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The unruly image: memory and transmission in Argentina.

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CHAPTER 4: IMAGE-SPACE

From Storage Archive to Image-Space

The expressions of collective memory linked to the dictatorial past had their visual matrix in the photos of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and in the “siluetazo” movement. From this, I argue, the long development of these visual practices can be organized into three generative nuclei: the first is oriented towards proof and testimony; the second is linked to artistic interventions with a singular political dimension; and the third is linked to the formal transmission of recent history and a project of democratic citizenship.

Images in the second category cannot be confined to a specific period or identified with a specific group of creators. Although they “educate” us in a deep sense, they are not only didactic images. They do not indoctrinate – they do not prove anything nor do they pretend to teach – but they affect us at different levels of consciousness. Nor are they emblematic images that can be used as flags of a political mobilization. They deal with time, absence, its remains and traces, and with stupor or desire. Their political nature does not lie in the reaction to a specific social situation. The photographic materials for these works on memory come largely from the artists themselves, from the family album and in many cases from the archive of Mothers and the human rights movement. The protagonists of this type of visual transmission are found in the HIJOS organization and its environment. In this same environment, didactic forms of political art that intervene in politics directly were also developed. Although I will not discuss them in detail, we must include here organizations such as the Street Art Groups (GAC) and the Colectivo situación (Situation Collective), which carry out surprising and fleeting actions in public places that have both an aesthetic and political character.

Power Is Always Optimistic

It is not a unique phenomenon that memory work in Argentina has constantly required images. What is unique is that, from the beginning, these (persecuted, banned, slandered) images were fundamentally inconsistent with the narratives of the state. The imaginary promoted by the military governments did not consist only of a paranoid narrative (the danger of subversion) and was not exclusively nourished by military images. It also promoted triumphalism and optimism. The dictatorship meticulously organized a policy of “psychological action” aimed at winning the “hearts” of citizens (Risler 45–49) and spreading an optimism of which the most ridiculous aspect is symbolized by the poster

produced during the Malvinas War which shows a young man giving a thumbs-up and the words: “We are already winning! Argentiniens, let’s defeat them!” (official notice, *Clarín*, May 4, 1982). The subsequent military governments presented their policies as modernizing advances, in short, as progress. It was an entire program of affective management that had its climax in the 1978 World Cup and in the first days of the Malvinas War. During the post-dictatorship, particularly during Carlos Menem’s administration in the 1990s, the government’s calls for national reconciliation and the need to look toward a promising future became widespread. It was a time when the painful conscience of the failure of collective utopias was combined with the emergence of neoliberal optimism. As various authors have shown,⁶² this was a dogmatic, naïve, and even cruel optimism which replaced the old collective solidarity with aspirational models for solitary and increasingly precarious subjects, promoting dubious success-oriented images. In a certain sense, the 1990s were a euphoric time in which the equivalence between the Argentine peso and the US dollar, established by Menem’s government, seemed to validate commercial and individualist values. It was a time that replaced hope in collective emancipation with “individualized drives for the inexhaustible consumption of commodities” (Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia* 7).

When this kind of affective or emotional regime and its repertoire of images manage to impose themselves on the social climate, denialism and forgetfulness advance. As Sara Ahmed explains in *The Promise of Happiness*, the promise of happiness contained in attitudinal optimism induces acceptance and submission (12–13). This was the case in the 1990s in Argentina. In this context, the memory practices associated with disappearance, those of the mothers and grandmothers, were not only a political counterpoint but also an affective one. They disrupted the cadences of the state and sabotaged the therapeutic optimism of the elites. This affective sabotage acquired an even more radical dimension with the group HIJOS. The optimistic imaginary spread throughout the country and the world based on the notion of the “end of history” (Fukuyama) was counterpointed in Argentina by a broad social protest movement linked to the struggles for memory and justice. Needless to say, the policies of privatization, job insecurity and parity with the dollar resulted in an economic and political debacle that led to the massive uprising of 2001.⁶³

⁶² See Eagleton, Ahmed, and Berlant.

⁶³ In December 2001, Argentina witnessed one of the most significant popular uprisings in the region, known as the “Outbreak of 2001”. The deep economic recession resulting from neoliberal policies of the 1990s

The Lesson of Walter Benjamin

In 2014, a symposium on Walter Benjamin was held at the ESMA, a former clandestine navy prison that today is a memory site. Several Argentine academics who worked on the theme of memory and the recent past (such as Ricardo Foster, Roberto Pittaluga, and Luis Ignacio García) have developed a special interest in this German author. There are two emblematic texts by Benjamin that have been particularly inspiring for the memory, truth, and justice movement in Argentina. One is Benjamin's essay "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia". The other is his collection of theses "On the Concept of History". In the former, Benjamin shows his enthusiasm for the surrealist movement, to which he attributes a gesture of radical freedom. In the second, the author develops a concept of history that is intended to be materialist and that fundamentally differs from the historicism of his time. Benjamin's interpretation of history in terms of catastrophe, his attempt to overcome the cult of progress, and his idea of a history of the defeated have had significant repercussions in Latin America.

Historiography of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century interpreted the past as a linear development towards progress. This cult of progress so closely associated with modernity was for Benjamin of an ideological nature. Modern historiography treated the past as a one-directional narrative where the event is a necessity in the causal chain of history. To structure the past in this way implies considering it natural and definitive. What is more, the past described in this way becomes a legitimation of the present, making the latter its logical result. This is why the conventional historical narrative is a story that empathizes with the victors. In his "On the Concept of History", Benjamin traces an extreme dichotomy between mythical time (which he equates with progress) and historical time (which he equates with human experience).⁶⁴ These are incompatible poles. In mythical time, human beings cannot escape their destiny. This means that authentic novelty is impossible (Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing* 78–79). Historical time, on the other hand, is volatile and contingent, and it can be determined by the conscious human will.

culminated in a social and political crisis. Within the framework of the massive social protests, 39 people were murdered due to the repression ordered by the Executive Branch. President Fernando de La Rúa had to present his resignation and flee by helicopter from the Government House. Before the inauguration of Néstor Kirchner in 2003, the country was immersed in a period of political instability in which five provisional presidents succeeded one another.

⁶⁴ "Strictly speaking, myth and history are incompatible. The former dictates that because human beings are powerless to interfere in the workings of fate, nothing truly new can happen, while the concept of history implies the possibility of human influence upon events, and with it, the moral and political responsibility of people as conscious agents to shape their own destiny" (Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing* 78).

The task of the materialist historian, according to Benjamin, was to read history “against the grain” (“On the Concept” 392). This means that the facts that have been ignored by positivist history as irrelevant to the present, the “marginal” facts, gain new visibility when they are removed from their original context. This is particularly true for the defeat of emancipatory revolts in the past and for the terror exercised by colonial systems and indigenous genocide in the Americas. According to Benjamin, what we call progress is also a story of conquest and destruction, whose debris “grows toward the sky” (392). “There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” and it is this barbarism that disappears in the narrative synthesis of historicism (392). For Benjamin, the historical past is neither fixed nor decided: it is as contingent as the present itself and can be interfered with through critical action. This action must retrace the path of history as progress and dismantle its character as fate. The aim is then to “read what was never written” (Benjamin, “Paralipomena” 405). The purpose is not to recover what has been forgotten – an endeavour that for Benjamin is impossible and futile – but to look for the form that the past takes in a critical constellation with the present. Historical knowledge must be connected and referred to redemption.

A Dialectical Relationship with the Past

The historicist’s claim that a historical event can be reconstructed as it was has an unacknowledged model in the photographic technique, understood as a technical, that is, unmediated, representation of a moment in the past. For Elizabeth Collingwood-Selby, this kind of “photographic reason” has been at the core of historicist conceptions. As clearly shown in our time, every photograph is an inevitable staging, a limited point of view, a specific relationship between the inside and outside of the frame or the field of the camera. Similarly, every historical event is such by virtue of some form of record (documents, testimonies, photographs) and this already implies mediation. The event of positivist historiography is not the event in its *here and now*, but an inevitable selection. This selection is based on the needs of the present. The present remembers only the aspects of the past event in which it can recognize itself, that is to say, which are related to it and which it can categorize and manage. Historicism as a claim of historical objectivity is managed memory. For Benjamin, integral memory does not exist, except in a messianic future. The past is by definition something open, pending, and each present relates to it in a different way. The indigestible remains of the past persist in uncontrollable areas of collective memory. It is as if they are waiting for the moment in which they become legible (readable) or the “moment of

its recognizability” (“On the Concept” 390). According to Sigrid Weigel (74), for Benjamin images reside in language and only become visible at the time of their legibility (*Lesbarkeit*). The moment of cognoscibility is necessarily a present moment, that is to say, it takes place when a present enters into a critical and fleeting constellation with an image of the past. This occurs in a moment of crisis, that is, in a present saturated with tensions, or a present in its “moment of danger”.⁶⁵ Benjamin also associates this moment of legibility with an awakening from the dream of history.⁶⁶

In his work on surrealism, Benjamin refers to these critical constellations, these sudden moments of historical lucidity, as “profane illuminations”, that is to say, non-religious revelations; in his text “On the Concept of History”, he uses the concept of the “dialectical image” for them. This concept needs some explanation. The narrative exposition of history records historical time as a linear and natural continuity. The dialectical image, on the other hand, presents a shocking display of images that denote the tensions of an undecided historical situation. In this regard, for Benjamin the dialectical image seems to be a device of both thought and experience, and a method as well as an objective. It is a method of inquiry to the extent that it involves contrasting fragments, ruins, or heterogeneous objects in order to achieve a non-synthetic image of the past. It is an objective because these images must be the goal of the materialist historian. The dialectical image recovers those dilapidated remains that are obscured by the narrative of historical progress but refuse to disappear. In the “rubbish” of history we find what the historical narrative has discarded, the evidence that all progress is also destruction. But we also glimpse collective desires, old and truncated promises that still smoulder among the ashes of the past.

In his essay on surrealism, Benjamin credits André Breton with discovering the revolutionary energy that appears in the antiquated, that is to say, in outdated, outmoded, abandoned, and obsolete remains. Although he understood it primarily as a literary phenomenon, surrealism constituted for Benjamin the first model for the concept of the dialectical image. In surrealist literary practice and avant-garde cinema he found a “principle of montage” that he understood to be ideal for the materialist presentation of history (*Arcades*

⁶⁵ “to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (Benjamin, “On the Concept” 391).

⁶⁶ “The history that showed things ‘as they really were’ was the most powerful narcotic of the [nineteenth] century” (Benjamin, *Arcades Project* 463).

Project 461).⁶⁷ Benjamin suggested that the anachronistic remnants that persist in the present, rearticulated according to the principles of montage, could “blast open the *continuum* of history” (“On the Concept” 396; italics mine), thus doing them justice. Relying on Louis Aragon’s *Traité du style* (1928), he contrasts the image with metaphor. He describes bourgeois progressivism as a bad poem saturated with metaphors. It should be noted that, in surrealism, the metaphor is not distinguished in a strict sense from the comparison that narratively and constructively harmonizes everything. The surreal image is the opposite of a comparison, which belongs to the explanatory calm of rational and Cartesian discourse. The surreal image seeks the unexpected encounter of heterogeneous entities, thus blasting meaning. It is the chance encounter of dissimilar logic, a fleeting spark or lightning bolt that produces a momentary illumination, without any mediation. The classic example of this is the well-known image of the umbrella and the sewing machine in a dissection room. This spark originates in the juxtaposition or montage of antithetical series of facts, images, objects, etc.; they can produce, according to Benjamin, a kind of revelation that he referred to as a profane illumination, “an immediate mode of knowledge that is exempt from the protocols of epistemic control” (García, “Una política” 115), yet is in no way a mystical or religious epiphany. Benjamin thus replaces a conceptual logic with a visual logic and the metaphorical concept with the image. The image represents the “interruption of a continuity in the now of remembrance” (García, “Una política” 130). For Benjamin, it is in politics where metaphor and image drastically collide. While the former serves the continuity and progress of discourse, the latter interrupts, disarms, and halts.

Memory Practices as Image-Space

Given the collapse of the historicist pretension of an “objective” and narrative recovery of the event, the task of the historian is necessarily political. The relationship with the past suggested by Benjamin involves a practice of memory as a “political relationship with history” (García, “Una política” 112). In the essay on surrealism, Benjamin also introduces the concept of *Bildraum*, which can be translated as space of images or image-space. García views Benjamin’s *Bildraum* as a repository of past collective experiences, of truncated promises of emancipation, ready to be politically updated in the present (“Una política” 126).

⁶⁷ “The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event. And, therefore, to break with vulgar historical naturalism” (Benjamin, *Arcades Project* 461).

This means that the image-space that surrealists work with “is the space of utopian action” (Hansen 319) and thus is also a political space in terms of messianic temporality. In fact, the attempt to “win the energies of intoxication for the revolution” (Benjamin, “Surrealism” 215) is for Benjamin the great merit of the surrealists (Löwy). The image-space constitutes a point of view from which the past is decoded not in historical but in political terms (Benjamin, “Surrealism” 216–217). In this complex, suggestive, ardent essay, Benjamin proposes that the critical artist find his place in this image-space, abandoning a contemplative attitude.

The concepts of *Bildraum* and *dialectical image* are unfinished ideas. It is not possible to reach a conclusive definition and a transversal and terminologically consistent theory of either of these concepts in Benjamin’s work. It is also not easy to determine their operational scope for the historian of the present. This has been the conclusion of prominent Benjamin scholars such as Rolf Tiedemann and Max Pensky.⁶⁸ Benjamin’s poetic writing style and use of ambiguity as an epistemological-critical resource should also be taken into account. Despite its nebulous contours, the concept of image – the dialectical image, particularly – continues to be a fruitful one as a critique of essentialist historiography and of the concept of linear temporality. It also constitutes a formidable tool for dismantling the persistent mythology of progress in capitalist society. But above all it is a concept that reconfigures the relationships between memory and history through politics (Benjamin, “Surrealism” 217). The radical novelty of this concept is that it shifts the point of view of the past as an objective fact to that of the past as a fact of memory. This is not because objective facts have not had a material existence, but because they can never be separated from the way in which they are registered, and from the movement that remembers, constructs, and reconstructs them. This is how it has been viewed time and again by art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, for whom the image confronts us with time. Although Benjamin thought in linguistic images, Didi-Huberman applies his concepts to graphic or artistic images. The image combines various times and it is not easy to understand the historicity it contains. In fact, the image expresses our relationship with the past more clearly than history. For him the image, like memory, is rooted in anachronisms and survivals, as explained by Aby Warburg (*Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*), who believed that images, or cultural products in general, were

⁶⁸ “Dialectical image and dialectic at the standstill are, without a doubt, the central categories of the *Passagen-Werk*. Their meaning, however, remained iridescent; it never achieved any terminological consistency” (Tiedemann 942). “If the dialectical image was the quintessence of his method, this fact both establishes the continuing attraction of an imagistic approach to radical cultural criticism, and the profound difficulties in appropriating such an approach in the present” (Pensky 195).

endowed with their own vitality and that they were recirculated anachronistically in very different configurations and times. This constituted their *afterlife* or *Nachleben*, that is to say, the survival of images, their covert return after being forgotten. Didi-Huberman sees in Warburg's monumental project *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* (1929), which is like a heterogeneous album of surviving images that explores their anachronistic relationships, an attempt parallel to that of Benjamin in his *Arcades Project* with its montage of quotations. He considers the concept of survival as similar to the concept of a dialectical image (Didi-Huberman, *Arde la imagen* 24). Its survival makes it liable to enter into an unprecedented constellation with the present, allowing an overlap and thus creating the possibility of the consciousness of another story. For Didi-Huberman, the inevitable anachronism of images contains a messianic energy that makes it possible to reinvent history through the images created by the historian and the artist.

Works of art establish unexpected relationships not only between themselves, but also within themselves. This means that *Bildraum* should not only be understood as an artistic and political sphere or circuit where artists work by generating alternative images, but as the space that opens the work itself to historical reconsideration. In the montage procedure the artist can associate different temporalities, making the fragment and anachronism key to dismantling linear chronology. Thus, the images of memory trace backwards a temporal series that includes the victims of past genocides and current cases of political disappearance. The events of the past are not static or inert, but in motion. What is more, the past constantly produces new traces, new inscriptions in the present. These are traces of the past that are lodged in a kind of collective unconscious and resurface in another era in the form of desynchronization, *déjà-vues*, and anachronisms.⁶⁹

I would like to highlight two ideas that appear in Benjamin's essay "Surrealism", which are useful to understanding the relationship between image and memory in the Argentine context: the idea that, faced with the progressive optimism of social democracy (which generates conformism), it is necessary to "organize pessimism" (217) and the idea of an "image-space" linked to the body and political action. Regarding the first, it is evident, as we have seen, that memory practices in Argentina prevented the people in the present from

⁶⁹ "It is a memory that the historian summons and interrogates, not exactly 'the past.' There is no history that is not commemorative or mnemonic: this is something evident... For memory is psychic in its process, anachronistic in its effects of montage, reconstruction or 'decantation' of time. We cannot accept the commemorative dimension of history without accepting at the same time, its anchor in the unconscious and its anachronistic dimension" (Didi-Huberman, *Ante el tiempo* 60).

accepting a self-complacent narrative of national history for many years. The images of the memory of the recent past have never ceased to be “killjoys”, which time and again prevent the collective imagination from retreating into conformity and acceptance. In this regard, the call to “organize pessimism” can be understood as the call for a certain reorganization of images. In that sense, I believe that the set of visual creations that form the corpus of this thesis is part of a circuit, both political and aesthetic, that maintains a vitally critical relationship with the recent past. It is a space that generates unmanageable images, to the extent that it is difficult for a historical narrative to absorb them without scandal. They display the “debris of history” in different ways, associating the present with its spectres. But they are also images that indirectly recall collective hopes deployed in the past. Images of memory keep the past open and suggest that acts in the present can reconfigure it. Lastly, they evoke and involve the body in various ways: not only the body of the disappeared, but the body that carries their portraits or the caring body that lends itself to drawing their silhouettes, or the body that is anachronistically articulated with the disappeared (as in Lucila Quieto’s photographic montage operations).

Didi-Huberman has worked on this relationship between body, emotion and politics in *Pueblos en lágrimas, pueblos en armas* (*People in Tears, People in Arms*). For Didi-Huberman, collective suffering over the victims of an oppressive system can be transformed into an uprising. Images that evoke the horror of the past can be innervated in the body through emotion, which is political in that it is collective. In the art of HIJOS, one can distinguish perspectives and formal procedures that were decisive in the surrealist revolution. Some examples of this are the perspective of childhood or the child’s gaze, the intervention of the technological in art, and the intertwining and dialogue between different genres and media, which Susana Rosano referred to as the “transmediality” of the creations of HIJOS. Humour can also be mentioned as a corrosive and de-realizing element that Benjamin presents in his text on surrealism as a gateway to this alternative image-space.⁷⁰

I believe that the alternative archival materials that human rights organizations managed to put together were the material basis for the development of a new fabric of images of memory. They are traces of a traumatic past that continue to be inscribed in the present. Artists in this sphere work with *survivals*; they work on the past using the principles of montage and remembrance. The montage thus has a political dimension because it exposes

⁷⁰ “For in the joke, too, in invective, in misunderstanding, in all cases where an action puts forth its own image and exists, absorbing and consuming it, where nearness looks with its own eyes, the long-sought image-space is opened” (Benjamin, “Surrealism” 217).

conflicts and clashes. They do not aim to reconstruct or document historical events. They work on anachronistic encounters, irruptions, and temporary desynchronization that are like disruptive symptoms in the present consciousness. They produce new isolated remains of the past in search of future coherence. They are images awaiting a present that can finally make them legible, recognizing itself in them. I argue that visual memory practices in Argentina, as closely associated as they are with the struggles against state violence, constitute a potential reserve of dialectical images. This is why I believe that these practices can be understood as part of what Walter Benjamin called a *Bildraum*, or image-space.

The Uruguayan sociologist Gabriel Gatti, a child of disappeared parents, recently described the phenomenon of detention-disappearance as a foundational disaster that undermines our understanding of the world and results in a collapse of language (12). This means that in the environment of those affected directly or indirectly by this collapse, the same images that have emerged in response to an erasure (legal, civic, existential erasure, the erasure of history that in terms of the individual involves a forced disappearance) become cognitive tools, forms of exploration. In these visual practices, the artificial boundary that separates the relatives of the disappeared from artists who are not (directly) their relatives is diluted.

The City and Its Symptoms

Among the first purely artistic images that were created on the subject of the disappeared is the exhibition *¿Dónde están?* (*Where Are They?*) by RES (Raúl Eduardo Stolkiner) in 1989. In some of RES' photos, an empty city appears where photos of a tapir foetus hang. This defamiliarization produced by the tapir foetus leads us to think not only about the disappearance of pregnant detainees and the theft of babies, but also about disappearance as a process that interrupts birth. It is as if we are talking about an aborted generation. The image is a reference to the futures that were terminated as soon as they were born. The long exposure time in these photos creates the feeling of bodies that are not so much disappeared as *disappearing* (Fortuny, *Memorias fotográficas* 53). They are spectral figures, bodies in motion, where different layers of time alternate that mimic the lack of discipline of memory self. The defamiliarization that a guilty city produces, where empty spaces still predominate as a result of fear and control, is epitomized by this enigmatic key suspended in the night

air.⁷¹

Another photographic art serial that displays empty, ambiguous, and enigmatic urban landscapes is that of Fernando Gutiérrez in his 1996 photographic essay *Treintamil* (*Thirty Thousand*) and the other two parts *Secuela* (*Sequela*, 2001–2004) and *Cosas al río* (*Things to the River*, 2008–2010). These are reminiscent of Eugène Atget's photos, which Benjamin considered as anticipating surrealism. In Fernando Gutiérrez's photos of urban and suburban spaces that are not clearly delimited and that are devoid of people, we see a ruined car in the middle of a vacant area, walls, inscriptions and shadows on walls, remains of buildings, and a single ghostly face. Whereas allegory is central the work of Raúl Eduardo Stolkiner, known as RES (e.g., the foetus of the animal and the disappeared person), Gutiérrez works with dilapidated objects in a metonymic relationship with the past. Remains like aeroplanes, the river, the Ford Falcon, barbed wire, and army trucks parked on the pavement are present in the collective memory. The photo at the end of the book features three pairs of shoes placed in a line next to the photographer's bare feet. The shoes reveal intolerable absences and are reminiscent of storage in Nazi concentration camps.

The Blasphemous Twist

The incorporation of humour (and black humour) in works related to the drama of disappearance shows how this image-space has not been fully captured by the disciplines of testimony and pedagogy or, more generally, by the logic of memory as public policy. A careful reading of the novel, blog, or diary by Mariana Eva Perez titled *Diario de una princesa montonera – 110% verdad* (*Diary of a Montonera Princess – 110% Truth*; 2020) and the theatrical show *Montonerísima* (2013), written and performed by Victoria Grigera, reveals, however, that this unexpected blasphemous twist (in that it is playful and humorous) does not denigrate (as one might suspect) either the tragedy of the past or the practices of memory and justice, but rather attacks the solemnity and ritualism that empties these practices of real content.⁷² A parody is made of the massive and institutionalized discourse of memory brought into vogue by the Kirchner administration and built on the figure of the

⁷¹ "Si algo hay en estas fotos de Res es extrañamiento. En el sentido de ostranenie o extrañeza de la que hablaban los formalistas rusos de principios de siglo XX : algo en la obra (en este caso la fotografía, no ya la literatura) quiebra la expectativa de quien mira, rompe con la percepción automática. Algo disruptivo logra que lo habitual se convierta en extraño." ("If there is something in these photos by RES, it is defamiliarization, in the sense of the early 20th century Russian formalists' concept of *ostranenie*: something in the work (in this case, the photograph, not literature) that breaks the expectation of the viewer, that breaks with automatic perception. Something disruptive turns the familiar into something unfamiliar"; Fortuny, "Memoria fotográfica" 3).

⁷² See on this topic: Pifano, and van Alphen, "Playing the Holocaust".

victim as the foundation of a renewed conception of citizenship. The novels (or diaries) of Mariana Eva Pérez and Victoria Grigera (and the playful montage in Bettini) put into practice, according to Jordana Blejmar, *profane memories* that create an alternative vocabulary that parodies the automatisms and clichés that are derived, for example, from the anachronistic and formulaic use of slogans and the militant terms of the 1970s today (qtd. in Mandolessi). These automatisms and commonplaces full of false solemnity that the institutional recognition of Mothers and Grandmothers created in progressive circles are, in fact, an obstacle to the transmission of the past. Using the old militant terminology of the seventies and the modern discourse of human rights, the government institutionalized the protest associations, integrating them into the institutional apparatus of the State where they follow the pace set by the State. In this regard, the *profane memories* of HIJOS are departures from this situation. They are renewed, provocative, and bold searches. By introducing self-irony and parody in their biographical texts, they disrupt the canonization of the victims and make works that cannot be used for civic education. A very useful text to situate in its true dimension the debate on this type of artistic transgressions or profanations, and the taboos imposed by the duty of memory and the methods of formal teaching, is the article by Ernst van Alphen entitled “Playing the Holocaust and playing with the Holocaust” (151–162). In this article, van Alphen defends the insolent and playful aspects of art to untighten the Holocaust archives and allow the flow of memory.

It is a paradoxically emancipatory gesture. First of all, they reject the way the media and institutions have confiscated and trivialized their private pain, recovering it as their own pain, one that cannot be transferred. At the same time, their works (addressed to everyone) constitute a gesture of disidentification. They distance themselves from the figure of the victim as a public identity. As Gabriel Gatti explains, these kinds of profane works reflect on the mechanism that sustains them, that is to say, the institutionalized notions of memory and truth and their trail of pious or moralizing formulas. To place the figure of the victim at the centre of philosophical reflection is to replace political thought with morality, making piety the axis of social praxis.⁷³

The works of HIJOS that parody the jargon, rituals, and bureaucracy of memory abandon the sphere of institutions to continue inhabiting the image-space and their characteristic inclination towards dissent. They are expressions that escape the forms of capture that place memory at the service of institutional purposes.

⁷³ Alain Badiou has written a scathing essay on this issue: *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*.

The Child's Gaze

For Benjamin, the crisis of experience had a lot to do with the crisis of narrative, that is, with the modern impossibility of sustaining tradition through narrative language in the era that began with the First World War. In these conditions, it becomes necessary, among other things, to recover the child-like dimension of perception. Benjamin consistently applauded the role that surrealist expression assigned to the child's gaze, which is capable of unapologetically undertaking a destructive and creative activity with respect to tradition. In childhood there is a tendency to disassemble and reassemble as an exploration of a new path. Nothing can separate the child from his or her concentration on the play and attraction to discarded things, to that which the adult has disdained. Benjamin's own concept of materialist history is inspired by this model governed by play and passion for what is left behind. In each rejected object the child recognizes "the face of the world of things" (Padilha 2). Childhood temporality is marked by the moment, which continues all the time. Walter Benjamin refers to this particular experience of time as the *Jetztzeit*, the *now-time*, where present, past, and future are combined and re-articulated. When objects deviate from their original function, they take on other possible meanings, which is a poetic principle of dealing with them. This is what occurs with toys in a child's hands. This is the case of images, according to Benjamin, for whom "each image proposes a reconsideration of the entire universe" (Padilha 3).⁷⁴

The creators connected to HIJOS are structurally burdened by an essential difficulty in transmitting the experience of their parents' disappearance. For most of them, this experience is above all and literally a childhood experience. Thus, the novels of HIJOS use a child's narrating voice to refer to the events that marked their lives, as if the adult narrative were incapable of accounting for those events. Some examples of this are the 2008 novel *La casa de los conejos* (*The Rabbit House*) by Laura Alcoba, where an autobiographical piece is written "from the height of the girl I was" (Alcoba, *La casa* 12), and the 2012 film *Infancia clandestina* (*Clandestine Childhood*) by Benjamín Ávila, which is built around the gaze of Juan, a twelve-year-old boy. In the 2003 film *Los rubios* (*The Blondes*) by Ernestina Carri, the events associated with the parents' disappearance are represented and explained with the help of parts of a children's toy made of building blocks (*Playmobil*). In the first images of

⁷⁴ "Para Benjamin a imagem substitui o conceito e cada imagem propõe uma revisão de todo o universo" (Padilha 3).

the 2007 film *M*, by Nicolás Prividera, the camera pans through the rooms of a house from the height and perspective of a child.⁷⁵ The remembering child cannot help but refer to a nebulous place of experience. For Benjamin and the surrealists, however, this type of gaze can also be the gateway to a greater sensitive density of lived experience that avoids the anaesthetic character of the historicist linear narrative.

The Recontextualised Image

Photography in relation to disappearance is, in some way, condemned to permanently oscillate between public and private or family contexts. The idea of removing the inherited image, often the photograph of disappeared parents, both from the family album and from the documentary archive of human rights organizations, and making them appear in different, sometimes unexpected contexts, is probably a means of satisfying the child's need to find their own unique relationship with these photographs. It is a gesture that can be associated with the attitude of the collector (if we exclude the frivolous aspect of it) who, according to Benjamin, rescues objects from their utilitarian or mercantile capture and in this way redeems them (Benjamin, *Arcades Project* 9). For family members and especially for children, photographs that used to be traces (in the sense of objects that were metonymically connected to the absent person) were transformed into substitute objects, "paradigmatic devices for the representation of absence" (Fortuny, "Memoria fotográfica" 7). In the intervened photos made by HIJOS artists, we observe how the figure of the disappeared father or mother moves towards the figure of the child who attempts to share the image-space with that of the parents, as in the photographic overlaps of Lucila Quieto. The encounter in and through the image proposes, as we have seen, an alternative or third time between the father's time and the daughter's time.

In the series of photomontages by Gustavo Germano, for example, presence and absence, life and disappearance, are contrasted, highlighting the "suspended" condition of the disappeared (Balletta 760). These are images that create tension in the essential relationship of photography with the temporal dimension. On the other hand, as already pointed out, neither Quieto nor Germano conceals the artificial nature of their compositions, which forces the viewer to remain awake. Germano does not "correct" the old amateur photo, nor does he retouch the new one so that it resembles a photo taken with an old technique. He simply

⁷⁵ The different variants of this child's gaze were studied by Mariella Peller in "La mirada de la niña. Sobre *La casa de los conejos* de Laura Alcoba".

juxtaposes both photographs where passages, environments, and the pose of those photographed are repeated (and where the victim no longer appears in the new image). Before being moved by what this implies, the viewer is driven to trace differences without being distracted by contrivances (Balletta 761). This means that intellect is challenged first, and only afterwards is emotion stirred.

1st Year, 6th Division, Class Photo 1967.

The school photo that Marcelo Brodsky shows in his work *Buena memoria* (Good Memory; 1997) is a classic group portrait of a secondary school class, on which the author's former classmates have written comments about its subsequent fate (fig. 1). Many of them are humorous. The "future" disappeared, however, are crossed out and surrounded by text indicating when and how they disappeared. The photo was not conceived to be exhibited as a work of art but as a communicative act for an event with students. The effect is disturbing because the indication appears among other more recognizable and banal biographical comments about the life trajectories of the other members of the group. We inevitably tend to look in the eyes of the future disappeared person for some omen of their fate. The anachronistic dimension of the photograph, the lines of writing that surround the faces, all of this makes us think of a previous present (that of the photo) visited by an atrocious future that leaves its marks (Fortuny, *Memorias fotográficas* 84). It is a set that evokes the work of the French artist Christian Boltanski, to whom I will refer in Chapter 5. Boltanski shows faces of young people who gradually became the faces of Jewish corpses. Here time is represented at a standstill before the catastrophe, inviting us to reverse the social erasure that all disappearance is. It reminds us that, before being fulfilled, every catastrophic omen is more like a hypothesis.

None of these visual expressions of memory can be understood in terms of testimony. They are expressions of desire. They return to the past, dismantle it, rewrite it, and reinscribe it in the present. They constitute small fragments of a weak utopian energy.

Conclusions

Taken in its broadest sense, images are integral to our relationship with the world. There is no doubt about the power that graphic images, such as photography, exert over our perception of reality. Advertising and journalistic images provide daily evidence of how images, regardless of their medium, can impact or stimulate the human sensorium. Artistic images possess the unique ability to challenge our visual clichés, occasionally prompting a sensitive

reconfiguration of the world or a sudden illumination that aids in its reconsideration. We comprehend the Benjaminian concept of the dialectical image as a both sensory and intellectual operation that disrupts the imaginary governing our natural connection with the present, reopening our memory to the injustice of the past that underlies this very present. It is, in part, in this sense that we will understand the political potentiality of the image in general.

It has already been pointed out that the importance of the image in the creations of the children is the simultaneously logical and paradoxical response to the phenomenon of disappearance. Now it should be noted that the artistic and protean use of these images in the works of HIJOS brings us closer, so to speak, to the possibility of a different kind of politics, to the extent that they move away from denunciation and demonstration, to enter a space that is experimental, both intimate and collective, where representation and identity lose their centrality in favour of shock and anonymity. The constellation of images that developed around the fight for the disappeared to be returned alive – images that made what was absent present, that made the past current, that revealed what had been concealed by the regime – still constitutes a political-affective space that produces constant instability. The meaning of the word “image” cannot be restricted to the photographic, graphic, or artistic image. The image must be conceived as an aesthetic-political operator that stubbornly insists on the violent origin of the present. Within this sensitive space, the mystification of progress and the linear temporality of capitalist modernity falter.

The infinite mourning for the victims of state terrorism is not only the mourning of family members, that is to say, a private or individual process, but a collective mourning that decentres us as individuals and nourishes our critical relationship with a common historical past. This is why it constitutes a political device of resistance. It is this relationship between mourning and politics that Judith Butler captured in *Precarious Life*, where she posits that mourning is not necessarily something private and solitary, but rather “furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order” (22).⁷⁶ According to Didi-Huberman, who briefly, but significantly, returns to the concept of “space-image” in *Desear desobedecer*, the image, in its direct relationship with *pathos*, also produces, or is capable of producing, a common

⁷⁶ “Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility. If my fate is not originally or finally separable from yours, then the “we” is traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against; or, rather, we can argue against it, but we would be denying something fundamental about the social conditions of our very formation” (Butler 22–23).

space of emotion, a sensitive space within which collective figures (and, therefore, political figures) of social and historical questioning can “function” (365).

One can thus posit the existence of a network of images that, due to their very nature, that is, due to the unstable and paradoxical relationship they establish between absence and presence, past and present, allow the creation of a “we” that continuously interferes, through its insistence on memory, with the (linear, triumphalist, amnesiac) temporality of domination.

I therefore return here to the distinction I made at the beginning of this chapter between three configurations or regimes in the treatment of images of collective memory. One is of a testimonial nature and orders the images by the strength of their evidentiary evidence. Another presents the images without determinations: images in a state of shock, closer to *profane enlightenment* than to any idea of civic utility (for police, informative, or educational purposes). The third is a configuration that organizes the images according to an educational or explanatory logic and whose objective is citizen education within the framework of a rule of law. These three forms of image organization contribute in different ways to the transmission of the recent past (in its documentary, affective and political aspects).

Benjamin suggested that the image-space initiated by surrealism enables an expansion of experience capable of affecting the sensorium of the body through a process of *innervation* made possible by new technologies, and thus creating an imaginary of collective rebellion (“Surrealism” 217–218). Beyond Benjamin’s debatable confidence in the efficacy and utopian energies of surrealism (an aesthetic that is currently appropriated in advertising) or in the critical possibilities of technology, it could be said that the images that emerged in the spheres of memory work, especially the creations of the children, mimic that space of ungovernable images. When artists take photographs from police or family archives and subject them to an aesthetic treatment, they transform them into political images, to the extent that the tensions they bring into play remain unresolved.

As Susan Buck-Morss has pointed out (*Dialectics of Seeing* 334–336),⁷⁷ for Benjamin, cultural transmission (in a broad sense that contains the so-called high culture as well as the so-called low culture) plays a privileged role in the task of redeeming the past. Transmission constitutes a political act of primary importance, not because culture itself has the power to change the world, but because historical memory decisively affects the collective will for

⁷⁷ “From what are the phenomena rescued? Not only, not so much from the discredit and disregard into which they fall, as from the catastrophe of how a particular form of tradition so often represents them, their ‘appreciation as heritage’” (Benjamin qtd. in Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing* 331).

change. The images of memory, in addition to contributing to collective memory, should nourish the collective imagination – but on the condition that the images do not become metaphors or illustrations that mitigate differences, that they are not placed at the service of what Benjamin referred to as the progressive or social democratic optimism that moralizes politics. For transmission to actualize such potential, a space must exist in which images are the point where memory and action are articulated (García, “Una política” 115).⁷⁸ The images of memory must express a tension, a disjunction, and an intransigence contrary to all political optimism, thus affirming “the primacy of politics over morality” (117).

In a time like ours, in which capitalism as a form of production, as a logic of life and death seamlessly occupies, as Mark Fisher pointed out, “the horizons of the thinkable” (8), and even decorates our oneiric life, we need to rely on survivals. The advance of denialism, militarism, rearmament, open racism, and indifference to the collateral deaths of capitalism on the borders of the West throughout the world today shows that the ideals of tolerance and democratic consensus have failed. Institutional attention to human rights education in recent years has not prevented the mythical circularity of oppression. This regression is, as Slavoj Žižek explains, “strictly correlative to the depoliticization of our society, i.e., to the disappearance of its proper political dimension” and its replacement by ethno-theological conflicts (116). This underscores the “need for a theory of history in which fascism can become visible” (Benjamin qtd. in Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing* 303). It is not so much that the decisive events of the past are forgotten; it is that their potential truth remains imprisoned in catastrophic forms of transmission.

I would like to propose that the future of the transmission of the past in Argentina depends on the future of this image-space, founded by those first passport photos held up by the mothers. This future depends, in turn, on the continued interruption by a flow of alternative images – images of dissent, not captured in a police-like logic of means and ends – of any project of imaginary understanding between the oppressors and the oppressed.

⁷⁸ For Luis Ignacio García, the image in Benjamin “is the point at which memory and action are articulated, and the ‘dialectical image’ is the instance of condensation of his political theory and his theory of history” (“Una política” 113).



Fig. 11. Marcelo Brodsky. *Buena memoria*. 1996, <https://marcelobrodsky.com/buena-memoria/>. Accessed September 24, 2023.