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The unruly image: memory and transmission in Argentina.

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CHAPTER 2: THE LAST MILITARY DICTATORSHIP IN ARGENTINA

The disappeared do not celebrate birthdays. Their date of birth is just the starting point for determining their age. The disappeared do not age because their bodies – the place where ageing occurs – are unimaginable. They also do not tolerate the accumulation of years that calculate the passage of infinite death. There is no celebration or mourning. Nothing except the persistence of memory that preserves the fading pain of a search: the disappeared are – only – the sum of acts in the effort to make their deaths visible, to overcome the unbearable anxiety produced by the unnameable. Death is precise. No one is fated to be born; on the other hand, no certainty is more solid than unavoidable death. The disappeared are those who have not died; those who face the threatening possibility of having been born forever without being eternal. No invention is crueller than the one expressed in the idea of limbo, the “frontier” of hell that will never be crossed. That is where the disappeared can be found, on the immobile border. (Héctor Schmucler, “En nombre de la Patria”)²⁶

Introduction

In this chapter I will expand on four axes that I consider essential for laying out the contextual background of memory practices related to state terrorism in Argentina. First, I will make a brief review of the national and international historical context and the emergence of the civil-military dictatorship in Argentina. Second, I will address the rhetorical construction of the enemy in the dictatorial account, that is, the concept of the *subversive*. Third, I will review the repressive design in the Argentine case with the help of the most recent studies on this subject. Finally, I will concentrate on that new social actor that emerged in 1977 as a product of resistance to state terrorism: the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo. International coordination around a systematic annihilation plan was contradicted by the

²⁶ “El desaparecido no cumple años. El día de nacimiento queda abandonado como punto de partida para establecer una edad. El desaparecido no envejece porque el cuerpo –lugar del envejecimiento– no es imaginable. Tampoco tolera la acumulación de años que calculan el transcurrir de la infinita muerte. Ni celebración ni duelo. Nada salvo la constancia de la memoria que preserva el esfumado dolor de una búsqueda: el desaparecido es, solo, la suma de actos que marcan el esfuerzo por hacer visible su muerte, por superar la insoportable ansiedad que produce lo innombrable. La muerte es precisa. Nadie está destinado a nacer; ninguna certeza, en cambio, es más sólida que la muerte indeclinable. El desaparecido es el que no murió; el que se enfrenta ante la amenazante posibilidad de haber nacido para siempre sin ser eterno. Ninguna invención es más cruel que la expresada en la idea de limbo, “frontera” del infierno que no se cruzará nunca. El desaparecido está ubicado allí, en la frontera inmóvil” (Schmucler, “En nombre de la Patria”).

production of new political configurations that decisively hindered the repressive program. The mechanisms of resistance against the systematic disappearance of physical bodies engendered new forms of political action, mainly led by Mothers' activism. This generated resistance practices linked to archival practices of reconstitution and reinterpretation of the past.

The Historical Context

The dictatorial contexts in the Southern Cone are not easily comparable to other contexts marked by policies of repression or extermination. Forced disappearance in Argentina and the emergence of the figures of the disappeared detainee must be understood in relation to long-term sociohistorical processes that refer to structural (global and regional) and conjunctural modifications, both internal and external to Argentina. The context of the Cold War is undoubtedly important, as is the dismantling of the Welfare States in those Latin American countries that knew local modalities of this form of political and economic management. The continental extension of forms of contestation and resistance, the conjunctural prestige of the Cuban revolution as an inspiration for egalitarian and democratic revolts, and the decolonization processes in Asia and Africa between the 1950s and 1980s all mark a time of profound transformations in the capitalist economic model, giving rise to a generalized confrontation over the meaning of modernity. The dictatorial processes of the Southern Cone in Latin America were coordinated at the regional level through a repressive strategy known as "Operation Condor". The countries of the region, supervised and protected in different ways by the US and its foreign policy of countering "communist influence", which was materialized in a joint military doctrine called "National Security", cooperatively implemented mostly clandestine policies of state terror, and it was within the framework of these policies that the strategy of the forced disappearance of people took place.²⁷ The objective of all of these repressive policies was to break the different forms of worker and popular organization, thus permitting profound socio-economic reconfigurations, the influence of which continues to this day. In 1973, the constitutional president Salvador

²⁷ "'State Terrorism' is understood as the systematic use of the State to perpetrate violations of human, civil and political rights by means that transgress even the consensual frameworks of repression established under the legal system in place. The practice of State terrorism seeks to annihilate or repress the armed or unarmed opposition and social protests and achieve obedience or active collaboration from the population. It should be noted that the concept of 'State Terrorism' can conceal or ignore the active or passive consensus and support of sectors of civil and political society for the policies of extermination or political persecution by reifying the State as the only actor in the practice of terror" (Crenzel, "Políticas de la memoria" 2n2).

Allende was overthrown in Chile. The dictator Augusto Pinochet governed for seventeen years, until 1989. That same year, constitutional guarantees were suspended in Uruguay until 1985. By that time, the dictatorial processes that had taken place in Paraguay and Brazil were already underway. Alfredo Stroessner in Paraguay was “re-elected” for 35 years from 1954 until he was overthrown in 1989. Beginning in 1964, Brazil was ruled by a dictatorship that lasted until 1985. On March 24, 1976, the bloodiest dictatorship in Argentine history began by overthrowing the discredited government of Isabel Martínez de Perón, and would last until 1983, the year of the elections that would be won by Raúl Alfonsín of the Radical Civic Union (UCR). In Argentina these global and regional processes converged with internal processes of socio-political and economic confrontation that were related to the proscription of Peronism starting in 1955, the prominence and intermittent occurrence of authoritarian or dictatorial governments until 1973, and the growth of social, trade union, and student organizations that resisted dictatorships and their model of economic development, which was experienced as unjust and despotic.²⁸ During this period, forms of armed resistance to the Argentine state were also developed, inspired by the victory of the Cuban guerrillas in 1959. The military dictatorship of Juan Carlos Onganía – which began in 1966 – took on a strongly repressive character and imposed the rule of the privileged sectors under the economic model in place. In this context, there was a sustained rise in the level of conflict that culminated in Argentina in 1969 with the mass uprising of the city of Cordoba called the Cordobazo. The Cordobazo was a political event launched by the university students’ movement, whose demands quickly spread to other sectors of the population that participated in mobilizations against the Onganía dictatorship. This mass uprising was followed by those of other large cities in the country. The phenomenon of bloody repression against leftist social organizations in Argentina, therefore, predates the dictatorship of Jorge Rafael Videla, which was officially called “El Proceso” (“The Process”; an involuntary but significant reference to Franz Kafka’s book *The Trial*, which in Spanish is translated as *El proceso*). However, the strategy of disappearance as a form of annihilation of the most rebellious sectors of the population had already begun to be used in the confrontation with the guerrilla groups in the

²⁸ Juan Domingo Perón governed for two terms from 1946 to 1955. He was overthrown by a coup in 1955. His third presidency was in 1973, upon his return from exile in Spain. In 1974, Perón passed away and his wife, Isabel Martínez de Perón, took over the presidency. Along with the Minister of Social Welfare, José López Rega, she conducted the political actions that would enable the coup of 1976. “Peronism” as a subject of investigation is a source of academic controversies between those who interpret it as a populist phenomenon that favoured the access of the working class to significant union rights and economic levels, and those who see it as a strain of paternalistic populism sympathetic to European fascism, among many other interpretations.

province of Tucumán in 1975, as well as the policies of paramilitary terrorism against activists of the opposition. During the democratic government of Isabel Martínez de Perón (1974–1976), for example, a sinister ultra-right paramilitary organisation led by the Ministry of Social Welfare (López Rega), the so-called Alianza Anticomunista Argentina (AAA; Anti-Communist Alliance of Argentina),²⁹ specialized in terrorist attacks on trade union and leftist political parties' headquarters and the executions of militants and political activists. It was precisely at this time that the state handed over the leadership of the fight against the guerrillas to the armed forces, giving them *carte blanche* to implement a policy of elimination.³⁰

The State's Narrative: "Who's the Enemy?"

From the 1970s the government and the military leadership designed what would be their target of exclusion and political persecution: the "subversive". The insistence on defining the "subversive element" and distinguishing it from the rest of society paved the way for the construction of a narrative that was legitimized almost without objections within the society.

In 1975, the section "Legal Framework for Subversive Elements" was incorporated into the Military Regulations, in which the term "guerrilla" was discarded and the term "subversive" was adopted. The document distinguishes "clandestine" from "open" subversion and characterises the target as a "criminal" that is not subject to international law. The figure of the "subversive" thus altered the legal system in place.³¹

The characterization of the enemy as a "subversive element" is significant. The term does not refer to an ethnic or racial minority, but to every person that according to military intelligence was conspiring against "Western and Christian values" and, in general, "the national way of life". This conspiracy consisted not only of the possible use of violence against the State, but also of the "indoctrination" of people in values contrary to those of nationals. The subversives were criminals not only for carrying arms and carrying out "terrorist attacks", but also for inciting other people, through their revolutionary ideas, to

²⁹ The Alianza Anticomunista Argentina, better known as the "Triple A", murdered numerous political opponents with the support of the Argentine state.

³⁰ In 1975, Executive Order 265 of President María Estela Martínez de Perón authorized the actions of the Armed Forces in the province of Tucumán, which would subsequently expand to the entire country under Executive Order 2772, issued by provisional President Ítalo Luder at the end of the same year.

³¹ The Geneva Convention, to which Argentina adhered, prosecuted as "prisoners of war" those who by their actions identified with the guerrillas, "prohibiting them from being tortured, killed or disappeared" (Larraquy).

perform acts that were contrary to certain values. According to General Videla, “terrorism is not only considered to be such when one kills with a weapon or placing a bomb, but when one activates other people through ideas that are contrary to our Western and Christian civilization” (qtd. in Lvovich and Bisquert 17).³² The subversive were distinguished not only by their possible actions, but also by their vocabulary (the use of certain words), what they read, their social affinities, and, more obviously, their political memberships.

The ideological basis of their opinions was an important indication for detecting them. Marxism or any inclination of a progressive or leftist nature could betray their subversive character. General Jorge Rafael Videla summarised this as follows: “Argentine citizens are not victims of repression. The repression is against a minority whom we do not consider to be Argentinian” (qtd. in Lvovich and Bisquert 18).³³ Those identified by this regenerative regime as subversives were considered “stateless criminals” who obeyed the interests of an international terrorist conspiracy. Subversion, as pointed out by Marcelo Cavarozzi (qtd. in Lvovich and Bisquert 17), was any form of dissident agitation, any critical behaviour in schools and factories, but also heterodox behaviour within the family, any non-conformist expression in the arts and culture, any questioning of the authority, and sometimes any student whose hair was too long and who was too politically extroverted. “The military leaders of the coup conceived a boundless enemy, which, they claimed, could only be defeated through (a dirty) war” (Lvovich and Bisquert 17).³⁴ Their different proclamations show that the military considered themselves to be saviours of a doomed nation that had lost its moral values and its “aspiration to greatness”. They also described themselves as surgeons operating on the sick body of the nation. Medical rhetoric was incorporated into the military narrative: the state machinery would proceed to remove “the subversive cancer” from the body of the nation. In order for this healing operation to be successful, these individuals, who were like cancer cells, would need to be deprived of any rights that could protect them, because as Vicente Palermo and Marcos Novaro have suggested, “what for *the Process* entitled people to have rights was not citizenship or humanity, but being ‘good Argentines’, which required organic ideological adherence to the postulates of the regime, from which it

³² “El terrorismo no es sólo considerado tal por matar con un arma o colocar una bomba, sino también por activar a través de ideas contrarias a nuestra civilización occidental y cristiana a otras personas” (17).

³³ “La ciudadanía argentina no es víctima de la represión. La represión es contra una minoría a quien no consideramos argentina” (18).

³⁴ “Los militares golpistas concibieron a un enemigo incommensurable, al que, según afirmaban, sólo se podía derrotar a través de la guerra” (17).

could be understood that subversives had no rights whatsoever” (qtd. in Lvovich and Bisquert 18).³⁵

The figure of the subversive, as defined by the doctrine of national security, can be compared to the *Homo sacer*, the legal figure of ancient Rome that Giorgio Agamben discussed in his work of the same name, i.e., a figure of exception or an included exception, an individual who could be killed without this constituting a crime. The project of annihilation could be read, if it was read correctly, in all public statements made by the military before the coup. One example is the Statement, published on March 24, which listed the *Basic Objectives for the National Process of Reorganisation*. The Statement established a series of goals that would serve to guide the military junta in power: to restore the “validity of Christian moral values, of national tradition and the dignity of the Argentinian” and to guarantee “national security, eradicating subversion and the causes that favour its existence” (Palermo and Novaro qtd. in Lvovich and Bisquert 17). This in itself clearly announced that the military would not stop at the military defeat of the guerrilla, which, furthermore, had already occurred before, in 1975, but would advance against all forms of sociability that could have “favoured their existence.” This eradication turned out to be for a large part of those affected by an atrocious literalism.³⁶

The Disappearance as a Technology of Power

“The killing machine”, as described by Larraquy, was part of a broader repressive design that unfolded within the framework of Operation Condor and undoubtedly involved registries, albeit secret ones.³⁷

In 1976, Argentina’s dictatorial power generalized and systematized a way to solve political problems that had numerous precedents in Argentine history, consisting of eliminating active dissent. Remember that Michel Foucault called *biopolitics* the

³⁵ “[L]o que para el Proceso daba derecho a tener derechos no era la ciudadanía ni la humanidad, sino el ser ‘buenos argentinos’, que exigía la comunidad orgánico ideológica con los postulados del régimen, de donde se podía entender que los subversivos no tuvieran derecho alguno” (18).

³⁶ It should be noted that this military narrative, despite its occasional setbacks, has never lost its relevance, as shown by its current resurgence in democracy with President Javier Milei’s triumph.

³⁷ Currently, human rights movements and the Mothers continue to demand the opening of the archives of the dictatorship. For their part, the military leadership insistently denied the existence of such an archive. However, some fragmentary records of the repressive design have been found. For more information, see Florencia Larralde Armas’ reflections on the photos stolen from ESMA by the missing former detainee Víctor Bastera.

management or administration of life by modern forms of government.³⁸ These forms of government require a set of techniques, rationalities, and practices that replace the old form of exercising power, which was to kill and let live, with its opposite, to make live and let die. However, according to Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembé, biopolitics cannot be understood without a necropolitical dimension that makes massacre profitable. This becomes evident in the forms of modernity in the global south linked to colonialism and racism, the latter – being a fundamental fictional element – to make violence against certain bodies acceptable.

Although racism always constituted a substantial part of the mechanisms of domination, in the repressive structures of the Southern Cone during the seventies, racist fiction was not exactly decisive. The enemy of the state and the nation was the “subversive” person, whose ideas and practices, according to the regime’s discourse, corrupted the most “sacred” aspects of the “national being”. However, this policy of elimination had undeniable economic value, considering that it facilitated these countries’ entry into the neoliberal logic of economic governance. Understanding the nature of power, then, means understanding its techniques and procedures, its structural framework. This technical framework or technology of power that acts on the population by showing that it can decide who deserves to continue living and who does not, could gradually begin to be known and studied after the defeat in the Falklands/Malvinas War.³⁹ The defeat left the armed forces apparatus severely weakened and on the defensive.

What became undeniable from the outset is that at the centre of this technology of detention was the figure of the disappeared: the concealment of bodies, the sharp separation between a person’s identity signs and their referent. It was a mechanism for making people disappear that was already in operation before the coup d’état. It had been used occasionally in combating guerrilla warfare and in actions by anti-communist paramilitary groups.⁴⁰ The coup of March 1976 made it systematic and widespread. The objective was not only to neutralize the defined enemy but also to prevent their remains from becoming a reference,

³⁸ Foucault wrote systematically about this concept in “17 March 1976” in *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, pp. 239–263, and “Right to Death and Power over Life” in *History of Sexuality* vol. 1., pp. 133–159.

³⁹ Armed conflict between the Argentine dictatorial regime and the United Kingdom, under the administration of Margaret Thatcher, 1982.

⁴⁰ In fact, in 1975 the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights was created to complain about disappearances, meaning that the search was institutionalized before the 1976 coup.

memory, or evidence. This entailed setting up extensive infrastructure whose axis was the clandestine detention centres (CDCs). The CDCs were transitional places between kidnapping or detention and death. It is possible that by 1976, the repressive architecture, inspired mainly by French colonial experiences, was already designed.⁴¹ Its techniques included civilian and military infiltration into universities, trade unions, and even factories. Military intelligence also intervened in educational institutions and social and cultural organizations. Repressive actions were coordinated jointly among the different branches and were recorded in a “Central Meeting” place. There were task forces responsible for tracking and detaining targeted victims. There were “specialists” in charge of the “interrogation” of detainees. These procedures, in turn, led to new detentions. Thus, the operations multiplied. A “presumed extremist” was identified through a “target order”, leading to a raid, usually at night, invading a private residence without a judicial order or prior notice. Suspects detained without prior surveillance were called targets of opportunity. The three branches of the military and the intelligence agency (SIDE) coordinated their information in the so-called “Situation Rooms”. There, the final fate of the detainees was decided based on data obtained under torture. Victims could be released or placed at the disposal of the PEN (National Executive Power). They could be transported to a CDC or subjected to a “final disposition” order, meaning death and disappearance. As Pilar Calveiro pointed out in her work *Poder y desaparición: Los campos de concentración en Argentina* (*Power and Disappearance: Concentration Camps in Argentina*), if one examines the organizational structure of military actions, the centralized, planned, and therefore deliberate nature of all these operations becomes clear. But at the same time, it shows the degree of autonomy and impersonality that characterized this killing machine. The aim was to make complicity in these actions widespread and collective, thus spreading eventual responsibility. All personnel were involved in one way or another, and this is one of the reasons why the so-called “pact of silence” in the Armed Forces persists to this day.

Those who did not succumb in the confrontations with their persecutors could die in false accidents or be subjected to various forms of torture. Tortures aimed to extract useful information from detainees, but their normal effect was moral and physical degradation.

⁴¹ See the influences of the Prussian army and the methodologies of repression of the French school in the massacres that took place during the attempts to liberate Algeria. One of the offices dependent on ESMA – the main detention and torture center in Argentina – had inscriptions from the French general who directed the repression in Algeria.

Many of them were then transferred to what we now call “death flights”.⁴² Under international pressure, in 1977, Videla declared that the disappeared were part of the “anti-subversive war”, that they had gone into hiding, fled the country, or were unidentified bodies resulting from armed confrontations. The effectiveness of this machinery was also due to the enthusiastic participation of powerful sectors of civil society, including the church and business groups. Their collaboration consisted mainly, but not exclusively, of denouncing alleged subversives. Chaplains participated in the confession of the tortured. Both sectors provided “blacklists” of parishioners, in the case of the church, and workers, in the case of companies. Faced with questions from foreign journalists about the issue of disappearances, Videla asserted that the disappeared “have no entity, ... they are neither dead nor alive, they are disappeared”.⁴³ This distinguishes the Argentine case from other extermination practices, such as those applied against “Jews”, “Gypsies”, or “Armenians” in the past. Unlike these cases, the disappeared simply “are not”.

The effect of the violence exerted by this technology of disappearance extended not only to the body of the detainee and their subjugated individuality but also to their family and social environment and the set of relationships that constituted their social being.⁴⁴ Families were struck by a sudden and enigmatic absence. Social networking spaces were disrupted. This resulted in interruptions, suspensions, and isolation. People no longer asked about the disappeared; they even tried to disengage from the social sphere to which they belonged. Thus, support relationships in the community were deactivated. The regime provoked profound transformations in social life, reconfiguring the boundaries between what is visible and what is not, between what can be openly stated and what can only be whispered in privacy. The criteria for deciding what can be openly enunciated and what can only be whispered in intimacy are transformed. Secrecy is established as the main axis of coexistence: a secrecy that the power manages at will, making the illegal proceedings in the

⁴² “Every Wednesday, for two years, transfers were made ... Around fifteen or twenty Capucha prisoners were called by their number and taken to the Basement hooded and shackled. In the infirmary they gave them an injection that made them sleepy. The prisoners crossed the metal gate and, helped by the guards, got into a van that took them to the airport. They took flight. On the plane they were given one more dose and after a few hours they were thrown naked into the sea ... The officers also received spiritual support from the ESMA chaplain and sought a Christian explanation for the criminal act ... During the Soccer World Cup in 1978, most of the ‘death flights’ were carried out” (Larraquy 197).

⁴³ Videla’s 1979 television statement, <https://www.lavoz.com.ar/noticias/politica/videla-1979-no-esta-muerto-ni-vivo-esta-desaparecido>. Accessed August 26, 2024.

⁴⁴ See Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*.

victim's environment partly visible. Terror acts by violating the psychic singularity of the subject but, at the same time, deeply affecting their relational environment.⁴⁵ The state disrupts the certainties upon which one's own identity is constructed.

A parallel logic develops. The state denies certain heinous acts for which it is responsible but at the same time obliquely evidences them, generating murmurs that contribute to spreading terror. People disappear one night, in front of a few witnesses, but also during the day, in broad daylight and publicly. The disappearance device not only consists of making people die without a trace. As befits biopolitical power, power also lets live. Many children of pregnant militants were born in captivity. In most cases, their parents were eliminated, but their children were offered for adoption to couples in the executioners' environment or were handed over to adoption institutions. In this way, the military power actively intervened in the lineage of several generations. Power disrupted identities, creating new genealogies, affecting the continuity of memory, and producing, not only annihilating, ways of life. Some of the kidnapped were released. These people returned to their original social environment after going through all the stages prior to their disappearance. In this case, one could speak of a survival or additional life to the survivor, the unexpected extension of a life constantly threatened with revocation. Thus, power confirms its sovereignty over bodies, not only by killing, as I said, but by allowing to live. The person who has returned from hell will always be surrounded by a stigma, an aura of suspicion, and at the same time will serve as a living example of what can happen to anyone. The unexpected "appearance" of the disappeared is a decisive aspect of the device. It is a particularly anti-political resource. If the self-exposure of singularities within the community framework is a condition of politics, according to Jean-Luc Nancy's definition (*The Inoperative Community*), or it is the public exposure of "those without part", in Jacques Rancière's definition, the disappeared body represents the opposite of politics. It cannot even be said that the disappeared is absent because it has not left from anywhere (to be somewhere else).

Disappearance is a process without end; it does not expire and it does not end. That is why mourning is impossible, and the state's debt to society cannot be repaid. In the words of Jean-Louis Déotte, "there is an infamy of disappearance on which not enough reflection has

⁴⁵ "What is it that disappears? An individual, a body, personifies and at the same time articulates social relationships that, when faced with the sudden emergence of this very particular form of violence, are broken and violated. They break over each of the bodies that have disappeared, but also over the bodies of the survivors. ... [I]t is in the subject and in his own body the place where the problem of domination and power is settled and debated" (Vega Martínez 187).

been made. An indefinitely prolonged doubt, as disappearance is an event that lasts forever” (“Las paradojas” 274).

The Battles of The Mothers

The strategy of disappearance implemented by the military government, in the framework of the political and economic transformations required by this new phase of world capitalism and the military logic of the Cold War, was opposed by a handful of relatives of victims who did not resign themselves to the state’s terror. Their strategy was to expose what state power had tried to hide: the identity of the abducted and the fact of their disappearance. At the centre of this struggle were the photographs of their children and new ways of appearing in the public space. The mothers took these photographs to the most symbolic space in the country: the Plaza de Mayo. The Mothers’ first public demonstrations generated the symbols that represent them as an organisation at the national level and worldwide: rounds, headscarves and silhouettes. These modes and means of symbolic production and reproduction have been closely linked to public practices of remembrance, not only in their representative nature, but also in their performative character, “and they have even come to be recognised as part of a universal symbolic language” (Langland 88). During the dictatorship, the Mothers fought several battles in which what was at stake was precisely the visibility of their cause. Once the procedures for filing complaints with the institutions were exhausted, these battles were fought fundamentally by the occupation of symbolic urban spaces. The initial battle occurred when the Mothers stood in the Plaza de Mayo for the first time. One of the accounts in the Mothers’ testimony concludes that the first round was probably carried out on April 30, 1977. According to this account, there were about fourteen Mothers gathered in the Plaza de Mayo. They had not received an answer from the institutions and so they took to the streets. Azucena Villaflor was one of the founders of the Mothers’ organisation and she was the one who encouraged others to take to the streets to make their cause visible. Since the authorities prohibited them from staying together in the Plaza and ordered them to walk around, they decided to walk in circles, in pairs, around the central monument of the Plaza. So they walked around in the Plaza, but in circles. The Mothers agree that the rounds in Plaza de Mayo “were practically invented by the police ... They would ask us to walk around, in pairs. We had to walk around, so we started to do so”.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ To access the complete testimony of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, see Televisión Pública, “Madres de Plaza de Mayo. La historia - Capítulo 1: Los caminos de la plaza (1975-1977)”. YouTube, 25 Mar. 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NDJP9vRUX2o>. Accessed February 19, 2019.

The rules of martial law did not allow meetings to be held in public places, but they did not expressly forbid people from walking around in pairs. The rounds were formed by the Mothers walking in circles around the central pyramid of the Plaza de Mayo (a symbol of freedom, an emblematic monument of the main square of Buenos Aires) *carrying the photographs of their children*. They began to walk in rounds systematically every Thursday at 3:30 pm... and continue to do so, to this day (fig. 1).⁴⁷ At the beginning, more and more Mothers began to join them, and afterwards, various sectors of society and occasional passers-by accompanied them in their rounds. The rounds were part of the construction of a new political space, virtually the only public space of opposition and a place of resistance that remained during and after the military dictatorship.



Fig. 1. Round and first March of Resistance. December 10, 1981, Archive of the Association of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo.

The path of the Mothers' march bears a series of interesting possible connotations. Their circular walk in the heart of Buenos Aires can represent the frustrating circularity of

⁴⁷ During Kirchner's government, there was a period in which the Association of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo proposed that the resistance marches be suspended, because they considered that their demands had been met and there was no longer any reason for resistance. This caused tension among some groups of Mothers who did not support the Kirchner administration. The rounds resumed in 2016, against the government of Mauricio Macri. It should be noted that, the day after the inauguration of the new administration, the pro-government newspapers published articles questioning the number of disappeared and minimizing the consequences of the last military dictatorship. Shortly afterwards, Macri's administration tried to gain the approval of the "2 for 1" bill that cut prison terms for military officials in half. This resulted in hundreds of requests for the release of military officials who were serving prison sentences. The bill was widely rejected by society and opposed by successive demonstrations. The Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation eventually rejected its validity.

mothers looking for their children in the Kafkaesque labyrinth of the state bureaucracy but it also involuntarily clearly symbolizes the determination to persist and the infinity of that persistence. The round, the circle, has no beginning or end; it is a symbol of eternity. A group of Mothers who identify themselves as such (wearing a baby's diaper as a headscarf or with their children's ID card photos hanging from their necks; fig. 2) also allude to another kind of temporality, a very different kind than that of the ephemeral and historical political events of the dictatorship. The round alludes to a time that is not the linear time of history, but that of the millenarian circuits that govern the time of things that are considered eternal, such as the processes of reproduction and death. It is the circular time of natural history, in which the military intends to intervene and which it tried to control. That is to say, against a state that seeks to be eternal and that intends to become the arbiter of life and death, but that is essentially temporal and historical, the circular march of Mothers seems to present a timelessness or the eternal return of natural life. Furthermore, this figure on which the Mothers have insisted since 1977 was in some way a living archive or the first form of an archive that the Mothers presented against the state archives.

The implicit message is *habeas corpus*, meaning, *there is a body*: in place of those bodies secretly taken away by the Argentine state, the Mothers put their own bodies and, later, use their own bodies to hold the photographs of their children. What the Mothers manage to do with these ritual appearances in the public square is to bring private issues regarding filial relations out into the public sphere of politics. This is so because the filial relationship, their kinship, the relationship of mother and child, is what is continually being represented. The effect in a country with strong family traditions, and with a government that supposedly wants to save family unity, is considerable. But in addition, and this could only be understood much later, the performative ceremony of the rounds was changing the very conditions of politics. The men, who were by definition the agents and protagonists of politics and public space, withdrew, were neutralized, or were attacked at the core of their subjectivity. It was the women, and in principle or especially women as mothers, who would take on the leading role under these new conditions. The circumstances of the private sphere, filial relations, and natality would occupy the entire public space.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ "The Benjaminian prophecy will thus be fulfilled: our era will be that of male impotence in creation, and that of the metamorphosis of masculine sexuality into feminine sexuality. With the political withdrawal of the fathers came the emergence on the public scene of women as mothers: the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, the Women in black, etc. and a new way of understanding the event according to Arendt: the event as 'natality'" (Deótte, *La época de los aparatos* 350).



Fig. 2. Mother wearing child's ID card photo. <https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/E-s4xiuUcc6y8E5F7Hbl0iqaP4hSfQvOYbgNGgDP-3uHB0PUQSg-mvTqMy9t9bhsQzGy=s110>. Accessed March 26, 2019.

The second great battle for visibility was the procession to Luján organized in October 1977 in the framework of the religious festivities dedicated to the Virgin of Luján in the Luján basilica on Mother's Day. The ceremony was multitudinous and was widely covered by the media. The Mothers decided to wear white headscarves to recognize each other and to make themselves visible among the crowd. Many of those headscarves either were or represented diapers. The Mothers thus emphasized on Mother's Day their status as women stripped of their children. In their testimonies, the Mothers recognize that the procession to Luján was not what they had expected in terms of the visibility of their searches, but on October 9, 1977, the white headscarves would become the symbol that would identify a struggle (figs. 3 to 7): "This metamorphosis from the diaper to the headscarf would be the first of a series of transformations that this symbol would experience, of enormous signifying power" (Gorini 119).



Fig. 3. White headscarves. <http://manifestacionesdeayerhoy.blogspot.com/>. Accessed March 26, 2019.



Fig. 4. Headscarves and helmets. Mothers of Plaza de Mayo protesting the laws of pardon at the doors of the *Casa Rosada* (House of Government). 1987, Archive of the Association of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo.



Fig. 5. White headscarves. <http://www.periodicodesdeboedo.com.ar/40-anos-del-proceso/>. Accessed March 26, 2019.



Fig. 6. The symbol of the white headscarf is painted on the surface of several main squares in the country. 2012, *ARQHYS* magazine.



Fig. 7. White headscarf illustration. 2012, *ARQHYS* magazine.

The third major battle of the Mothers, one of the most costly, was in December 1977 and consisted of managing for the first time to have an important national newspaper publish an announcement with the names of the disappeared children and the Mothers' appeal for information on their whereabouts. What the Mothers did not know was that they had been infiltrated by a Navy intelligence agent, the infamous Captain Alfredo Astiz, who had pretended to be a relative of one of the disappeared. After overcoming great obstacles and receiving threats, the Mothers managed to get the announcement published, but the following day the regime unleashed a fierce counteroffensive: the Mothers' most prominent figure, Azucena Villaflor, was abducted and disappeared along with two other Mothers and twelve members of the Santa Cruz human rights group and several French nuns. It was a harsh blow. The Plaza de Mayo was surrounded by soldiers and a powerful mechanism of intimidation was put in place. Fear spread within the movement of Mothers and many chose not to go or not to enter the Plaza de Mayo. Nevertheless, that Thursday, thirty Mothers managed to enter the square and reclaim it. The fourth battle of the Mothers took place in 1978, when the dictatorship obtained a great media victory by organising and winning the World Cup (fig. 8). On that occasion, the Mothers, in great isolation and surrounded by nationalist euphoria, managed to maintain their presence on the street and even project themselves abroad thanks to the foreign media present at the event (fig. 9).



Fig. 8. The dictator Videla with the players of the Argentine team. 1978, *Infobae*, <https://www.infobae.com/deportes-2/2018/06/01/a-40-anos-del-comienzo-del-mundial-78-ceremonia-inaugural-dictadura-militar-alemania-polonia/>.



Fig. 9. Still from the news programme *Telesur* during the World Cup. 1978.

It should be noted that the “flights of death” took place especially during the 1978 football World Cup. The traces had to be eliminated through the disappearance of the bodies.⁴⁹ According to the shocking statements of one of the very few remorseful soldiers, Adolfo Scilingo, the detainees were hooded and dragged to a plane belonging to the Navy, in which they were anaesthetised and from which they were thrown out alive between the Río de la Plata and the Argentine Sea.⁵⁰

The fifth battle took place when the first “March of Resistance” was held in December 1981, the first mass demonstration against the dictatorship, in which the Mothers were at the centre of a massive protest (fig. 10). The Mothers appeared not only as a particularly affected group, but as leaders of the resistance to the dictatorship.



Fig. 10. March of Resistance. 1981, Hasenberg-Quaretti Archive.

⁴⁹ There is a natural element that resists the disappearances: the sea. A wave of corpses would appear between the Uruguayan and Argentine coasts, dragged there by the sea currents. These corpses were buried as NN and the Junta tried to conceal the findings from the press. The writer and journalist Rodolfo Walsh was one of the first to denounce this operation. Walsh was persecuted by the dictatorship, and disappeared at the hands of a task group in 1977.

⁵⁰ “The flights were officially reported by Mendía [Vice Admiral of the Navy] a few days after the military coup of March 1976. It was reported that the procedure for handling the subversives in the Navy would be without a uniform, and wearing trainers, jeans and T-shirts. He explained that subversives would not be shot in the Navy, since they did not want to deal with the problems faced by Franco (in Spain) and by Pinochet (in Chile). Nor could they act against the Pope. To respond to the questions of some of the naval officers, they explained that the subversives would be thrown from the planes in full flight” (testimony of Adolfo Scilingo, former captain of the Navy, repressor of the ESMA, in 1995, qtd. in Verbitsky 22).

The sixth great battle took place during the Falklands/Malvinas War, in 1982, the last attempt by the dictatorship to regain popular support, again through nationalist propaganda. On this occasion, the Mothers, who opposed the war, were, once again, almost totally isolated. The occupation by the Argentine military government of the Malvinas Islands in 1982 resulted in mass euphoria in Buenos Aires, comparable only to the exultation of the masses in Vienna at the start of World War I in 1914, one of those strange moments of mass joy that precede a great catastrophe. In Argentina, the state had accustomed its citizens from childhood (from primary school) to experience the British colonial occupation of the archipelago (which occurred in the eighteenth century) as a historic humiliation, a kind of bleeding wound in the country's sovereignty. The military knew very well what kind of feelings it would provoke in the population by the (ill-judged) manoeuvre of challenging the United Kingdom in this matter. The military then presented themselves as heirs of the founding heroes of the nation and believed they deserved the support of the entire country. It is assumed that the vast majority gave them this support, including several opposition and even human rights organizations. There was mass participation in the provision of logistical support to the soldiers on the islands and thousands of people volunteered. This explains the difficult situation of the Mothers, whom many began to see no longer as spoilsports, as during the 1978 World Cup, but even as traitors. The Mothers, however, launched the slogan "The Malvinas Islands are Argentinian but so are the disappeared" and the disastrous process of the war, which ultimately discredited the Armed Forces, placed them back in the centre of the mass protests. This led to a decisive chapter in the struggle for visibility: the alliance with the artists of the so-called "siluetazo" (silhouette protest).⁵¹

⁵¹ The "siluetazo" will be addressed in Chapter 5 of this work.