argentina, and in the social and political realms, some commentators today have found hope in the emergence of new social actors whose protests came to the fore in the heat of the 2001 crisis. Despite their tremendous impact in the default period, these social movements cannot be celebrated or idealized as “revolutionary” for several reasons. Firstly, because they are still quite “local” or “national” manifestations rather than a generalizable political model for other nations to adopt; and secondly, because the pickets, the factories taken over by workers, and the popular assemblies constitute very effective, but also short term responses, to a concrete historical conjuncture—the impunity and immoral neoliberalism of the 1990s, and the freezing of the middle class’s savings (*corralito y corralón bancarios*) that sparked a hybrid middle-class/popular rebellion not seen in the country for decades. None of these groups, however, have brought, or might ever be able to bring about, macro economic or political changes. In fact, such is the case that some of these social movements and formations have continued while others have waned (like the middle class pot banging protests for example). But, it is true, nonetheless, that these new resistance actors still draw on the mythical mobilizing forces of Evita, Perón, the Peronist Resistance, the anarchists, etc. That is, the new, post-default movements, in their daily politics, draw upon a tradition of social and political dissent, as sociologists Joseph Klesner (2007) and Roberts and Portes (2006) have revealed in their analyses of the picketeer movements and the popular assemblies.

In *The Absent City* Piglia fictionalises this tradition of political and social dissent through key figures like the anarchists Russo, Macedonio, and Enrico Malatesta, the first anarchist gaucho, the figure of Rajzarov, and all the other references to real and fictional social and political actors prior to the 1970s coup. Such resistance, however, is more difficult to find in the context of non-fictional politics, in 1992, when the novel was published, and President Menem’s refusal to annul the amnesty laws, and his open support of what was termed at the time *mano dura* or *gatillo fácil* (easy trigger or tough on crime measures) turned the state and the police into “legal” agents of repression. These “tough on crime measures” passed by government aimed at criminalizing social protests which were reaching a peak of intensity, as GEPSAC’s study reveals: 42% in Menem’s first presidency (1989–1995), and 32% in Menem’s second presidency (2007, p. 31). In fact, the imposition



Figure 7.1: “En Argentina el peor delito es ser joven y pobre”. Argentina Indymedia. 16 December 2007. <http://argentina.indymedia.org/news/2007/12/572279.php>. Last accessed 30 May 2008. The banner reads: “Easy trigger and torture are state crimes”. The slogan cleverly joins state terrorism during the *Proceso* with the easy trigger repression of the Menemist period. This was so because police forces involved in the military repression enjoyed impunity and were allowed to continue working in the police forces in democracy.

of *mano dura*, for example, gave rise to another human rights group formed by the families of easy trigger victims called “Familiares y Amigos de Víctimas de Gatillo Fácil” [Family and Friends of Easy Trigger Victims] (Fig. 7.1).

This image suggests that for anyone reading Piglia’s novel in 1992 the “repression” was still very much alive and had mutated from its cruellest and most surreptitious forms during the dictatorship to new “legal” forms of institutional violence. In this sense, a reading of Piglia’s novel situated in 1992 confirms the novel’s thesis that the *Proceso*’s footprints and traces could still be observable in the present of Argentina in 1992. But as said before, the novel also allows for enduring hope by sustaining the memory of alternative and oppositional realities and discourses. This would imply, from a post-default, post-2001 perspective, a breaking out of historical repetitions. As Patrick Dove has stated

Piglia’s writing is a reflection on history as a horizon for thinking, or as historicity. In the absence of historicity, there can be no insight into the past, nor

can there be a thought of the future as anything but a mere extension of the present. It is historicity, in other words, that contains the possibility of thinking difference or rupture in any given present, at any given moment. (2004, p. 224)

Like Benjamin's "blasting of the continuum of history", a historicizing of events allows us to see the connections between the different histories of the defeated (the Indians, the gauchos, the left, the poor, the under- and un-employed in the default moment) and to seek (in our own complex, heterogeneous and conflicted present) to seize moments of rupture with this oppressive past which are continuous with but seek to convert the history of the defeated into a moment of new hope. That is, one must recognise that the present and its history have alike come into a transformed relationship.

But, in addition to a utopian view of history as that which is waiting to happen in the future, the novel also imaginatively recreates the geographical coordinates of the city's revolutionary past. As feminist poet Adrienne Rich said in her famous 1984 essay "Notes Toward a Politics of Location", we need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history. In the following passage, the geographies of horror and resistance become clearly articulated through the description of Buenos Aires and "the South":

Tenía la grabación que le había dado Renzi. Era el último relato conocido de la máquina. Un testimonio, la voz de un testigo que contaba lo que había visto. Los hechos sucedían en el presente, en el borde del mundo, los signos del horror marcados en la tierra. La historia circulaba de mano en mano en copias y en reproducciones y se conseguía en las librerías de Corrientes y en los bares del Bajo. Junior puso el casete y se dejó llevar por el tono del que había empezado a narrar. Al costado la ciudad se disolvía en la niebla del otoño, mientras el auto tomaba por Leandro Alem hacia el sur. (2003, p. 30)

He had the recording that Renzi had given him. It was the machine's latest known narration. A testimony, the voice of a witness recounting what he had seen. The events occurred in the present, on the edge of the world, the signs of horror marked on the earth. The story circulated in the form of copies and reproductions from hand to hand. It was available in the bookstores on Av. Corrientes and in the bars of the Bajo, the neighbourhood near the port. Junior put in the cassette tape and let himself be carried away by the inflections of the person who began to narrate. Beside him, the city dissolved in the fog of

autumn while the taxi turned down Av. Leandro Alem, heading south. (2000*b*, p. 30)

Once again the passage suggests the notion of preservation of these stories or of an oral Archive as the phrase “circulated . . . from hand to hand” evokes. The system of references is all important to understand Piglia’s politico-geographical allegory in its proper dimension in this paragraph. As the voice of the narrator gives way to the anonymous, disembodied voice of the tape, the story’s two main characters, an anarchist and a gaucho, emerge as the allegorical representatives of the marginalized and the defeated. The spatial coordinates also work as allegories of the city of Buenos Aires: particularly Corrientes street and its famous “subversive” bookstores, Leandro Alem Avenue and “the South”, meaning not only South America but also the southern areas of Buenos Aires and the southern areas nearest to the port, which were in the first half of the twentieth century centres of political dissidence, especially from immigrant anarchists and communists.

These space coordinates are loaded with historical meanings that exceed the mere description of place, since the references also point to specific political and social “knots” of conflict that took place in and around these areas. The bookstores of Corrientes street, for example, used to be centres of strong radical intellectual activity, where many revolutionary groups met to discuss Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, and other radical theorists. During the dictatorship, these bookstores and the universities and intellectual magazines became severely repressed and the state went as far as to burn books and pamphlets in their fight against “the communist threat”. Book burnings took place in Buenos Aires (especially targeted was Eudeba, the University of Buenos Aires’s Publishing House), in public libraries in cities like Córdoba and Rosario (a well-known case are the 55,000 books of Constancio C. Vigil People’s Library in Rosario) and included the destruction of over a million and half titles published by the Centro Editor de America Latina (at the time managed by Boris Spivacow) and by Ediciones de La Flor. The bookstores mentioned in the novel thus allegorically represent the ideological and intellectual persecution of the military junta but at the same time the survival of pockets of cultural resistance. At the time Piglia published *The Absent City*, the process of intellectual repression initiated by the junta had reached new heights through the sale of the last national publishing houses and catalogues to transnational companies, which largely fell into bestseller culture.

In addition to the Corrientes street bookstores, other significant geographical referents mentioned in the novel are the southern parts of Buenos Aires near the port. These were not only the sites where immigrants from different cultural backgrounds met, but also the site

of the “conventillos” [workers’ tenement houses] where much social unrest sprang up. The area also saw the birth of national cultural traditions like tango, but also of political dissent, anarchism, and of the Peronist Resistance in 1955. Immigrants, political exiles, refugees and poor people from the interior provinces lived together in these tenement houses, which soon became sites of strong revolutionary ideas and fierce political dissidence.

In the novel, these two sites (the southern port areas and the Corrientes street bookstores) allegorically represent “dissident” intellectual centres that escape official control and where books, ideas and discourses that were officially proscribed came to be disseminated. Also, the geography of Buenos Aires is represented in the novel as sinister and mysterious and as if submerged in a double life whose underworld is the clandestine resistance. Calle Corrientes, for example, is where the pamphlets and printed copies of the Resistance are made and circulated; and the Avellaneda workshops are where the clandestine tapes (of the oral archive) are recorded. Rather than mere points in the map, then, they are allegorical “sites” or spaces of social and political struggle. As Patrick Dove claims, in *The Absent City*, “literature sets itself a dual task: that of exposing and marking the limits of prior cultural configurations, as well as that of opening new spaces in which to think the future as potential difference, rather than as mere continuation of the present” (2004, p. 238). The utopian, then, needs to find a new spatial as well as historical configuration of dissident politics and social movements. Without cracking open the pastness of the past in both historical and spatial terms, it seems difficult to be able to imagine a different future.

In the next chapter I will explore one more example of early postdictatorial fictions that seem to me to suggest the recovery of a positive or utopian perspective even if, at the same time, they acknowledge past defeats.

## Reconstructing the history of the defeated: Tomás Eloy Martínez's *La novela de Perón*

### 8.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on Tomás Eloy Martínez's *La novela de Perón* (1985) and its account of Perón's biography and of the Ezeiza massacre on 20 June 1973. I analyse not only the novel's dialectical take on history but also its positive or hopeful elements through Walter Benjamin's notion of a "weak" Messianic power. Although the final image of the novel is one of mourning and defeat, the text refuses to foreclose history in that very same defeat by incorporating wishes of hope and utopia.

### 8.2 The eyes of the fly; or dialectical history

In the previous two chapters, the textual strategies of intertextuality, citation and polyphony, and the cultural critique of Europeanism in Argentina were used by Piglia as tools for a complex and multi-layered reconstruction of Argentine cultural, social and political forces. In this chapter I show that both Piglia and Eloy Martínez are writers who explore the links between literature and power in their fictions. As Argentine critic Carolina Zelarayán has pointed out, the link between literature and power "apunta a dos aspectos distintos pero a la vez estrechamente conectados: por un lado, las relaciones de la literatura—como institución—con las instituciones de poder y con las formas políticos-sociales del mismo y, por otro, el poder en sí mismo de lo que la literatura puede" [underlies two distinct but interrelated aspects: on the one hand, the relations between literature—as an institution—and the institutions of power and their social-political formations and, on the other hand, what literature itself, as literature, can do] (1998, pp. 567–568). In Eloy Martínez's novels, especially in *La novela de Perón* (1985) and *Santa Evita* (1995), literature provides a de-



mystifying portrait of some of Argentina's most controversial historical figures and events. This process of demystification of larger than life figures like Evita, Perón, López Rega, Isabelita and many others can be seen as the opposite, says Zelarayán, of “un discurso idealizador [que] ha enraizado, en el espacio social, estereotipos positivos asimilados, sostenidos y transmitidos por el sujeto cultural” and which remain largely unquestioned “hasta que se deconstruyen, revelando el mecanismo que los legitima” [a mystifying discourse that has firmly established positive and idealizing stereotypes in the social sphere which have been assimilated, sustained and passed on by the cultural subject. These images remain largely unquestioned until they are deconstructed and their legitimising mechanisms revealed] (1998, p. 568, bracketed addition mine).

The novel thus both deconstructs and reconstructs the past of General Perón and the violence prior to the coup of 1976 from two opposing perspectives: the Peronist left as represented by the Montoneros, and the criminal wing of the Peronist right represented by Lopez Rega and the Triple A. The novel weaves three distinct narrative threads which eventually converge in the exhaustive reconstruction of 20 June 1973, when a multitude gathered at Ezeiza airport to greet Perón on his return from exile. Thus, a first narrative thread develops the biography of Perón, especially his childhood and his early years as a cadet, in search of keys to the public personality and cult figure he went on to become. This is woven with Martínez's account of the exile years in Madrid, on the one hand, and with the Montoneros's armed resistance in Argentina on the other. This third narrative thread offers to a certain extent a more romanticised or idyllic portrait of the Montoneros as doomed apprentices of the revolution. The book is therefore structured in zigzag form, as the narrative swings and oscillates from one side to the other (from left to right, or from the Montoneros to the extreme right represented by Lopez Rega) as it presents mutually competing or dissenting histories whilst all the time reconstructing Perón's controversial biography. Between the extremes of Montoneros and Lopez Rega, a myriad nuances are provided by the multiple perspectives and voices of journalists (including a fictionalized version of Eloy Martínez himself), friends and relatives of Perón, politicians, ordinary people like Doña Luisa, etc, who are progressively interwoven into the novel's texture.

For Santiago Colás (1994, p. 155), *The Perón Novel* also fictionalises Nietzsche's two types of destructive history: the “monumental” and the “antiquarian”. Whereas in the first one history appears as a series of great men, deeds, and events that serve as models for the present, in the second, history appears as the continuity of the similar across times. There are cases, argues Colás, when both appear as dimensions of the same vision of

history (1994, p. 155). This is indeed the particular case of the Peronist left and of the *Proceso*, the former seeking continuity with Perón's first presidency on his return from exile and failing to see the change that had already taken place in Perón, and the latter seeking continuity in the legitimacy and status of the 1880s generation in Argentina. The antidote Nietzsche prescribed for these histories, Colás reminds us, was parody and interruption. That is, to a monumental history one must respond by pulling the mask away from the great figures and to an antiquarian history one must respond by showing the gaps and breaks in what pretends to be a single, uniform and coherent historical line. Thus, for Colás, both Piglia and Eloy Martínez do this. They represent the underside of official history, and Eloy Martínez, in particular, also unmasks Perón's myth by representing three historical "truths": Perón as a historical protagonist, Perón as an empty historical figure filled in by people's wishes and hopes, and Perón as historical narrator, that is, Perón's own construction of himself (in his speeches and discourses, in his memoirs, etc.).

Despite all this unmasking and demystifying, however, the novel clearly condemns the criminal massacre of Montoneros and of the people who gathered at Ezeiza in 1973 to welcome Perón through a multiplicity of voices that attempt to provide an explanation of the event. The account of Diana Bronstein and Nun Antezana's Operation June 20 is clearly sympathetic and so is the description of the Montoneros's plan to bring back the Socialist/Peronist fatherland. In fact, the chapters that describe Nun and Diana's plan is entitled "The Countermemoirs", thereby suggesting that the underside of "official" history is told in these pages. Whereas for López Rega Operation June 20 is "a conspiracy" plotted by "one or two columns of Montoneros who want "to take over the dais when the General lands at Ezeiza" and "demand the heads of several people (his in particular: they call him 'the sorcerer')" (1998, p. 113), for Nun Antezana and for Diana "the revolution begins today or never" (1998, p. 343). The final representation of the massacre in the last chapter of the novel "Don't let the Sparrows Alight" mixes the hateful speeches and actions of the Triple A and López Rega's snipers with poignant scenes of grief and mourning for the Montoneros' tragic fate.

Half the novel, then, is intent on showing the cruelty of the Triple A death squad as foreshadowing the violence to come of the *Proceso*. Death squads had started their action under the military government of President Lanusse. They were set up by right-wing Peronist leaders from the trade union sector to counter guerrilla attacks which had led to the assassination of various trade union leaders, and were also used as an instrument in intra-Peronist power struggles. Under President Isabel Perón, José López Rega, Min-

ister for Social Welfare and esoteric member of the Propaganda Due masonic lodge (aka P2), played a leading role recruiting men for these groups from his bodyguards with the active collaboration of federal police officers. The Triple A death squad [Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance] functioned from 1972 to 1974, but other death squads in fact operated from 1970 to 1975 as well. It is estimated that these right-wing death squads carried out between 700 and 1,500 political assassinations, out of which the Triple A were responsible for about 744 (without counting the 17 official deaths of the Ezeiza massacre) (Heinz and Frühling 1999, p. 707). Interestingly, Perón and his government did not show any interest in the investigation and prosecution of death squad activities. (Heinz and Frühling 1999, p. 704).

In contrast, the large majority of Montoneros seems to have been students and academics with a high number of women (around 50%) (Heinz and Frühling 1999, p. 623), most of whom had joined the ranks of the Peronist Youth, founded in 1958. Their strategic goals were threefold: after 17 years of Peronist proscription, they wanted to seize power again, to make the return of Perón possible and for the people to take up power, and to defeat the army of the oligarchy and of imperialism (Heinz and Frühling 1999, p. 623). Their violent methods were theoretically based, as was explained before in chapter 5, in what General Perón had said: “we must be committed to wrench from the privileged by force what they do not hand over to us by reason. The violence of the dictatorship can only be thrown by stronger violence. Violence in the hands of the people is not violence, but justice” (Montoneros’s *Cuadernos de Marcha*, (quoted in Heinz and Frühling 1999, p. 623)).

As I have argued, their violence provided the perfect excuse for the Argentine military to take over power in 1976 and carry out the *Proceso*. Of course, it must be said that victims of assassinations by Montoneros included leaders of the labour bureaucracy, military officers, former Minister of the Interior Mor Roig, and former president Aramburu (Heinz and Frühling 1999, p. 626). But during the *Proceso*, according to Rodolfo Walsh, in his famous Open Letter to the military junta on 24 March 1977, the military were responsible for 4,000 Montonero deaths: 600 in armed struggle, 1,300 executions, 2,000 secret executions, and 100 for various reasons (Heinz and Frühling 1999, p. 633). Despite the Montoneros’s violence, the theory of a “dirty war” has been discarded as absurd when the total number of victims of the Armed and Security Forces between 1976–1983 was 492 (including the Army, Navy, Air Force, Gendarmerie, Police, Prison guards, and Prefecture) (Heinz and Frühling 1999, p. 648). In no way can this figure be compared not only to the 30,000 disappeared,

but to the use of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, the most brutal methods of torture learned from the French strategy in Algeria and Indochina, and the clandestinity of over 340 detention centres (not to mention massive rape, property theft and theft of babies). Also, of course, the state must always be a guarantor of the law, and thus guerrilla activity should have been tried and judged in a court of law. There is, in this sense, nothing that can possibly justify the military's actions.

In addition to the voices recounting the Montoneros massacre in the hands of the Triple A, there is also a multiplicity of voices representing Perón's memoirs and counter-memoirs. The method behind this polyphony is based on the contrast between what Zelarayán has termed "un discurso panegírico" (a panegyric or eulogistic discourse) with its opposite "un discurso humanizador-desidealizador" (a humanising-demystifying discourse) (1998, p. 569). Whereas the first one reproduces a heroic discourse legitimated by political and institutional power, the second contests the first one, contradicting it and showing the real person/man instead of the myth. One example of how these two discursive dimensions operate in dialectical tension are the memoirs Perón writes with López Rega and the true biography that is revealed when the magazine *Horizonte* invites Perón's family to the hotel lobby of Ezeiza. Whereas in the first biography Perón asks López to enhance the best features of his parents and to paint him as a hero, leader and conductor from a very young age: ("Have I understood correctly what you asked me to do, General: bring out the masculine traits in the portrait of your father and your mother's feminine ones in hers? No half-tones, so as not to confuse the readers. Have I presented them in the way you want: as exemplary lives?" (1998, p. 55)), among the *Horizonte* guests is Julio Perón who reveals to us that his brother's "official" biography is full of errors, omissions and lies: ("But I on the other hand am annoyed, Juan, that you persist in describing yourself as a former pupil of the International School in Olivos and not of the Polytechnic School in Cangallo, and that the error is now perpetuated in all biographies of you. You thus offered yourself not only the luxury of making up your own life but also of turning other people's lives topsy-turvy ... Aren't we your classmates, former pupils of a school we never attended?" (1998, pp. 42–43)). Thus, as Zelarayán claims: "las memorias son cuestionadas en su pretensión de verdaderas versiones sobre la vida de Perón, [desde] varias concreciones narrativas que conforman contradiscursos o contramemorias" [the truthfulness of Perón's autobiographical memoir is questioned through multiple other counter-narratives and counter-memories] (1998, p. 571, bracketed addition mine).

These memories and counter-memories of Perón force readers to constantly wonder as to

Perón's "true" identity, and together with it, as to the truth behind any Manichean versions of Argentine history and of Peronism. As Tulio Halperín Dongui has said: "by using Perón as the link between the Argentine past and present, *La novela de Perón* succeeds where many scholarly studies have failed. It draws a map of Argentine contemporary history in which Peronism has finally found its proper place—not as an aberration, not as a new beginning but as yet another thread in the complex web of continuity and change in which even the recent catastrophe will finally find its place" (1988, p. 22). That is to say, for Dongui, Martínez's biography of Perón illuminates the fact that Perón was formed in institutions like the Colegio Militar, which had been founded by Sarmiento, and influenced by other military leaders like Mitre and Roca as well, and it is in this sense, then, that Perón can be seen as heir to a certain military tradition from which a certain continuity with a past of catastrophe and violence can be drawn. Who, then, is Perón? asks the text obsessively. For "Eloy Martínez" the narrator, Perón embodies Argentina's political identity: "Perón . . . wasn't just a man. It was twenty years of Argentina, for or against . . . My entire country passed by way of his body: Borges's hatred, the executions of the firing squad of the ringleaders of the Liberation Revolution, the leftist unions, the trade union bureaucracy, and even though I didn't know it then, the dead of Trelew also passed that way" (Martínez 1989, p. 316).

In the same way as there is no one Perón and no one homogeneous Argentine society, reality is also multiple and differently interpreted as the allegorical cipher of the fly in the following passage from the novel shows:

Una mano viene a posarse sobre la mano manchada y yerta del General. Tiene azul el lomo, las alas transparentes, ávidos los ojos . . . —Observenlá—indica el General. Vean esos ojos. Ocupan casi toda la cabeza. Son ojos muy extraños, de cuatro mil facetas. Cada uno de esos ojos ve cuatro mil pedazos diferentes de la realidad. A mi abuela Dominga le impresionaban mucho. Juan, me decía: ¿qué ve una mosca? ¿Ve cuatro mil verdades, o una verdad partida en cuatro mil pedazos? Y yo nunca sabía qué contestarle . . . (1989, p. 192)<sup>1</sup>

A fly lands on the General's stiff, liver-spotted hand. It has a blue back, transparent wings, avid eyes . . . "Look at it". The General points. "Look at those eyes. They cover almost its entire head. They're very strange eyes, with

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<sup>1</sup> From now on all quotations in Spanish are from Tomás Eloy Martínez (1989). *La novela de Perón*. Madrid: Alianza; and all quotations in English are from Tomás Eloy Martínez (1998). *The Perón Novel*. Trans. Helen Lane. New York: Vintage.

four thousand facets. Each one of those eyes sees four thousand different pieces of reality. My grandmother Dominga was very impressed by them. Juan, she used to say to me, what does a fly see? Does it see four thousand truths, or just one truth divided into four thousand pieces? And I never knew what to answer her.” (1998, pp. 243–254)

The multiplicity of perspectives allegorized in the eyes of the fly with its thousand facets refers not only to the multiple and contradictory interpretations of Perón himself and of Peronism, but also, and as a direct consequence of this, of diverse and multiple sociopolitical forces in Argentina artificially gathered together at the time under Perón’s quasi-mythical figure. Lloyd Hughes Davies has argued that Martínez’s text “demonstrates that the past is elusive not only because of the failings of memory but because of the inconsistencies of reality itself, which López Rega calls ‘desaciertos de la realidad’[unfortunate errors of reality]” (2007, p. 194). These inconsistencies are represented throughout the novel by the various references to the fly, which represents the notion of a reality that swarms and is in constant flux and movement. Perón becomes in the novel both a historical pseudo-mythical political figure that concentrated and epitomized radically different positions under his leading charisma, and a biographically constructed tyrannical man who consorted with radically different political forces. As an allegorical cipher, Perón seems to incarnate decades of social and political contradictions in Argentina, especially from 1945 till 1975, when the country oscillated between an agro-export economy and an agro-industrial one. For Eloy Martínez, during his exile, Perón increasingly became an “empty signifier” multiply traversed by myriad social and political tensions, which became finally resolved in his catastrophic support of López Rega and the extreme right, thereby betraying “the people”. As “Eloy Martínez” the narrator in the novel says: “The General is an endless contradiction of nature . . . There is no definite pattern to him” (1998, pp. 313–314); but this contradiction, far from causing admiration, is identified as the source of much violence in Argentina.

In fact, in one of the most memorable passages in the novel, “Eloy Martínez”, the journalist, meets Perón in person for the first time and is both repelled and fascinated by what he perceives are Perón’s multiple identities:

Entonces me le acerqué. Le oí decir exactamente lo que yo esperaba que dijera. Sentí que él siempre adivinaba cómo lo veía el otro; que él se adelantaba a encarnar esa imagen. Había sido ya el conductor, el General, el Viejo, el dictador

depuesto, el macho, el que te dije, el tirano prófugo, el cabecilla del GOU, el primer trabajador, el viudo de Eva Perón, el exiliado, el que tenía un piano en Caracas. Quién sabe qué otras cosas podría ser mañana. Tantos rostros le vi que me decepcioné. De repente, dejó de ser un mito. Finalmente me dije: él es nadie. Apenas es Perón. (1989, p. 237)

Then I moved closer to him. I heard him say exactly what I expected him to say. I sensed that he always intuited how the other person saw him; that he hastened to incarnate that image. He had already been the leader, the General, the Old Man, the deposed dictator, the macho, the man I told you about, the tyrant on the run, the ringleader of the GOU, the first worker, Eva Perón's widower, the exile, the man who had a piano in Caracas. Who could say what other things he might be tomorrow. I saw so many faces of his that I felt let down. All of a sudden, he ceased to be a myth. I finally told myself: he's nobody. He's just Perón. (1998, p. 316)

Perón is nobody as a person but everyone as a political cipher. Like an empty signifier, Perón could speak for the people, for the state, or for corporate interests. How is this to be explained? With Perón the central question of the state is put back onto the agenda. In Perón's time the working class was co-opted by the state in whose management it participated but whose mechanisms it could not master. If the working class rejected co-option, then they had no choice but to go down the road of violent segregationism and anarchism rejecting all participation in democratic institutions. As Perón expert and historian José Pablo Feinmann explains: "el Peronismo es un movimiento que desde su base sindical forma parte del sistema capitalista, con el que negociará permanentemente los intereses de los trabajadores" [Peronism is a movement that due to its strong trade-unionist platform is part of the capitalist system with which it will permanently negotiate the welfare of the workers] (2008, p. iv).<sup>2</sup> That is, unlike Montoneros, who sought a total revolution like that led by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, the Peronism of the 1950s and early 1960s, because of its trade-unionist origins, preferred a third way between capitalism and socialism.

This has often been cited as a possible explanation for Perón's "betrayal" of the Montoneros on 1 May 1974, during a big rally in Buenos Aires, in Plaza de Mayo. Montoneros

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<sup>2</sup> José Pablo Feinmann (2008). "El Ajedrez Madrileño de Perón". *Peronismo: Filosofía política de una obstinación argentina*. In: *Página/12* 39 (17th Aug. 2008). Suplemento Especial.

attended the rally in large numbers, but interrupted Perón's speech and shouted "What is going on, General? Why is the popular government so full of *gorillas* [depreciatory term for the military or for right-wing supporters]?" First Perón called the protesters "stupid idiots". After they abandoned Plaza de Mayo, he talked about "infiltrators who work within and who, in terms of treachery, are more dangerous than those who work outside" (Heinz and Frühling 1999). That is, according to Feinmann's explanation, by the time Perón returns to Argentina, the time of the Peronist Resistance is over (since the time of the Peronist proscription is over as well), and another time begins: not anymore that of armed, violent resistance but that of building political consensus. As Feinmann puts it:

La lucha (dirá [Perón] en agosto de 1973, ante los gobernadores de provincias) ha finalizado . . . Esa lucha enconada, difícil, violenta en algunas circunstancias, ya ha terminado; y comienza una lucha más bien mancomunada, de todas las fuerzas políticas en defensa de los intereses y objetivos nacionales . . . Ahora viene la etapa de la primacía del tiempo. La sangre ha sido para conquistar al gobierno. El tiempo lo necesitamos para gobernar. (2008, p. iv)

The struggle (Perón will say in August 1973 to the provinces' governors) has ended . . . The past struggle, which was difficult, acrimonious and even violent in some cases, has come to an end; and a more conciliatory struggle has now begun, in which all political forces must join to defend national interests and objectives . . . This is the stage of the primacy of time. The blood was needed to conquer the government. The time we need it to govern. (My translation)

This meant, as Feinmann suggests, that Montoneros and the ERP/FARC radical and armed factions no longer represented the avant-garde of Peronism for Perón in 1973. This is what, according to this explanation, Montoneros did not see or could understand on Perón's return. But another possibility is to see Perón as revealing what his "true" intentions and motives had been all along. This is historian David Rock's interpretation of the "stupid idiots" incident. For Rock: "it now became apparent that Perón had used the Left as an instrument for his return to power and that the Left, in a mix of blind ingenuousness and opportunism, had allowed him to do so. But his new plan, for which he had enthusiastic backing in both the army and the CGT, was to destroy it". That is, once back in Argentina, now that he does not need the armed left anymore, Perón will simply dismiss them as useless parts in an obsolete resistance mechanism.



But Feinmann also warns against any simplistic reductionism either of Montoneros or of Peronism: “La violencia insurreccional de fines de los sesenta y primera mitad de los setenta es, en Argentina, el producto perfecto de varios determinantes internos: la proscripción del Peronismo, el arraigo del liderazgo *maldito* de Perón en la clase obrera, la teoría de la dependencia, el auge del nacionalismo popular, el diálogo entre católicos y marxistas y la nacionalización del estudiantado, entre otros fenómenos” [The insurrectionist violence of the sixties and early seventies is, in Argentina, the result of a number of internal factors: the proscription of Peronism, the rooting of Perón’s *curse*d leadership in the working class, dependency theory, the expansion of popular nationalism, the dialogue between Catholics and Marxists and the nationalistic fervour of the student population, among many other factors] (2007, p. 38).

In its last phase, therefore, at the beginning of the 1970s, Peronism appears to be divided between two visions: one from the outside, that Perón had in exile, and one from the inside, which is debated by left-wing and right-wing Peronist factions inside Argentina. As Feinmann explains, whilst in exile in Spain, Perón was able to see the “whole” political scene, attending to demands from the left and the right as a master puppeteer overseeing the chess board from above, but once returned to Argentina, he himself became a piece of the game and therefore was no longer able to control the totality of Argentina’s dissenting forces. In Feinmann’s words: “Perón, en Madrid, comienza a sufrir un equívoco feroz. Algo que no advierte. Desde afuera, en exterioridad, se puede manejar el Todo. Desde adentro, en interioridad y como parte de la misma historicidad que todos, no. Perón en Madrid vive otra historicidad” [Perón, in Madrid, begins to make a gross mistake. Something he does not realise. From abroad, with the external perspective, he can handle the totality. But once inside, and as part of the same historicity shared by all Argentines, he cannot. Perón in Madrid lives another historicity] (2008, p. iv).

This vision of Perón as being “out of synch” with history and suspended outside history finds an echo in the opening chapter of the novel. The time is 20 June 1973, and Perón is flying back to Argentina after eighteen years of exile and political proscription. Perón’s return is figuratively represented in the novel in “empty” or suspended space and time coordinates:

Una vez más, el General Juan Perón soñó que caminaba hasta la entrada del Polo Sur y que una jauría de mujeres no lo dejaba pasar. Cuando despertó, tuvo la sensación de no estar en ningún tiempo. Sabía que era el 20 de Junio de 1973, pero eso nada significaba. Volaba en un avión que había despegado

de Madrid al amanecer del día más largo del año, e iba rumbo a la noche del día más corto, en Buenos Aires ... Arriba ... el reloj del General señalaba las cinco, pero allí mismo, en ese punto móvil del espacio, ninguna hora llegaba a ser verdadera. Su secretario lo había retenido en la cabina de primera clase, para que se mantuviera fresco al llegar y la muchedumbre que lo aguardaba lo viese como al otro: el Perón del pasado ... Hacía dos meses que el General estaba preparándose para volver a Buenos Aires: desde que el régimen militar había reconocido el triunfo de los peronistas en las elecciones y se aprontaba resignadamente a dejarlos gobernar. “Venga ya mismo a la patria. Instálese en su hogar”, lo apresuraban cientos de telegramas. ¿Mi hogar?, sonreía el General. En la Argentina no hay más hogar que el exilio. (1989, pp. 11–13)

Yet again, General Juan Perón dreamed that he was walking toward the entrance to the South Pole and that a pack of women wouldn’t let him past. When he woke up, he had the sensation of not being in any time. He knew that it was June 20, 1973, but that meant nothing. He was flying on a plane that had taken off from Madrid at dawn on the longest day of the year, and was heading for the shortest day, in Buenos Aires ... Up above ... the General’s watch said five, but there where he was, in that mobile point of space, no hour shown on a timepiece was really the right one ... the crowd awaiting him would see him as the other Perón: the one of the past ... Perón had been preparing for two months to return to Buenos Aires: since the military regime had acknowledged the Peronists’ victory in the elections and had begun readying itself to allow them to take over the reins of government. “Come back to your homeland straightaway. Settle in your own home”, hundreds of telegrams urged him. My own home? He smiled. In Argentina the only home is exile. (1998, pp. 3–6)

The passage suggests a switch-point or transition between two “Peróns”: the one of the past, prior to exile, and seeming supporter of the workers and of trade-unionism, founder of the homeland, and the “new” Perón on return from exile. The temporal suspension of chronological or “clock” time and the consequent spatial disorientation that ensues are narratological forms of marking or prefiguring a time-space hiatus in history, from the seemingly socialist project of the Perón of the first presidency to the Perón of the time and space of a forthcoming multinational capitalism, with its ensuing disorientation and confusion as lived by the “new” Perón. Spatially, the “entrance to the South pole” evokes

multiple images of Argentina as the “protector or guardian of the Southern Cone”, the “Yankee of the South”, and of Buenos Aires, in particular, as “the Paris of the South”. On the other hand, this European-styled “south” finds its literary, dialectical underside (as variously imagined by the Argentine literary tradition from Borges to Saer) in the figure of the “orilla” (the border, the edge)—a space where margin and periphery are in constant tension and con-fusion with the centre.

As a geographical signifier, then, the South becomes, on Perón’s return, a contested site of struggle between home and exile and between the national state and global market capitalism. The temporal disorientation Perón suffers (“he had the sensation of not being in any time,” “it was June 20, 1973, but that meant nothing”) “suspends” Perón’s return in historical time. It is only when the plane lands, and the Ezeiza bloodbath begins, that Perón’s return enters history again. Later on, Perón’s disavowal of Montoneros and of a left-leaning Peronism marks the beginning of a history of defeat for the radical left. Perón had returned but the Peronist/Socialist homeland had not returned with him. This is why the Ezeiza massacre symbolically marks the beginning of the end of the Peronist utopia of social justice (or of a left-leaning Peronism like that which had briefly been envisioned in Perón’s first presidency).

The time-space coordinates in the passage also symbolically represent Perón’s return as a sort of historical hinge whereby one door closes (the utopia of a socialist Peronist Argentine state) and another opens (the phase of the “*patria financiera*” or of speculative finance capitalism) ushered in by the *Proceso*. The Ezeiza massacre therefore symbolically condenses in one day the explosive clashing of over half a century of political contradictions not only within Argentine society but also within the Peronist movement itself. Perón’s death in 1974, towards the end of the novel, thus puts a full stop to the Peronist utopia and symbolizes for Argentina the prelude to the forthcoming financial speculation, privatization and labour relaxation. And yet, and despite all this, Martínez’s novel insists on viewing history as open-ended as the following section of this chapter shows.

### 8.3 “Otra Argentina es posible”: Benjamin’s “weak” Messianic power

The last chapter of *The Perón Novel* narrates how, after Lopez Rega’s snipers open fire on the crowds gathered at Ezeiza airport, Perón’s plane lands at an army base. That same night the General delivers a speech to calm people down and clear up the confusion that

those events provoked. After distorted reports of the Ezeiza massacre fill the television screens, Perón, in a rather “absent-minded” state, addresses a political speech to the Argentine people. Zamora, a reporter, is watching the news together with people from the interior provinces who had gone to Buenos Aires to see Perón on the day of his arrival:

Aunque el discurso era improvisado, López parecía seguirlo con los labios sin dificultad. El General dijo:

“... para evitar desórdenes, no quise que se realizara una concentración de noche, en una zona oscura como el aeropuerto. Lo hice con todo sentimiento, pensando en la pobre gente que desde tan lejos había ido a Ezeiza a darme la bienvenida ...”

Algo en la imagen, sin embargo, estaba fuera del orden natural, como si lloviese para arriba.[...] Uno de los hombres se dio cuenta que los labios de López se adelantaban al discurso.

– Fijensé bien—musitó. – Al General lo están arreando. Volvió a ocurrir. En la boca del Secretario se leyó: “... y me gustará ver a los Jujeños en Jujuy” una fracción de segundo antes de que la frase brotara de la garganta del General.

“... y a los Salteños en Salta”, dictaron los labios. “Salta”, repitió Perón.

El desencanto cayó sobre la gente como una enfermedad instantánea. Una de las mujeres se apartó llorando del televisor y fue a recostarse junto a los braseros. Otras empezaron a calentar la comida de los chicos. La casa entera quedó suspendida en ese abismo que hay entre la indiferencia y el estallido, hasta que uno de los campesinos se alzó por fin y dijo, sereno, irrefutable:

– Ese hombre no puede ser Perón.

– No puede ser—aprobaron las mujeres.

– Cuando Perón se entere de lo que está pasando, volverá—dijo el campesino.

El día más corto del año entró en la eternidad, como se decía entonces. Llegó a su fin. Zamora se puso de pie:

– Aunque vuelva, es demasiado tarde. Ya nunca más seremos como éramos. (1989, pp. 316–317)

Although the speech was delivered impromptu, López appeared to be following it with his lips with no difficulty. The General was saying:

“... in order to avoid disorders, I did not want a crowd to gather at night, in a dark area such as the airport. I did so most regretfully, thinking of the poor people who had come to Ezeiza from such a long distance away to bid me welcome ...”

Something about the image, however, was outside the natural order of things, as though it were raining upward. [...] Then one of the men realized that López’s lips were moving ahead of the General’s speech.

“Just look at that”, he muttered. “They are driving the General along”.

It happened again. On the secretary’s lips could be read the words “... and I shall enjoy seeing the people of Jujuy” a fraction of a second before the phrase came forth from the General’s throat.

“... and the people of Salta”, the secretary’s lips dictated.

“Salta”, Perón repeated.

Disappointment came over the crowd like an instantaneous illness. One of the women walked away from the television set in tears and went to lie down alongside the braziers. Others began to warm the children’s food. The entire house remained suspended in that abyss that exists between indifference and a violent outburst, until one of the peasants finally rose to his feet and said, calmly, irrefutably:

“That man can’t be Perón”.

“It can’t be”, the women agreed.

“When Perón finds out what’s happening, he’ll come back”, the peasant said.  
[...]

The shortest day of the year entered eternity, as they said. It reached its end. Zamora rose to his feet.

“Even if he returns, it’s too late. We shall never be again as we were”. (1998, p. 428)

The passage represents the peak of the moment of defeat and the sense of pessimism that descends over the people “like an instantaneous illness”. For Zelarayán (1998, p. 575), moments like this in Martínez’s novel articulate the crossings between three discourses: on the one hand, the discourse of decadence, of moral and ethical corruption, represented

through the conflation of Perón's and López Rega's voices and, on the other, the discourse of destruction, encoded in words and phrases like "disappointment", "illness", "shall never be as we were" and "too late". But these two discourses are also interwoven with a third one—el discurso del desencanto [the discourse of disenchantment]—which, according to Zelarayán, "entreteje las nociones de pueblo, utopía, crisis, revolución y contrarrevolución" [interweaves the notions of the populace, utopia, crisis, revolution and counter-revolution] (1998, p. 575). This textual dimension represents, therefore, "el desencanto del pueblo que vive la crisis de ver frustrados sus proyectos utópicos de país ante la presencia/ausencia del líder decadente, tras el cual se obra una acción contrarrevolucionaria" [the disenchantment of the Argentine populace who go into crisis after seeing their utopian projects frustrated when confronted with the presence/absence of a decadent leader behind whom a counter-revolutionary movement is being plotted] (Zelarayán 1998, p. 575). But, although on the one hand, Perón's speech represents the death of a "previous" historical Peronism of social justice, the text also symptomatically invokes notions of re-birth or resuscitation as when the peasant says "When Perón finds out what's happening, he'll come back". This irrational belief of a "second" come back of Perón is also repeated in Doña Luisa's final entreaty when Perón dies:

A las nueve y media del 4 de Julio, el cortejo fúnebre partió hacia la capilla de Nuestra Señora de la Merced, en la residencia presidencial de Olivos ... Doña Luisa sintió que en aquella opresión del fin también ellas estaban muriendo. Le brotó un nudo en la garganta. Se dió cuenta de que apenas el ataúd desapareciera de la pantalla todos quedarían huérfanos para siempre, y ella no era mujer de resignaciones. Subió al altar de cajones de frutas y abrazó el televisor con fuerza. La sonrisa del General la envolvió entonces con su calor omnipotente, y doña Luisa creyó que todo podía suceder, que bastaba decirlo para que sucediera:

– Resucitá, machito! ¿Qué te cuesta? (1989, p. 321)

At 9:30 on July 4, the funeral procession left for the chapel of Nuestra Señora de la Merced, at the presidential residence in Olivos ... Doña Luisa had the feeling that they too were dying in that oppressiveness at the end. She had a sudden knot in her throat. She realized that once the coffin disappeared from the screen they would all be orphans forever, and she was not a woman who readily resigned herself. She went up to the fruit-crate altar and gave

the television set a strong embrace. The General's smile enveloped her in its omnipotent warmth then, and Doña Luisa thought that anything could happen, that a person needed only to say it for it to happen:

"Come back to life again, man! What'll it cost you?" (1998, pp. 433–434)

Thus, although the final image of the novel is one of mourning and defeat expressed through the discourse of destruction ("funeral procession", "oppressiveness", "coffin", "orphans"), at the same time, and as in Piglia's novels, the text refuses to foreclose history in that very same defeat by incorporating wishes of hope and utopia in phrases like "anything could happen", "not . . . resigned herself", "a person needed only to say it for it to happen", and "come back to life". This wishful optimism in a second return articulates in the novel a kind of "negation" of defeat and mourning that brings to mind Ernst Bloch's notion of hope as that which is as-yet-unfulfilled. The plea these characters make is for what has remained unrealised in history. Eloy Martínez himself has said that "fiction and history are written in order to correct the future, to build up the riverbanks for the navigators to come, to situate the reader in a wished-for place" (1999, p. 1). The notion that there is still a possible, alternative reality to what has effectively ensued historically is the novel's latent positive or hopeful dimension. This is the "other" Argentina that is (still) possible, which can also be seen represented as a wish in the following photograph taken during the default crisis in 2002 and which echoes locally the slogan of Porto Alegre 2001 World Social Forum (Fig. 8.1).

But we must be careful, at this point, to specify what, exactly, needs to be resuscitated of the utopian ideal of Peronism. Not least because Peronism meant so many different things according to whether it was appropriated by the Argentine right or left. When one mentions the hopeful or utopian aspect of Peronism as a political myth, perhaps what one means are mostly the three basic tenets of Perón's first presidency: national sovereignty, economic independence and social justice (Giani 2008). One does not mean or wish for a return to the 1970s violence, or to Perón's concept of "the nation in arms" (Feinmann 2007, p. 35), or to a right-wing concept of Peronism. If anything, these three pillars of Peronism need to be recovered as a collective project on the basis of criticism rather than of violence.

The extracts I have analysed from the novel seem to suggest that within some of the postdictatorial narratives of mourning and defeat, there still endures a latent narrative of hope (or of unfulfilled potential) that is carried forward into the present/future. It is this underside of "unrealised potential" that the post-default and post-amnesty-laws present has brought back to light, for this unfulfilled or unrealized potential still endures



Figure 8.1: “Que se vayan todos: Argentina’s Popular Uprising”. Photograph by Argentina Arde and Andrew Stern. 15 February 2002. [http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/free/imf/argentinatxt/2002/0918que\\_se\\_vayan.htm](http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/free/imf/argentinatxt/2002/0918que_se_vayan.htm). Last accessed 16 June 2008. “Another Argentina is possible”. The slogan echoes that of the World Social Forum “Another World Is Possible” which was held in January 2001 in Porto Alegre.

in the collective imagination. As Eloy Martínez has said: “With time a work belongs less and less to the author and, increasingly, to those who read and discuss it. For an author, his own work is situated in the past. For the reader who examines it, the text is a continuous present, a code that can eventually be deciphered” (1999, p. 2). This echoes the hermeneutics of Gadamer (2004, p. 393) for whom a literary or artistic text is always reappropriated by readers according to their circumstances in the present, as we saw in chapter one. Rethinking an unrealised or unfulfilled potential that remains latent in postdictatorial fictions is one of the tasks that this thesis sets out to do as part of its recovery of the past in its exemplary function. This also means that in addition to providing counter-narratives, giving the lie to official accounts of history, and expressing affect through the task of mourning, postdictatorial fictions also work as vessels of hope, carrying hope forward.



History and memory become exemplary not because they teach the new generations that the past should not repeat itself (how could it?) but because they remind the present of what remained unavenged and unrealized in the past and therefore remains latent in the present. This view is confirmed by what Eloy Martínez himself has said of history and fiction:

The writing of history as a novel, or the writing of novels with historical facts are not merely methods of correcting the official story, or of countering the discourse of power ... fictions about history are writings about the future ... images with which the past rewrites in novels the history of the future. (1999, p. 12)

Postdictatorial literature thus carries within itself a positive or exemplary dimension insofar as it contains the latent seeds or wishes of other repressed imagined possible worlds. In this sense, Martínez's account of Perón's death is a symbolic figuration of one of the most important "interruptions" in Argentine history unleashing the cycle of violence known as the "the longest night" (i.e. the Montoneros's persecution, the Trelew and Fatima massacres, and the ensuing dictatorship period) and extending up in different degrees to late 1990s and early 2000s. The underside of the longest night is this latent sense of utopia or hope expressed by the peasant and by Doña Luisa, which in the novel becomes the dialectical opposite of mourning. As Hamacher comments *apropos* of Benjamin's second thesis in "On the Concept of History", the "happiness" or the affect of hope does not reside in an event in particular but rather "in a possibility, which proves to be a possibility only in the miss and which only by virtue of this miss preserves itself as a possibility for the future" (2005, p. 38).

But, as historian Daniel K. Lewis points out, the Peronism of 1943–1955 was a contradictory and controversial phenomenon. On the one hand, it was seen by friends and loyalists as "a champion of Argentina's sovereignty and national interests" (D. K. Lewis 2001, p. 104), while its opponents and critics deemed it an intolerant, totalitarian, and even fascist government. As Lewis says: "the Peronists attacked their political enemies. Supporters of the Democratic union faced harassment, universities and public schools fell under tight restrictions. Opposition parties in the Congress ... faced censure if they voiced protests against state actions. Judges ... were impeached and replaced with loyalists. Newspapers and reviews that challenged Perón were closed" (D. K. Lewis 2001, p. 104, punctuation slightly modified from original). This suggests that what is at stake in this

vision of Peronism as utopia must necessarily divert from Perón himself, as a man, leader or person, to Peronism as a general, abstract concept or ideal that implies the defence of national interests, the championing of the poor, and a degree of independence from foreign interests or dominion (which in turn becomes highly problematic in times of globalization). These are, as said, the three dimensions that Peronism helped to firmly root in the left-wing Peronist collective memory, notwithstanding what ensued historically. That is to say, this is the “happiness” that a left-wing Peronism/Socialism as an *ideal* promises.

In this sense, the “happiness” or the affect of hope Doña Luisa is invoking in the passage, does not reside in an event in particular but rather “in a possibility, which proves to be a possibility only in the miss and which only by virtue of this miss preserves itself as a possibility for the future” (Hamacher 2005, p. 38). Postdictatorial narratives of defeat, then, seem to carry within themselves, in latent form, the seeds of the possible that spring forth from a missed opportunity (the idea that when Perón returns and sees what is going on, he will put things right). For Hamacher, “happiness [the opposite affect of mourning] is only cognizable in its pure—that is, missed, deferred and unseized-possibility. And only as such a possibility does it offer itself to a future cognition” (Hamacher 2005, p. 39, bracketed addition mine). Historical cognition, says Hamacher (2005, p. 39), is “cognition of that which has yet not become history, that which yet can become history”. It is this weak Messianic power of hope that Walter Benjamin expresses in his second thesis on history:

Reflection shows us that our image of happiness is thoroughly coloured by the time to which the course of our existence has assigned us ... In other words, our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. The same applies to our view of the past, which is the concern of history ... There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one ... Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply [...] (1999, pp. 245–246)

On the secret agreement between past generations and present ones Hamacher has said that “for the past to have a future merely means that the past’s possibilities have not yet found their fulfilment, that they continue to have an effect as intentions and demand their realization from those who feel addressed by them” (2005, p. 41). That is, the latent possibilities of an as-yet-unfulfilled redemption to be found in postdictatorial novels will “speak” only to those who feel addressed by them. A cultural project that does not make

the past redundant, then, would seek to release this messianic power, which for Hamacher is nothing other than “an instance to correct the miss, to do the undone, to regain the wasted and actualize the has-been possible” (2005, p. 41).

This Messianic power is also postulated in Benjamin’s fifth thesis on history: “For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (1999, p. 247). If the literature of the postdictatorship constitutes in itself a cultural archive or reservoir of the unfulfilled collective images of the past, then those who feel interpellated or addressed by those images need to seek ways to make those images relevant to their own present/future. It bears repeating that this possible future is not an abstract or ideal possible in general and for all times but, as Hamacher argues: “a possible always for a particular future that recognizes itself in it as missed” (2005, p. 40). This takes us back to the hermeneutic notion that there must be a subject in the present who feels interpellated or addressed by the possible that was missed in the past.

It is, however, difficult to say how the latent wishes of left-wing social justice can be actualised in Argentina at present. In the context of recent public debates on the role of the state in President Cristina Fernández’s administration, her Program of Wealth Re-Distribution and the interventionist economic policies of her cabinet were met with the fierce opposition of farmers and the upper middle classes. In fact, in 2008, her confrontation with the big farmers and landowners brought to the public forum a renewed discussion of a national project or *proyecto de país*. In addition, cultural projects that seek to democratise and open up those debates, such as Memoria Abierta and Carta Abierta, have attempted to foster a more culturally active and politically informed citizenship, but these have often been criticised and attacked by what the Carta Abierta intellectuals have called “the new right”. This view is expressed by Marta Bertolino, one of the over one thousand professional intellectuals to have signed “Carta Abierta” since March 2008. For Bertolino:

[La politización global de la gestión Kirchnerista y el debate de modelo de país] se da en el marco de un proceso histórico que arranca en el 2003—que a su vez viene de la profundísima crisis de 2001—en el que se viene privilegiando la política. Se vuelve a poner sobre la mesa la política ligada a la historización de los procesos en nuestro país, cosa que estaba borrada, de la que se renegaba. Entonces, se vuelven a articular y vincular las cosas que suceden con las que habían sucedido antes y en este contexto, por ejemplo, todo el capítulo de impulso a los juicios contra el terrorismo de Estado viene a formar parte de

este proceso de entender el presente por lo que ha sido la historia política de nuestro país. (Bracketed addition mine)<sup>3</sup>

[The increased politicization of both the Kirchners' administration and the debate on the national project] both begin to take place in the context of a historical process that starts in 2003—which, in turn, started in the profound crisis of 2001—and which puts politics back on the agenda. Back under the spotlight are politics in its ties to historical processes in our country, a kind of explanation that had been erased and apostatised. From then on the focus is on determining the connectedness between what happens now and what had happened then in the past; and it is in this context, for example, that giving support for the trials against state terrorism becomes part and parcel of this process of trying to understand the present through the lens of the political history of our country. (My translation)

This desire to connect past and present and “historicise” them implies coming out of the general apathy that was dominant in the 1990s. But this coming out of political apathy has proved to be extremely difficult for Argentines. As another intellectual, Horacio Baster says:

Lo que hace Carta Abierta es abrir un espacio desde donde marcar con autonomía e independencia las críticas que hacen falta, lógicamente, en la convicción de que estamos en medio de una batalla por el sentido social. Porque la intensidad del debate intelectual tiene que ver con que de alguna manera el Kirchnerismo repuso una idea de épica en la historia. Hay un sentido del pasado, hay una lucha, hay un conflicto, un antagonismo decisivo en el presente que vivimos, y ahí es donde los intelectuales recuperamos un rol más vinculado a la tarea genuina de un intelectual que es la interpretación de momentos decisivos de la historia.<sup>4</sup>

What Open Letter (Carta Abierta) does is to open an autonomous, independent space from which to make all the necessary criticisms, with the conviction, naturally, that we are living through a new moment of social conflict. In this

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<sup>3</sup> Leo Ricciardino (2008). “Intelectuales a la carta”. In: *Página/12* (24th Aug. 2008). URL: <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/rosario/18-14900-2008-08-24.html> (visited on 24/08/2008).

<sup>4</sup> Leo Ricciardino (2008). “Intelectuales a la carta”. In: *Página/12* (24th Aug. 2008). URL: <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/rosario/18-14900-2008-08-24.html> (visited on 24/08/2008).

sense, the intensity of the intellectual debate is tied to the fact that Kirchnerism has restored a certain epic dimension to history. There is a sense of the past, of struggle, of social conflict, of decisive antagonisms in the now, which is where intellectuals have recovered a role closer to the genuine task of the intellectual, that of interpreting key moments in history. (My translation)

The first question that emerges after a claim like this is whether, and to what extent, has Kirchnerism opened up a new context for intellectual and academic debate. To what extent has this “sense of the past” and “of struggle and social conflict” put back on the agenda some of the “epic dimension” of history that marked the 1970s and was crushed by the military repression and neoliberalism. There is no doubt a need to believe that this is indeed a special moment. If so, it is in the context outlined by these intellectuals that Doña Luisa’s appeal in *The Perón Novel* continues to embody a desire for that which can yet become different. In this sense the reverse of defeat is not victory but hope.

In fact, for Benjamin, the historical (unlike the historicism of consummated facts) is “only ever that which it is not yet—the always other, open possibility” (Hamacher 2005, p. 40). This is what is desired and missed in Doña Luisa’s plea and the yet-to-come of Ernst Bloch. “Only that can become historical which is not yet historical”, as Hamacher has postulated. But this also means, in principle, that this possibility can be missed, passed over, buried, twisted, forgotten. That is, it might be that in the same way as the fervid resistance of the default moment has subsided (the country cannot live in a permanent state of chaos and resistance) this moment outlined by Carta Abierta as opening up with the Kirchnerist era may, in time, subside as well. What remains an ongoing struggle, however, is that of a democratization of discourses and the recovery and redemption of memory through an emancipatory critique of the past. This struggle has been ongoing ever since the return to democracy and it has of late put the postdictatorial imagination in a different hermeneutic situation to the one it had in the 1990s when “historical memory” was repressed by National Reconciliation. It is this new moment that may be characterised by the word “reconstruction” as Eloy Martínez has put it: “Perhaps what we should be offering now is a reconstruction (though I use the word cautiously). By ‘reconstruct’, I mean recuperate the community’s imagination and cultural traditions, in order to give them a new kind of life” (1999, p. 9). That is, recuperating a community’s latent and unrealised dreams through fiction and culture, for example, but also through critical commentary, allows those dreams to circulate again, and to return and permeate reality. It is, no doubt, the return of the repressed but also of the unfulfilled.

If, as Hamacher says, history is no telos and it has “to be won [and lost] over and over again, at each singular moment, ever again in a singular way” (2005, p. 47, addition in between dashes mine), then this is one of those times when history might begin to be debated again in Argentina. And, it is “only because the present Now recognizes itself as ‘meant’ in a former one”, as Hamacher says, that “the present [has] been given the ‘weak messianic power’ to fulfil the demand for happiness of the previous one” (2005, p. 51, bracketed addition mine). It is in this sense that *The Perón Novel* expresses a latent longing and a desire for a better world or a Benjaminian demand for happiness—precisely because it is a record of defeat. Its positive or optimistic dimension being the latent unavoidable unfulfilled “other” of the very defeat the novel portrays.

In the following chapter, then, I will explore how more recently written postdictatorial fictions, like those of Martín Kohan, are structured around two main issues: a) what to do with the legacy of a revolutionary past and of the history of the oppressed in the present era; and b) how to explain the atrocities of state terrorism from the point of view of society as a whole. Both questions are deemed fundamental if Argentine society is to envision a better future of social justice and to have a more active democratic participation, and fiction is one of the imaginative “sites” where answers to these fundamental questions can be rehearsed.

Case Study 3:  
The pedagogic function of the past

## Martín Kohan's *Dos veces junio*, *Museo de la Revolución*, and *Ciencias morales*

### 9.1 Introduction

In this final case study I explore how the post-default postdictatorial fictions of Martín Kohan are structured around two main critical questions: a) what to do with the revolutionary legacy of 1970s, and b) how can Argentine civic society not only explain the atrocities of state terrorism but also make sure something like it never happens again. Both questions are deemed fundamental if Argentine society is to envision a transformed future of social justice and active democratic participation and fiction is one of the imaginative “sites” where these fundamental questions are being debated and rehearsed.

### 9.2 “Algo deben haber hecho”: Examining the complicit silence of Argentine society

In the previous case studies of this thesis I attempted to carry out an original reading of 1980s and 1990s postdictatorial fictions from the critical socio-political perspective of the present and from a more positive, utopian, or hopeful position than that of mourning and defeat. Rodrigo Fresán, Ricardo Piglia and Tomás Eloy Martínez have each in their own way been read as examples of narratives that were written at a moment when Argentines were gripped by pessimism, impunity and neoliberalism. Whereas Fresán reacted to trauma with an increasingly textualised, ahistorical and apolitical cosmopolitanism, Piglia and Eloy Martínez have on the contrary used their fictions as reservoirs or cultural archives of a rich historical past of resistances and counterhistories of the oppressed.

Despite documenting these defeats, I have insisted that Piglia and Martínez’s fictions



nonetheless contain a latent kernel of hope that posits redemption in the future. I have argued that some conditions are given in this present for a renewed and more hopeful reading of such novels as defeat no longer seems to tell the whole story. Since Argentina began to give signs of an economic recovery in 2002, and the climate of impunity slowly shifted to justice and the recovery of memory, especially from 2003 onwards, new postdictatorial fictions have been written that seem symptomatically to suggest that a change in the structure of feeling of Argentines may be under way. Out of the numerous writers producing less pessimistic and more pedagogic postdictatorial fictions after the 2001 default, I will focus on Martín Kohan because his fictions (together with those of other writers like Laura Alcoba, Carlos Gamerro, Guillermo Saccomanno, Matilde Sánchez, among many others) are clearly most representative of a new tendency to recover and question the past, especially the revolutionary legacy of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Martín Kohan (Buenos Aires, 1967– ), like Piglia, seeks to broaden and radicalize the act of reading (not only of literature, but also of essays, archives and documentary sources) as a form of intervention in the present. His latest novel, *Ciencias morales* (henceforth Moral Sciences) (2007) is an autobiographically-inspired narrative of his formation years at the prestigious Colegio Nacional in Buenos Aires.<sup>1</sup> Kohan has tried to convey through the suffocating sense of confinement and strictly enforced discipline of the school an allegory of Argentina during the military process and more specifically during the Malvinas/Falklands war. In the same way as the thickness of the walls prevented any contact with the exterior (“el colegio tenía unos muros muy gruesos, viéndose anulada toda exterioridad” [the school had thick walls that quashed any sense of exteriority]), the nation as a whole was cut off from external information and blinded from the truth of the clandestine horror. Kohan has remarked that though not “realist”, the novel has been made “straight from the materials of reality”<sup>2</sup> and the world represented in the novel is the one he personally experienced while he was at school in the 1980s. Despite being fully aware of the prestigious literary antecedents of his novel (from foundational novels like Miguel Cané’s *Juvenilia* (1884) to the more recently written *Un dios cotidiano* (An Ordinary God) (1957) by David Viñas or the successful *El director* (The Headmaster) (2006) by Gustavo Ferreyra, Kohan has

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<sup>1</sup> The *Colegio Nacional* of Buenos Aires is the most prestigious free and public secondary education school of Buenos Aires attended by national heroes like Belgrano and Alberdi, notable personalities, including two Nobel laureates, four presidents of Argentina, and the Montoneros guerrilla leader Mario Firmenich. Some students from this school were disappeared during the *Proceso*.

<sup>2</sup> Patricio Lennard (2007). “Tomar distancia”. In: *Página/12* (18th Dec. 2007). Interview with Martín Kohan. URL: <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/libros/10-2852-2007-12-18.html> (visited on 19/06/2008).

underlined that his novel is not an intertextual rewriting of any of these novels, but rather that he wrote *Moral Sciences* from the perspective of the mythological dimension that the Colegio Nacional has in the collective imagination of Argentines. Kohan has compared the school to a miniature replica of the country and his novel explores how discipline, punishment and censorship have worked within the school, and allegorically, in the country, to normalise repressive behaviour and to force the population into silent compliance.

In fact, the novel portrays how Kohan himself in his school years heard rumours of the disappearances of students:

Yo curso en el Buenos Aires entre 1980 y 1985 ... Cuando yo entro en el 80, el momento más brutal de la represión ya había pasado. No quedaba de eso más que un eco flotando en el aire. De hecho, en mi división no hubo desaparecidos ni tampoco yo viví la situación de cuando se produjeron las desapariciones. Todo eso era—tal como dejo ver en *Ciencias morales*—algo de lo que se sabía pero no se sabía bien al mismo tiempo. Entonces, mi experiencia y la de muchos de mis compañeros era la de una absoluta naturalización de esas condiciones. No era una situación que nos resultara opresiva, y sólo después la empezamos a pensar en esos términos. Sí la vivíamos, quizás, con cierto temor, pero con un gran deseo de obedecer, con una marcada disposición al acatamiento ... En mi caso personal, cuando desde el colegio se comenzó a revisar lo que allí había pasado, la pregunta que me hice fue : ¿Cómo pude pensar que todo esto era normal? Y esa es una pregunta que quise responderme escribiendo esta novela. (Lennard 2007)

I attended the Colegio from 1980 to 1985 ... When I was admitted to the school in 1980, the most brutal moment of the repression had already passed. Nothing remained of it save an echo. In fact, I knew of no disappearances in my class or throughout my time at the school. They were, as I hint in *Moral Sciences*, something that happened but that we did not know much about at the time. So, my schoolmates and I learned to normalise the experience of the disappearances. We didn't perceive this situation as oppressive, and it was only later that we began to think of it in those terms. We did live the moment, however, with some fear, but also with a great will to obey, with an evident disposition to respect the norms ... In my personal case, when the school decided to review the events of those years, the question I asked myself was:

How could I ever think all that was normal? And this one of the questions I have tried to answer in this novel. (My translation)

Normalization and obedience to norm are also the main underlying themes of *Dos veces junio* (henceforth *Two Times June*) (2005). What Kohan seems to be seeking in this novel is an explanation for the kind of obedience and discipline needed to systematically torture thousands to death. Only the army and the police force, informed and trained by an ideology of discipline, personal loyalty and total subordination to authority, could have perpetrated such a systematic political genocide for so long. But Kohan makes it clear that the high ranking officer and the torturer did not act alone—there were hundreds of subalterns and conscripts and subordinates of all kinds, who, without necessarily being torturers themselves, participated nonetheless in the smaller or pettier aspects of the repressive machinery. These subalterns obeyed orders without questioning them for a second, so one of the aspects Kohan explores in *Two Times June* is the extent to which an internalization of the norm, a predisposition to obey authority to the point of looking away in the face of immoral events, or even of complicitly participating in such events, eventually came to affect the whole of the nation.

In fact, two identifiable collective psychological effects followed from this: firstly, a collective sense of blame and guilt at not having stopped or resisted the repression; and secondly, a progressive depolitization and apathy best expressed in the phrase “no te metas” (do not meddle, intervene or interfere—either in public protests or simply to help other people in distress or need), which of course, amounts to denial. This utter individualism and the internalised rule of not meddling or interfering with what the police or the army were doing was the result not only of the paternalistic and repressive political apparatus mounted by the junta, but also, of the spectacularly “staged” abductions aimed at creating fear in the population performed by the police or army officers as the *Nunca Más* reports. In the section “Anonymous groups or gangs who forced their way into homes at night” (*Nunca Más* (*Never Again*) 1986, pp. 11–18), abduction is described in some detail. In most cases, the report says, there was usually “a group of five or six people who forced their way into homes. Sometimes several groups were involved, and in some special cases up to fifty people took part. The members of the gang always had with them weaponry that was totally disproportionate to the supposed threat posed by the victims. . . . The intimidation and terror was employed not merely to forestall any possibility of response by the victim. *It also aimed at achieving a similar effect on those living nearby*” (*Nunca Más* (*Never Again*) 1986, pp. 11–12, emphasis mine).

People were violently torn from their homes usually at night, but also in broad daylight, while the neighbours usually stared in panic or horror and the famous “algo deben haber hecho” (they must have done something) became common currency among neighbours too scared to do anything. This experience in daily life, added to the propaganda against the “subversives” manufactured by the junta, was enough, as Piglia has explained, to produce an awareness of two paranoid realities going on at the same time. As Tulio Halperín Donghi has said: “The extreme savagery of the country’s turn toward violence makes even the most insightful historical exploration of its causes pale in comparison with the memory of having experienced its consequences” (1988, p. 3). And it is here that art and literature have a chance to represent that which escapes rational explanations of cause and effect.

Thus, to be able to incorporate the recent episode of terror in the body of Argentine history requires, for Donghi, “modifying some of the basic assumptions on which the historical image of the country has been built” (1988, p. 4). And this has meant for quite a while now admitting that those recent horrors brought about by the military junta had always been very much there. That is to say, we must recognize that such horror was not an isolated meaningless aberration of a group of madmen but the climaxing point of a brutal underside to Argentine history. Kohan’s novels allow us to understand this brutal side to Argentine history and society by focusing not on the victims but on the victimizers. *Two Times June*, for example, begins with the discourse of the torturers, as a conscript is facing a notebook opened next to a telephone with the question “A qué edad se puede empesar a torturar a un niño?” (At what age can a child be tortured?). The date is June 10th 1978, and while the Argentine football team prepares to play against Italy in the World Cup, the conscript is annoyed that the question written in the notebook contains a spelling mistake in the word “empesar”. In the following minutes, alone in the room, he struggles between two systems of law: if he corrects the “s” for “z”, he will be questioned by his superiors. Encouraged by the fact that he is not being watched, the conscript finally decides to correct the error, but with a great sense of guilt at having symbolically transgressed military rule. The first section of the novel then narrates the conscript’s search for Dr. Mesiano whom he needs to find in order to ask him the question he saw written in the notebook.

Progressively the novel interweaves through montage, brief fragments (usually no more than two or three paragraphs in length) representing three kinds of discourses: the internal hierarchical laws of military rule, the medical and scientific advice given by Dr. Mesiano and Dr. Padilla to torture the detainees to the limits of pain without killing them (expressed in the discourse of scientific positivism and rationality), and the matter of fact language

and brutal narrative of a clandestine birth in the “Pozo de Quilmes” (Quilmes pit) detention centre and theft or *apropiación* of a detainee’s baby. The scientific discourse of the doctors who aided the torturers, for example, is often interwoven with fragments that provide measurable and quantifiable information about the national football squad’s age, weight, height, shirt number, birth date, and tactical field positions on the eve of the match against Italy in 1978. The Football World Cup was in fact one of the events in which the whole Argentine society participated despite the guilty knowledge or assumption of the atrocities of the repression. Throughout the novel, Dr. Mesiano’s patronizing and falsely moral discourse is passed on to the newly drafted conscript who works as his personal driver. “Moral values are decaying”, “We must do as we are told”, “Our duty is to obey”, “When duty calls we must answer”, says Dr. Mesiano, to an approving, dutifully obedient narrator. Screened behind this moral and scientific discourse, however, the worst atrocities imaginable are in the meantime being committed in the name of the nation whilst the whole of society is being disciplined into silence and due obedience.

On one level, then, the novel fictionalises the “moral justification” army officials have invoked to defend themselves in court since the return to democracy: the notion that there was a “dirty war” where individual “excesses” (rather than a collective and systematic genocide) were committed, the excuse that brutal repression was the only means of “protecting” people against the terrorist subversives, and a self-sacrificing self-righteousness that portrayed the military as performing a tough but necessary service to their homeland. These and many others clichés have been invoked often enough. In fact, after thirty years of democracy, and even after the *Nunca Más* report was published, and countless testimonies, photographs, documentary films, empirical forensic proof has been gathered, and over 90 stolen babies have been found (about 400 still remain to be found), and even after several recent trials have proved the systematic nature of the genocide, still military and police repressors continue to invoke a false morality and to deny the extent of the extermination.

This implies that culture has a big role to play when it comes to coming to terms with the dictatorship’s past and present consequences. Martín Kohan has said that, when writing *Two Times June*, he tried to distance himself from the usual (and more testimonial) representations of the horror and to explore a new point of view that wasn’t that of the testimonies of the survivors and witnesses, or that of the military officers. He indicated that he was interested in exploring the voice, tone, and point of view of “the subaltern”, that is, the voice of s/he who was not him/herself a torturer or a high rank official but who saw, heard or knew of people being tortured, and who directly or indirectly, no matter how

small their responsibility or petty their participation, collaborated to keep the repressive machinery going for so many years. Thus, for Kohan:

No me interesaba la idea del victimario cabal: Astiz, Galtieri ni Videla, sino esas formas grises más ligadas a la complicidad social que a lo que puede ser la figura del torturador. No era ver que pasa por la cabeza del tipo que picanea, sino ver qué pasa con aquel que no tiene ningún peso sobre su conciencia, que no carga con la responsabilidad de ser un torturador, que no se siente un torturador, al mismo tiempo que no forma parte de las fuerzas represivas, y que no está formado ideológicamente. [...]

Yo veía en la literatura las formas de complicidad del que no es un represor consciente y premeditado sino que simplemente se presta a toda una maquinaria impersonal, que él no pondría en funcionamiento pero que al mismo tiempo sostiene y permite que funcione. Esto tiene que ver muchas veces, no con lo que pasó y con lo que se dice, sino con lo que pasa y no pasa, con lo que se deja de decir, con lo que pasa como si no pasara, con la insinuación, con lo que se espera que pase y no pasa.<sup>3</sup>

I wasn't interested in the idea of the total victimizer like Astiz, Galtieri or Videla, but in those grey areas more closely connected to social complicity than to the figure of the torturer. The point was not to see what was going on in the mind of the torturer who used electric shock treatment, but to explore what happens with the one who bears no burden upon his conscience, who does not bear the responsibility of being a torturer, who does not feel he is a torturer, and who does not play an essential part in the repression, and is not ideologically indoctrinated. [...]

I saw I could treat in fiction the forms of complicity of he who is not a conscious, premeditated repressor but who simply allows himself to be used in a giant impersonal machinery, which he himself did not start off but which he helps sustain. This is often connected, not with what happened and is actually reported, but with what is said and what goes unsaid, with what happens and what people pretend does not happen, with what is insinuated and what is expected to happen and yet never does. (My translation)

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<sup>3</sup> From Silvina Costa (2004). "Martín Kohan: Dos Veces Junio". In: *Segunda Poesía* (24th June 2004). URL: <http://www.segundapoesia.com.ar/2004/06/martin-kohan-dos-veces-junio/> (visited on 03/03/2008).

So, the interest of fiction is turned now more to society at large rather than to the perpetrators of the crimes themselves—those who “bear no burden upon their conscience” and yet allowed those atrocities to happen—Argentine society rather than just the repressors. This has the added function in fiction to widen the narrative towards the conditions of possibility for such events. Also, as the quotation shows, insinuation rather than allegory is the main writing strategy that structures the novel, thereby moving closer to what remained silent, unchallenged or assumed in Argentine society at the time of the repression. This also suggests that the subject matter of the novel is, as a consequence, less focused on mourning the horror from a testimonial point of view (or from the point of view of the victim), and more focussed on giving voice to what remains tacitly understood but unsaid. Insinuation, like allegory, is still a very oblique form of stating an acknowledged but unarticulated truth. If Kohan is not fictionally interested in the possibilities of representing the victimizer, but he is, on the other hand, interested in the subaltern, it is probably because he seeks to understand the social mechanisms of the horror in the midst of ordinary life. There must have been, in addition to fear, of course, also some sense of obedience, discipline and compliance, perhaps Kohan suggests, inside Argentine society at large that made such systematic horror possible.

One illustrative example of how codes of discipline and obedience may have been internalised through language is when the conscript remembers his father’s teachings on how to survive the “CoLimBa” (Correr, Limpiar, Barrer: Run, Clean, Sweep the floor—a slang term for the mandatory military period drafted young men had to undergo at the age of 18):

Recuerdo que mi padre dijo: “Los milicos son gente de reglas claras”. La primera de esas reglas establecía: “El superior siempre tiene razón, y más aún cuando no la tiene”. Recuerdo que me dijo que entendiera bien eso, porque si entendía eso, entendía todo. (2005, p. 16)

I remember my father telling me: “Military people have very clear rules”. The first rule states: “An officer of higher rank is always right, no matter how wrong he is”. I remember that my father asked me to be very clear about that, because if I was, I would be able to understand everything.<sup>4</sup>

The unadorned, matter of fact language in which the normalization of such facts is incorporated into daily living suggests another dimension to the horror of the repression

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<sup>4</sup> All translations from (Kohan 2005) are mine.

that exceeds the detention camps and that extends into society as a whole. How could the conscript remain neutral in the face of the question that opens the novel? Did he not care? Was he too afraid to react? At the same time, the simplicity and brutality of the question itself (At what age can a child be tortured? A question a real survivor of the “Pozo de Quilmes” [Quilmes Pit] heard from one of the watchmen) constitutes a brief, condensed example of the general tone of the novel. The scientific answer to the question—that babies cannot be tortured not because it is inhuman and morally unacceptable but because their body mass index is not dense enough to sustain electricity—illustrates the kind of rationality and “morality” upon which the use of torture rests—transferred from a moral plane to a technical question. Eventually, in the novel, doctor Mesiano manipulates the baby’s weight in order to prevent it from being tortured so that he can steal it and give it to his childless sister. Thus, the montage of fragments, the matter of fact language in which the torture sessions are narrated, and the scientific rationality underlying the organization of the clandestine centres of detention (which can only be compared to the Nazi “concentration” camps) create an effect of dehumanization that makes the account of the horror not more neutral but even more unbearable.

In fact, Kohan has said that it was precisely this sense of personal loyalty and obedience to the next in command that was a small but necessary part in the assembly of such a repressive apparatus. In Kohan’s words:

En un aparato represivo hay una parte de la maquinaria que funciona sobre la base de vínculos y fidelidades personales. No hay un compromiso de tipo ideológico, no se trata de una toma de conciencia en el sentido ideológico-político, sino de simple adhesión personal. Yo no digo que eso caracteriza a toda la maquinaria represiva, no me propuse analizar eso, sino demostrar cómo, al igual que lo que ocurre con un motor, lo que lo hace funcionar depende en gran medida de piezas muy pequeñas, que pueden pasar desapercibidas, y que estarían representadas por los vínculos paternos, filiales y de adhesión personal. Y que eso anula completamente los valores propios.<sup>5</sup>

In every repressive apparatus a part of the machinery works on the basis of personal ties and loyalty. There is no ideological commitment to a cause; it is not a matter of a higher politico-ideological awareness, but more of mere

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<sup>5</sup>Guillermo Piro (2002). “Un tiempo de horror eficaz. Entrevista con Martín Kohan”. In: *Revista Ñ. Clarín* (29th June 2002). URL: <http://www.clarin.com/suplementos/cultura/2002/06/29/u-00601.htm> (visited on 02/03/2008)



personal adherence. I am not claiming that this alone characterises the whole of the repressive machinery; it wasn't my intention to analyze that [in the novel], but rather to show how, as in an engine, what makes a machine work depends to a large extent on the smaller pieces, those that may even be invisible to the eye, and that would be best represented by what I see as paternalistic, filial, personal ties [to authority]. And it is this that completely annuls one's own personal moral values. (My translation, bracketed additions mine)

The second section of the novel starts on June 30th 1982, a few days after the Malvinas/Falklands war has finished and the narrator learns that the only son of Dr. Mesiano was killed in combat. The narrator first reads in the newspaper about Argentina's defeat in the 1982 Football World Cup (again against Italy), and of its defeat on the Malvinas/Falklands war as he browses through the list of conscripts and private soldiers dead in combat. He then turns to the police news section where the news of a horribly mutilated body found in the back garden of a house in Berisso is reported (the reference may be to a house near the Police Station in Berisso (Comisaría 8 de Berisso), which was a clandestine center of detention). The narrator then decides to visit Dr. Mesiano in his sister's house to pay his condolences and while he is there, he meets the baby who was stolen from the "subversive" and who is now four years old and is living under a false identity and birth date with Dr. Mesiano's sister and husband. The fragments also incorporate hints at some of the transformations the military Junta incorporated into the fabric of daily life. The transition from state to a savage multinational capitalism, for example, is hinted at through the following phrases: "El cuñado del Dr. Mesiano se dedica al negocio de la importación. Tiene que viajar mucho y pasa mucho tiempo fuera de su casa, pero le va bien" [Dr Mesiano's son-in-law is in the imports business. He has to travel around a lot and he spends a lot of time outside the house, but he's doing quite well] (2005, p. 176). There is also a hint of immorality in the whole description suggested by the personal attitudes of the family that range from Dr. Mesiano's cold comfort clichés in the face of his son's death in Malvinas ("No hay que llorar. A los héroes no se los llora" [We mustn't cry; we must not cry over heroes] (2005, p. 173)), to his sister's insinuations to the narrator ("Yo tomo sol desnuda en esa parte del jardín que ves ahí" [I sunbathe naked, there, in that corner of the garden] (2005, p. 177)) to a fragment where the omniscient narrative voice hears the parents calling the child, and permutates the child's false name (Antonio) for his real identity (Guillermo), which the mother had given him when she gave birth to him on the kitchen table of the clandestine detention centre.

It is important to notice, however, that these hints of immorality are only suggested, and never explicitly mentioned by the omniscient narrator who describes the conscript as still sustaining a neutral, non-judgmental attitude based on his personal loyalty to Dr. Mesiano. In the novel, then, the conscript stands as innocent witness of a horrible crime he has not committed himself but that he has witnessed and allowed, as has, allegorically, Argentine society. This returns us to the notion that it was not only obedience and the naturalisation of the horror but also fear and self-preservation that explained the silence. That is, it is not impossible to conceive that unimaginable physical violence led to silent retreat and refuge in the family rather than to increased trust or unity with any one collective body, and by the return to democracy habit became second nature, and the repression of unbearable guilt and shame found its echo in Menem's Process of National Reconciliation and refuge in the stupidity and numbness of celebrity culture and a materialistic and individualistic lifestyle that suited economic neoliberalism. The 1990s must have felt, indeed, like the "end of history" for some Argentines.

This suggests an explanation as to why the tone and scope of the novel's narration are less focused on mourning and defeat than on trying to find some sort of alternative explanations for the "normalization" of such genocide. Despite fear, horror and trauma people had to function normally: they still had to go to school and to work and pretend they didn't see or hear anything. Readers are shown in the novel how violence insinuates itself as a new dimension in urban life, changing daily existence forever yet modifying little on the surface. A good example is the episode of the World Cup football match against Italy on 10 June 1978 when the Argentine supporters are returning home after the national squad's defeat:

Era una especie de infinita marcha fúnebre, uno de esos fenómenos excepcionales de tristeza general; sólo que esta marcha no tenía un punto de llegada adonde dirigirse: se extendía por todas partes, se dispersaba por todas partes. Si a los que salían del estadio, después de asistir a lo que había pasado, los hubiesen dejado librados a su propia voluntad se hubiese visto que no tenían voluntad: se hubiese visto que se ponían a deambular sin sentido, a dar vueltas igual que se le da vueltas a un problema que no tiene solución. Pero aquí la desazón se derramaba como un orden, porque para eso estaban los vallados infranqueables, y las motos de luces brillantes, y los caballos quietos pero intranquilos, señalando los lugares por donde se podía pasar y por donde no se podía pasar. Y así los que vivían en el oeste llegaban al cuarenta y dos, los

que vivían en Pacheco llegaban al quince, los que vivían en la Boca llegaban al veintinueve. (2005, pp. 78–79)

It was a sort of infinite funeral march, one of those exceptional moments of generalized sadness; except for the fact that this march did not lead anywhere in particular: it scattered all over the place, it dispersed all around. If those who came out of the stadium, after having witnessed what had happened, had been left to their own devices, it would have been possible to see that they had no will of their own: it would have been possible to see them roam aimlessly, turning here and there as a problem with no solution is turned around in one's mind. But here despair spread like an order, because that's what the impassable fencing was for, and the motorcycles with bright headlights, and the quiet yet restless horses; they showed the ways one could go through and those one could not. And so those who lived in the west got to the forty-two, those who lived in Pacheco to the fifteen, and those who lived in La Boca to the twenty-nine. (My translation)

In addition to the overwhelming sensation of defeat and mourning allegorized in the bitter football defeat, the passage underlines the image of Argentine citizens leading zombie-like existences in a hyper-controlled and surveilled city. There is also the notion that order could only be maintained if daily life somehow continued its course unaltered as the descriptive detail of people marching towards their respective bus stops conveys. This also suggests the “safety valve” mechanism of sport and entertainment—where the truths of a supine and repressed everyday existence can be put to one side, which nonetheless do not work in this passage because Argentina's been defeated. The return to everyday life accentuates the forms of a repressive regime but all unity—as in a joyous crowd—has been drained away. This also recalls Piglia's vision in *La ciudad ausente*:

The control was perpetual . . . There was a strange disparity of consciousness in what was occurring. Everything was normal and yet the danger could be felt in the air . . . Everyday life goes on in the middle of the horror, that is what keeps many people sane. The signs of death and terror can be perceived, but there is no clear evidence of behavior being altered. The buses stop at the street corners, the stores are open, couples get married and celebrate, nothing serious can possibly be happening. (2000*b*, p. 73)

Both Piglia and Kohan seem to suggest two dimensions to the daily horror: on the one hand, the disparity or double consciousness that despite appearances all is not well. This sensation, which becomes exacerbated to the limit at times of state repression, does not necessarily disappear in democratic times as poverty, malnourishment, child labour on the street, etc. constitute the denied human “side effects” of neoliberalism and globalization. And on the other, both writers seem to suggest that to be able to continue living under the signs of the horror, citizens must necessarily go through some sort of desensitization or forgetfulness. They might resist inwardly or make an exaggerated show (almost a parody or mimicry) of obeying—which echoes the kind of mimicry Homi Bhabha writes on in *The Location of Culture* (1994) with regard to colonial/postcolonial situations and resistance to imperial power. That is, people adopt two personas: they comply outwardly and hate and resist inwardly, or else find different outlets for this resistance. And as suggested above, this applies as much in times of repression as in democratic times whenever society turns a blind eye to issues like violence, racism, intolerance, poverty, injustice, etc. It is in this sense, then, that a politics of memory acquires an emancipatory role insofar as it may aim at raising awareness of this desensitization process. Or it might try to call up those styles of earlier inner silent or underground resistance mobilizing indignation as affect. Literature then clearly has a role in both raising awareness of these processes and moving or activating people’s affect and compassion while at the same time offering a historical explanation or context.

Kohan’s novel also works very well as a critique of the scientific rationality—turned barbarism—and of the immorality that made such a systematic extermination possible at the same time that it attempts to explain and understand how the rest of the country could go on living and working as if nothing was happening. How could millions of Argentines enjoy and rejoice at the Football World Cup knowing that metres away from the River Plate stadium operated the ESMA (Navy Mechanics School), one of the most atrocious clandestine centres of detention? What sort of ideology and mechanisms were necessary to discipline a whole country into submission and silence? How could this be stopped from ever happening again? Kohan wants to ask these questions and make them part of the horror of the times.

It is undeniable that Kohan’s account gains a particular relevance at this historical conjuncture since the theft of babies born in the detention camps together with real estate theft and rape became after the dictatorship the only three crimes punishable by law and therefore not pardonable by the Due Obedience and Full Stop Laws. However, convictions

have so far been difficult since they necessarily rely on actually finding the babies and on surviving victims in the cases of rape. So far, the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo have recovered the identity of 96 out of about 400 stolen children through an unprecedented DNA program and data bank. Since the annulment of the Due Obedience and Full Stop Laws in August 2003 by President Kirchner, the theft of babies has become part of the “megacausas” (mega law suits) together with rape and other forms of torture, and the forced disappearance of people. Since then, and up to February 2008, although the judicial processes have been slow and marred by the suicide and/or disappearance of key witnesses (such as the famous case of Jorge Julio López), paradigmatic trials have taken place with very significant convictions like those of Bussi and Menéndez in August 2008, of Cristian Von Wernich and the colonels from the 601 Battalion in 2007, and of Etchecolatz and Simon in 2006.

But at this point we must remember that violence was not the exclusive terrain of the military, but also of the guerrilla or armed groups of the 1960s–1970s. In the following section I will explore how Kohan’s *Museo de la Revolución* (2006) incorporates into the novel’s structure the question of what to do with the legacy of the 1970s revolutionary past.

### 9.3 “The Revolution teaches”

Following along the same path of reconstruction and of dialogue with past experience and memory is Kohan’s 2006 novel, *Museo de la Revolución* (henceforth Museum of the Revolution), which instead of focusing on the dictatorship, lays claim to the enormous ideological legacy of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky as they were read and understood by Argentine students in the 1970s. The novel tells the story of a Trotsky-Peronist Montonero, Rubén Téscare, who in 1975 travels to the small town of Laguna Chica in Córdoba in order to hand over a bag to a guerrilla partner who, in turn, will take it back to his guerrilla cell hiding in the forests of Tucumán. Disobeying the orders of his superiors, he spends the night at a local hotel with a girl who becomes his “entregadora” [informant or nark], that is, she betrays him and turns him in to the repressors that operated in the so-called “Operativo Independencia” (Operation Independence) in Tucumán prior to the 1976 coup.

Operation Independence, together with the Ezeiza massacre, are often seen as pre-figuring the horror of what is to come on the 24 March 1976. In November 1974, the widow Isabel Perón declared a state of siege. On 5 February 1975, she signed secret Decree

no.261, which authorised the army to neutralise subversive elements in Tucumán. Four days later, the army launched Operativo Independencia to wage war against the ERP [Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo—People’s Revolutionary Army]. General Vila’s Operativo Independencia actively promoted in the media an image of conventional warfare between two comparable armies. But five thousand troops, along with state security police, were deployed against some 120 to 140 ERP guerrillas (Andersen 1993, p. 125). The ongoing rhetoric of a legitimate war in Tucumán served three purposes. It allowed the army to practise methods of terror it would soon deploy in the country at large: the electric pod, the live burial, hanging by wire. It provided a “smoke screen” for the illegal violence perpetrated by the army against sugar cane workers in Tucumán at the moment. And thirdly, it legitimated the army’s presence and power for its impending take over (Wright 2007, p. 100).

But, why was the ERP in Tucumán at the moment? As it is well known Tucumán was one of Argentina’s most impoverished provinces. Sugar-cane estates had long been its main economic activity, but due to a major slump in the 1960s, unemployment and poverty became widespread. Following Che Guevara’s teachings about rural guerrilla warfare, the ERP, who like the Montoneros, saw themselves as the vanguard of the liberation movements in Argentina, tried to “take” Tucumán in 1975. This revolutionary ideology of the ERP, the PRT [Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores—Workers’ Revolutionary party] and of Montoneros as well cannot be understood unless one knows how important Che Guevara and Franz Fanon’s theories were for these guerrilla groups.

Here is the voice of Tanya, a PRT active member who gives her testimony in Patricia and William Marchak’s book *God’s Assassins*:

I was nineteen or twenty years old when I became politically active in a leftist organization that advocated armed struggle, the Revolutionary Workers’ Party (PRT). I never belonged to the armed faction, but to the intellectual student groups that supported action and engaged in propaganda. We were concerned with the Third World and Third World movements. We thought that society was divided into two big blocs and that the domination was so powerful that *there was no alternative* to an armed struggle in order to overthrow the oppressors. (Patricia Marchak 1999, p. 124, emphasis mine)

What is striking about her account is the absolute belief that there was no alternative to guerrilla violence. José Pablo Feinmann analyses this belief in the absolute histori-

cal necessity of armed struggle in the light of Ernesto Che Guevara's theory of the *foco insurreccional*. Feinmann says:

Ernesto Guevara extrae la teoría del *foco insurreccional* de la experiencia de la Revolución Cubana. Escribe: "Consideramos que tres aportaciones fundamentales hizo la Revolución Cubana a la mecánica de los movimientos revolucionarios en América, son ellas:

"1ro. Las fuerzas populares pueden ganar una guerra contra el ejército.

"2do. No siempre hay que esperar que se den todas las condiciones para la revolución.

"3ro. En la América subdesarrollada el terreno de la lucha armada debe ser fundamentalmente el campo". [...]

El 16 de abril [de 1967] se publica su *Mensaje a los pueblos del mundo* a través de la Conferencia Tricontinental ... Y lleva como acápite una cita de José Martí: "Es la hora de los hornos, en que no se ha de ver más que la luz" ... la izquierda peronista se inspira en Guevara, lee apasionadamente el texto de la Tricontinental ... el pasado que dibuja el verdadero rostro de la izquierda peronista es el de Guevara. (Feinmann 2007, pp. 50–55, emphasis mine)

Ernesto Guevara bases his theory of the insurrectional *foco* on his experience of the Cuban Revolution. He writes: "Three main contributions can be extrapolated from the Cuban Revolution into the Latin American revolutionary movements. These are:

1. Popular forces can win a war against the army.
2. It is not always necessary to wait for the all conditions of the revolution to take place.
3. In underdeveloped America, the terrain of armed struggle must be first and foremost the countryside.

On 16 April [1967] his *Message to the Tricontinental* is published ... And it carries an epigraph by José Martí: "Now is the time of the furnaces, and only light should be seen" ... the Peronist left finds inspiration in Guevara; they

passionately read this text of the Tricontinental ... the past that paints the true picture of the Peronist left is that of Guevara. (My translation)<sup>6</sup>

So, Ernesto Guevara's theory, expounded in his "La Guerra de Guerrillas" [Guerrilla War: A Method] (1960), helps explain why the ERP, the PRT and Montoneros sought to carry out this absurd small-scale guerrilla warfare in Tucumán, but also, of course, in the urban centres. These groups also "guevarise" Evita (Feinmann 2007, p. 67) and are led by slogans such as "gloria o muerte" [glory or death], "patria o muerte" [the homeland or death], "Perón o muerte" [Perón or death], "liberación o muerte" [emancipation or death] (Feinmann 2007, p. 59). It is this revolutionary fascination with death and violence as the only means of liberation, then, that the revolutionary groups come to value as the only means to overcome oppression. And as was said before, this provided the perfect excuse in 1976 for the coup and the repression that followed, and helps explain, to a certain extent, why the Argentine populace hailed the 1976 coup with relief.

In *Museum of the Revolution*, then, important questions are asked about this revolutionary past. Its protagonist, Tésare, becomes one of the first disappeared in the "Operativo Independencia" but his story is read only twenty years later (1995) from Tésare's own diary by Norma Rossi, an exile living in Mexico since the late 1970s who is interested in giving Tésare's diary and political notes to an editor working for a publishing house in Buenos Aires. The novel finishes with the editor's shocking realization that Norma Rossi is in fact Tésare's *entregadora*. The book thus runs on three simultaneous tracks: the story of Tésare's last night before he is turned in (set in 1975) to the repressive forces, the story of Norma Rossi and the Argentine editor (set in 1995), and Norma Rossi's reading of Tésare's essays on Marx, Trotsky, and Lenin to the editor. These threads are seamlessly crocheted together avoiding a division into chapters or parts and thereby suggesting some sort of relevance or natural continuity not only between disparate times (1975 and 1995) and geographies (Córdoba, Buenos Aires and México DF) but also between the revolutionary ideas and different political moments.

For instance, the revolutionary theories and texts of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky are first read and reinterpreted from the revolutionary vision of Tésare's commitment to the Peronist fatherland and the Montoneros in Argentina, then read in the context of 1995 Menemist politics and exile by Norma Rossi and the Argentine editor, and finally left open

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<sup>6</sup>*La Hora de los Hornos* (1968) [The Hour of the Furnace] is also the title of a film by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino which together with Gillo Pontecorvo's masterpiece *La Batalla de Argelia* (1965) [*The Battle of Algiers*] became two of the most emblematic cultural productions of the armed Peronist left.



for the hermeneutic process of the actual, current reader of Kohan's novel. This series of juxtapositions in the times of reading suggests some continuity between apparently dissimilar moments: from the Russian revolution, to the revolutionary pre-dictatorial moment of 1975 in Argentina, to the Menemist period (1995), to the present post-default moment (2006) in which the novel by Kohan is published.

When asked about the novel's structure, Kohan replied that he had first written the essays on Marx, Lenin and Trotsky and only later did he think of a narrative plot in which to frame or embed those texts within a revolutionary context.<sup>7</sup> This suggests a narrative composition similar to Borges's, where the narrative interest lies first and foremost in discussing some idea (in Borges philosophical; in Kohan philosophico-political) and then thinking of a narrative frame or medium to carry it through in narrative terms. When asked how relevant he thought those texts by Marx, Lenin and Trotsky were, especially thirty years after the dictatorship and almost fifteen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Kohan replied

En mi escritura había un impulso de fascinación por la imaginación revolucionaria. Evidentemente, la atmósfera social y el estado de cosas es otro, y de ahí el pasaje entre el '75 y el '95, que me permitía jugar con eso: no casualmente decidí situarla durante el menemismo. La novela pone en juego otros dos planos: uno ha tenido que ver con la militancia revolucionaria argentina en los '70 y lo que viene de ahí en adelante, pero está la otra dimensión, la revolución rusa; y más allá de que después de la caída del Muro nos toca una etapa de melancolía, también hay una potencia épica de lo que fue la revolución triunfante. En las ideas de tiempos, repliegues, avances, presentes y futuros de Marx, Lenin y Trotsky hay una fuerza política e ideológica enorme. Desearía haber capturado algo, en mi novela, de esa vibración.<sup>8</sup>

There was in my writing a fascination with the revolutionary imagination. Obviously, the social atmosphere and the current state of affairs have changed, and obviously the passage from 1975 to 1995 allowed me to play around with this: it is no coincidence that I decided to set the novel during the Menemist

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<sup>7</sup>Patricio Lennard (2007). "Tomar distancia". In: *Página/12* (18th Dec. 2007). Interview with Martín Kohan. URL: <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/libros/10-2852-2007-12-18.html> (visited on 19/06/2008)

<sup>8</sup>Martín Kohan (2006a). "La teoría revolucionaria abarca la vida cotidiana". In: *Página/12* (21st Aug. 2006). URL: <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/espectaculos/4-3510-2006-08-21.html> (visited on 18/02/2008).

period. The novel brings into play two planes: one concerned with the revolutionary militancy in 1970s Argentina and what came thereafter, but there is another dimension, the Russian revolution; and although after the fall of the Wall we enter a period of mourning, there is also the epic potential of what was the triumphant revolution. In the notion of different times, retreats, advances, presents and futures theorised by Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky there is enormous political and ideological strength. I was hoping to have captured in my novel something of that vibrancy. (My translation, bracketed addition mine)

But what does it mean that there is enormous political and ideological strength in Marxism, Leninism and Trotskyism today? This question of the relevance of Marxism today echoes those posed by Magnus and Cullenberg in their introduction to Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1994): What remains of the socialist vision(s) after the "collapse" of the Wall in 1989? Has the collapse of communism also spelled the death of Marxism, and of Marx as an important philosopher and thinker? . . . In particular, how will intellectuals in the Marxist tradition respond, theoretically and politically, to the global transformations now occurring? (1994*b*, pp. viii–ix) But before analysing this legacy of Marxism in Kohan's novel, first we can usefully consider another figure in the Marxist tradition—Antonio Gramsci and his notion of the formation of intellectuals on the left.

In the *Prison Notebooks* (2001), Gramsci argues that intellectuals fall roughly into two groups: on the one hand, those who are professional or traditional intellectuals, philosophical, literary, scientific and so on, and on the other hand, those who are organic intellectuals, distinguished less by their profession than by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong. Thus, intellectuals, in the wide sense of the word, are seen by Gramsci as performing an essential mediating function in the struggle of class forces. However, unlike Gramsci's importance given to the political party (in his case the Communist Party) as channelling the activity of these organic intellectuals, in Argentina at present, the weakening of the role of political parties as formal practitioners of conflict articulation (GEPSAC (Grupo de Estudio sobre Protesta Social y Acción Colectiva) 2007, p. 60) has meant that at present fewer intellectuals are likely to develop organically from out of a class whose interests the political parties supposedly serve, and that, contrariwise, more intellectuals are likely to develop organically in relation to human rights organizations, community centres, popular assemblies, people's libraries, and the cultural centres developed in the factories taken over by workers and in anarchist organizations, etc. Thus, for the past few years in Argentina, the response of intellectuals



Figure 9.1: *MU*, the Lavaca collective cultural critical newspaper. Online access at <http://lavaca.org/mu/>.

in the Marxist tradition has been of a cultural politics rather than of party politics like in the past. In fact, many of the new collectives of political activism include full cultural/intellectual formation programmes with pedagogic and politically oriented cultural activities, which are seen by these groups as a fundamental part of their organizations' work. That is to say, we must take account of the politicisation of culture or of cultural politics in a period where organised left political parties have been in decline.

With the crisis of 2002, class struggles found a different political expression than the party. For sociologist Maristella Svampa, the devastating collapse of the default meant that the entire political class had become discredited to such an extent that the dominant refrain of the mass mobilizations of 2002 became "¡que se vayan todos!" "out with the lot of them!" (2008, p. 81). Rather than turn to party politics, then, "Argentina turned into a laboratory for new forms of collective action, including *piquetero* organizations mobilizing the unemployed, neighbourhood assemblies and worker-led takeovers of bankrupt factories; there was also a proliferation of the most varied cultural groups" (2008, p. 81). These social collectives have also created cultural centres that sponsor ongoing activities such as workshops, performances and joint cultural projects with universities and the community

at large. Long-running and well known examples of this are the cultural initiatives of the Lavaca collective, a workers' cooperative created in 2001 that supports cultural initiatives like the monthly newspaper *MU* (see Fig.9.1), books and documentary films, a Cátedra Autónoma de Comunicación Social [Public Lecture in Communications], and a yearly course on Independent Journalism and Critical Thinking.

UBA [the free, public state University of Buenos Aires] also runs a Centro de Documentación y Formación sobre empresas recuperadas [Centre of records and skills training for worker-led factory take-overs] through its university extension, which combines free, public university courses on self-management with archiving activities, literary study groups (Café Literario—Literary Salons) and independent publishing projects with the Chilavert Workers' Recovered Press. Other monthly activities include workshops and forums for social, cultural and political debate, and the formation of a people's library and a Programa de Investigación sobre Cambio Social (Social Change Research Programme), a joint collaboration between the Gino Germani Research Institute at the Facultad de Ciencias Sociales de la UBA (University of Buenos Aires Social Sciences Research Group) and the MNER (Movimiento Nacional de Empresas Recuperadas—National Movement of Workers' Recovered Factories). The aim of this latter initiative is, for example, to produce intervention strategies to satisfy the needs of the workers-led factories for the improvement of production, market integration, labour conditions, and socio-cultural projects that would feed back into improving the lifestyle of the workers and neighbours. The factories taken over by workers are not the only ones to create their own organic intellectuals (either in joint projects with the state universities or not). Other similar cultural projects can be found in the popular assemblies and community centres, and in people's libraries and human rights organizations.

Professional intellectuals, in turn, have become quite active for the past few months as well. On 15 May 2008, *Página/12* published an "Open Letter" (Carta Abierta/01) and two more have so far followed (Carta Abierta/02, 4 June 2008; and Carta Abierta/03, 11 June 2008) signed by over 1.500 professional intellectuals in favour of President Cristina Fernández's Plan de Distribución de la Riqueza (Wealth Redistribution Plan) and in full support of democracy, which was being attacked, they felt, by the media biased reporting (especially from the pages of *Clarín* and *La Nación* newspapers) of the four months of protests that drew in not only large-scale agribusiness concerns and small to medium farmers, but also the middle classes in several major cities, who once again staged cooking-

pot demonstrations [*cacerolazos*] as they had during the crisis of 2001–2002.<sup>9</sup> The protests erupted after the March hike in agricultural taxes, which raised to 44 per cent rates that had formerly varied in line with international prices, made no distinction between small and large producers, and was peremptorily enacted by presidential decree. This prompted an aggressive stand-off between the government and a range of organizations, uniting farmers and the urban middle classes. Though the protests were freighted with issues of class and race including visceral middle-class rejection of a left-wing Peronism traditionally associated with the lower orders, they also voiced concerns about the concentration of political power in the presidential couple and a small coterie of associates. Indeed, the rapid escalation of the conflict greatly undermined the *presidenta*'s authority.

Government spokesmen interpreted the farm dispute as exemplifying a supposed polarization between the oligarchical right and a nationalist-popular administration. As tensions increased in the early months of 2008, President Fernández nonetheless appealed to populism, emphasizing the importance of the agricultural levies to the implementation of notional redistributive policies, and to attempts to keep domestic prices down. Fernández then submitted a bill for Congressional approval in early July, which was then rejected in the Senate. In its wake, the presidenta was forced to withdraw the original tax plan, fixing the rate of the levy at 35 per cent. For Maristella Svampa, the conflict with the countryside had a paradoxical result: “on the one hand, it brought onto the political stage different social and economic actors, linked to the agribusiness model, while strengthening the positions of the most conservative and reactionary sectors. On the other hand, its denouement has imposed political limits on the government which probably signal the end of the “K Era” ... and its timid experiments with building a centre-left coalition” (2008, pp. 94–95).

It was precisely in response to this political struggle that Carta Abierta was born. The four letters published in 2008 have been signed by renowned intellectuals such as Horacio Verbitsky, Nicolás Casullo, David Viñas, Noé Jitrik, Horacio González, José Pablo Feinmann, Ricardo Forster, Jaime Sorín and countless other writers, artists, journalists, university professors and academics, and have so far touched upon debate topics like democracy, social justice and equality, a critique of the “rebirth” of the extreme right in Argentina, a proposal for a fairer distribution of media rights (TV, radio and newspapers) and the nationalization of state assets like Aerolíneas Argentinas [Argentine Airlines] and the private pension system [AFJP]. In the first Open Letter, for example, they express the need for

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<sup>9</sup> See “Carta Abierta/1” (2008). In: *Página/12* (15th May 2008). URL: <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-104188-2008-05-15.html> (visited on 15/05/2008).

rearticulating the intellectuals' role within Argentine society and politics in the context of the conflict with the countryside:

En este nuevo escenario político resulta imprescindible tomar conciencia ... de la importancia de librar ... una batalla cultural ... Tomar conciencia de nuestro lugar en esta contienda desde las ciencias, la política, el arte, la literatura, la acción social, los derechos humanos, los problemas de género, oponiendo a los poderes de la dominación la pluralidad de un espacio político intelectual lúcido en sus argumentos democráticos. Se trata de una recuperación de la palabra crítica en todos los planos de las prácticas y en el interior de una escena social dominada por la retórica de los medios de comunicación y la derecha ideológica de mercado ... pero sobre todo [de la recuperación de una palabra crítica] que crea imprescindible volver a articular una relación entre mundos intelectuales y sociales con la realidad política. [...] Teniendo en cuenta esta escena de nuestra actualidad, nuestro propósito es aportar a una fuerte intervención política—donde el campo intelectual, informativo, científico, artístico y político juega un rol de decisiva importancia—en el sentido de una democratización, profundización y renovación del campo de los grandes debates públicos. Estratégicamente se trata de sumar formas políticas que ayuden a fecundar una forma más amplia y participativa de debatir. (“Carta Abierta/1” 2008)

In this new socio-political scene it is imperative to become aware of ... the importance of engaging ... in a cultural struggle ... To become aware of our place in this political struggle from the vantage point of science, politics, art, literature, social action, human rights, gender conflicts, opposing hegemony with the plurality of an intellectual political space lucid in its democratic arguments. It has to do with the recovery of a critical reflexivity in all aspects of praxes and in the interior of a social scene dominated by mass media rhetoric and the ideological right of the market ... but above all, it has to do with believing it is essential to rearticulate the connection between the intellectual and social worlds with political reality. [...] In the context of the current events in our country, our aim is to contribute to a strong political intervention—where the intellectual, informative, scientific, artistic and political fields play a decisively important role—that will lead to a democratization, deepening and renewal of

the main debates in the public arena. From a strategic viewpoint, we try to put together political formations that will help to impregnate a broader and more participative spirit of debate. (My translation)

Democracy, debate, discursive and cultural struggle, critical reflexivity, engaging in the main debates of the public arena—these are the ideas and praxis that according to these intellectuals have found an opening since 2003. We must contrast this with the discourse of violence, death and glory of the 1970s. Carta Abierta emphasises the critical and cultural aspect of this new phase, and calls for a new relation between the social and the cultural spheres based on a critique: “Desde el 2003, las políticas gubernamentales incluyeron un debate que involucra a la historia, a la persistencia en nosotros del pasado y sus relaciones con los giros y actitudes del presente” [Since 2003, our government policies have included a debate that involves history, the persistence in us of the past and its connections with turns and attitudes of the present] (“Carta Abierta/1” 2008). For these intellectuals, a debate is taking place at present that involves the economic, social, cultural and militant or combative legacies and biographies and that has as one of its central points how memory, articulated through a human rights politics rather than through a discourse of violence, encompasses all the tensions and conflicts of our historical experience. Their call in Carta Abierta is to openly and publicly debate those legacies in the realms not only of politics, society and economy but also of art and culture.

This recalls John Kraniauskas’s argument in “Political Puig: Eva Perón and the Populist Negotiation of Modernity” that “Peronism (as regime and as national-popular movement) actually was constituted—at least in part—through cultural form” (1996, p. 125). For Kraniauskas: “Peronism . . . takes us with Eva [Perón] into and through an emerging mass media—musicians on tour, popular theatre, radio, film, and their associated magazines—which was beginning to make its presence felt on politics: Eva meets Perón, the media meets the military” (1996, p. 124). That is, Peronism meant that political forces in Argentina had to mingle with the popular, and that the mass media forms of communication (radio, TV, newspapers, popular magazines, etc.) became important media through which politics began to be filtered and staged. This also means that, as another commentator asserts, back in the 1940s and 1950s, Peronism was constituted as a cultural phenomenon in as much as it was a political and economic one (Tandeciarz 1997, p. 4). In the same way as Evita and the mass media allowed for a contentious mobilization of popular forces back in the 1950s, Carta Abierta uses *Página/12*, state universities, cultural centres and the Biblioteca Nacional [the National Library in Buenos Aires] (among other sites) as

platforms of contentious critique. But (and this is a big but), unlike Peronism, their call to arms is not “popular”. Indeed, it is quite the opposite: Carta Abierta intellectuals have explicitly remained “academic” and “intellectual” in their critique. As Carta Abierta has said:

Carta Abierta no tiene nada que enseñar al pueblo. Se debe hablar con el lenguaje propio, sin travestirse. Ya nos proletarizamos y nos fue mal. Este es un espacio que trabaja con la palabra y, como nos estamos dentro de una campana de cristal, ponemos el cuerpo.<sup>10</sup> [...] (Ricardo Foster): No hay que simplificar el lenguaje para TN [Todo Noticias]. Los medios lanzaron la palabra al zócalo de la historia. Carta Abierta reclama la posibilidad de pensar sin complacencia la complejidad del drama argentino y latinoamericano.<sup>11</sup>

Carta Abierta has nothing to teach the people. It must speak its own language, and not transvestite it to make it more accessible to the people. When we proletarianised our language and action, we suffered. This is a space that works with language and discourse and, because we don't live in an ivory tower, we also come out onto the streets. [...] (Ricardo Foster): We must not simplify our language for TV news channel TN (Todo Noticias). It was precisely the news media that flushed the word down the drain of history. Carta Abierta claims back the possibility of thinking without concessions the complexity of the Latin American and Argentine drama. (My translation)

This implies a position that echoes other cultural practitioners like Beatriz Sarlo, for example, who, while distrusting the language of the mass media, still need to make use of mass media forms of communication to voice their concerns and critiques without they themselves being led astray by those media. Hence the call not to “transvestite” the academic language. The four letters Carta Abierta has published so far have been accompanied by a First National Encounter held in Rosario on 20 September 2008, and by a very active participation in marches and demonstrations (especially during the agrarian lockout and the conflict in Bolivia). There seems to be certain urgency at the moment to engaging

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<sup>10</sup> The reference “ponemos el cuerpo” is for example to the active street demonstrations and marches Carta Abierta has taken part in to condemn what they called “intentos desestabilizadores” [destabilizing attempts] during the agrarian lockout to Cristina Fernández de Kirchner last March/April 2008, and in favour of Bolivia's President, Evo Morales when the Santa Cruz crisis broke out in September 2008.

<sup>11</sup> “Un laberinto intelectual” (2008). In: *Página/12* (14th Sept. 2008). URL: <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-111585-2008-09-14.html> (visited on 21/11/2008).



in these cultural and discursive debates and struggles and on creating a new space of informed political dissent and activism in the interests of creating a participative democracy. Clearly Carta Abierta represents an attempt to bring politics and history back into the social/cultural sphere. But there is also, at the same time, a preoccupation with the division between an ideal public reader of those letters (academic experts, professional intellectuals, etc.) and the public in general (the viewers of TN, for example). This returns us to the argument that what is needed is the formation of politicised and critical voices. Whether Carta Abierta can help bring this about is something that remains to be seen (not least because of continuity since the movement does not seem to have, for the time being, any institutionalised form).

In any case, this suggests that the question of a cultural change is very much back on the agenda again (as it was in the 1960s and 1970s) and that at the moment it involves intellectuals working in public universities, schools and the media, as well as people in general working in Memory Museums and people's libraries, and all other cultural centres encouraging political activism within the new social groups rather than the political party as Gramsci had envisioned in his *Prison Notebooks*. However, some uncertainty remains as to whether Argentine society (and not just professional intellectuals) is "ready" for a new politicised cultural production.

But we need to return now to the question of a legacy of a Marxist tradition in Kohan's novel and address the question of how the present is haunted by the persistence of past revolutions. When the Argentine editor asks Norma Rossi why she has kept Tésare's diary secret for so long but has only now (in 1995, fictional time) decided to give it up for publication, she replies that the reason was that she had not been sure up until now what sort of reactions such a text would arouse in the populace:

Me dice que vacila por una razón muy concreta: porque no está segura de las reacciones que un texto así puede despertar en circunstancias como las presentes (supongo que se refiere a los hechos que en el país han venido sucediendo en los últimos años, entre otros, un nuevo uso impropio de la palabra "revolución". Alguien ya se ha ocupado de hacer la lista de ese abuso en la historia argentina del siglo XX: la revolución de 1930, la revolución libertadora, la revolución argentina, la revolución productiva). Un texto así, agrega Norma Rossi, con un autor así, en circunstancias como las presentes, puede, eventualmente reactivar cierto tipo de conciencia política, sacudir cierto apagamiento y cierto escepticismo que son todo un signo de los tiempos, puede interesar y hasta motivar a

quienes en otro tiempo creyeron en un futuro de cambio o a quienes desconocen por completo lo que es tener en la vida ese tipo de perspectiva; un texto así con un autor así, puede estimular esa clase de disposición social que en otro tiempo era corriente, y ahora, en cambio, se ve poco menos que eliminada por completo, suplada por el desgano o la mezquindad del proyecto individual. (2006*b*, p. 52)

She tells me that she hesitates for a very concrete reason: because she's not sure what reactions a text like this one might arouse in the present circumstances (I guess she means the events that have lately been taking place in our country, among them, the latest misuse of the word revolution. A list has already been made of how that term has been used and abused in twentieth century Argentine history: the 1930s revolution, the libertarian revolution, the Argentine revolution, the productive revolution). A text like this, Norma Rossi adds, with an author like this, in circumstances like those of the present, can, eventually, reactivate a certain kind of political conscience, cast off the spiritlessness and scepticism that are themselves a sign of the times; it can interest and even motivate those who, in other times, believed in a future of change or those who utterly ignore what it's like in life to have that sort of perspective; a text like this with an author like this, can stimulate that kind of social disposition that was common in other times, and now, instead, has been little less than eliminated, replaced by the apathy or pettiness of the individual project.<sup>12</sup>

So the main goal of the novel seems to be to rearticulate, or put back into circulation certain ideas that coloured the revolutions of the 1970s but that ended up catastrophically due to an excess of violence. It is the present moment's apathy, individualism, and lack of historical and political conscience that are the true enemies or the underside of this cultural, critical, and political project. Potentially, then, Marx, Lenin and Trotsky, but also the left in Argentina, can teach the new generations to fight against oppression. But this fight is no longer that of the revolutionary violence of the 1970s and of the proletariat but the fight for a critical consciousness that, one assumes, may eventually lead the way to a new socialism (no longer only that of the historical socialisms, but a new kind, fitted to modern times). This notion of the past as a reservoir of valuable experience and of the

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<sup>12</sup>All translations from Martín Kohan (2006*b*). *Museo de la Revolución*. Buenos Aires: Mondadori, are mine.

present as a “new” moment of transformation is also articulated in Kohan’s novel through the reading of Tésare’s politico-philosophical notes on the revolution. In one of the reading moments between Norma Rossi and the Argentine editor, there is a notion of pedagogy, understood as the recovery of a revolutionary text, and thereby, of an *ideal* of struggle, which is linked to a utopian vision of a transformed future:

Es cierto que una revolución rompe violentamente con las tradiciones del pasado. Pero también es cierto que en ese mismo pasado existe una tradición de revoluciones, una tradición revolucionaria, de la que Lenin dice que es preciso aprender (“La revolución enseña”). De manera que Lenin, el gran liquidador, también atesora. Brilla en los saberes del presente, los saberes del que atina a ver la oportunidad y el momento, y además en los saberes del pasado, los saberes del que acumula experiencia y la erige en pedagogía. (2006*b*, p. 65)

It is true that a revolution violently breaks with the traditions of the past. But it is equally true that in this same past there is a tradition of revolutions, or a revolutionary tradition, from which, Lenin says, it is necessary to learn (“The revolution teaches”). So Lenin, the great destroyer, also treasures the past. He has an outstanding knowledge of the present, which is important if he is to see the right opportunity for the revolution, but also of the experiences of the past, which are for him pedagogically valuable.

These words, written by Tésare in his notebook, constitute a preservation of the revolutionary past insofar as Marx, Lenin and Trotsky’s theories and writings (or teachings) are sustained not only by Tésare’s writing, but also by Norma Rossi’s reading, and consequently, by our reading of the novel in the present of 2006 (the novel’s date of publication). Does it matter in the novel that the Argentine editor decides not to publish Tésare’s notebook because it was given to him in an act of betrayal (by Tésare’s “entregadora” or informer)? Yes and no. On the one hand, it matters because in the novel this gesture of the editor amounts to denying any relevance or validity to Tésare’s notes in the “present” of Menem’s neoliberalism (let us remember that the date in the novel is 1995). That is to say, it amounts to asking what relevance Marxism and the tradition of the revolution (including the 1970s revolutionary attempt in Argentina) would have in 1995 in the face of Menem’s dismantling of the welfare state, the privatization of the national resources, and the destruction of national industry. In this sense Menem stands as everything that is

opposed to a Marxist revolution understood not as communism but as an egalitarian distribution of income, increased workplace democracy, the end of economic exploitation, and the eradication of class differences. So, the editor's gesture of refusing to publish Tésare's notebook allegorically amounts in the novel to acknowledging defeat and engaging in the work of mourning in the specific context of 1995 Argentina.

On the other hand, the paradox lies, precisely, in that Tésare's notes are in fact published, non-fictionally in the post-default present. That is, they are in fact "published" through Kohan's book. What within the fiction is a denial and an act of mourning in the fictional time of 1995, outside that fictional world, in 2006, the year of publication of the novel, becomes an affirmative act of recovery or of the persistence of that utopian tradition. If only from the point of view that those discourses (written by Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky, and recuperated by Tésare and then read to us through Norma Rossi) are put back into circulation and into the field of forces of the public sphere through the publication of Kohan's novel in 2006. Thus, Tésare writes:

La revolución en el pasado no desaparece del todo: el pasado, sobre todo cuando se trata del pasado reciente, se atesora con la ambición de lo imborrable. Dice Trotsky: "Sus dirigentes han traicionado a la Revolución de Octubre. Pero no la han derrumbado, y la revolución tiene una gran capacidad de resistencia." La resistencia es la clave de su persistencia. La revolución de Octubre todavía es. Se ha visto traicionada, pero no está muerta. Todavía es. Por eso puede y debe renacer en el futuro. (2006*b*, p. 123, emphasis mine)

The revolution in the past does not altogether disappear: the past, especially when it's the recent past, is treasured with the ambition of what is indelible. Trotsky writes: "The leaders have betrayed the October Revolution. But they have not knocked it down, and the revolution has a great capacity for resistance". Resistance is the key to its persistence. The October Revolution still is. It was betrayed, but it's not dead. It still is. This is why it can and must be reborn in the future.

What is treasured, then, is the capacity of Marxism to still offer a vision of a better world, of a fairer human condition and a more just ethics than that offered by the dominant discourse today of free market liberalism. This vision of a better, transformed world must not die (or has not died) and remains as indelible as ever in, to quote Jaques Derrida, "a certain spirit of Marxism" (1994*a*). In fact, Derrida's famous opening sentence "maintaining

now the specters of Marx” (1994*a*, p. 31) claims that to think of Marxism today is to see multiple specters. Why, Derrida asks, is this the case? He answers his own question in two ways: first, Marx, who was interested in displacing the subjectivity of the bourgeois individual agent with a new kind of subjectivity, often spoke of the crowd, the horde, the masses, the community without a leader, rather than the individual agent (1994*a*, p. 31). The many, rather than the one. In addition, Marx himself, properly speaking, is no longer a living subject. Thus Marx himself became a dead man who haunts current thought. Implicit in Derrida’s book on Marx, then, is a critique of those who fancy themselves “beyond” Marxism’s historical moment and at the gates of “the end of history” as his critique of Francis Fukuyama’s book *The End of History and the Last Man* makes clear.

A specter, according to Derrida, must be mourned, and for mourning to occur, the body must be dead. Thus the certainty of the death of both Marx and the death of certain types of communism may now usher in the “birth” of the specters of Marx (in the plural, for there are many) and the maintaining of his spirit, even if dominant discourses today insist on the end of Marxism. For Derrida, what is over is a *certain* idea of communist Marxism (the Soviet Union, the International of Communist Parties, and everything that resulted from them) (1994*a*, p. 33), but what remains as a haunting specter is the Marxist philosophical tradition. “The Marxist inheritance was—and still remains, and so it will remain—absolutely and thoroughly determinate. One need not be a Marxist or a communist in order to accept this obvious fact”, says Derrida (1994*a*, p. 33). In fact, he says, “we live in a world, some would say a culture, that still bears, at an incalculable depth, the mark of this inheritance” (1994*a*, p. 33) . . . [But] “this inheritance is never a given, it is always a task” (1994*a*, p. 40). We, as heirs of Marxism, then, are in mourning.

Today, also, for Derrida, time is out of joint, it is unhinged (1994*a*, p. 31). Today is the time when justice should be done, when intellectual work should recognize that the past lives within the present. Now that “the dogma machine and the ‘Marxist’ ideological apparatuses (states, parties, cells, unions and other places of doctrinal production) are in the process of disappearing, we no longer have any excuse, only alibis, for turning away from this responsibility” (1994*a*, p. 32). Derrida goes as far as to say that there will be no future without this: “No future without Marx, without the memory and the inheritance of Marx” (1994*a*, pp. 32–33). He also repeatedly claims that media culture of the 1990s is deliberately late to the end of history (1994*a*, p. 33) and that the discourse on the end of history “looks most often like a tiresome anachronism” (1994*a*, p. 34). The end of history, for deconstruction at least, happened some time ago, in the 1950s, with

the news of the totalitarian terror in all eastern countries and with the canon of the modern apocalypse philosophers (Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger), which in fact gave birth to deconstruction (1994*a*, p. 34). Derrida seems to suggest that perhaps what we are really talking about when we say “the end of history” or the “end of Marxism” is really in fact, the end of a certain *concept* of history (1994*a*, p. 34). How can we believe, asks Derrida, in Fukuyama’s “good news” of a victorious capitalism and a less than perfect liberal democracy (1994*a*, p. 43) when “never before have violence, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the Earth and of humanity” (1994*a*, p. 53)? For Derrida, Fukuyama oscillates confusedly between two discourses: on the one hand, he announces the “good news” of a capitalist liberal democracy, and on the other other, “he does not hesitate to oppose the *ideality* of this liberal democratic *ideal* to all the evidence that bears massive witness to the fact that neither the United States nor the European Community has attained the perfection of the universal state or of liberal democracy, nor have they even come close” (1994*a*, p. 46).

The issue for Derrida, then, is how to make a present, living embodied practice from the injunctions of the specters of Marx. A new alliance formed without organization, without party, without nation, without State, without property is the new “Marxism” that Derrida nicknames the New International. To ask “whither Marxism?”, Derrida writes, is to follow a specter, because after the end of history, the specter comes, by coming back as *promise* rather than programme or design (1994*a*, p. 52). Thus, the spirit of Marxism Derrida envisions is not one of the proletarian movement or revolution or of the Communist Party but of the philosophy of responsibility and of Marx’s spirit of radical critique (1994*a*, p. 48).

This spirit of radical critique is what I wish to emphasize in my argument. There can be no better future without a culture of critique. Two tasks, then, seem to suggest themselves: firstly, how to keep Derrida’s spirit of radical critique alive in the age of late capitalism (again, understood not as a political party or organization but as a spirit of radical critique), and secondly, how to make this spirit intelligible in Argentina, that is, in “our” specific national context. Some possible answers have been glimpsed in the realm of culture: in the cultural work of memory and in the demand for social and judicial justice and truth. Other answers seen in literature, film and art have suggested the return or the maintaining of a contestatory, interventionist or critical politicised act. All of these initiatives are helpful to develop, I have argued, a critical recovery and reconstruction of the past: one that does not idealise the suicidal violence of the left in the 1970s, and one

that does not do away with this legacy of resistance and critique either.

To conclude, Piglia, Eloy Martínez and Kohan have been seen in Part II of this thesis to produce new, original and critical readings not only of precursor literary texts (as Piglia proposed for example in *Artificial Respiration*) but also of precursor revolutionary texts and traditions adapted to Argentine reality (that is, Marxism, Leninism, etc, read through the lens of “our” national situation). They have also read those precursor texts from the perspective afforded by the future (our present) that treasures the (revolutionary) past and learns from it. It is the conjunction of these two forms of reading precursor texts and tradition that makes the past absolutely relevant to the present sociopolitical experience, and therefore, that gives the text—but also other politicised cultural productions—a more trans-historical or transformative role than as a mere object of consumption or entertainment. This, then, might be the role of a politicised fiction or of the political imagination in fiction—to maintain a spirit of critique that feeds on the revolutionary strategies of the past.

In this sense, in the works of these writers, Piglia, Eloy Martínez and Kohan, there is a sense that defeat (like victory for that matter) is always ever temporary and that our responsibility as intellectuals, cultural producers and critics is to “maintain the ghost”, as Derrida would put it (1994*b*, p. xviii), of Marxism(s) as critique. The ghost of the disappeared Tésare is, in a way, the ghost of the failed 1970s revolution in Argentina. Through Tésare’s notes, and indeed through his very condition as disappeared, Tésare is neither dead nor alive. He is indeed a ghost haunting the living (not only Norma Rossi but also us, his readers). “This being-with spectres would also be, not only but also, a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations”, says Derrida (1994*b*, p. xix). And it is certainly our responsibility to maintain the ghost through a politics of memory like Memoria Abierta, the Memory Museums, the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo and the dozens of literary fictions and films and artworks have done so far.

## Part III

### Conclusion and Future Paths



## The way ahead

### 10.1 Conclusions

The inspirational starting point of this thesis was the International Coalition of Historic Sites Museums of Conscience's notion that historic sites of memory can actively engage citizens in human rights issues. In my thesis I have extended their notion of "site" to include not only the material remains and buildings where historical events happened but also culture, and more specifically literature and the cultural archive, as privileged "sites" of memory where historical events have been imaginatively recorded, preserved and reconstructed and where memory and historicity can play a potentially emancipatory role. I have also argued that engaging citizens in human rights issues is too broad and universal a category that needs to be rethought in the context of each national situation and that needs to be historicized and politicized if it is to become an effective form of struggle against oppression in specific national situations. This historicizing and politicizing of the cultural was presented in chapter one through a critical perspective that sought to actively and explicitly connect the past to the present. Based on Gadamer's (2004, p. 84) hermeneutic notion that art is knowledge and experiencing an artwork means sharing in that collective form of knowledge, I then followed Hugo Vezzetti's argument in favour of a plural democratic project for the Memory Museum in ESMA, arguing that art and culture also play a fundamental role in the construction of a more plural and democratic society that does not repress the histories of its "others" but, quite on the contrary, gives them due voice and legitimacy. Gadamer's (2004, p. xxi) notion that "through a work of art a truth is experienced that we cannot attain in any other way" became the guiding spirit of Part I of this thesis.

This critical approach then led me in chapter two to offer an account of postdictatorial cultural production not anymore as a site of mournful memory and defeat, but as a cultural

reservoir of unfulfilled hope. Led by the belief that understanding has a practical effect on life, and that we learn to understand ourselves in and through the work of art, I invoked Fredric Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping as what needs to be collectively regained by citizens living in a democratic society today. I argued in chapter two that memory does not exist in a vacuum divorced from experience and social reality but that it must be selective and therefore pedagogically and politically formed by establishing explicit links and connections between facts and events in the past and present. This "exemplary" role of memory formed the basis of my analyses of the novels later on.

My main research goal was to explore ways of rediscovering the emancipatory potential of postdictatorial culture whilst still preserving Idelber Avelar's notion of mourning and defeat. However, I proposed to extend his critique by including an affirmative cultural and political project that did not freeze the untapped potential of the past into the past. This reevaluation of postdictatorial cultural production raised the question of whether all postdictatorial productions were equally useful for a project of identity reconstruction and emancipatory critique. This question entailed mapping out some irreducible nuances within postdictatorship fiction such as the differences between historiographic metafiction novels, post-*boom* novels, narratives of utopia and narratives of defeat, deterritorialized and globalised "new" narratives, documentary fictionalized journalism (or "true fiction") and double-coded narratives, which were sketched in chapter three under the coordinates of the Argentine historical and the geographical imagination of the postdictatorship period. From this exhaustive cartography emerged my four case studies: on Ricardo Piglia, Tomás Eloy Martínez, Rodrigo Fresán and Martín Kohan. Part Two of my thesis, then, embarked on a study of these writers' best known novels in order to explore my hypothesis that postdictatorial fictions constitute a cultural archive or reservoir that contains as many ruins of the past as catastrophe as kernels of hope and unfulfilled potential.

Thus, Part Two of the thesis embarked on the analysis of my first case study, Rodrigo Fresán. I showed how his narratives bore all the traces of the shifts from memory, defeat and trauma to an apolitical cosmopolitanism of the textual surface. My analyses of Fresán's latest novels revealed a tendency towards more "globalized" forms of narrative that abandon the nation. His reinterpretation of the Argentine literary tradition (from Borges to Cortázar and Puig) progressively erases the marks of a "national" culture, history, and identity but ends up with an apolitical, hollow kind of cosmopolitanism which I have taken to be symptomatic not only of the worst aspects of the homogenization and globalization of culture but also of unredeemed personal and collective trauma at the loss of a belief in

a collective national project. Fresán's contradictory appeal to a very prestigious Argentine literary tradition whilst at the same time proclaiming a totally cosmopolitan and anti-nationalistic stance to fiction was proved in chapter six to render reality as an increasingly poor and clichéd reproduction of textual simulacra. Quotation, parody and plagiarism, I argued, served no longer as tools of a localized critique but as artifices for the mere reproduction of a translocal global culture without any specific anchoring in historical/material reality. Without this material ground, the text tended to become a surface of flowing signifiers. This contrasted with the discontinuity and schizophrenic textual montage of Fresán's *Argentine History*, where fragmentation conveyed a splintered national identity filtered through the traumatized autobiographical recollections of the writer. Fresán's works seem to indicate that cosmopolitanism as a political and cultural project must remain firmly rooted in each particular national situation if it is not to fall back into yet another form of apoliticism and homogenizing cultural imperialism. The end result of this hollow cosmopolitanism is, as I have demonstrated, a fake, clichéd, "plastic" or sanitized reproduction of other people's and nation's identities and the repression of traumas and conflict under the smooth, glossy surface of a false cosmopolitan "equality" and freedom.

Fresán's novels were then contrasted with those of writers still attached to national identity and histories. Postdictatorial nations like Argentina still need to build a more democratic society, fight for truth and justice, and make strong social demands to the state. Thus, my analysis of the new social movements of protest (such as picketeers, workers-run factories, popular assemblies, and active cultural and intellectual initiatives like Memoria Abierta and Carta Abierta) sought to identify an updated context for the interpretation of the narratives by Piglia, Eloy Martínez and Kohan. My analyses of Piglia's narratives showed that rather than escape into a one-size-fits-all cosmopolitanism, Piglia prefers to engage in a discussion of the hybrid crossings of the Argentine literary tradition with the North American and European traditions so as to destabilize notions of civilization and barbarism that still form the axes of the Argentine cultural imaginary. Chapters six and seven, therefore, extrapolate three main conclusions from Piglia's postdictatorial narratives. Firstly, that there is no need to abandon the local/national in the name of an abstract cosmopolitanism since the national situation of postcolonial countries like Argentina is *per se* a hybrid and multiply-determined one. And this means recognizing, above all, in culture, but also in social and political life, the multiple antagonisms within Argentina's history and identity. Secondly, Piglia's way of releasing multiple narratives and counter-narratives in his novels through the allegorical cipher of the cyborg and the plot of

conspiracy was shown to be two of the most effective strategies for historical/geographical collective cognitive mapping of Argentina. And thirdly, Piglia's narratives also convey the hope that collective persistence is resistance. In the same way as social collectives continue to fight for social justice, postdictatorial fictions like Piglia's can be read as providing an imaginative reservoir or archive of social dissent and political struggles from which younger generations can learn.

This optimistic or hopeful vision in Piglia, formed the main basis of my analysis of Eloy Martínez's *The Perón Novel*. Martínez's dialectical accounts of the Ezeiza massacre and of Perón's personality and myth were reinterpreted less in terms of the defeat of the Peronist left than in terms of the untapped potential for change that "interrupted" moments in history entail. Walter Benjamin's notion of the "weak" messianic power of unrealized histories and Ernst Bloch's notion of concrete utopia as that which is waiting to happen were invoked as concepts that articulate in these novels a utopian remainder of a desire for a better, transformed world.

Finally, my last case study introduced the need for the emergence of a self-critical society, one that is not afraid of asking what the conditions of possibility of the dictatorship were, or what ensured its grip on power for so long, and how Argentines could live day by day with thousands of disappeared people and cheer the football national squad knowing that the World Cup was indirectly part and parcel of an extermination plan. These questions still plague the national consciousness and Martín Kohan's postdictatorial fictions deepen and widen the debate on national identity and political antagonism with a specific view to understanding who Argentines are at present. I argued in chapter nine that this debate was an important part of living in a democracy which does not repress or sweep under the carpet the nation's dead through a policy of "national reconciliation".

These findings, which combine insights from both the texts themselves and the social and political context in which they might be read today, also suggest some possible lines of future research in terms of, firstly, memory and the cultural archive; and secondly, the connections between professional intellectuals and the wider public sphere. I will explore these two in the following final section of this study.

## 10.2 Future paths

This thesis has highlighted the potential of the critical cultural analysis of texts for the recovery of national history, memory and identity in the present era of globalization. It

has done so by focusing on how postdictatorial narrative fictions in Argentina can be used as critical tools for building a lasting culture of human rights and democracy as part of wider struggle across all fronts of human experience—social, historical, legal, political and now also cultural and artistic. From this platform, my suggestions for further research are threefold. Firstly, this critical approach could be applied to other cultural productions in photography, art and film, for example, where the primary focus of research would be on the study of the representation of conflict and national identity, traumatic memory, human rights abuses and social and political oppression. The aim would be not only to remember and preserve the past as exemplary memory but also to use the imaginative and emotional power of art and culture to catalyze critical thinking and to mobilize affect (i.e. feelings of solidarity, compassion, etc.) about the ongoing issues of today.

A second research path would explore emerging and alternative forms of social and political intellectual activism like the Carta Abierta initiative. What is interesting in this intellectual movement is that instead of being merely oppositional, as has frequently been the case in the past, it has adopted a *collaborative* critical stance (thereby coming closer to Žižek’s notion of resistance as not that which merely opposes power but as that which grabs power and does something positive with it). Carta Abierta’s idea that intellectuals need “to go public” and participate in the wider public discussions of the most urgent national matters going on today is an important step in taking intellectuals (both academics and artists) out of the university and into the street or public arena. The publishing of their four letters in *Página/12* newspaper (and the critical responses they have had in *Clarín* and *La Nación*), their active participation in marches and demonstrations, the dialogues they have had with government officials (like ex-president Kirchner at the Biblioteca Nacional, among others)<sup>1</sup> and their collaboration with social movements, popular assemblies and human rights groups to offer concrete help and solutions to their daily conflicts and problems suggest more of a constructive and collaborative role. Their call to clearly state and publish the intellectuals’ opinions on urgent daily matters in the national sphere has returned some of the old flavour of the collective political subject of the 1970s and constitutes a critique of sorts to the dominant apolitical subject of the 1980s and 1990s. Whether this is sustainable in the future, and whether Carta Abierta will continue to have such an active role in the public sphere, is an open question. In the meantime, their four letters, and all the public

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<sup>1</sup>See Javier Rodríguez Petersen (2008). “Kirchner volvió a denunciar que quisieron destituir a Cristina”. In: *Clarín* (13th June 2008). URL: <http://www.clarin.com/diario/2008/07/13/elpais/p-01714069.htm> (visited on 30/11/2008). And Horacio Verbitsky (2008). “Kirchner con los intelectuales”. In: *Página/12* (14th July 2008). URL: <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-107778-2008-07-14.html> (visited on 30/11/2008).

forums they have engaged in, have already suggested new debates on the role of professional intellectuals, the development of which it will be interesting to observe.

A third research path might consider the connections between art and culture with national public institutions like the Memory Museums in Argentina and international ones like the Coalition of Historic Sites of Conscience. This would imply exploring and designing educational and civic engagements programmes that use art and culture as helpful tools of critique. Exemplary memory can only become such if its lessons are transferred to other situations in the present. Thus, whereas the first path of future research focuses on developing further strategies of “cognitive mapping” by drawing explicit connections between a nation’s history of human rights abuses and traumatic memories and oppression and the way these abuses have been and continue to be “recorded” in the nation’s collective cultural imaginary; the second path focuses on transferring those tactics to pedagogic and civic engagement activities carried out by public institutions like the Museums of Conscience, schools and universities, people’s libraries and community centres. These projects would incorporate art and culture as figurative or metaphorical “sites” of memory where a reflexive critique can be fostered and developed.

With regard to the second path, in my visits to three Historic Sites of Conscience (Rosario Memory Museum, A Space for Memory in ESMA, Buenos Aires, and The Workhouse, UK), I noticed that artistic and cultural representations are fundamental complementary sources and resources within the museums’ historical and testimonial archives. In fact, during my one-month internship at the Rosario Memory Museum (12 September–12 October 2008) (Fig. 10.1), I was able to confirm how postdictatorial art and culture was used as exemplary memory in pedagogic projects that involved not only museum-goers but also primary and secondary schools.

The Education Department at the Museum, led by Fabiana Elcarte and by Museum director Rubén Chababo, has been designing school projects [Guías de trabajo para escuelas—school workshops] that use (post)dictatorial fictional and non-fictional texts, films, songs, photography, installations and all sorts of artworks to discuss and raise awareness of issues like state authoritarianism, censorship, human rights and collective struggles since 2001. One example of the kinds of activities they organise is a workshop/exhibition entitled “Química de la Memoria” [The Alchemy of Memory], which they organized in March 2007 with the help of artists Marga Steinwasser and María Antonia Sánchez.<sup>2</sup> The Museum together with these artists published a newssheet inviting people from the city to bring

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<sup>2</sup> The exhibition “The Alchemy of Memory” and others like it can be visited online at <http://www.museodelamemoria.gov.ar/muestras-quimica-de-la-memoria.htm>. Last accessed 28 November 2008.



Figure 10.1: Rosario Memory Museum. September 2008. Words like commitment, truth, justice, memory, solidarity, etc. are inscribed on the facade's walls.

objects that reminded them of the dictatorship years and to bring them to the Memory Museum together with a brief text explaining their significance. The objects were seen as “portadores de una historia” [bearers of history] which, in visible or invisible ways, “lleva(n) inscripta la huella de sus portadores” [carry the traces of their owners] (text on the Memory Museum exhibition postcard).

The aim of the workshop was to encourage people to collectively build a network of objects and memories that would remind all participants of their experience of those years. “De este modo, ‘Química de la Memoria’ exhibe los objetos recolectados, formando en su conjunto un gran rompecabezas cuyas partes están formadas por las memorias individuales de cada uno de los donantes” [This is how “The Alchemy of Memory” exhibits the collected objects: as a big puzzle where each piece is made up of the individual memories of each of its contributors] (Guión No23 [Script for School Workshop No23], Museo de la Memoria de Rosario, 2007). In addition to the collection of objects, the workshop also invited visitors to reflect on memory, history, and other past and present issues by reading fragments from books like *Si esto es un hombre* [If this is a man] by Primo Levi, *Nosotras presas políti-*



Figure 10.2: Two objects taken to the museum for the The Alchemy of Memory Exhibition (a kettle used by political prisoners in Rosario in 1976, and a 1978 Football World Cup souvenir).

*cas* [We, Political Prisoners] (a collectively-authored book written by 112 female political prisoners between 1974–1983), seeing fictional and non-fictional films like *Crónica de una fuga* [Chronicle of an Escape] by Israel Adrián Caetano, and *Generación desaparecida* [The Disappeared Generation] by Jan Thielen, and discussing songs lyrics like “La Memoria” by León Gieco, and “Quien quiera oír que oiga” Litto Nebbia. Then they also invited the schools to visit the exhibition and gave the school teachers a workshop activity pack with all sorts of material for students to do in class as a follow up to the visit. The material not only encouraged the students to reflect on the exhibition they had seen at the museum, but also it helped them reflect on various aspects of state terrorism in Argentina, on human rights struggles, and on the connection between these topics and the students’ personal lives.

Thus, the representation of the past became during the exhibition as much about its material remainders (the objects collectively collected and exhibited) as about its symbolic representations in film, plastic art, fictional and non-fictional writing, photography and music. For the Museum organizers “la memoria...impulsa al arte contemporáneo al debate social y político...y lo instala en el lugar de denunciar los límites de la representación y de las narrativas oficiales del pasado” [Memory...takes contemporary art into the arena of social and political debate...and defines its task to denounce the limits of the official stories and representations of the past] (Guión No23 [Script for School Workshop No23], Museo de la Memoria de Rosario, 2007). For the Museum “la memoria...no es un estado de recepción pasiva sino un ejercicio, una práctica que tiene que ver más con el porvenir que con el



pasado, de donde por cierto proviene. Porque ejercicios sobre memoria son sus novelas, sus estudios sobre psicología, sus diarios y su poesía” [Memory...is not a passive state of reception but a task, a practice concerned more with the future than with the past, from whence it comes. This is so because the task of memory is written in its novels, in its psychology studies, in its diaries and poetry] (Guión No23, Museo de la Memoria, 2007).

The Museum is incredibly active in its commitment to an active memory and during my short one-month stay there I attended one international workshop on national and international archival policies and procedures (II Encuentro Archivos y Derechos Humanos. “Archivos y derechos humanos: usos actuales, posibilidades y limitaciones”. Rosario, 25 y 26 de setiembre de 2008), an art installation (*Proyecto Bajo Control* por Mariela Rojkin—Under Control, an art project by Mariela Rojkin), two book presentations (*Historia Política del Nunca Más* de Emilio Crenzel [Political History of the Never Again report by Emilio Crenzel]; *Corrientes en Malvinas: Memoria, Verdad, Justicia y Soberanía* compilado por Pablo Andrés Vassel [Corrientes province in the Malvinas/Falklands War: Memory, Truth, Justice and National Sovereignty, compiled by Pablo Andrés Vassel]; *ADN* [DNA] a photographic exhibition on HIJOS (children of the disappeared who have recovered their identity) by Martín Acosta, and the 3rd Encounter in Rosario for “Teatro x la Identidad” [Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo’s Theatre for Identity].

Each month the museum organises different artistic, cultural and academic activities like the ones I have mentioned that attempt to draw ever stronger links and connections between the museum and society at large, and not just with the victims and relatives of state terrorism. This has ensured that the past does not stay frozen in the past as Vezzetti claims, and that history is constantly made relevant to the present and that an intergenerational bridge is built. Also, using art and culture to reflect on the conditions of possibility and consequences of state terrorism prevents what Todorov calls an “abuse of memory” (the exhaustion of memory by overexposure) by constantly renewing the museum visitors’ perception of past events through art. Art and culture, then, become an essential means for transmitting experience without saturating memory and numbing our responses. The Museum thus becomes the opposite of a dead, forgotten memorial, and art and culture become the agents of constant renewal of perception. This view also recalls Edward Soja’s notion that “sites” are not only physical spaces where material things and actions happen but also “imaginative” places. The Museum is such a place where democratic values can be taught and pursued and where transformation can be thought, imagined and rehearsed. I would argue that, as professional intellectuals, we need to open the university and its

research activity to the wider community and engage in civic action plans and schemes that may potentially bring a more critical and radical edge to literary and cultural studies. Hopefully this thesis is a first but not final step in both these directions.

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