



MEMORIES OF THE PAST, IMAGES OF THE PRESENT

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND CONTESTED MEMORIAL NARRATIVE IN ARGENTINA

BACHELOR THESIS
LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES
MANDY GEISE, 0420158
JUNE 2013

UTRECHT UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES
PROF. JORDÃO

El sistema

Plan de exterminio: arrasar la hierba, arrancar de raíz hasta la última plantita todavía viva, regar la tierra con sal.

Después, matar la memoria de la hierba. Para colonizar las conciencias, suprimirlas; para suprimirlas, vaciarlas de pasado. Aniquilar todo testimonio de que en la comarca hubo algo más que silencio, cárceles y tumbas.

Está prohibido recordar.

Se forman cuadrillas de presos. Por las noches, se les obliga a tapar con pintura blanca las frases de protesta que en otros tiempos cubrían los muros de la ciudad.

La lluvia, de tanto golpear los muros, va disolviendo la pintura blanca. Y reaparecen, poquito a poco, las porfiadas palabras.

Eduardo Galeano, *Días y noches de amor y de guerra*

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
1. National Identity and Collective Memory <i>A Theoretical Framework</i>	8
2. Oppressed Civilians, Suppressed Narrative <i>The Military Dictatorship: The Implementation of Fear and its Lasting Effects</i>	16
3. Documenting the “Truth” <i>A New Democracy and Nunca Más</i>	21
4. A Different Kind of Oppression <i>Menem’s Neoliberalism and the Economic and Social Crisis</i>	31
5. Ambiguity on the Screen <i>The Representation of Argentina’s Past and Present in Los rubios</i>	39
Conclusion <i>Taking back the Country</i>	47
Works Cited	50

Introduction

In this paper, my interest lies with the dynamic character of collective trauma, cultural memory and national identity in Argentina. I seek to illustrate how recent traumatic events altered society and national identity and how these were -- and still are -- woven into the narrative of the nation. Particularly, the analysis focuses on tenuous post-traumatic relations within contemporary Argentine society and their manifestations in media.

Over the course of the past half century, Argentines have experienced various turbulent moments, of which the military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983 and the economic default of 2001 -- the sad denouement of the neoliberal policies of the 1980s and 1990s -- were arguably the ones with the most significant impact. These events affected the political and economical landscape, but they also altered the sociocultural panorama. They profoundly influenced the contents and shape of the media, the reciprocal relation between the media and society and the way in which Argentines perceive and portray themselves and the nation of which they are members. I set out to discover what consequences these two recent traumatizing landmarks in Argentine history had for the sociocultural fabric of the nation and in what way these events shaped the national narrative. This helps me to answer my question as to how the mentioned episodes affected social cohesion and national identity in Argentina. If, as argued (for example, by Hall 1996), national identity is a narrative, it does not come into existence out of nowhere, nor does it function in a vacuum. How exactly such a narrative has been shaped in Argentina in the periods after the military dictatorship and after the economic crisis is what I hope to explore successfully in this paper.

It is not possible to discuss national identity and collective memory without examining the use of popular culture in the formation of the nation. Hayden White has pointed out that the best representations of the past and present are found in the media, particularly in works of art. Popular art forms, and especially newer ones such as films, videos, and digital art forms, are more important for the transmission of history, culture and identity today than history in traditional educational forms (White 1980; Lorca 2011). These images have created new relations with the past, for they turn exact, verifiable events into exemplary and symbolic versions of history by extracting experiences from the story of a group or individual that can essentially function as a magnifying mirror of what a whole society has experienced. For example, by giving an account -- idiosyncratic enough to make the story stand out and indicate a particular historical instance, but generalized enough to share commonalities with

most affected by the particular instance -- of how everyday life during the dictatorship was overshadowed by insecurity and fear to get abducted, tortured and/or killed by hands of the state, an institution that is supposed to protect citizens rather than impose a climate of terror one can see how fear, depreciation and mistrust of state institutions have become deeply embedded into Argentine society. Memory in this figurative, analogical form can come to represent experiences of whole groups. It is this power of media and art to turn literal acts into representational examples that makes it so useful for my analysis.

So, I will investigate the interaction between history, memory, and national identity by exploring art works. The research puzzle in this paper centers around the following main question: How is current-day Argentine national identity produced and reproduced and how does collective memory help to shape this identity? A satisfactory answer should be reached by answering the following questions: How do cultural productions, with the example of *Nunca Más* and *Los rubios*, reflect and shape processes of memory making after collective traumatic experiences? What is the narrative of a collective contemporary Argentine history and how do recent traumatic events fit into this narrative? Which topics and strategies are employed in the struggle for the shaping of a national narrative and a collective memory?

My scope of research encompasses two different moments in the past decades, and the works I explore are, correspondingly, from different time periods. The first moment, after the dictatorship, when the Argentines were trying to digest the reality of the atrocities of the decades right behind them, is linked to the publication of CONADEP's report *Nunca Más*.¹ This is an essential work that is useful in my analysis as it not only aimed to document a traumatic period in Argentine history; in the process of the compilation and publication of the report -- selecting witnesses, writing up testimonies, compiling a summary report, getting it published and eliciting a wide-ranging spectrum of reactions -- it discovered the impossibility of coming to "one" truth or to reach a dominant narrative. This process itself also demonstrated how state violence and collective trauma are written into cultural narratives and how such narratives are subsequently implicated to inscribe, resist and heal trauma. The

¹ The National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, or CONADEP, after its Spanish name *Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas*, was set up in 1983 with a mandate to investigate forced disappearances and other atrocities committed during the dictatorship of 1976-1983. *Nunca Más* was the truncated version, used for commercial publication, of the final report the commission produced at the end of its investigations. The commission and report will be discussed in more length in Chapter 3, but readers seeking a comprehensive, detailed study of the creation, function and place of CONADEP and the report it produced in post-dictatorial Argentine society, would find in Emilio Crenzel's *La historia política del Nunca Más* (2008) is an excellent resource.



Picture 1. Silhouettes of people disappeared during the military dictatorship, held up during a march in memory of the victims of the state repression, Plaza the Mayo, Buenos Aires, March 24, 2010.

second subject will be the film *Los rubios* (Carri, 2003), in which the young filmmaker Albertina Carri delves into personal and national past by reconstructing the forced disappearance of her parents. In the consideration of this film I will address the problem of the dictatorship embedded in the postmodern society after the effects of neoliberal policies and globalization had become painfully obvious. This film is made after the Menem years and consequent economic collapse had torn away at social cohesion in the country, still so fragile after the political repression of the 1970s.

To answer my research questions, I will begin with laying out a framework of national identity and collective memory based on work of Benedict Anderson, Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Bourdieu, Andreas Huyssen, Stuart Hall, and Tzvetan Todorov. Anderson's theories are of particular importance to come to a good understanding of the concept of national identity. Bourdieu's idea of *habitus* is valuable to investigate the complex of common concepts and perception schemes shared within Argentine society and how this is internalized through national socialization. Huyssen provides solid tools to analyze the dynamics involved in the use of representations and symbols as markers of identity and collective memory. Stuart Hall

has successfully dissected the role culture plays in the construction of nations and national identities. Finally, Todorov has written valuable pieces about the meaning and uses of memory and trauma in contemporary societies, in which he also considers the dynamics of struggles for control of the hegemonic narrative.

Understanding the dynamics of the social and mnemonic processes at work in Argentine society requires interpretation not only of theories regarding collective memory but also of the contemporary history of Argentina. Therefore, after setting out my theoretical framework in the first chapter, I will continue with a concise treatment of the events that occurred during the years of the military dictatorship in Chapter 2. Because my analysis concerns the evolvement of national identity and collective memory over time, the second period of concern will not immediately follow. Rather, I will focus here on the first years of the memory making process regarding the dictatorship. The *Nunca Más* report was first published in 1984, and thus will be regarded in the light of an Argentina recently returned to democracy. Chapter 4 will then expound on the following time of neoliberalism, when the Argentine people were given back their political freedom but bereaved of their material and eventually their social capital. Finally, in Chapter 5, an analysis of how media channeled a changed national identity and narrative, also regarding the dictatorship, will be discussed with *Los rubios*, a film that came out at a time when another groundshaking event had been added to Argentina's palmares: a neoliberal meltdown and an economic default. By applying my focus to works that have effectively rendered bare processes of nation and memory making and have highlighted their complicated dynamics, I hope to show what dynamics underlie the way in which memories and the experience of state terror are written into the story of a nation. My hypothesis is that the economic crisis and the forces of globalization and post-modernism had an emancipatory effect on considerate parts of Argentine society, which changed the terms of the struggle for memory. I expect to demonstrate how changes political and social circumstances have given Argentines more opportunities to add their voice to the cacophony surrounding national identity.

1. National Identity and Collective Memory

A Theoretical Framework

Nations and national identities express the cultural need for belonging, for coordinating individual action in a social way, and for fostering a sense of shared identity, for solidarity and cooperation. As Benedict Anderson put forward in his now classic *Imagined Communities*, nations are to be understood as mental constructs, as “imagined political communities” (1983: 15). Members of even the smallest nations do not know the majority of their fellow-citizens, do not meet, do not hear from one another directly. And yet they are convinced that they belong to a unique national community -- not least because they read to a large degree the same newspapers, watch the same television programs, hear the same political rhetoric, receive the same education, etc. The idea of the nation builds upon a common national culture and shared history, present and future, as well as a type of national territory. The concept of the nation has little to do with ethnicity, language or religion; it depends more on the willingness of its members to belong together. It is a historical principle, as its existence in the present is founded upon ideas of a shared past and a perceived shared future. This makes the nation an open and flexible community; it is perceptive to change, and its terms are continuously negotiated (1983).

The subjective image of the nation is both the defining force of, and defined by, the sociocultural and political organization of a society. On one hand, as is argued in Bergero and Reati's compilation *Memoria colectiva y políticas de olvido*, the nation appears as an all-encompassing account that incorporates historical events and foundational ideologies which draw the lines of a portrait of the nation. This idea of the history of the nation is what existing social, political and economical constructs and developments within a nation-state are based upon. History thus dictates the conditions of the present. But history does not only define the present; the present defines the past, too. A nation's foundational constructs and developments are of an equal influence on the image or identity of a nation as they are shaped by it. The interpretation of the past is adjusted by the conditions of the present, such as who is in the position to establish or contest the narrative. Moraña (in Bergero and Reati's edited volume) highlights the importance of power in memory and identity creation by explaining that the basic premises of constituting a narrative of the nation('s history) are challenged by the plurality of subjects that make up the nation, and the plurality of their perceptions regarding the nation and its history (1997). One subject adds a certain line or shade to the nation's

portrait that another disagrees with and tries to modify. This is what makes the narrative of the nation a continuously contested one: the portrait will never be finished, nor will it ever look the same to any of its painters or spectators. Historically created uneven power relations within society mean varying degrees of power to contribute to the image of the nation. The position of the subjects in society determines to what extent they are given the possibility to give their version of how past events resonate in the present. Memory is not a straightforward reproduction of the past, but instead, argues Huyssen, a selective recreation that is dependent on the remembering individual or group's contemporary social context, convictions and aspirations (1995).

The nation, regarded as inseparable of the forms of identity shaped in its interior, is also a project in progress, situated between "the virtues and the harshness of memory" (Moraña 1997: 32-33). Like the concept of the nation, the concept of identity is linked to an interpretation of the past -- in the case of contemporary Argentina, to a past of traumatic events -- that transforms a community and alters its collective conscience. Identity is thus not conceived of as a static state that remains unchanged throughout time, but a continuous formative process that is distorted by social or political traumas and fractures, and stimulated when social cohesion increases (1997). De Cillia et al. bring forward that national identities are specific forms of social identities, and they underscore the entwined nature of the nation and identity. Both concepts are subjective, influence and simultaneously are influenced by the past, and both have social and political functions. How national identity, based on perceptions of the past in the present, is regarded, depends on discourse and ideology, and thus national identity is tightly related to struggles to obtain a position from where discourse can be influenced, and ways to perpetuate and transmit discourse and ideology. National identities are discursively, by means of language and other semiotic systems, produced, reproduced, transformed and destructed (1999).

The notion that national history and identity have led to a certain organization of society that is perpetuated in the present through the (re)production and transmission of discourse by means of language and encoded symbols, relates perfectly to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*. This concept insists that identities are produced and sustained through symbolic schemes, which are shared and internalized within groups and serve three functions: cognition, communication, and social differentiation. *Habitus* has been described as the epitome of common history, collectively internalized and exhibited in the active presence (Bourdieu 1990; De Cillia et al. 1999). This complements the idea that social, political and

economical models, constructs and developments exist in their current form because of the “history of the nation” that Bergero and Reati proposed, where events of the past define the current sociopolitical conditions (1997).

Even in our globalized age, in which we see footage of destruction going on half the world away -- and in some cases are extremely deeply affected on a national level by conflicts that are taking place in countries not even on the same continent, such as in the case of US military interventions like the ones in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan -- experiences of the past are mostly meaningfully transmitted on a national rather than a global scale. This has everything to do with the locally shared understanding of certain ideas and symbolic schemes that make up the *habitus*. It is why the “political site of memory practices is still national, not global” (Huysen 2003: 16).

In my view, national identity can be regarded as a sort of *habitus*, that is to say as a complex of common ideas, or concepts of related attitudes intersubjectively shared by a specific group of persons (in this case, the nation); as well as of similar behavioral dispositions, all of which are internalized through national socialization or the earlier mentioned discursive strategies to construct national sameness (Bourdieu 1990). The attitudes to which Bourdieu refers are those manifested toward the specific ‘in-group’ on the one hand and respective ‘out-groups’ on the other hand. Behavioral dispositions include both dispositions toward solidarity with one’s own group as well as the readiness to exclude the ‘others’ from this constructed collective and to debase them. This concept is commonly applied in studies of conflict or discrimination, but it is also useful in the light of collective memory and national identity construction because of its ability to expose power relations at work in the struggle to dominate the national narrative. Also useful for this paper is the notion that, according to Bourdieu, *habitus* results from the socialization of experiences in which external structures are internalized and thus can be used to build a bridge between the individual and society, between the personal and the political. His approach emphasizes the dual character of social reality; it exists both inside and outside of individuals. The individual and society are two dimensions of the same reality (Bourdieu 1990).

With national identity playing such a central role in this paper, it is perhaps important to stress that just like memory and history, identity is not an uncontested and unmediated concept. There is no such thing as a one and only national identity in an essentialist sense. Rather, different identities are discursively constructed according to context, that is, according to the social field, the situational setting of the discursive act and the theme being discussed.

In other words, national identities are not completely stable and static. To the contrary; they are dynamic, fragile, and often incoherent. It becomes clear then that nationality is a narrative, a “story” that members of a community tell about themselves in order to define their social and cultural context. As argued by Hall, national narratives do not emerge from nowhere, nor are they fixed entities existing in a vacuum; they are, rather, produced, reproduced and spread by actors in institutionalized contexts (1996). National narratives influence not only the way in which members of the nation perceive themselves, but also have an impact on their actions in a social context and their capability to control narratives and exercise political power.

The nation, like national identity, is governed by the emphasis on a common history, and history always has to do with remembrance and memory. Maurice Halbwachs’s notion of ‘collective memory’, the selective recollection of past events which are thought to be important for the members of a specific community, lets us identify a connection between theoretical discourses on national identity, representations and symbols, and the rituals of everyday life. Collective memory, according to Halbwachs, maintains historical continuity by recalling specific elements from the archive of historical memory (1992: 46-51). Halbwachs’s concept is of particular interest for an analytical approach to the discursive construction of national identity, especially regarding the question of which national history is told by a nation’s citizens, what and how they recollect, and between which events they make a connection in their subjective national narrative (Halbwachs 1992; De Cillia et al. 1999).

Like Bourdieu, Halbwachs centers his theories on the personal situated in the collective. He maintains that everything individuals remember, no matter how personal, exists in relationship to ideas or values. Any individual memory is dependent on collectively constructed words, language, images, people, and locations. But where Bourdieu focuses mainly on ideas flowing from the external, communal to the internal, personal level, Halbwachs’ places emphasis on the influence of the individual on the collective. Following Halbwachs, the individual memory is always incorporated in a group memory. Individuals refer to collective frameworks when remembering events, because there is no chance of recalling something outside of common frames and concepts (1992).

However, the character of historical memory has changed since Halbwachs first wrote about the functioning of collective memory in the 1920s. The original distinction between remembrance and memory on one side and history on the other has been slowly dissolving as a consequence of the fainting boundary between present and past. History used to function mostly as a tool to define the relation of a nation to its past, to “monumentalize national and

universal pasts as to legitimize and give meaning to the present”, as Andreas Huyssen argues (2003: 2). This static, historical past was used to cultivate or reinforce cultural, social and political constructs in nations or communities, as was discussed earlier in this chapter. As the technological revolution and globalization have brought along a compression of time and space, and ways of living and thinking have changed, the role of belonging and collective history in maintaining social, political and cultural constructs has been altered. Rather than keeping the past in the past, as if history were a showcase of national heritage stocked with events from the past that can be looked at and opened when needed to evoke feelings of shared national identity by referring to the nation’s history, today’s memory and history are considered dynamic phenomena that are entwined with the present and constantly contested.

This argumentation, which we have seen before from Moraña and Bergero and Reati, about the reciprocal relationship between past and present, vindicates Pierre Nora’s claim that memory is “a living dialogue about the past between members of a community, and as such is open to debate, contestation, forgetting, and manipulation” (Nora 1989: 9), as opposed to a static and incomplete reconstruction of a past not maintained by the community. Illustrative of Huyssen’s stance that “the past has become part of the present in ways simply unimaginable” (2003: 1) in earlier times, in Argentina memory and history now define current cultural and social life and the relation to its present. No longer solely a marker of the relation of a nation or community to its past, memory in contemporary Argentina, as in many other countries plagued by a traumatic past, is more a reflection of how socioeconomic and political conditions of the present determine the way different sociopolitical groups perceive a nation’s past.

Like this, memory functions as a mirror of the relations within and structures of a society. The media have been critical to the construction of collective memory, a narrative of the nation that is necessary for the consolidation of national identity. An illustration of the power of film to forge bonds between members of the “imagined community” of the nation, to use Anderson’s phrase, is that of *La historia oficial*, Luis Puenzo’s 1985 story about a mother who slowly discovers the chilling true origins of her adoptive daughter. The account of a conservative woman being confronted with the horrors of the military dictatorship in a very intimate manner -- her own daughter, whom she thought to be legally adopted, turns out to be the “stolen” child of disappeared parents -- it represented the blindness (deliberate or not) of vast parts of the Argentine middle class regarding the horrific scenarios that were unfolding in Argentina, which then, as time went by, slowly was replaced by a decision to not accept the

situation any longer. Such an analogy made the new understanding of the past very explicit. The power of media to act as such a mirror makes them extremely suitable to analyze processes of collective memory and national identity making through different forms of media, especially art.

As Diana Taylor has convincingly reasoned concerning the process of writing (whether it is writing the scenario of a film, a novel, a newspaper article, or creating a museum), it is a “way to constitute a narrative that provides a way to reconstitute lost community” (1997: 159-160), instrumental in the remaking of social identities. Through the act of writing, an encoded version of events can be given, and the voice of the author has the power to tell his or her story. Art reflects and shapes culture, and, as Stuart Hall has noted about the role culture plays in the construction of nations and national identities, nations are not only political constructs, but also “systems of cultural representations” (1996: 2). People are not only citizens by law, they also participate in forming the idea of the nation as it is represented in their national culture. The nation and national identity are represented in the minds and memories of the members, but the idea of a specific national community becomes reality in the realm of convictions and beliefs through reifying, figurative discourses continually launched by politicians and intellectuals, and disseminated through the systems of education, media and the arts, as well as militarization (Hall 1996).

The capacity of art to portray simultaneous layers of symbolic messages and communicate by ways of analogy makes it a particularly apt vehicle for the reification of rhetoric concerning nation, memory and identity. Tzvetan Todorov -- venturing out from his familiar area of literary theory in an essay about the uses and “misuses” of memory (*Los abusos de la memoria*, 2008) -- brands memory used in such a symbolic way “exemplary memory”, a “process of analogy that makes justice possible because it generalizes from the particular. [When I] open my memory to analogy and generalization, I make of it an example and I extract a lesson from it; the past thus becomes a principle from which action in the present may be derived” (2008: 31). Todorov places this exemplary memory in opposition to an intransitive “literal memory” that lets painful segments of a group’s or individual past be preserved in their literality, remaining intransitive: unchanged it lacks symbolic references and fails to tell us anything meaningful about a nation’s dynamics. With literary memory, there is no opening of the memory to a dialogue which might subject it to debate or render it usable by future generations. In contrast, exemplary memory is a process of analogy that makes justice possible because it translates from the particular to the general (from the

individual to the collective) by making use of language and ideas commonly understood throughout the group; “an instance among others of the same category” (Todorov 1996: 256). When employing an exemplary or figurative use of events, through a practice of ascribing symbolic significance to pivotal events, persons or objects from a traumatic period, the past can be used as a representational manifestation of a more general category of atrocities, and used as a model to understand new situations with in other places and times (Todorov 2008). The exemplary use of memory is extremely instrumental when creating a narrative of past and present. By giving a meaning to experiences, events, or objects that is understood throughout the community, exemplary memory is instrumental in communicating about individual and collective memory and their interaction with national identity. Memory in this figurative form can come to represent experiences of whole groups. Media and art are excellent conveyors of such symbolic, representational examples.

A constitutive feature of memory is its selectiveness. Other than depending on ever-changing structures of power and the control over discourse within a society, collective memory also is determined by other selection processes. Todorov explains that memory, at any given moment and necessarily, is an interaction of both suppression (forgetting) and conservation. As such, memory is necessarily a selection: some features of the occurred events will be preserved, others immediately or progressively marginalized, and later disappear into oblivion. All collective memories are partial – and hide as much as they reveal. Memory, which finds connections between the sociocultural, political and private lives of a nation’s individuals, uses those connections to satisfy the needs of particular groups. (2008) What we choose to remember and how we express our memories is influenced by our politics; by what we deem important and decide to prioritize over other interests, personally and socially; what we seek to remember and how and when to remember it. Again, we come back to the interaction between the collective and the personal. Thus, individual memories are implied in collective memory construction -- verbalization, communication, and negotiation -- making collective memory a “manifestation of communicative memories” (Assmann 1995: 129). “Collective memorization” is an activity of the present, in which the past is continuously redefined, but this interaction between the past and the present is the consequence of collective agency rather than the result of historical accuracy (Bal et al. 1999: vii).

Because the question of who dominates the discourse on memory is so important for the narrative of the past, we always have to consider which group or collective is at work,

what are the interests and sentiments at stake? Robben describes how Argentines from different political groups have different ideas about exactly how unjustifiable the state's actions were. The majority is of the opinion that systematically kidnapping, torturing and killing thousands of people constituted state terrorism. On the other range of the spectrum, another group believes that the military coup was necessary to safeguard the country's democratic and catholic values (2005). These two views, and the many shades of perceptions between them are vying for the dominant position in discourse. How the period exactly will be remembered depends then on who can most successfully influence public rhetoric.

Information about a nation's narrative of the past can be found in daily means of communication like newspapers, television programs, websites and blogs, and radio; all can be used by civil society to express where they stand on the issue. But messages, opinions, and social constructions can also be integrated into more elaborate or abstract ways of communication, by encoding them in rituals, museums, monuments, films; turning them into symbols. The special characteristic of the *Nunca Más* report -- the extensive report was compounded and integrated into a narrative version -- elevated it from a document dryly summing up unmediated factual events into a more representational form of history. Any of these ways of remembering are important for a nation and can serve as excellent ways to investigate how societies remember.

2. Oppressed Civilians, Suppressed Narrative

The military dictatorship: the implementation of fear and its lasting effects

Over the past four decades, as socioeconomic, political and global conditions have changed, both the topics and strategies of national identity construction in Argentina have changed with them. Globalization, as previously argued, meant shifts in the use of history and memory. But it also brought a shift in power relations as it affected the production of goods and services while simultaneously stimulating the spread of a neoliberal ideology (Roberts 2005; Kantaris 2010; Hellinger 2011).

During the presidency of Juan Domingo Perón the phenomenon of mass movements emerged in Argentina, and mass mobilizations grew into -- and remain until this day -- a powerful political tool for traditionally marginalized groups. In the era of Perón's rule, it was mainly workers who gathered in front of the *Casa Rosada* to listen to his speeches and catch a glimpse of his popular wife Evita, and who often mobilized themselves to political ends. *Peronism* became a big and important social and political movement, to the chagrin of the conservative classes. However, after the death of Evita, the fractionalizing of the Peronist movement, and the exile of Perón, the country slid into a period of political unrest and struggles between political groups, mainly the various Peronist divisions. The return of Perón was to solve everything, but when he died not long after he had become president again, leaving behind a socially and economically unstable country in institutional chaos, the military saw it as the only prudent option to take matters into their own hands. Military interventions were no exception in Argentina; in uncertain times, when things seemed to escalate, the military often would intervene, take the reins and hand over leadership to a civil leader once a stable situation was created. This time, however, it was different. The military held on to its newly seized power, and became obsessive in its objective of creating a safe and stable environment, to reestablish an Argentina built on conservative, Catholic values and free of threatening or subversive elements. They aimed to "restore the essential values of the nation" ("Argentine Junta" 1976). It was the beginning of a cultural war, a battle over the very image of the nation (Robben 2005; Feitlowitz 1998).

Argentine citizens were subject to gross human rights violations. The way in which the military leaders fought the opponents that in their eyes were enemies of the state, who threatened their society and cultural values, had a lasting effect on a psychological level. In the effort to root out leftists, union sympathizers, peasant activists, and anyone else the regime

deemed subversive to the Catholic capitalist conservative order were abducted, tortured, and most of them eventually killed. Numbers on the subject of tortured and murdered (or disappeared) persons vary greatly depending on the source. In its report *Nunca Más*, CONADEP (the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons), documented that 8,960 citizens had disappeared from 340 clandestine detention centers (2006: 20). Human rights organizations and NGOs like the Mothers of the *Plaza de Mayo*, H.I.J.O.S. and the Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS)² estimate there are about 30,000 disappeared persons (Brysk 1994), while still larger numbers were imprisoned and tortured. The majority of the citizens abducted by the military forces were taken to secret detention centers, where they were subjected to psychological and physical torture. Torture was a methodical and sadistic practice, used not just to get information, but also to spiritually break the victims. After several months – or, in some cases, several years – of physical and mental suffering, the captives were buried in anonymous mass graves or thrown out of airplanes into the Río de la Plata, bound by hands and feet, heavily sedated but still alive so as to avoid that their bodies would be dragged in with the tide. (Robben 2005; CONADEP 2006)

Perhaps as important as numbers, is the atmosphere of fear and suspicion that was consolidated due to the methods the government used to secure its power. The state controlled public discourse, suppressed opposition and severely curtailed freedom of expression. One of the strategies the military used to control and strike fear in the population, Taylor informs us, was through random arrests and kidnappings that paralyzed people with fear precisely because it was not possible to rationalize who would be kidnapped and taken to one of the clandestine detention centers to perhaps never to be heard from again; it could happen to anyone, anytime (1999). In addition, a vast majority of the disappeared people (62% according to CONADEP) were abducted from their own home, the private sphere of life

² H.I.J.O.S. is the acronym of *Hijos por la Identidad, la Justicia, contra el Olvido y el Silencio* (Children for Identity, Justice, against Oblivion and Silence). It consists of mostly sons and daughters (but also some other family members) of persons who were killed or disappeared. The Mothers of the *Plaza de Mayo* (*Madres de Plaza de Mayo*) initially started their organization with weekly protests on *Plaza de Mayo*, the square in front of the presidential palace, in which they demanded the government let them know about the fate of their missing children. In directly addressing the government, holding them accountable and demanding action, they were some of the first civilians to defy the threat of retributions that existed for those who did not comply with the ideology of the government, and to break the silence that existed as an effect of the self-censorship civilians had been imposing upon themselves during years of state terror. Since the first protests in 1977 they grew into a large and extremely powerful non-governmental actor. The organization has splintered into different groups due to ideological differences, such as exhuming bodies for evidence and the acceptance of reparations, and they work on different aspects relating to the legacy of the dictatorship now. The Center for Legal and Social Studies, CELS, is a prestigious research organization that carries out well documented research into all sorts of legal, political and social issues.

deemed a safe haven (2006: 21). Robben poses that the intrusion of that private space added to feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. The obscurity around the subject as a consequence of the government's rhetoric -- "There is no war, there are no disappearances or abductions." -- made things even more frightening. Simultaneously, the government maintained that the subversive elements threatening Argentine society ought to be annihilated if Argentina was to become a healthy, honorable nation (2005). This double discourse is reminiscent of the US Army statement after the My Lai massacre of 1968: "There was no massacre and the bastards got what they deserved" (Cohen 2001: 103).³ The literal denial that any torture was taking place was immediately accompanied by both reinterpretations and justifications for the act.

Another disorienting component of the years of state terror was the gradually increasing sensation that everyone could be an enemy, scared into betraying others, or at least too fearful to help one another, for example when they saw people being taken away. Marguerite Feitlowitz gives an account of a woman forcefully taken away from a public bus. As the soldiers, dressed in civilian clothes, dragged her to the back of the bus by her hair, past the other passengers, one woman said softly "Not by the hair", but no one else said a word. Fearful and suspicious, none of the other passengers dared to speak up. How much exactly the passengers knew of what would await this woman as she was taken away is hard to determine, but what this example illustrates is that in addition to the loss of the home as a safe haven, public space was also manipulated by the government (Feitlowitz 1998: 173-174). Argentines conditioned themselves to be as unremarkable and unprovocative as possible. Who knew what might attract the attention (and ire) of the authorities?

Throughout the gripping *A Lexicon of Terror*, Feitlowitz provides a plethora of examples of the ways in which language and behavior were manipulated throughout the years of authoritarian rule. The work provides a comprehensive overview of the manners in which Argentine culture and society were submerged by a perverse discourse. The phrase "El silencio es salud" -- coined in 1975 by the City of Buenos Aires in a campaign to reduce

³ This scandalous episode of the Vietnam war was structured upon the same ambivalent rhetoric and media manipulation at work in the denial of state repression in Argentina: literal denial on one hand, and ideological justification of the acts on the other. Not coincidentally, the architects of these similar, seemingly schizophrenic discourses -- the leaders of the Argentine military junta and, in the US, Secretary of State Kissinger and President Nixon -- were heavily influenced by the context of the Cold War and the fear of barbaric communist world domination. Their shared goal to weed out all leftist subversives would lead them to collaborate on questions such as Operation Condor, the internationally devised campaign involving the intelligence agencies of the Latin American authoritarian regimes and the US, with the goal to exterminate their perceived enemies regardless of their geographic location. The role of the US government under the guidance of Nixon and Kissinger has been detailed in Robert Dallek's excellent *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (London: Penguin Books, 2007).

traffic noise, but interpreted in a completely new way -- became a guideline principle for many citizens. (Feitlowitz 1998: 34) Here external messages -- “Don’t get involved in the business of others, it is in your own interest that you don’t speak up or stand up for someone else.” -- influence individual behavior, which in turn again has its effect on external, societal structures. The fact that this phrase became so ubiquitously used, is illustrative of how Argentines imposed a self-censorship upon their behavior, and internalized phrases that directed them to behave as was required of them, claims Stanley Cohen (2001: 153-155). They were not perpetrators, nor victims in a direct sense, but “bystanders”, although there was no way to know with certainty if someone was an actual “bystander” or an enemy in disguise. The bystanders may not have been directly responsible for any of the violence, the mutual distrust among citizens and the bystanders’ failure to take action against the perpetrators had tremendous consequences in terms of trust and social cohesion. Not only were neighbors, coworkers and all the people in the surroundings to be distrusted because they might collaborate with the enemy, even if they did not belong to the enemy’s side, they refused to take action. Citizens felt abandoned by their fellow compatriots, their neighbors, their country. This complicates the distinctions between guilty and innocent, and right and wrong (Cohen 2001). Between the clear extremes of the enemy and the own group, there were many people residing in what Primo Levi, when speaking of divisions between victims and perpetrators in the concentration camps of World War II, has described as the *gray zone*⁴, which made it unclear whether someone was enemy or friend, traitor or ally. This added a whole new dimension to the feelings of anxiety and insecurity. The “we”, as Levi put it, lost its limits. There was not one barrier between one individual’s group and the other, but there were many, in fact there were barriers between every individual (1988).

The atomizing effect of this form of violence was enormously damaging to the social tissue and the feelings of belonging characteristic of a national, shared narrative. As they never knew who was with them or against them, citizens grew increasingly suspicious of each other. Argentines became to mistrust not only the government, but also their fellow citizens.

⁴ In his lauded essay collection about the Holocaust, *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi explains that the dualistic division in two parties (victim and perpetrator) is too simplistic and does not apply to real life conflict situations. In the case of the concentration camps during WWII, for example, there is a “hybrid class of prisoner-functionary”, prisoners who collaborated with the guards to secure their life (1988: 37). In the clandestine detention centers of the military junta, there were also the matches of the Argentine national soccer team during the 1978 world championships that the prisoners and guards watched together, the common toast on New Year’s Eve, and dinners with detainees and captors at upscale restaurants in Buenos Aires. There was also a number of detainees who were released, as they were considered “recuperated”. Ana Longoni has written an interesting review on the discussion about how to interpret the acts of captives, *Traiciones. La figura del traidor en los relatos acerca de los sobrevivientes de la represión* (Buenos Aires: Norma, 2007).

The perception of neighbors, friends or co-workers as a constant threat incited distrust among Argentines. It was harmful for the feelings of solidarity within the community and fed feelings of hostility. Apart from repression of subversive elements, citizens, and social bonds, underlines Caroline Fournet (2007), there was also repression of cultural expressions, intelligentsia, the media and, as a consequence, a whole society. Consequences of this can be observed in the struggle for the narrative of present and past today; the struggle to reach a national consensus of the past has been accompanied by manifestations of a great sense of distrust, suspicion and disinterest or even disrespect for the experiences of others.

The destruction of social bonds meant an eradication of the normal spaces in which memory is exercised, since Argentines could not make use of their conventional channels of communication and semiotic transmission, essential to articulating social (national) identity and narrative. In *Cultura transnacional y culturas populares*, María Cristina Mata et al. discuss a study conducted in Córdoba starting in 1985, two years after the end of the dictatorship, that showed that during the period of authoritarian rule, there was a lack of any “discourse about the collective sphere”, related to the lack of a space in which citizens could “act upon reality together”. As Mata et al. maintain, this illustrates that the former location for the articulation of memory in everyday life had been suppressed during this period. Life changed at a level which affected symbolic processes, with the result of the suppression of collective memory, achieved by the regime’s objective of the destruction of community (Mata et al. in García Canclini 1988: 238-239).

From 1976 through 1983, the Argentine military tried to destroy the social fabric of life. It wanted to “cure a society that had been gravely ill for decades” (Robben 2005: 179). Instead of “curing” it and ridding it of the violence that had been plaguing the country for years, the military attacked its civilians in such a way that destroyed the very foundations that make people social beings by instilling fear, suspicion and uncertainty. With the return of democracy, there was also the need for a return of social bonds and the semiotic codes that uphold them. Argentines needed to rediscover how to effectively transmit ideas and experiences, and this would prove a challenging process.

3. Documenting the “Truth”

A New Democracy and Nunca Más

After the dictatorship, struggle was far from over. Now the battle over how to deal with the past began. With the installation of a new, democratically elected president on December 10 of 1983, Argentina could start a new future. Raúl Alfonsín had an immense faith in democracy and the resilience and feelings of unity of the Argentines:

The notion that the people can be the protagonists of this definitive new beginning inspires in all of us a sense of responsibility in keeping with the effort that we undertake together today and infuses in us the strength to confront the problems that afflict our fatherland.

(Alfonsín 1983)

From the beginning of his presidency, Alfonsín was unambivalent about his intentions to install a system of human rights. He ordered the prosecution of junta and guerrilla leaders, signed international human rights treaties and, after only five days in office, he created CONADEP, the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons. The objective of this truth commission was to shine light on the perverse crimes committed by the dictatorship, by drawing on interviews and testimonies from victims. (Hayner 1994; Crenzel 2008) The bridge of Argentina’s transition toward democracy was thus supported by judicial and non-judicial pillars. The commission's final report, and the resumed version that was published in 1984 under the title *Nunca Más*, describes the different forms of arrest, torture, imprisonment and murder, and provides the reader with complementary statistical information, such as the estimates of disappeared people in different jurisdictions or the percentage of the abductions that took place in domestic areas (CONADEP 2006).

For a better understanding of the functioning of a commission such as CONADEP and its potential effects on a recovering society, I will make a brief side trip to explain the phenomenon of truth commissions in general and the one set up in Argentina in particular. A truth commission is “an official body set up to investigate a past history of violations of human rights in a particular county – which can include violations by the military or other government forces or by armed opposition forces” (Hayner 1994: 600). A truth commission attempts to paint an overall picture of human rights abuses or violations of international humanitarian law over a past period of time. It is always vested by some sort of authority, such as the executive branch of (a new) government or transnational institutions such as the UN, which offers security or protection to investigate sensitive issues, access to information

and greater impact with its report. CONADEP's investigation, for example, could count on access to all governmental resources, an extensive network of witnesses as statements were taken in Argentine embassies and consulates and exiles returned from abroad to testify, and even the armed forces were cooperative to a certain extent. (The top leaders were only "cooperative" in as far as their double discourse, which they still maintained, allowed them to.) (Speronello n.d.; Crenzel 2008)

Quests to expose the traumatic events of the past (through testimonies written up by a truth commission such as CONADEP) contribute to establishing a narrative of the past. Even if truth commissions and trials should not be viewed as some panacea, they are still important and helpful for the process of democratization and the reinforcement of justice. Official acknowledgement of the widespread abuses is important in itself. In her article on various truth and reconciliation commissions, Hayner reasons that a successful truth commission serves a cathartic role in society, assuming that truth causes reconciliation (1994). The widely accepted hypothesis that "truth contributes to reconciliation" has been partially supported by research carried out in post-conflict societies, such as Peru, Rwanda or South Africa. Gibson, for example, aimed to gauge the reconciliatory effect of the truth commission in South-Africa through measuring the acceptance of the narrative and interpretation of the apartheid era that was created by the South-African truth and reconciliation commission on an individual level. He concluded that "under some conditions, for some groups" (2007: 258) truth contributes to reconciliation. Nonetheless, no matter how strong a truth commission's positive effect may be on resolving immediate hostile feelings present within a society, here a problem presents itself that is tied to the central themes of this paper and illustrates the importance of focusing on collective memory rather than trials, transitional justice or official discourse when seeking to understand the effects of collective traumatic experiences on a nation. Attempting to measure the reconciliatory effect of an official narrative of the past on society ignores the contestation through which that narrative came to be. This is precisely what the struggle for collective memory is all about. The past never ceases to be a point of contention in the sense that there will always be debate about the subjective experiences of individuals and groups, how to shape a national narrative of the past, and how memories of events are embedded in the national identity. Since my focus lies with *how* the past is remembered and reproduced culturally, the question whether Argentines can "overcome" their shared past is irrelevant, as I argue that there is no way to leave the past in the past. Sentiments of bitterness and hostility so fresh immediately after conflict can be mellowed in the truth and reconciliation process,

until there is a moment where one could claim that traumatic events of the past no longer lead to deep, possibly violent, divisions in society. The positive correlation between truth and reconciliation, as Hayner (2004) and Gibson (2007) have brought forward, is problematic, because of the ambiguity of one of the essential components of this claim, “truth”. That Hayner and Gibson glance over this might be due to their arguments being made for a different purpose; they studied reconciliation processes from the arenas of human rights and conflict studies. Nevertheless, the oversimplification of “truth” is debatable. A problem with truth commissions is exactly that they are often depicted as the unambiguous and complete truth, to be subsequently adopted by government officials and accepted as the official narrative. Different views of the story are not part of the official History, despite all those different experiences and views and memories adding to a society and thus also affecting interaction and social constructions within a society.

I will not go further into this problematic use of “truth” for reconciliation, because although I do not deny that the judicial and cathartic functions of truth commissions are valuable for post-conflict societies, they are not of interest to me here, since my focus lies elsewhere. I focus instead on the political and social environment controlling the establishment and functioning of such commissions, and how they contribute to national identity and collective memory.

Rather than focusing on trying to leave the past behind, which Huyssen (2003) deems a defunct memory coping mechanism, a truth commission should expect to stimulate a collective memory, a narrative of the past created by contestation and debate through which a reconfigured, reformatted society will carry on in its redefined shape. Atrocities cannot be forgotten, and that is not what a truth commission should aim for. It is not its objective to erase history or instruct people to push painful experiences to some far corner of their mind, where eventually darkness will cover them. In the same fashion, a truth commission should not be a tool to establish a monolithic truth and suppress other narratives.

What does it mean then, when Van Druenen states that CONADEP “became a benchmark of truth” in its chronicling of the dictatorship? (2010: 62) Organizations that originally opposed CONADEP, because they thought its mandate’s reach was not extensive enough, such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, ultimately collaborated with the truth commission on an individual basis. The eventual contribution of numerous human rights organizations had a positive effect on the quality of the work the commission could carry out, and made *Nunca Más* into a very well documented account. However, the report was not as

polychromatic as could have been expected with the contributions of so many different organizations. *Nunca Más* conveyed a master narrative that “simultaneously reformulated and implemented visions and interpretations of the past that were circulating in society at the time” (Van Drunen 2010: 78-79). According to this narrative, the years of authoritarian oppression were understood as the confrontation between two groups: the leftist, revolutionary guerrillas and the military forces, while it was conceded that the greatest responsibility for the violence lay with the military, because they could employ the intelligence, infrastructure and networks of the state (although the disparity in the ability to impose terror was not stressed that emphatically). Van Drunen (2010) and Crenzel (2008) both argue that this narrative framework, dubbed the *teoría de los dos demonios* (theory of the two devils) acquitted the rest of society of any complicity (Cohen’s so-called “bystanders”) and understated the power of the military repression, which outweighed the reach of the harm inflicted by the guerrilla movements.

CONADEP and *Nunca Más* were established with the principal aim to obtain insights and determine a “truth” about the political violence and state terror. When *Nunca Más* was published, the Mothers rejected it, understanding it as an attempt to impose the idea that the disappeared are dead and that that implied the end of the story. Even though many other parties, amongst which human rights organizations and perpetrators, rejected its claim of universal truth, the majority of Argentines accepted *Nunca Más*’ narrative. The report was presented to the public in July 1984, and officially handed over to president Alfonsín in September. From the start, it sold extremely well: on the first day of its release, the first edition (of 40,000 copies) sold out, and within eight weeks 150,000 more copies of it were sold (Crenzel 2008). The democratic government actively promoted it within a rhetoric geared towards convincing the public that times of terror, oppression and violence were over for good: Argentines now lived in a democracy and human rights would be respected from now on. The state obviously had more leverage than the divided civil society groups. CONADEP was a body invested by governmental authority and legitimacy, and the state thus held a position of privilege in the truth making process that was part of the CONADEP project.

For Foucault, “[t]ruth is very closely related to systems of power, and “truth” is produced and sustained by power” (1980: 133). Dominant narratives of the past and the stories that concretize these structures reflect the hegemonic political agendas and ideologies of the day. For this reason, discussions of memory are very difficult to separate from those of power. Even seemingly mundane aspects of daily life, such as the commemorative street signs



Picture 2. A sign commemorating the disappearance of Gerardo Strejilevich, a physics student and member of the Peronist youth movement, at the place where he used to live. It was placed in 2008.

figuring in Picture 2 and 3, are tied up in questions of power. The goal of the different actors is to establish their narrative of the past, and this can be done through many channels: journalism, language, films, literature, museums, and murals are but a few cultural and symbolic conveyors used to form an image of the past and shape individual and collective identities.

Cultural products such as the *Nunca Más* report, are a tool of the powerful, the marginal, and all those degradations that lie in between, because while culture is used to support and express power, it is also used in challenges to power (Wodak et al. 1999). When discussing the process through which *Nunca Más* came into being and conquered its place in Argentina's imaginary, it is imperative to remind ourselves that, in trying to define their national history and identity, various actors question dominant narratives of the past and articulate new ones, to challenge authority and rally support from others. Perpetrators -- former military leaders, policemen, priests who all were involved in torture, kidnappings, disappearances and the stealing of babies -- who tried to rally support for their amnesty and escape accountability attempted to discredit certain parts of the report, for example, and



Picture 3. A plaque “honoring the casualties of the police repression of the popular rebellion of December 20, 2001”, in the middle of Plaza de Mayo.

lobbied for the removal of a list with names of perpetrators from the draft of *Nunca Más* before it would get published (Van Drunen 2010).

After “truth” has been established through the efforts of a truth commission, the state would have the opportunity to implement this vision of the truth (by executing the advantaged position it has when creating discourse). In the case of Argentina, the state showed some restraint in applying this “truth”: it was, for example, used to judicial ends, since parts of the report served as evidence during the trials of former military leaders; and when, in the 1990s, *Nunca Más* was adopted into the curriculum of public schools. There was also much space for debate and challenge of the narrative. Countless civil groups have contributed to report and there have been opportunities for NGOs to collaborate in the creation of spaces of memory in later years.

The government may have given opportunity to other actors to incorporate their views on history and memorialization into the narrative, but on the other hand, the narrative as it was established by *Nunca Más* remains dominant (not necessarily because it is not enough contested) and has had far reaching social and political consequences. Its writers were not shy to describe the period of military rule as “the greatest tragedy of our history, and the most

savage” (2006: i). The role of the commission’s president Ernesto Sabato, an acclaimed Argentine author, has been seminal to the symbolic value of the work, for example shown in metaphorically describing detainees’ experiences as hell, all the more saillant when considering the military’s Catholic discourse. The rhetoric employed in the report deconstructed the military discourse, but it also created the illusion that the dictatorship was an historical exception. Human rights violations were acknowledged, but the background of the conditions that the conflict and the violations originated in was ignored. No attention was given to what causes had led to the violence. The new democracy was presented as completely different from past administrations and free of all woes that had plagued Argentina in the previous decades. However, as will be shown in Chapter 4, the return of Argentine democracy did not mean a radical break with the past; there were many continuities in terms of political processes, social conditions and players in the political field, which would become increasingly obvious in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s.

At the level of state institutions, the first half of the 1990s was a low point in initiatives related to accountability and memory. After the implementation of amnesty laws that blocked the judiciary road of holding perpetrators accountable for the crimes they committed, human rights organizations now sought alternative means of ending impunity. The focus on memory became even stronger, and memory was employed in new roles. As the first years of democracy flew by and the wounds of the dictatorship lost their stinging freshness, the struggle for truth and the “construction and transmission of a memory of the military dictatorship became increasingly important” (Van Drunen 2010: 110). New generations that had no first-hand experience of the dictatorship made it important for human rights organization to convey their experiences the best they could. In the argument of the human rights organizations that memory should not be disconnected from the present and future, we see a reflection of the theories put forward by Huyssen, Moraña and Todorov, that memory is not located in the past, but a dynamic force of that continuously redefines the present. The discussion around *Nunca Más* now centered on which of its elements could be used to highlight parts that would underscore the purposes of the human rights organizations.

The debate at the societal level started linking the demands to settle accounts with the past to the founding principles of democratic institutions, eventually turning into a debate on democracy. What was democracy? Was Argentina a democracy? How could real democracy be achieved? Some were of the opinion that there had not been that much of a break with the military regime, while others saw a clear discontinuation in the democracy. The parties could

not reach consensus when trying to answer these and similar questions, but they did agree on the wish for a more inclusive and participatory democracy and a conception of human rights that also addressed social and economic rights. Not much came from the envisioned changes, and this ultimately led to another traumatic period with explosive culmination, this time of a more socioeconomic character. A detailed account of this will be given in Chapter 4 (Crenzel 2008; Van Drunen 2010).

Even throughout the 1990s and 2000s, *Nunca Más* conserved its privileged position as the legitimate, “true” interpretation of the period of the military dictatorship, while at the same, the document itself was ascribed multiple redefinitions of meaning. The memories of Argentines remained extremely diverse. Van Drunen shows us that for some Argentines, 1976-1983 was a period in which military forces executed state terrorism, systematically abducting, torturing and killing thousands of people. Some of their compatriots feel repugnance concerning all socialist movements and believe that the military coup was necessary to safeguard the country's democratic and catholic values (2010). In an example by Robert, a blogger posts pictures of a Ford Falcon, an icon of the military abductions during the dictatorship, accompanied by the phrase “*Mantenga limpia Buenos Aires*” (“Keep Buenos Aires clean”), hinting that the current federal and city governments are led by subversives and the military has not finished its job of cleaning society of sick elements (Robert 2005). The former members of the leftist guerrilla organizations still have a very romantic narrative on their actions and continue to maintain that the only recourse to bring about progressive change during the 1960s and 1970s was violence. Many human rights organizations involved in the compilation of *Nunca Más* or in other projects of memory making, such as the ESMA, have diverging views on the past and push the exclusive dominance of their own version of history (Cohen 2001; Van Drunen 2010).

Other reasonings drive the actions and discourse of former perpetrators. As explained in Chapter 2, the regime upheld a double discourse in which it denied responsibility for atrocities while at the same time maintaining the abstruse discourse about the dangers posed by subversives. The junta leaders accepted only a fuzzy notion of responsibility. The same stubborn tendencies can be observed in the dictatorship's victims, even though among them the perceptions of history vary greatly. Organizations such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo were not always willing to cooperate with CONADEP because of differing ideas about the past and present. Very tenacious about their image of the Argentine nation, they did not

want to show any other version of history but their own. (Vezzetti 2002; Crenzel 2008; Van Drunen 2010)

It can be concluded then that there is no such a thing as a single collective Argentine memory regarding the authoritarian past (or any other period, for that matter), no straightforward narrative and interpretation of the past shared throughout society. The analytical challenges that collective memory and traumatic history pose cannot be addressed in a linear and univocal ways. Both the ambivalent character of memories and their function as subjective processes rooted in experiences and in symbolic markers means that they are perfectly conveyed through representational memory in art and media. In *Nunca Más* we can observe the “literal” recall of events, eventually being elevated to a more representative, transformative form of memory. The report’s notably narrative style has been lauded and credited for the impact of the report. Undoubtedly, the hand of a great author like Sabato was of great importance in setting up the narrative and integrating the facts into an eloquently written piece of work, rather than merely a dry statistical inventory of testimonial facts. With the collapse of authoritarian regimes across Latin America, CONADEP and *Nunca Más* were analyzed by different states and human rights organizations as vehicles to convey and expose the political violence experienced from the 1970s through the 1990s. Truth commissions were established throughout the region with the principal aim to uncover and acknowledge the horrors of times of political violence and state terror, and according to Crenzel -- regardless of whether these inquiries into the past were followed by judicial action, or if their reports proposed other narrative and explicatory strategies -- the Argentine *Nunca Más* report was an inevitable model for all (2008).

Nunca Más has become a symbol of reference through the many uses Argentines have found for it. The document itself has been ascribed numerous new meanings and can be used to define the past and present in ways (instrumental) desired by any particular actors. Herein lie both the strength and the problems of the iconic document. The canonical character it has acquired and the emblematic memory it proposes have made its reading of political violence and the forced disappearances of the period of the military dictatorship the prevailing interpretation. Its key narrative and interpretations have emerged in judicial trials, public discourse, political debate and in mainstream cultural productions. However, disputes about the contents and meaning of the report between the legislative branch, the armed forces, consecutive governments and political and human rights organizations have shown that *Nunca Más*’ rendition of the past is not an unambiguous one. In the struggle over a memorial

narrative, different groups of civil society, as well as the state, have exposed their own readings about the events of 1976-1983. Furthermore, CONADEP's unsubstantiated insistence on a political and socioeconomic break with the past proved damaging in later years. In the following chapters we will see how another traumatic period in which the state failed to secure the rights and safety of Argentine citizens has led to a more vociferous and empowered society that has carved out a powerful role in the political landscape and obtained more control to define its identity.

4. A Different Kind of Oppression

Menem's Neoliberalism and the Economic and Social Crisis

In the 1990s, the erosion of military dictatorships and restoration of democratic governments in Latin America coincided with a series of momentous political changes around the world: the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the end of apartheid in South Africa, and the increasing hegemony of post-modernist and neoliberal political and social realities under the aegis of the theory espoused in the Washington Consensus. This theory held that unregulated free markets reflected the true nature of collective human economic behavior and were the way to ensure increasing economic prosperity and political stability in a fully integrated global economy (Hellinger 2011).

As is argued in Rotker's seminal volume on the new social reality and identity of Latin America's urban denizens, *Citizens of Fear*, changing dimensions and consequences of the social experience have led to new national identities, recreated and maintained under new postmodern structures. Paradigmatic changes in human society, from political and economic changes to major technological innovations, are reflected in postmodern identities (Rotker 2002). This, too, rings true for Argentina, a country where the profound division between state and society has had a long history, but was exacerbated by imperialist globalization.

The military dictatorship of 1976-1983 forcefully shifted Argentina from a social and economic paradigm of statism and national modernization to the neoliberal paradigm of postmodern, globalized market economics. Neoliberal policies and the eventual economic meltdown and social explosion that would follow, made Argentina plunge into a new national crisis that subsequently led to a new episode of schizophrenia. Every aspect of Argentine life was affected: education, health, transportation, employment, but primarily, it was their social cohesion and identity that suffered the most.

The inauguration of Alfonsín in December 1983 might have meant the discontinuation of oppressive political policies; it was much more difficult to immediately set course for an economic route different from the disastrous financial policies he had also inherited. Essentially, there had not really been a break with former political practices. It was believed that it was important that truth, justice and memory were promoted and that profound problems of political structures, corruption and social and economic divisions that had contributed to the military coup and repression were addressed with the return of democracy, but no substantial action was taken. Old problems that had plagued Argentina (economic

instability, abuse of power, disproportionately violent police interventions, clientelism, corruption) before, emerged again (Crenzel 2008; Hellinger 2011). Only a few years after the end of the dictatorship ended, Alfonsín had to resign amidst soaring inflation and social unrest. His successor, Carlos Menem, had run his campaign on a platform of economic populism in with raising income for workers as one of the spearheads. But he inherited hyperinflation and social upheaval from his predecessor, and Argentina was under pressure from the IMF and allies to implement comprehensive economic reforms. His policy took a radical turn for the right, in particular when he appointed Domingo Cavallo as Minister of Economy. Menem's election coincided with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and a neoliberal policy seemed the solution that would lead Argentina to a bright new future as an important player in the new globalized capitalist order with the international financial institutions -- and thus, western capitalist nations, the 'victors' of the Cold War -- on his side. As Hellinger explains, this neoliberal 'revolution' was based on the premise that the magic of the free market would result in a better (re)distribution of resources than a development model managed by the state. In the early years of the Menem administration, Argentina became the lighting example of successful neoliberal reforms led by the ideology of the Washington Consensus (Hellinger 2011). Cavallo designed a set of market oriented, neoliberal reforms, envisioned to inhibit inflation and stabilize the economy and the value of the Argentine peso. These structural reforms included the privatization of state-owned companies, reduction of state-related employment, administrative decentralization, deregulation of economic activities, and opening up the domestic market to foreign trade and investment (Carranza 2005). It meant a sudden exposure to the risks and effects of globalization, such as cheap import goods and privatizations, as institutions that had long isolated Argentine workers and businesses from the global economy, disappeared. More than 200 companies owned by the state, as well as social security programs, were privatized. But the *pièce de résistance* of the reforms was the *Ley de convertibilidad* (Law of Convertibility), that pegged the value of the Argentina peso to that of the US dollar with a 1:1 ratio.

The short term effects were predominantly positive. Economic growth rates between 1991 and 1994 were high, monetary stability kept inflation under 10%, the standard of living for the average Argentine citizen improved, and imported products became cheaper and more easily available. But it did not take long before the first cracks in the shiny model became visible. The anticipated trickle-down effect failed to materialize. The ubiquitous presence of inexpensive import products forced local producers to shut down their businesses. The



Picture 4. Protesters on their way to Plaza de Mayo, carrying signs saying “Ayer desaparecidos, hoy excluidos” (“Disappeared yesterday, excluded today”).

privatizations that were expected to attract high investments and innovation were surrounded by accusations of corruption, and the monopolies they created, now mostly in the hands of foreign investors, were not necessarily more efficient than the former state companies. Thousands of employees lost their jobs, and after 1994 an ever growing group of the workers and parts of the middle class witnessed their income shrink or disappear (the rate of unemployment in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires oscillated around 30% in 1995) (Villalón 2007). Menem’s promise to transform Argentina into a modern consumerist society by repeating the liberal economic model of the 19th century and attracting of foreign investments did not stand up to the new relations in the age of (the transnational politics of) globalization.

Apart from his catastrophic economic policies, Menem also failed to deliver in the human rights area. He was a big advocate of what he called reconciliation, but what many Argentines considered to be synonymous with oblivion and amnesia. When Menem assumed the presidency in 1989, several repressors were in jail, including General Rafael Videla and Admiral Emilio Massera, who had been sentenced to life in prison. In 1990 Menem granted an executive pardon, freeing the former repressors. It was an act Menem deemed “necessary

for the healing of Argentina” (Feitlowitz 1998: 87). In human rights circles, Menem is blamed for imposing reconciliation in the form of societal amnesia. In another pro-oblivion, pro-reconciliation move, Menem announced plans to demolish the ESMA, the building most synonymous with the horror of the military period, and one of the most contentious sites following the dictatorship. This announcement earned Menem the title of “bulldozer of memory”. The citizens, growing weary of repeatedly being misled, mistreated and disappointed by their leaders, lost even more trust in the state (Villalón 2007; Crenzel 2008).

The far-reaching policies of the neoliberal program were not strongly opposed by the traditional political parties, and the unions, having lost a significant part of their membership because of the high unemployment rate, had lost their leverage. Opposition to Menem would turn out to emerge from another corner: the citizens. His policies eventually led to political protests organized in new ways. The first of these popular uprisings started in December 1993, when riots broke out in La Rioja (Menem’s home province) and Santiago del Estero. The following years, everywhere in the country new protest movements would surface: *piqueteros*, a form of protests using road blocks; *cacerolazos*, where demonstrators add intensity to their demands by banging on pots and pans (*cacerola* is the Spanish word for pan); and *escraches*; campaigns of public condemnation through demonstrations.⁵ These new forms of protest resulted in a continuous series of strikes and protests from March through October 1997 (Kaiser 2002). The situation was exacerbated by the devaluation of the Brazilian real in 1999, which had a disastrous effect on the Argentine economy and drove the country into a recession. A logical step would have been to devalue the peso, but both the IMF as well as the Menem’s administration insisted on maintaining the tie between the dollar and the peso. The loss of confidence among investors and citizens resulted in massive flight of national and foreign capital; the country was in free fall. The financial, political and social nadir was reached shortly after a run on the banks in November 2001 led Cavallo to instate a limit of the daily withdrawal amount, known as the *corralito*. Mass protest in the streets of Buenos Aires, by people from all across the social cutting board, accompanied the fall of government, and none of the presidents that rapidly succeeded one another could revert the

⁵ Deriving from the word *escrachar*, meaning “to uncover”. *Escraches* are a form of public protest developed in Argentina during the 1990s by H.I.J.O.S., the organization founded by children of people who disappeared during the dictatorship. Although they were originally aimed at public condemnation and the exposure of the identities of hundreds of torturers and assassins, they are now used for individuals accused of all sorts of reproachable behavior. Politicians that implement policies with disastrous social, economic or safety effects (or fail to implement policies that could prevent problems) have increasingly been targeted.

downward spiral. Protests brought down the ineffective president Fernando de la Rúa (Carranza 2005; Villalón 2007).

Democracy has survived, but Argentina remains deeply marked by the crisis, yet another mark on the strenuous state-society relationship in Argentina. Unemployment, income polarization, monetary and financial instability that, combined with the rollback of the state, generated a growing heterogeneous mass of unemployed people without institutional protection from either the state, the unions, or other organizations. But the failure of the political establishment to reform the state by stripping it of perverse political practices such as clientelism, corruption, patrimonialism was just as important to the protesters. Besides employment and welfare benefits, one of the central demands of the protesters was an end to the public policies and perverse political practices that repressed them. Various authors point out that one of the principal issues at stake during the protests of 2001 remains an object of contention today: the crisis of representation. (Zibechi 2004; Carranza 2005, Villalón 2007; Hellinger 2011)

Kaiser (2002) underscores that illustrative of the existence of a profound crisis of legitimacy and democratic representation was also the protesters' repetitive chant: "*Qué se vayan todos!*" ("Kick everyone out!", referring to the political establishment). Many citizens who had somewhat restored their faith in government in the years after authoritarian rule, once again had lost their trust completely. Wary of the government and state institutions, they wanted to take matters into their own hands, and be in control of their country and of their situation. Once again, Argentine citizens and their government were pitted against each other. The increasingly damaging economic conditions and the unsatisfactory political situation fostered dissatisfaction and fed citizens' readiness to voice their demands. Having lost faith in the ability of representative democracy to solve their problems of survival and realizing that their elected representatives had absolutely no plans for them, the unemployed organized themselves not only to protest but also to attend to their basic human needs at the neighborhood and factory level. The protest was "as much about the material living conditions as an individual and the collective quest for recognition and respect of rights" (Carranza 2005: 13).

However, between the first decade after the military dictatorship and the decade following the economic default, citizens have carved out more possibilities to influence the narrative. Since 1993, the *escraches*, *puebladas*, *piquetes en cacerolazos* have grown to be a powerful and permanent social and political phenomenon. Citizens have not only used them

as tools to exercise political power -- e.g. to successfully demand the ousting of politicians or the implementation of social programs -- but also to redetermine their role as citizens and renegotiate power relations and the control over discourse. They have become a permanent actor in the political landscape, lending agency to (marginalized) civilians and giving them a voice in the cacophony of the national identity debate (Kaiser 2002; Villalón 2007). *Escraches* are widely used to expose the identities of torturers benefiting from amnesty laws., and were the trademark of H.I.J.O.S.'s politics of memory in the 1990s. Marchers go the neighborhoods where former perpetrators live, inform the neighbors in the surrounding area about the atrocities the perpetrators committed by handing out flyers, walking the streets holding signs, banging drums, by chanting phrases such as "*Alerta, Alerta, Alerta los vecinos, que al lado de su casa está viviendo un asesino*" ("Alert! Alert! Alert all neighbors, there's an assassin living next door to you!") (2002: 499) The demonstrations end in front of the perpetrator's home with speeches and music. Usually, the home is then marked by red paint (symbolizing blood) and slogans on the walls. As a communication strategy, *escraches* present a new and dynamic twist in the struggle over narrative. As Kaiser aptly states: "Their way of bringing back the past into the public sphere compels society to face specific effects of the failure to administer justice and to define its policy toward the original human rights violations as well as within ongoing struggles for accountability" (2002: 500).

Kaiser argues we need to consider *escraches* both in the context of the struggle for democratization and the struggle for memory. Battles concerning a narrative of the past take place in a number of cultural realms and different forms of media that include films, literature, testimonies, museums, memorials, or demonstrations. *Escraches*, part of the latter, have become *lieux de mémoire*, to borrow from Pierre Nora (1996: xvii). *Escraches* contest denial and ignorance by reminding their fellow Argentines of the *desaparecidos* through the visible presence of their children. In short, they "challenge discourses that encourage artificial and premature reconciliation and disregard the equally necessary realities of truth and justice" (Kaiser 2002: 505).

Understanding the various meanings given to citizenship within a framework of the nation in Argentina is problematic considering divisions along class lines. The middle class may have suffered a blow and been reduced, but it has by no means been wiped out and the class divisions that have plagued Argentine society for so long, especially since the demise of Peronism, remain and have been exacerbated by the new economics. Spatial segregation by social class as defined in Rotker (2002), the results of land markets and social discrimination,

has promoted social and political polarization and led to an abyss between different groups, of which has their respective idea of the past, which means the proliferation of national narratives. Nonetheless, discursive strategies and artistic devices have been employed convincingly to construct national sameness and uniqueness on the one hand, and the plight of the marginalized or dispossessed had become, in some way, internalized as part of current Argentine reality and an issue that needs to be addressed, rather than dismissed as a problem of just the poor. An explanation could be that, according to Bourdieu, as soon as it is elevated to an imaginary collective level, both the construction of sameness and the construction of difference violate pluralistic and democratic variety and multiplicity by internal homogenization (1990).

The emancipatory trend observed after the economic implosion means that a great number of Argentines, many previously marginalized, have found ways to organize themselves, challenge the legitimacy of political leaders, and articulate their outlooks. After the years of neoliberal policies and the economic default, in which major parts of Argentine society were not only denied socioeconomic rights but the state failed to comply in building robust, lasting and transparent institutions and implement structural changes, Argentines started to organize themselves and increased the number and intensity of claims to their social, economic and civil and rights. Foreign currents from and international influx of ideas and capital, and new means of communication brought by globalization also were a stimulating factor. The contestation of their current circumstances also enhanced their clout in the debate of issues of the dictatorship, which they find are linked to the problems that plague Argentina today. Many groups believe that inequality and socioeconomic domination in the present are a different incarnation of the dictatorial past (Villalón 2007).

The recent past is thus a central part of the present. Under the new post-modern structures, new national identities are created, shaped by different dimensions of social, economic, political and cultural experience. During protests, any protests, regardless of the topic at stake, many demonstrators tote Argentine flags, as if to make the claim to the nation's narrative even stronger. This encompasses the proposal national identity should liberate and empower people, not suppress them. The changed political landscape meant that groups that were previously excluded from control over public discourse now, too, have channels to exert their influence. The following statement from De Cillia et al. can explain the political importance of the relationship between control over narrative and national identity:

the identity narrative channels political emotions so that they can fuel efforts to modify a balance of power; it transforms the perceptions of the past and of the present; it changes the organization of human groups and creates new ones; it alters cultures by emphasizing certain traits and skewing their meanings and logic. The identity narrative brings forth a new interpretation of the world in order to modify it (1999: 156).

In other words, a narrative of national identity can be used to political and social ends. Whoever can exert control over the direction of new discourse about national identity can pronounce their vision of the nation's future and employ such rhetoric in order to achieve its political and social goals.

The plurality of newly empowered actors who now hold brushes to make their addition to the portrait of the nation, make that national identity perhaps is a more democratically contested one, and collective memory, more than ever, is used as a political tool. The more possibilities different groups and individuals have to chime in on the story of the past, the richer, more dimensional (and more complex) the national narrative becomes. The nation's portrait ever more colorful, with more detailed strokes.

The meaning of the nation is contained in stories that are told about the nation, in memories which link its present to its past and in the perceptions of it that are constructed. As demonstrated, myth-making and the construction of a collective, agreed upon image of the nation's collective history are then very significant processes in the creation of a national identity, and the media are especially suitable canals for the production and reproduction of narratives. Argentines have given meaning to the recent traumatic events using different strategies, narratives and frames over time. Both the military dictatorship and the far from smooth transformation to a post-modernist, globalized country have made their cultural, sociopolitical and economic mark on today's Argentine society.

5. Ambiguity on the Screen

The Representation of Argentina's Past and Present in Los rubios

The new forms of popular mobilizations are one way in which new experiences of nation, identity and the profound division between the state and Argentine civil society have become evident. Many striking examples can also be found in media and cultural expressions. The media have become the leading factor in shifting contemporary social processes. As Beatriz Sarlo claims, postmodern reality is characterized by a constant simulation of (historical) events; people live through experiences that emerge from exposure to representations of occurrences. Both present and past are rendered and lived through films, TV series, literature, newspapers. The media have come to wholly encompass reality at the turn of this century (2005).

Media accounts of the past and present give the author the freedom to represent notions about past or present reality as he experiences it, and are, as such, useful to get an inside grasp of the perceptions of Argentines of their nation and their own place in it. Filmmakers have created narratives whose style and content reflect both the disorientating effects of dictatorial rule, globalization, and the improvised efforts of the citizens to make a living in times of increasing uncertainty. The artistic context gives them the opportunity to use symbols and representations as they see necessary, for, as Van Alphen has argued, it is art that gives them that agency. Subsequently, the power of the filmmaker to define his own narrative implies the power to influence the viewer's ideas about reality, since "art is not only the object of framing [...] but it also functions, in turn, as a frame for cultural thought" (Van Alphen 2005: 194).

This characteristic of art is what makes it a perfect conveyor of the exemplary, representational memory as defined by Todorov that was spoken of earlier. Films such as *Últimas imágenes del naufragio*, *Mundo Grúa*, and *Los rubios* all express post-authoritarian Argentine realities and are exemplary of the struggle with the legacy of the dictatorship and the forceful globalization and how to fit this into the shared narrative of Argentina as a nation. This makes them suitable for analysis of how their messages and the frames described by Van Alphen convey realities.

Comparing *Los rubios* to the creation process and reception of *Nunca Más* reveals the extent to which the political, cultural and social reality of the 1980s has disappeared under the effects of globalization and neoliberal economics and has given rise to a new world that Albertina Carri, the director of *Los rubios*, inhabits and which informs the style and content of

her film. The film, which came out in 2003 and was directed and co-written by Carri, can be seen as a semi-documentary. It documents Carri's search for answers about the disappearance of her parents, who were political activists during the military dictatorship. Her search leads her to the house she lived with her parents as a child. She conducts interviews with the old neighbors in the hope to get more insights into what happened to her parents, but also about the life she lived with them: what her youth was like, if their recollections pair up with her own memories. The questions central to the film, "Who were my parents?"; "Is the memory of them just an image created after the desires of those who remember them?"; "How did my parents disappear?" give Carri the opportunity to show how much of the past is based upon (false) recollections and the way we (wish to) think of the past now, in the present. One of the neighbors maintains she is absolutely certain that the members of Carri's family were all blond, and this statement -- which is not corroborated, neither rejected, at the end of the film -- functions to illustrate how indeterminate "truth" can be. It helps Carri explain why she rejects an idea of a monolithic, unequivocal narrative regarding the past.

An outstanding feature of the films made after the military dictatorship and the economic default is their choice not to incorporate grand social narratives, which is exemplified by the lack of a voice over or explanatory monologues. Kantaris argues that this is typical of the Argentine filmmakers' vision of Argentina in the globalized era (2010: 31-35). Explanations of the state of the world and programs for its improvement are no longer available; all that cinema can do is attempt to record the life that passes before the camera, its truth lying in what it cannot see or say, rather than anything more positive. And yet the power of the narrative remains, the fascination of the imagery compels; this vision without vision somehow seems a more truthful picture of the world as we have come to experience it than earlier styles, genres and forms (Kantaris 2010). This provides a strong contrast with the films made in the period right after the dictatorship, in the period *Nunca Más* was published. Filmmakers in that era expressed the wish to produce a cinema that brought people consciousness, defined national identity, was anti-colonial and anti-imperialist; an authentic, pro-people cinema: "Our purpose is to create a new person, a new society, a new history and a new cinema." (Birri qtd. in Foster 1983: 467). There are clear correspondences between the position from which Birri is writing -- his desire for a thorough sociocultural revolution -- and the process of redemocratization in Argentina. Not in the socialist sense underlying Birri's words, but in the sense of the need to reconstruct Argentine society and its culture along meaningfully democratic lines, and the duty of filmmakers (and other artists) to offer cultural

productions that would contribute to the new social and historical consciousness of “never again” were determining factors in the cinematographic sphere in the 1980s. Filmmaking in Argentina in the post-dictatorship period demonstrated a more pronounced break with the past than did other forms of cultural production. Films, along with television, because of the large capital investment needed for production and distribution and their enormous public visibility, were subject to severe restrictions during authoritarian rule. Film production adhered mostly to the Hollywood platform -- or at least, films were produced that could not pose a threat to the regime. Thus the filmmaking that gathered momentum in Argentina after the return to democracy constituted a newly defined cultural component. In this sense, film production was closely coterminous with the process of redemocratization.

In the following decades this sense of urgency ebbed away, filmmakers no longer necessarily felt the need to promote historical and social integration with their products. Then came the economic collapse of 2001, which compounded the trauma of the dictatorship suffered by Argentine society. This double trauma has created its own crisis of representation since it is of the essence of trauma that it cannot be narrated, and thus it renders subjectivity beyond the reach of the excluded. Albertina Carri tried to move beyond this with her film *Los rubios* (The Blonds; 2003), a film that is both historical fact and fiction, by letting different Argentines literally pronounce their trauma. By “speaking of the unspeakable” (Robben 2005: 231), she attempted an important step in the ever-evolving process of recovery from the trauma of political genocide and in the dialogue about social justice that followed in its wake. The film goes beyond conventional ways in which the sons and daughters of the victims of political genocide -- Carri herself is the daughter of political activists that disappeared during the dictatorship -- can talk about their memories.

The first wave of post-dictatorship films, which had releases in the first years of democracy, tended to address society’s confrontation with the military secrets, pain, and shame of the dictatorship. An example is *La historia oficial* (Puenzo 1985), in which an upper-middle-class housewife discovers the horrors woven into the fabric of her very own life when she finds out that her adopted daughter was actually taken from her parents, who were victims of the state repression. The second wave of films, which began to appear in the 1990s, is concerned with the victims of the dictatorship (such as torture survivors and their families). *Garage Olimpo*, relating the ordeal of detainees in a clandestine detention center, is a prominent example. The third wave, from the late 1990s to the present, consists of the documentary perspective of the children of the disappeared (Vezzetti 2002; Sarlo 2005). *Los*

rubios can be described as such a dictatorship documentary from the “third wave”, as depicting a daughter’s search for her identity through the remains and fragments of her parents’ writings and photos, testimonies of surviving friends, and forensic science. But the narrative and concept of the film are not that straightforward. Carri, as many other filmmakers of her generation, has moved away from the theme of justice that characterized the earlier waves of post-dictatorship productions. Instead, she focuses on historicizing memory itself. As a result her film poses as a critique to the collective memory construction in her nation and seeks to act as a corrective. She highlights the interaction between individual and collective memory as explained by Halbwachs. But she seems to indicate that the individual memory Halbwachs deemed so essential to the existence of collective memory is fragile and suffers under the weight of collective memory. In Carri’s world, individual memory should not be subordinate to collective memory, and she refuses to use the grand narratives -- envisionings of society based on ostentatious one-dimensional truths that should apply to everyone -- previous filmmakers used. This is defining for filmmakers of her period, and can be traced back to the post-crisis circumstances that have empowered other groups to add to the narrative regarding memory, engendering a more cautious and ambiguous approach of collective memory. The collective version of memory has become less uniform and more questioned by society as it was before the 2001 economic default and crisis of political representation brought in its wake the emancipation of numerous formerly excluded and "voiceless" groups. As chronicled by Emilio Crenzel and discussed in Chapters 2 and 4, the recent growth of previously unheard (or unspoken) contributions to the collective memory was also observed in the multiplicity of diverging ideas regarding *Nunca Más*’ contents and its meaning for society. Diverging opinions of the report were more limited in the 1980s than they are now, or at least, less different voices were heard. That such a well-known book, which could be considered part of the Argentine historical and cultural canon, is the subject of so many alternate interpretations is not only a testament to its status as an object so well-known in Argentine society that everyone must have an opinion of it; it also points to an increasing restoration of the damage done to the spaces of social interaction, and it shows that sociopolitical conditions have had a stimulating effect on debates regarding memory, identity and national history. In *Los rubios*, this increase in ambiguity concerning narrative is reflected in Carri’s rejection of the suggestion she should follow a narrative just because it would fit into the dominant one, and opts to follow her personal story. She prompts the spectator to



Picture 5. Final Scene of Albertina Carri's Los rubios.

revise the mechanisms of memory itself rather than forcing his compliance with a collection of certainties about the past.

The film opens with peaceful rural sounds over a consistent but ominous low hum. Birds chirp, cows moo, and the best way of approaching a horse is discussed. These sounds are mingled with Carri's voice directing her crew members as the camera moves slowly, almost voyeuristically, past a toy house. The house is empty and lit from the inside; its doors and windows are open. The lighting changes to daytime and Playmobil figures are moving in stop-motion animation around a farmhouse. From the opening scene through the final scene of the film, in which the entire production team walks away from the camera wearing blond wigs, the viewer is flooded with disjunctions -- paths that seem to lead nowhere, but still keep the narrative moving. The main question of the film, as referenced in the title, is never answered: were Carri's parents really blond? The public is confronted with many questions, and no obvious answers. Carri's rejection of one "truth", facts, and grand narratives opens up the possibility for reflection about the discourse of meaning and the (symbolic) representation of traumatic memory. Instead of being politicized, her rendition of a part of Argentina's shared past is more personal, and she refuses to adopt dominant narratives already in place. Rather, she offers a new voice to the debate, adding another shade to the image of the collective past. The way in which she approaches the project is a very particular form of exercising cultural memory, because its connection to its object is mediated not through

recollection but through what Sarlo (2005) calls “imaginative creation”. In this way it is similar to the function of the ESMA, the former clandestine detention center in Buenos Aires now used as an experiential museum, because it allows people to experience an event or a past without having actually lived through it. This proposition rests upon the postmodern assumption that memory is always already mediated by popular culture and thus is itself a mass media product (Sarlo 2005). Gabriela Nouzeilles chronicles how critics (especially documentary film makers) have argued that the transmitted narrative of traumatic experiences in symbolic form is impure, and have criticized Carri’s style because it would break with the truth-telling tradition of documentary film as a representation of reality, a window onto the repressed world of victims, a film genre whose appeal rests precisely on respecting certain techniques that insure that the viewer is seduced by the *truth* of its discourse as opposed to the artifice of the fiction film. Carri’s film was condemned as too postmodern in its fictionality and thus untruthful to the memory of her parents (Nouzeilles 2005). This is problematic, because, first of all, Carri has the freedom to tell her story however she chooses, but she is asked by national institutes -- INCAA, Argentina’s National Film Academy, was one of the critics -- to integrate her work into memory narratives that are already ‘written’. Secondly, Carri never intended to make a straightforward documentary with *Los rubios*, a literal, chronological enumeration of events. She made use of the interpretative and symbolic privileges making a film provided her with, and made a work that included a rendition that represented her personal trauma and, through the use of symbols, also that of many others. By refusing to submit to a matter-of-fact style of filming, Carri creates a story that balances the line between personal and collective memory, exploring the tensions between the representation of reality and the contested mythic space that collective memory occupies, something a literal or “real” film could not have achieved. As Andreas Huyssen argues, the:

...fledgling attempts, in Argentina and Chile, to create public spheres of “real” memory that will counter the politics of forgetting pursued by post-dictatorship regimes [...] The fault line between the mythic past and the real past is not always that easy to draw -- one of the conundrums of any politics of memory anywhere. The real can be mythologized just as the mythic may engender strong reality effects (2003: 15-16).

The discussion surrounding *Los rubios* is an enlightening illustration of Todorov’s dichotomy between the literal memory and the exemplary, figurative memory. While critics dismiss the

film for distorting the memory of the dictatorship, the “distorting” is its most powerful contribution to the discussion of national history. It is a critique of the politicization of memory and underscores that the act of remembering is problematic. Carri refuses to master the narrative of her parents’ disappearance the way the INCAA or other parties might like, opting instead to tell her own story about growing up under assumed identities with the help of toys, stop-action animation, and dressing-up.

Carri’s film suggests that within the grand narratives there are smaller, less bombastic narratives of longing and loss, that do not aim to present a unilateral view of the past. The clash between her style of storytelling and the INCAA’s ideas about the way in which controversial memory should be treated ends up being a cornerstone to the film’s overall message about identity, post-dictatorial and post-crisis Argentina, and indicates the attention Carri’s generation has given to the abundant experiences of the past without tying an ideological vision to it. The dismissal of her treatment of memory as unfit comes as no surprise if we consider the context of social power.

Although her film strikingly portrays the wounds the dirty war inflicted upon the social tissue of Argentine society from her personal perspective, making use of strong symbolic representations, it did not promote the integration of a consented narrative of the traumatic period into collective history (Wilson 2012). Carri’s identity in *Los rubios* is rooted in loss and can be perceived as a product of skeptical postmodernism, and after the successive failures of the dictatorship and globalized neoliberal economics, Argentina remains without a plausible explanation of its own conditions of existence.

According to Kantaris, this is compounded by the postmodern notion of the demise of the grand narratives; uncertainty is the only thing of which we can now be sure. This has left the filmmaker with no other recourse than that of ethnography, but an ethnography ‘from the inside’, using an autobiographical approach. This ‘inside’ position or auto-ethnographic mode of observation complicates comprehension of an image of the world depicted; images can be seen on the screen, but cannot be read or assigned meaning. The world appears visible but incomprehensible. Effects are shown without causes; the narrative eschews the causal structure enabling the images that constitute the text to stand in mute illegibility; we see the things that have happened, but the story does not include its causes. The result is the naturalism and minimalism that for the most part have become the dominant trends in recent Argentine cinema. Other recent Argentine films have adopted some of the forms and techniques of ethnographic practice but they, too, suggest that “to see is *not* to

know.” (Kantaris 2010: 33). These films form a coherent corpus whose thematic and technical elements stem from similar social and artistic concerns. In its portrayal of modern Argentine life, film plays a crucial role in defining space and constructing new roles played by the characters and spaces they inhabit. These spaces tend to be transitional and public, rather than permanent and private; alienating and chaotic. These films feature narrative structures and cinematic styles that have abandoned ‘classical realism’ and therefore demand disciplined understanding on the part of the spectator. They seek to create a cinema that can express the new and disturbing conditions that have come to pass in Argentine life in the past two decades (Kantaris 1996, 2010; Sarlo 2005).

Bare facts do give a clear enough picture of the extraordinarily deep and widespread damage done to the nation’s economy, and can perhaps, to some extent, provide an idea of the crippling beatings Argentina’s social structure has endured. However, if we desire to understand how the past 40 years have been experienced by Argentines themselves, we better refer to media and art forms. Through the appropriation of representation to express the “real” experience of trauma and crisis, Argentine cinema helped construct different modes of subjectivity relating to Argentina’s experience of capitalism, neoliberalism and economic crisis. It is a shame that institutes as INCAA fail to acknowledge the transformative power and constructive capabilities representational cultural expressions possess. It is one thing to acknowledge such forms of recall are subjective -- but, isn’t every act of recall a subjective one? --, another is to deny it or label it as insignificant fiction. As Eli Wiesel has so pointedly remarked when relating to his own experiences as a prisoner in World War II’s concentration camps:

How can we do analytical justice to collective violence and trauma, without unduly distorting the shattering experiences of the victims? The truth of Auschwitz remains hidden in its ashes. (1990: 166)

There is an unbridgeable gap between theoretical models and the unfathomable depths of individual and collective trauma and the social act of creating a national narrative. Distinctly social and cultural expressions like the media, and especially art, can fill this gap -- perhaps not completely, but more than anything else.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, I set out to discover the consequences of the two most recent traumatizing landmarks in Argentine history: the last military dictatorship of 1976-1983 and the economic default of 2001 (and the period of comprehensive neoliberal reforms leading up to it), as well as the way in which they shape the national narrative, helping me to answer my question as to how the mentioned episodes affect(ed) collective memory and national identity in Argentina. My objective was to examine the way in which ideas of identity and memory are shaped, transmitted and reinforced by images and narratives in forms of media, namely art. By analyzing two different periods, I hoped to expose the shifts in the debate surrounding memory and national identity.

State terror aimed at causing bodily harm but also targeted social relations and cultural practice. The trauma inflicted upon the Argentines undermined social cohesion, as it ruptured social bonds and disintegrated trust. In many arenas the legacy of the dictatorial rule is the subject of contention: the mass media, history books, official commemorations, and all sorts of forms of art. In a country where the state controlled public discourse and suppressed opposition so ferociously, it is understandable that the debate over national narrative and identity has turned out to be so intense. After focusing on the confusing years that brought back democracy and provided an opportunity to contribute to the national narrative through CONADEP, but eventually did not mean universal redemption, my focus shifted toward a possibly even more disorienting time in Argentina. Menem's neoliberal policies left big significant portions of the Argentine population unemployed, underemployed, or completely bereft. Democratic institutions and the juridical system had lost much credibility (or never regained it to begin with). Past and present were easily connected in a society in which politicians and the police continued to abuse its power, corruption thrived, a system of accountability only worked on a selective basis, and exclusionary economic policies deepened socioeconomic inequalities. The balance of power had not changed following the democratic transition. A further erosion of trust in the state institutions and another bitter stain on national identity was created with the economic default of 2001.

The main difference between the two discussed traumatic periods and the (state and societal) response in terms of collective action and memory, is that the deliberate attacks on the social during the dictatorship hindered sociocultural interaction and damaged Argentines' ability to function as social beings, while during the years of the neoliberal fiasco and the

economic default, citizens' ability to organize themselves in groups and communicate (through socially constructed codes) with each other was given a boost. The hardships endured in this period brought about a change which reinforced the component of civility in Argentina's collective identity. The struggle for the defense of human rights and the constitution of a narrative of past and present became crucial for democracy and the determination of an altered national identity, but reversely, democracy was (and is) also instrumental to struggle for a narrative of the past.

This thus confirms my hypothesis in which I expected to demonstrate how changes political and social circumstances have given Argentines more opportunities to add their voice to the cacophony surrounding national identity. Argentines' new forms of protest and new ways to let themselves be heard changed the forms in which memory shaped their collective identity. The changed political landscape means that groups previously excluded from control over public discourse now, too, have channels to stake their to claim to history. During the second half of the 1990s, as civil discontent with the state grew stronger, the human rights movement found increasing societal support for its demands. This support found expression in the growing participation of new actors in the struggle for memory and identity, but also (social) justice. This led to new expressions of memory (a new wave of films flooded the scene) and to renewed debates on how to remember the recent past.

One of the central positions in the memory discussion was held by *Nunca Más*, the report created by Argentina's truth commission CONADEP. The *Nunca Más* report proved to be a valuable case for discussing the wide range of different actors interested in the construction of memory. The argument put forward in my theoretical introduction, that power is one of the most significant determinants of memory discourse, underlines the way the report's narrative was formulated. In this case, the state held dominance over the discourse, even though societal actors were given the possibility to contribute. But, the dominant position of the state in establishing a narrative of the authoritarian period and the tenuous post-dictatorship relations and their media manifestations in Argentine society would be altered as a consequence of new political developments.

By analyzing *Los rubios* I defended the validity of nation and national identity as a viable framework in contemporary Argentine cinema, rendering bare the function of cultural productions within a national context. The film tells a story of personal ambivalence that is also the story of collective ambiguity. Of all forms of expression with the capacity to convey a transformative, exemplary model of collective memory, film is perhaps the strongest. Agency

is drawn from the capacity of drama to articulate several simultaneous layers of potentially contradictory messages, many not in the verbal text. Emblematic of its generation, *Los rubios* no longer makes use of grand narratives of the nation, but illustrates the social, political and cultural effects of traumatic experiences and globalization through representational practices on a small-scale, personal level.

I conclude that the media that formed the corpus of my research have played a crucial role in shaping both the contents of collective memory and the ways the past was (is) dealt with, while also being a reflection of these dynamics. As evident in both CONADEP's narrative report *Nunca Más* and *Los rubios*, the image of the identity of the Argentine nation has been contended in different ways, and with the image of the present identity, the image of the past has changed, too. The different participants in the struggle for memory and identity display significant variety in strategies, experiences, ideology and interpretations of the past.

Impactful, traumatizing events or periods in contemporary Argentine history, such as the subjection to state terrorism during the most recent dictatorship and the economic default in 2001 have been, and are being, processed in distinct ways. Memory can be understood as a cultural phenomenon as well as an individual or social one, and social aspects play a major role in the processes of collective remembering. The debates surrounding *Nunca Más* and *Los rubios* has been a clear indicator of friction between opposing interpretations of the recent Argentine past; while the report was written by a commission vested with governmental authorities and could be considered an extension of the executive branch, individuals and civil groups have given various interpretations of both the contents and the meaning of the report that cover a whole range of disparate narratives about the past.

By relating the country's political, social and cultural crises to media, engaging with the way in which the authoritarian and socioeconomic crises have been lived and experienced, Argentines have managed to construct a complex, multilayered account of their own present, perpetually connected to the troubled past. As collective memory connects the past to the future, it is promising to see that both civil society and the state continue to put forward alternatives to turn atrocities into narratives and spaces where a "reconciled" and reimagined national community can come together to move forward. The image of the Argentine nation is not a narrative of the past; it is an unfinished project.

Works Cited

- Alfonsín, Raúl. *Mensaje presidencial del Dr. Raúl Alfonsín a la honorable Asamblea Legislativa, 10 de diciembre*. Buenos Aires: Imprenta del Congreso de la Nación, 1983.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.
- “Argentine Junta Under Army Chief Assumes Control”. *New York Times*. March 25, 1976. A1
- Assmann, Jan. “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity.” *New German Critique* 65 (1995).
- Bergero, Adriana and Fernando Reati, eds. *Memoria colectiva y políticas de olvido: Argentina y Uruguay, 1970-1990*. Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 1997.
- Bal, Mieke, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer, eds. *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Dartmouth: University Press of New England, 1999.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990.
- Brysk, Alison. “The Politics of Measurement: The Contested Count of the Disappeared in Argentina”, *Human Rights Quarterly* 16.4 (November 1994): 676-692.
- Cohen, Stanley. *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*. Cambridge: Polity, 2001.
- Carranza, Mario E. “Poster Child or Victim of Imperialist Globalization? Explaining Argentina’s December 2001 Political Crisis and Economic Collapse.” *Latin American Perspectives* 145.32.6 (November 2005): 65-89
- Carri, Albertina, dir. *Los Rubios*. Primer Plano Film Group, 2003.
- CONADEP. *Nunca Más: Informe de la Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de las Personas*. Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 2006 (8th ed.).
- Crenzel, Emilio. *La historia política del Nunca Más*. Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2008.
- De Cillia, Rudolf, Martin Reisigl, and Ruth Wodak. “The Discursive Construction of National Identities.” *Discourse & Society* 10.2 (1999): 149-173.
- Feitlowitz, Marguerite. *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Foster, David William. “Contemporary Argentine Cinema”. *New Latin American Cinema*. Michael T. Martin, ed. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997. 464-479.

- Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Colin Gordon, ed. New York: Pantheon, 1980.
- Fournet, Caroline. *The Crime of Destruction and the Law of Genocide: their Impact on Collective Memory*. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007.
- Galeano, Eduardo. *Días y noches de amor y de guerra*. Mexico D.F.: Ediciones ERA, 2000, 2nd ed.
- Canclini, Néstor García, ed. *Cultura transnacional y culturas populares*. Lima 1988.
- Gibson, James L. "'Truth' and 'Reconciliation' as Social Indicators." *Social Indicators Research* 81 (2007): 257-281.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Hall, Stuart. "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?" *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, eds. London: Sage, 1996. 1-17.
- Hayner, Priscilla B., "Fifteen Truth Commissions -- 1974 to 1994: A Comparative Study." *Human Rights Quarterly* 16.4 (1994).
- Hellinger, Daniel. *Latin America: Democracy at Last?* New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Huyssen, Andreas. *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- . *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Kaiser, Susana. "Escraches: Demonstrations, Communication and Political Memory in Post-Dictatorial Argentina". *Media Culture Society* 24 (2002): 499-516.
- Kantarís, Geoffrey. "The Last Snapshots of Modernity: Argentine Cinema after the 'Process'". *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 73.2 (April 1996): 219-44.
- . "Last Snapshots/Take 2: Personal and Collective Shipwrecks in Buenos Aires". *Cultures of the City: Mediating Identities in Urban Latin/o America*. Richard Young and Amanda Holmes, eds. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010. 31-45.
- Lorca, Javier. "El arte problematiza la memoria". *Página 12*. May 23, 2011.
- Moraña, Mabel. "(Im)pertinencia de la memoria histórica en América Latina." *Memoria colectiva y políticas de olvido: Argentina y Uruguay, 1970-1990*. Adriana Bergero and Fernando Reati, eds. Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 1997. 31-58.
- Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24

- Nouzeilles, Gabriela. "Postmemory cinema and the future of the past in Albertina Carri's *Los rubios*." *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 14.3 (2005): 263–278.
- Robben, Antonius C.G.M. *Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005.
- Robert, Karen. "The Falcon Remembered". In *NACLA Report on the Americas* 39.3 (November 2005).
- Rotker, Susana, ed. *Citizens of Fear: Urban Violence in Latin America*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002.
- Sarlo, Beatriz. *Tiempo pasado. Cultura de la memoria y giro subjetivo. Una discusión*. Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2005.
- Taylor, Diana. *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's Dirty War*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.
- Taylor, Julie M. *Agency, Trauma & Representations in the Face of State Violence: Argentina*. Brasilia: Universidade de Brasil, 1999.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*. New York: Henry Holt, 1996.
- . *Los abusos de la memoria*. Barcelona: Ediciones Paidós Ibérica, 2008.
- Van Alphen, Ernst. "“Qué historia, la historia de quién, historia con qué propósito?” Nociones de Historia en Historia del Arte y Estudios de Cultura Visual." *Estudios Visuales* 3 (December 2005): 79-98
- Van Drunen, Saskia. *Struggling with the Past: The Human Rights Movement and the Politics of Memory in Post-Dictatorship Argentina (1983-2006)*. Amsterdam: Rozenberg Publishers, 2010.
- Vezzetti, Hugo. *Pasado y presente. Guerra, dictadura y sociedad en la Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2002.
- Villalón, Roberta. "Neoliberalism, Corruption, and Legacies of Contention: Argentina's Social Movements, 1993-2006". *Latin American Perspectives* 153.34.2 (March 2007) 139-156
- White, Hayden. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality". *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (Autumn 1980): 5-27.
- Wiesel, Elie. *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990.
- Wilson, Kristi. "The Split-Person Narrative: Resisting Closure, Resistant Genre in Albertina Carri's *Los rubios*". *Latin American Perspectives*, 40:88. 2012.

Zibechi, Raúl. “New Challenges for Radical Social Movements”. *NACLA Report on the Americas* 38.5 (March 2004)