

# **The Experience of Loss and Identity Struggles in Post Conflict Narratives**

**the "children of disappeared" case  
in Argentina**

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## Abstract

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This thesis analyses post conflict narratives that aim to depict identity struggles and mourning processes of Argentine children of disappeared. Many of these children were born in captivity in illegal detention centres and were illegally appropriated in the line with a systematic plan to steal babies. Their parents were among the thousands of disappeared persons during the military dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983). The children grew up in military families, not knowing anything about their true biological parents until the day they were *recovered* and found out that their biological family had been looking for them since the moment their own relatives disappeared. The films analyzed in this study give insight into a variety of identity struggles and experiences of loss of these children, as they all experience an identity crisis within a lost situation. Remarkable is that many narratives tend to demonize the raising parents in favour of the biological parents whereas other films demonstrate the very contrary, imaging a reality in which children do not distance themselves from the raising parents and/or even reject their biological family. The narratives in particular demonstrate the different “routes” and choices these children are confronted with concerning identity and loss experiences.

**Key words:** Social Sciences & Literature and Culture Studies, Latin America & Caribbean, loss, mourning, identity, memory, children of disappeared, post conflict narratives, film, Argentina, illegal appropriation

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# Introduction

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The psychological legacies of the political violence of the 1970s and 1980s in Argentina continue to influence children that were born during the military dictatorship (1976-1983) of whom the parents have been disappeared in these years of state terrorism. This thesis analyses post conflict narratives that aim to depict struggles of this specific generation. Many of these children, in the meantime adults, were born in captivity and illegally appropriated by military families. To the perception of the military they were saved from their “subversive” parents and they grew up not knowing anything about their true parents, until the day that they were *recovered* and found out that their biological families had been looking for them since the moment their own relatives disappeared. The insights acquired in this research are not only relevant for the way we look at those children, to understand their experience of loss and struggles, but also for the way the perpetrators are being perceived. Before expounding on the main argument and different narratives used in this study, I provide some historical background.

During the military dictatorship in Argentina that lasted from March 1976 until December 1983 the military junta was responsible for the disappearance of thousands of people. It is estimated that the number of disappeared or killed people ranges from approximately 9,000 to 30,000. The majority of the victims that were imprisoned, tortured and assassinated during this regime ranged from left-wing insurgencies (guerrillas) to popular movements and human rights groups, among them all people that had been engaged in social or political activities. These groups together with labour unionists, peasant leagues, students, journalists, intellectuals, politicians and artists were perceived as “subversive” and belonged to the wide range of targets of the military junta (Armony 2005). The brutal state repression was part of the Process of National Reorganization, which was initiated by Jorge Rafael Videla at the beginning of the regime. It was a process during which Argentine society had to be reorganised in the line with western and Christian values (Van Drunen 2010).

The military regard themselves as defenders of the state, of tradition, family and property. Their perception required that children of political dissidents had to be removed from their parents, due to the assumption that the parents would educate

them into subversion. Children were thus given to “good” families as “botín de guerra” (war booty).<sup>1</sup> The military believed that they had saved these children (Arditti and Lykes 1992, Armony 2005). Thirty percent of the disappeared victims were women and ten percent of these women were pregnant (CONADEP 1984). About five hundred children were born in captivity under severe circumstances and were immediately taken away and given to other families who in many cases could not have children themselves. In these cases the “adoptive” family provided false information for the “adoption” and manipulated the illegally appropriated children; they changed the identity of the children, erased the memory of the past and all possibilities to get in contact with the biological relatives (Arditti and Lykes 1992: 466). In Argentina there are still around four hundred “children” that have not yet recovered their true origin.<sup>2</sup>

On 28 February 2011 former dictator Jorge Videla and last head of the military junta Reynaldo Bignone, six ex-military officers and one ex-civilian doctor appeared on court to face charges for 34 cases of baby theft that took place during the military dictatorship.<sup>3</sup> The *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*, which have initiated this charge, investigated that the military worked in accordance with a systematic plan to steal babies from political prisoners. Although births took place in every detention centre, there were also strategic maternity centres.<sup>4</sup> Other trials have been planned throughout the year, during which around 350 witnesses will testify against them.<sup>5</sup> Among those present at the first trial was also Victoria Donda who is one of the stolen babies that already has recovered her origin in 2003 with the help of the *Abuelas*, and on whose story is based the film *Eva y Lola* (2010, Argentina, Sabrina Farji), analyzed in chapter 3 of this study.<sup>6</sup>

Donda and other recovered children’s experiences of loss and struggles for identity emerge in many narratives in various ways. There are dozens of narratives that are concerned with this “stolen baby” case, which differ from visual material

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<sup>1</sup> <<http://www.abuelas.org.ar/>>, consulted on February 1, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> <<http://www.hijos-capital.org.ar/>>, consulted on February 1, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> <[http://www.clarin.com/politica/Acusaron-Videla-robo-bebes-desaparecidos\\_0\\_436756361.html](http://www.clarin.com/politica/Acusaron-Videla-robo-bebes-desaparecidos_0_436756361.html)>, consulted on March 3, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> <<http://sur.elargentino.com/notas/el-robo-de-bebes-en-la-dictadura-entendido-como-plan-sistemtico>>, consulted on April, 3 2011.

<sup>5</sup> <[http://www.memoriaabierta.org/materiales/pdf/la\\_construccion\\_del\\_archivo\\_oral.pdf](http://www.memoriaabierta.org/materiales/pdf/la_construccion_del_archivo_oral.pdf)>, consulted on July 16, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> <<http://www.cij.gov.ar/nota-7292-Lesa-humanidad--cerca-de-80-testigos-ya-declararon-en-el-juicio-oral-por-robo-de-bebes.html>>, consulted on July 16, 2011.

(documentaries, films, television series, etc.) to written narratives (novels, biographies, etc.). Especially visual material reaches a wide public, for it is shown on television, on film festivals and in cinemas all over the world. Film and television makers bring into vision their own interpretations, some being objective, others untruthfully. My passion for films started long ago, taking this together with my interest in Argentina and its legacy of the dictatorship, I ended up with the subject of my research, the main question being: *How do post conflict narratives contribute to understand identity struggles and mourning processes of Argentine children of disappeared?* For this study I analyzed three Argentine films that have been made during the last ten years (between 2000 and 2010) and one film that came out merely one and half year after the military regime, the film *La historia oficial* (1985, Argentina, Luis Puenzo), analyzed in the first chapter.

Chapter one examines the discovery of the baby theft in which the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* played a crucial role. Puenzo broaches the debate around the importance of the truth and gives insight into forms of protest and some fundamental characteristics of the military. In the second chapter I analyze the film *Cautiva* (2003, Argentina, Gastón Biraben), which is a portrait of a girl who just found out she was illegally adopted and who is extremely shocked. Biraben clearly indicates his vision, which is strongly different from the other films. The third chapter discusses *Eva y Lola*, giving a truthful representation of the struggles of two children of disappeared, both based on true persons, both experiencing different dilemmas. I conclude with *Los rubios* (2003, Argentina, Albertina Carri), the final chapter, deviating from the other films in its genre: a mixture of a (feature) film and a documentary with director Carri as principal role. This narrative demonstrates “another” side of the story, as a different “route” emerges. For the analysis of the film I use documentaries concerning this matter, scholarly literature and written narratives (news articles, interviews, novels, etc.).

# Chapter 1. *La historia oficial*

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## Introduction

Luis Puenzo was a pioneer in bringing the “stolen baby” case onto screen with *La historia oficial* (The official story) (1985, Argentina). The film takes place during the eighties in Buenos Aires, a time that has marked Argentines history. The main theme of the film is the discovery of the illegally appropriated children issue during the military regime by the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*. The film exposes this problem, it examines on expressions of grief and protest of opponents of the regime and on the debate about the importance of the truth. The film has been featured at many international film festivals all over the world and won various awards, including an Oscar for best foreign film in 1985; a Golden Globe award for best foreign language film in 1986; and Argentinean Film Critics Association Awards for amongst others best actress, best cinematography, best director and best film in 1986.<sup>7</sup> This chapter functions, just like the film, to introduce the main theme of this study and to give relevant background information about the history of children of disappeared, about what happened to their parents and it examines the organization *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* which were concerned about the search for the stolen children.

The film has one particular scene that exposes the main theme. It is evening. Alicia and her long-time friend Ana have not seen each other for seven years; they are sitting on the couch, drinking eggnog and laughing out loud about memories of the past. Then Alicia asks the question we are all waiting for: Why did she leave the country without telling anybody and why did she never contact her? While still giggling, Ana starts telling what happened all those years ago. She tells about the day “they entered my apartment and tore the Gardel poster to shreds”, they stormed in, threw a sweater over her head and destroyed everything. Alicia and Ana are still laughing, but gradually the sphere changes. Ana tells she was hit with a rifle and was taken into a car. When she awoke she laid naked on a table where they started torturing her. When she got out of there, she had been there for 36 days; she had lost

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<sup>7</sup> <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0089276/awards>>, consulted on January 17, 2011.

27 pounds and had undergone all their treatment. She continues that after seven years she still feels she is drowning, which was one of the treatments she had undergone and that she is still terrified everyday to hear again the voice of the man who kept her for himself to rape.

Alicia subsequently asks her why they did this to her and she responds it was because she had a relationship with Pedro who was “very involved”. Then the camera focuses on Gaby who is sleeping in her room and the conversation between Alicia and Ana changes tack. Ana proceeds with her story and tells that there were so many people that she sometimes did not even know whether the cries were hers, or someone else’s. That there were also pregnant women who lost their babies there and others who were taken away, but always returned alone. The babies went to families who bought them without asking questions. Then, the conversation ends when Alicia asks: “Why do you tell me that?” Ana dries her tears and says she has never told this to anyone. When she is gone, Gaby enters the room while Alicia is still cleaning; she is frightened and accidentally pushes a glass of eggnog over a picture of Gaby.

This significant scene of *La historia oficial* is a turning point in the film. Alicia was never really aware of what happened in her country. Ana fled the country and suddenly she is back and puts the attention to this case. She stresses the fact that there were pregnant women in the clandestine centres and that their babies were taken away. Alicia is shocked; these facts seriously move her. But at the same time, she wonders why Ana told her this. Was there a specific reason for her friend’s revelation? The last shot on the picture of Gaby’s face immediately suggests that Gaby also plays a role in this story. From that moment on, Alicia realizes she has an “adopted” child of whose parents she knows nothing. She starts wondering whether Gaby is also a missing mother’s child and starts her investigation toward the truth about the past and the real identity of Gaby. This scene herald in the main theme of the film and also contains other important elements mentioned below.

*The official story* tells the story of upper middle class history high school teacher Alicia and businessman and lawyer Roberto who had “adopted” baby girl Gaby in the late seventies. After five years Alicia starts wondering about the biological parents of Gaby, in fact she gets suspicious that Gaby may be the daughter of forced disappeared persons. This is because her friend Ana told her that children were taken away from their mothers in secret detention centres and given to other



families by paramilitary forces. When she confronts her husband with her suspicions, he insists to forget everything about it, as this was one of the conditions of the “adoption”. However, it is obvious that Roberto, who has close ties with the military junta, has something to hide. Given that he will not help her further, Alicia starts going and investigate this problem on her own.

That is why she establishes contact with the organization *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* and meets member Sara, who could be Gaby’s biological grandmother. She brings Sara home. However, Roberto is unfavourably disposed toward the fact that she might be real family of his “adoptive” daughter, therefore when he hears the news, he immediately asks her to leave. When Sara is gone, Alicia and Roberto got a serious argument when Roberto asks where Gaby is. However, Alicia makes him face the facts saying that it must be hard not knowing where his daughter is. He is than so angered that he gravely assaults his wife. During this conflict the phone rings; it is Gaby who wants to sing a song for her mother before going to bed. However, Alicia is packing her bags to leave. The film ends with the scene in which Gaby is singing her song, swinging in a rocking chair at her grandparents’ home.

Director Luis Puenzo takes the viewer with *La historia oficial* to the stirring eighties of Argentina, a time during which severe state terrorism was carried out by Jorge Rafael Videla’s military junta. Videla and his successors were responsible for the arrest, torture, killings and forced disappearances of thousands of people. Among these people were also pregnant woman that were brought to secret detention centres where they gave birth to their babies in severe circumstances. Their babies were taken away, illegally adopted and raised by families who had close ties with the military (Arditti and Lykes 1992, Armony 2005, Van Drunen 2010). The central theme of the film is the discovery of this specific matter with the help of the organization the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* that played an important part in exposing this case. The theme is subdivided into different sub themes. One of these topics the film brings to the foreground, and which is also suggested by the title, is a discussion about the true history intertwined with the truth about identity. The debate about the true history in the film is represented in almost every scene: What is the true history? What is the truth? Who is Gaby? What is Gaby’s true history and real identity? These are

questions arising in the film. In the first section I therefore examine the importance about the truth.

Another theme is the introduction with the military junta, both by the use of symbolism as well as directly described by victims. Different characteristics of the regime come to the foreground in the film and give us a reproduction of how the military acted in times of state terror. The film creates a determined image of the military, which is important for the way they are being perceived. Different from the other main films in this research, the mourning processes of children have not been portrayed in *The official story*. In this case, the child is too young and does not know anything about her situation yet. Therefore Puenzo did not examine the way the child experiences the major changes in her life. In this section I thus focus on the grief of family members of disappeared, particularly on the expression through taking action. In the film the theme of grief approaches the one of resistance: these two elements converge in the social movement *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*. The reason of these grandmothers to convene was initially because of their personal struggles, which became later a reason for their collective resistance. Protest also appears in the actions and statements of the student generation who critically expresses their disaffection with the military regime.

## **Section 1: True history and identity**

The theme “the search for the truth” in *La historia oficial* starts at the beginning of the film. However, we do not know what the truth will be at the end of the film, therefore we can only speculate about it. Discovering the truth about history and about the real identity of her “adoptive” daughter Gaby has for main figure Alicia one and the same meaning. During her journey to the truth she develops herself from a conservative to an open-minded woman, for she represents in the beginning the formal and intellectual upper middle class of society, who seems to live in lies and close their eyes for true facts. In the end however, we experience her as a woman that leaves the lies behind, the truth being the only thing that matters. Alicia’s parents died in a car accident when she was just five years old. However no one told her the truth until she was already grown up. Her grandmother even invented letters from her parents. She used to sit in a rocking chair waiting for hours for her parents to come home.

However they never came back and she always thought that they had left her behind. This sadness has always followed her until she knew the truth, until then she could not leave it behind. Here, a parallel with Gaby's story is made: she also frequently sits in a rocking chair, just like her "adoptive" mum used to do, which seems to predict that Gaby awaits a similar fate.

To protect Gaby from being hurt, Alicia starts her own journey to find out who Gaby's real parents are and what her real identity is. She does not want to hide the truth for her daughter; she wants to prevent her from having similar feelings of being left behind. The rocking chair is a returning object in the film, which refers to the bond between parent (especially mother) and child. It is symbolic for the parent's swaying arms. In such a way, the child who is sitting in the chair experiences a similar safe feeling as in the arms of the parents. When a child feels alone or sad the negative symptoms will fade away or will weaken owing to the sway in the arms of the parents or, in case of absence of the parent, in the rocking chair. This is not only the case with Alicia – she spent many days sitting in the chair waiting for her parents – as with Gaby – who many times calls her parents while swaying in the chair. It thus suggests that the child always needs its parents, as the bond between him and them is unbreakable. Remarkable at the same time is that the presence of the rocking chair refers to the absence of the parents. For Gaby this alludes to the fact that her parents are *desaparecidos* (disappeared persons).

The truth about Gaby's history and therefore the truth about the identity of a person are of great importance for Alicia. Harvie Ferguson (2009: 77) confirms the importance to know your past as he states in *Self Identity and Everyday Life* that it is important to know your history, because history is your background and your foreground; it is a scene on which life can be understood and a specific social-cultural identity can be constructed. Dan Ben-Amos and Liliane Weissberg (1999: 7-10) endorse the importance of grasping your past for the understanding of a person in *Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity*. They argue it is important "to understand who and what each person was, he or she had to extend his or her being in time, reflect on his or her past as an imagined community of self", which implies that a story of a person can be constructed within a "larger historical setting and driven by the memory of past events". They thus state that memory is important for the understanding of the past, that it is a means to understand who you are. Ferguson as

well as Ben-Amos and Weissberg consider memory as a tool for the construction of identity, as it relates the past to who a person is in the present (1999: 7-10). In chapter 4 (*Los rubios*) I extend on the meaning of memory for children of disappeared parents.

It is thus important for the identity formation to know one's past. Alicia also considers important to get to know the truth about the past, especially as it was not the parent's voluntary decision to cede the custody of the child. Therefore her quest for the truth has serious consequences for Gaby. In the last scene we see Gaby sitting in the rocking chair shot from behind, we do not see her face, this practically confirms that on the one hand her parents belong to the thousands of disappeared ones and on the other hand, it refers to Gaby's "missing" identity. This thus affirms the importance to know the truth; otherwise she will always have a missing identity. Moreover, she is singing the song *En el país de No-me-acuerdo* (In the country of I-don't-remember) (Maria Elena Walsh) which has an underlying political meaning and in fact bears reference to Gaby herself; she became victim of the country's failures and shortcomings of the past – the military regime, the Falklands War, high currency inflation, corruption – amongst others resulting in a missing identity and an insecure future. The film has an open end, which means it will be unspecified what will happen to Gaby in the future. Here, Gaby represents other children of disappeared, for which the future is still unknown.

During Alicia's journey to the truth she has to face several ordeals. The rejection of three social institutions belongs to her discovering of the truth: family, religion and education. To start with the latter, education is the first social institution that put Alicia to the test. The most important thing for her as history teacher is to teach relevant and important events of history that are – most important – also written in history books. Her faith in facts however, clashes with – in the beginning of the film – her blindness for the truth. However, her students try to convince her that there are many facts that have not been written about in history books, that these often consist of one side of the story. To make their statements even more persuasive they hang up recent news articles in the classroom that have not been discussed in class and all have been covered up.<sup>8</sup> Keeping Ana's story about stolen babies in her mind, Alicia the more throws doubt upon the educational establishment. She discovers it is a

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<sup>8</sup> In the last section I give more details about the specific news articles and statements of the students.

conventional institution not oriented toward the truth, but based on lies and deception.

Alicia also discovers that the values and standards of the traditional family and her friends fit in the same line as the educational institution. She becomes aware that her friends believe in the same corrupt ideals as her husband, as one of them responds hypocritically to a story of a friend whose son is arrested and disappeared, that he must have done something wrong otherwise he would not have been picked up. Besides that, her husband Roberto always has withheld the truth about their “adoptive” daughter and he was also not going to change. The only thing that matters to him is elevating on the social ladder, whether in a good or bad way. When she cannot find support at home anymore, she tries to find comfort in the church. However, when she makes her confession and tells the priest that she might has “adopted” a child of disappeared parents, that she does not know what to do anymore and that is in desperate need of help, the only thing he says is that God has forgiven her sins. Thus, daring to face the truth can signify disclaiming ideals you once believed in, turning your back against traditional social institutions and people you love, suffering the opposition who will try to silence you and most of all risking to lose your most precious “gift”, your daughter.

## **Section 2: Military regime, symbolism and characteristics**

In films like *Garage Olimpo* (Olympic garage) (1999, Argentina, Marco Bechis) and *Crónica de una fuga* (Chronicle of an escape) (2006, Argentina, Adrián Caetano) we obtain a look from inside the organization: the practices of the right-wing paramilitary forces therefore take a central position, which means that the viewer is an eyewitness of the atrocities – kidnappings and tortures – they commit. In films like *Andrés no quiere dormir la siesta* (Andres doesn't want to take a nap) (2009, Argentina, Daniel Bustamante) and *La historia oficial* however, we do not see their actual deeds; nevertheless we obtain a clear picture of some of the characteristics of the military activities, which appear in *La historia oficial* in a symbolic manner. This section has not only the function to give an introduction to some essential features of the regime, but also to give answer to the question, what has actually happened to the children's disappeared parents?

Remarkable in *La historia oficial* is that doors are often being closed, in such way it is suggested that the viewer is not allowed to see what happens behind the doors, or the camera just gives a shot of closed doors. For instance, when Alicia investigates Gaby's true birth data in the hospital where she was "adopted", she hears a woman screaming and when she curiously takes a look inside the room, the door is rudely shut in her face. These closed doors symbolize the secrecy the military forces considered of great importance. They always acted in secrecy; they brought their victims to secret detention centres where they were exposed to extreme tortures (CONADEP 1984, Armony 2005). These cruel tortures appear in the film in a symbolic way during a scene of Gaby's birthday: first a magician picks a balloon with a sharp-pointed stick without bursting it, than he pretends doing it again with a pigeon, but he does not get through because of the upset children who do not want him to harm the bird. This cruel incident refers to the tortures executed by the military forces during the dictatorship. Torture was considered a legitimate technique and a routine practice during the interrogations in the clandestine centres. Disappearances and tortures were a resolute tactic to create fear among the guerrilla combatants. The fear to betray others or to reveal sensitive information during tortures weakened the opposition's willingness to fight. However, although at first directed at opponents of the regime, the terror soon affected the whole civil society (Robben 2000: 71, Armony 2005).

Another characteristic that appears in the film is the transgression of the personal environment. This violation of the home emerges in the following scene. It is Gaby's fifth birthday party. She escapes the attention and goes to her room upstairs to play with her new baby doll: she looks after her doll, saying that she must go sleep and do not worry, because "mummy is here". Suddenly, the door is kicked open by three of her cousins, they burst into the room screaming and shouting with plastic pistols and turning the room inside out rushing around like lunatics. Gaby, terrified, starts screaming and crying, taking her baby doll with her to protect it from being hurt until Alicia rushes toward the noise to see what is going on. This scene is a typical example of how the military forces worked: they forced an entrance into the home and destroyed everything possible. Nearly two-third of all disappeared were abducted at home (CONADEP 1984). This invasion on one's privacy is clearly depicted in *La historia oficial*. The intensity of how frightened people must have been during these interruptions is represented by Gaby's reaction. The military forces preferred arresting

political suspects at night when most people were asleep, because a person's defence mechanism is most weak if he is just awake. Apprehension and torture at home were common matters, which harmed the emotional, physical and social-cultural protection a home usually offers, given that a home is a base of trust and safety (Robben 2000: 74-75).

The military forces' tactic was not only to sow fear and terror among the opposition, but also to erase every piece of evidence including speaking about it by its partners in crime, which also stresses the secrecy mentioned above. This is demonstrated in the film in the reaction of the Father in the church when Alicia makes her confession. In fact, the film suggests that the priest was involved in the baby robbery of Gaby. He gave the impression that he knew something, because he did not disavow his share in this matter nor did he admit something. In fact he ignored Alicia's prayers for help. The only thing he remarks with respect to content is that she has protected Gaby from "evil and dangers", which also suggests that he is somehow involved. It is obvious that Father was a partner in crime and that he was commanded to be silent upon this case. This caused uncertainty and powerlessness among the relatives and other persons involved. In this case it thus meant that Alicia's faith in God would not help her any further and that the religious institution has taken its place next to the familial and educational institution. The unremitting suspense about the disappeared persons was also part of the regime's strategy. They killed the victims, destroyed their corpses, buried them as *Nomen Nescio* (name unknown, NN) or threw them drugged, but still alive, from airplanes (CONADEP 1984), so that all remains would disappear and there would be no evidence against them. The corpses of the dead became a symbol of victory and the military hoped that the search for the disappeared would disrupt political opposition from further activity or participation (Robben 2000: 71). However, as we will see in the next section, sorrow, fear and the disappearances of relatives did not obstruct people from resistance against the regime.

### **Section 3: Resistance**

In this section I examine an important organization that played a major role in exposing the stolen baby case in Argentina, as well as in the search for these children. The military's attempt to silence the opposition was in some cases counterproductive,

as it resulted in the rise of human rights movements. One of these was the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* formed of mothers that had lost their daughters that had been pregnant when they were abducted and which was established in October 1977. These grandmothers are still concerned about the search for the approximately five hundred missing grandchildren that were kidnapped, after their parents had been killed, or that were (supposed to be) born in captivity during the military regime.<sup>9</sup> Their goal is to find these children, to restore them to their family, but particularly to let them recover their real identity through revealing their past. The reconstruction of history for these children, but also for Argentina's society is of great importance for these grandmothers (Arditti and Lykes 1992: 461-465).

Resistance is also a theme in *La historia oficial*, which expresses itself in both the organization mentioned above as in the students in Alicia's class. The *Abuelas* appear for the first time in the film when Alicia is getting suspicious about the origin of her "adoptive" daughter. A glance at a march of the mothers gave us the more the impression that Gaby is also a daughter of disappeared. Protesting on the streets is a popular form of resistance under the *Abuelas*. Together with friends, family members and other parties involved they walk along the streets, with giant images of their missing children, calling for attention. In this way they do not only speak for themselves, but also for their disappeared children, who cannot fight for their rights (and those of their missing children) anymore (Peluffo 2007, Simpson and Bennett 1985). The reason of these grandmothers to convene was initially to share their feelings with other companions. Their personal struggles and pain became a reason for their collective resistance, especially when they realised they would probably never see their relatives again and they therefore started looking for their grandchildren.

Except from the marches, the *Abuelas* did everything to find their grandchildren: they visited courts, offices, hospitals, daycares; they hang up pictures of their loved ones; published articles and lists of disappeared persons' names in newspapers; they distributed leaflets and so on (Peluffo 2007, Simpson and Bennett 1985).<sup>10</sup> Some of their actions also appear in the film. I already mentioned marching as a type of protest in the film; the visits of daycares and hospitals also come to the foreground. For instance, Alicia gets in contact with grandmother Sara when she is

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<sup>9</sup> <<http://www.abuelas.org.ar/>>, consulted on February 1, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> <<http://www.abuelas.org.ar/english/history.htm>>, consulted on July 2, 2011.



gathering data about the birth of Gaby in a hospital. Sara immediately sees through that Alicia is also looking for data about a baby. What she does not know is that Alicia is not looking for the baby itself, but only for details about the true parents. However, further on in the film Sara discovers that Alicia has lied about it, when she observes her taking Gaby from daycare. She thus finds out because she and some of the other grandmothers are looking for their missing grandchildren near daycares.

Protest also appears in the actions and statements of the students in the film who expresses their disaffection with the military oppression. In section 1 I already indicated that the students claim that history books are incomplete. In the film Alicia, as many other middle class members, is not aware of the abductions, tortures and killings that are actually happening in Argentina. During history class the students confront her with the fact that people are missing, including babies and other young children that have been abducted by sympathizers of Argentines military regime. They hang articles about stolen babies on the blackboard to confront their teacher with these facts that have not been written about in their books, but really happen. Her students accuse the school of having required and approved history books that were written by assassins and in which crucial elements were left out. After the students have received their papers back and Alicia asked Horacio Costa why he did not supply literary references, he responds: “Do you only believe what’s written in books?” These statements are all types of protest to express their dissidence against the military regime. The military disappeared all corpses of the victims, which implies there is no evidence against them; this however certainly does not mean that it did not happen.

In *La historia oficial* Sara and Alicia meet each other in a cafe, where Sara tells about her missing daughter showing some pictures of her when she was just a child. One of the pictures shows Sara’s daughter suspiciously looking like Gaby. The similarity is striking, which makes Alicia presume it is Gaby’s biological mother. At the time the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* could only speculate about the child’s real origin with pictures and data that could probably match with the child. When they had located a child, they however had to prove that it was their real grandchild, which was not easily arranged. It so happens that in the time during which the story of Alicia and Gaby takes place this was not yet possible. It was however common knowledge that a

biological bond between child and parent could be established through blood testing. Since the parents of most recovered children were amongst the *desaparecidos*, the relatives had to solve this through another way. That is why the *Abuelas* approached different scientists that could develop a grandmotherhood test, so that blood testing was possible with merely the DNA of the child and of the grandmother (or another relative, being a sibling or aunt/uncle). In 1984 the first child could be identified thanks to the test developed by human geneticist Mary-Claire King and her lab.<sup>11</sup> To this very day 105 missing children have been traced, of whom only 93 are still alive and have been reunited to their biological families.<sup>12</sup> In August 2011 *nieta* (granddaughter) 105 has been identified after having approached the *Abuelas* with doubts about her origin.<sup>13</sup>

On their website the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* demonstrate their different running projects directed at localising more disappeared children. They work together with the National Committee for the Right to Identity (CONADI), which main effort is also to trace children that disappeared during the military dictatorship. The CONADI thereby assists youngsters who have doubts about their identity through screening documents about them, their families et cetera and referring them to the National Bank of Genetic Data, which conducts blood analyses. In addition, the *Abuelas* organize projects that are all related to this specific matter. Therefore they appear on festivals, concerts and other meetings where people get together in large numbers to campaign for their search for the missing children. In this manner, according to Van Drunen, they try to “socialize” this case, which implies they are not only looking for their own children to recover the identity, but also for all other missing ones. Van Drunen (2010: 101) states in her dissertation concerning this matter: “The message of the *Abuelas* was that, until the last missing child was found, doubts would continue to surround the identity of all the youngsters born during the military dictatorship”. They therefore seek publicity for finding support, to reach a greater part of society, which would later express itself in *Teatro por la identidad* (Theatre for identity) and other artistic expressions for identity (Van Drunen 2010: 101-102). It seems that *La historia oficial* that came out soon after the dictatorship

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<sup>11</sup> *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, Las Abuelas y la genética*. In 2008 the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* published this book about the genetic methods they use to identify kidnapped children.

<sup>12</sup> On <<http://www.abuelas.org.ar/>> the localised children of disappeared are registered, the list can be consulted under *Casos de nietos que estamos buscando*.

<sup>13</sup> <<http://www.noticiasargentinas.com/nuevosite/4596-abuelas-identifico-al-nieto-105.html>>, consulted on August 8, 2011.

and initiated the “children of disappeared” case, was one of the first “campaigns” that exposes the *Abuelas*’ search for these children and thereby seek to find support and attention, which the *Abuelas* would continue for years.

## **Conclusion**

As we can see this film gives a clear insight in the importance of the truth and thereby the importance of identity. Ana is the first one to indicate the truth, as she tells Alicia what is happening with babies in detention centres. It is suggested that she knows that Alicia is not her true daughter, and she thereby wants her to reveal the truth about Gaby. The second person that stresses the importance of the truth and identity for children of disappeared is therefore Alicia. In her search, she tries to convince her husband to admit that the situation around Gaby is wrong and that she must know who her real family is. It is even that important, that she gives up on him and on her faith. The father in the church tries to silence her, because he knows that she will discover and reveal the truth. Also Alicia’s students strongly indicate this relevance through hanging up news articles about the “truth”.

The last figures that even more emphasize the significance of recovering the identity of children are the *Abuelas*, they do this in a variety of ways like marching, visiting daycares, hospitals and so on. Everything around the true identity seems to be important and Puenzo seek to express this in *La historia oficial*. The message therefore is clear: one must do everything to prevent children from not knowing their origin and developing identity struggles. With regard to the experience of loss, Puenzo did not examine the child itself. He does explore the grief of the grandmothers, showing in particular how they cope with their loss. Because their children had been disappeared and were probably not coming back, they had to take care of the children of their children. They do everything to trace the grandchild, even inspiring scientists to develop a grandmotherhood test to determine the child’s identity with certainty. Besides demonstrating the importance of the truth, Puenzo also indicates that the child must return to its biological family. He thereby relates the “adoptive” family to the military and its corrupt activities to show a negative image about the raising family, to reinforce even more the importance of the truth.

## Chapter 2. *Cautiva*

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### Introduction

It is June 25, 1978, an unforgettable day for Argentina who won its first FIFA World Cup football in the final against the Netherlands. It is also because of this memorable day that Martha, who at the time worked as a nurse in the hospital in the Olmos Penitentiary in the film *Cautiva* (Captive) (2003, Argentina, Gastón Biraben) remembered the exact date of birth of a baby girl named Sofia Lombardi. The girl's name is now Cristina Quadri; she is one of the babies that was born in captivity and taken away from her mother to be raised by a military family. Director Biraben has dedicated *Cautiva* “a los miles de ausentes cuya voluntad de permanencia nos ha acompañado, y cuyas historias han sido la fuente de creación de esta película” [to the thousands of missing people whose persistent and iron will has guided us and whose stories have inspired the making of this film] which is indicated at the end of the film. *Cautiva* is therefore an emotional reproduction of one of the legacies of the military activities: the remaining child's struggles to find its real identity and its experience with loss. *Cautiva* is like *La historia oficial* featured at many international film festivals all over the world. The film has won various prizes including two Silver Condor Awards for best costume design and best supporting actor; a Horizon Award for best director at San Sebastián Film Festival; a Special Award for best director at Havana Film Festival; a Fipresi Award at the Toulouse Film Festival and it was the winner for the best film at the Mar del Plata Film Festival in 2003.<sup>14</sup>

The key scene of this film is one of the first scenes, during which Christina is told she is a child of disappeared parents. District attorney Horacio Gómez and psychologist Liliane Bernstein picked up teenage girl Christina from school with an official order to bring her to the courthouse. Christina reluctantly enters the judge's office and a man immediately steps up to her introducing himself as Miguel Barrenechea, a federal judge, and asks her to show her identity card. Christina feels uncomfortable because her parents do not know she is taken from school. The judge informs her it is time she learns the truth and tells her that her real identity and age are

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<sup>14</sup> <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0362496/awards>>, consulted on February 1, 2011.

different from the ones indicated on her ID card. Three tests were done, one in Argentina, one in the USA and one in France, they all showed that her blood matches the Lombardis' and Dominichs', her biological family. He continues that her parents were two architects kidnapped by security forces during the military dictatorship in 1978 and that many youngsters like Christina are just now learning the truth. Christina repeatedly asks if her parents know about all this. The judge responds that this is exactly the case, "they are not your real parents". The fact is the blood tests have proven with 99,98% certainty that her real parents are Leticia Dominich en Agustin Lombardi. He explains this case is called "appropriation", which means that the transfer of her custody was not executed with her parents' permission. Christina is really confused and shocked. After the judge has told that her real family has been searching for her ever since and now that she has been found, are claiming her, she is introduced to her biological grandmother. Christina however, is bewildered, takes her bag and runs out of the office.

I have chosen this key scene, because it clearly depicts the difficulty of this case. The judge proceeds with extreme caution, which implies how difficult it is to tell a young girl that her parents are not her real parents and that her biological parents have disappeared. The scene contains many disclosures that will change Christina's life for good. The uncertainty and confusion is written all over her face for the reason that she might have no parents anymore. The shock that her raising parents are not her real parents is immense. After this scene the search for answers about her past begins. The scene also suggests the girl will have to face a difficult mourning period, given that she finds herself in a situation without parents, which means that she has to mourn the lost situation. The gap between her past situation and the new one is large; that is why it leads up to an intense confusion about her identity. She does not know what to believe and she therefore doubts who she really is.

This scene is especially outstanding, because it clearly demonstrates the shock these children experience. Consequently life has turned upside down and changed for good from one moment to the other. This happens also to stolen child Victoria Donda (2010) who after she experiences the same shock, during months barely could eat, cried for days and who withdrew entirely from public life. It took a year before she could dedicate herself to her political work again. It was even more shocking for recovered twins Matías and Gonzalo Reggiardo Tolosa who were very happy with their raising family and suddenly were forced to live with another family when they

were just ten years old. Their whole life changed, they were moreover mostly scared to lose their raising parents.<sup>15</sup>

In the next three paragraphs follows a short synopsis of the film. The protagonist of *Cautiva* Cristina Quadri is fifteen years old when she finds out she is the child of two missing persons. Her real name is Sofia Lombardi. Cristina, confused and upset, does not know what to believe and only wants to go home to her “adoptive” parents. However, she is forced to live with her biological grandmother Elisa who has been looking for her for the past sixteen years. When she meets her grandmother for the first time, she runs away and takes the first train she can get. After she has called her mother, her father picks her up. Nevertheless, the federal police arrive before leaving and a policeman explains he has an order for the detention of Pablo Quadri, Cristina’s raising father. At the courthouse judge Barrenechea explains to Cristina’s “adoptive” parents that her birth certificate is an invalid, false document. Therefore, Cristina will be a ward of the state until the situation is solved.

At the beginning Cristina is hurt and confused, but eventually she starts the search for her past and to find out how much her “adoptive” parents actually knew about this. Together with friend Angélica, who has also a disappeared father, she starts investigating the truth about herself and her real family. Soon they find out that her parents were first taken to the Moron Police station and subsequently brought to the detention centre *La Chave*. Moreover, Angélica arranges a meeting with nurse Martha who worked in the hospital in the Olmos Penitentiary sixteen years ago and who was one of the last persons that saw Cristina’s mother alive. She tells them that Cristina’s pregnant mother was brought in blindfolded on a gurney and that she had to help deliver the baby. One of the rules was that they were not allowed to talk to the detainees, however Martha quietly told Cristina’s mother that her baby was a girl.

Cristina’s mother whispers to the nurse that her daughter’s name is Sofia Lombardi and then begs her to bring the baby. Martha told she was moved to see mother and daughter together. When she secretly goes to the woman the next day, she is gone. She saw blood on the sheets and a message written on the wall: “Agustín Lombardi, Sofia Lombardi nació, te quiero, Leticia”. That is why Martha knew exactly who Cristina’s parents were. She remembered the exact day of birth, because

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<sup>15</sup> <<http://www.diarioperfil.com.ar/edimp/0323/articulo.php?art=11729anded=0323>>, consulted on June 21, 2011.

of the cheering on television owing to the winning World Cup. Cristina asks if she recognizes someone on the picture she brought along. Martha points at a man that probably took the baby. She named him “Tuco” (glowworm) and informs her that there were good ones and bad ones and that Tuco was one of the worst. Everybody feared him. Cristina realizes the man she is describing is her godfather Jorge Macias, a very good friend of her “adoptive” father.

The central themes of *Cautiva* are the quest for the true identity and how to keep one’s head above water. Christina is merely fifteen years old when everything she was sure of in life turns out to be a delusion. She feels she is captured in a web of lies. Her parents had never told her she was not their real child and when they submit, they still distort the truth. The trust is extremely harmed and the girl feels miserable. Suddenly her real parents are dead and her raising parents are involved in illegal practices. She is messed up in a struggle with her true self and the ones who pretended they were her parents. Therefore reality becomes more blurred than ever. In the first section I therefore pay attention to these identity struggles and to the importance of having contact with other children of disappeared parents. Besides that, Christina finds herself in a confused and sad situation, which bears reference to the second theme I discuss: the experience of loss. Christina has to face a lost situation. The film suggests that the collective experience of loss is a significant way of coping. How Christina manages her new situation together with other people forms the second section of this chapter.

### **Section 1: Identity, what has changed and what to do next?**

According to James Fearon (1999) the notion of identity is a commonly used concept that has many definitions. In the article “What is Identity, as we use the word now?” Fearon sums up about fourteen different used definitions of scholars, to show the complexity of the concept that differs in what context you use it and varies from time to time. He managed to define the concept in a way that all types and forms of identity fit in the definition. He argues that the concept in the first sense refers “simply to a social category, a set of persons marked by a label and distinguished by rules deciding membership and (alleged) characteristic features or attributes. In addition, in the second sense of a personal identity, an identity is some distinguishing

characteristic (or more than one) that a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential but more-or-less unchangeable” (1999: 2-3).

To give a more extensive definition of the latter, as stated by Fearon the personal identity is “a set of attributes, beliefs, desires, or principles of action that a person thinks distinguish him or her in socially relevant ways (...) and form the basis for his or her dignity or self-respect” (1999: 11). There are thus two meanings: it refers to both social categories (and social identity refers to the membership in a social category) as to an individual’s self-respect. In some contexts identity can refer to characteristics and does not fit in terms of a “social category” and in other contexts social categories can be seen as identities, whereas there is no connection to the individual or personal identity. Nevertheless, these two senses of identity can be indirectly intertwined with each other, as social identity constitutes personal identity (Fearon 1999: 3, 14, 16).

In *Identity and Modernity in Latin America* Jorge Larrain (2000: 24) elaborates on the construction of identity, in the course of which he mentions three component parts that influence the construction of identity. These are the need of people to be part of groups with specific characteristics (Fearon’s “social category”), to have certain material goods and “the other”. However, in this part I merely examine the first and the last. Beginning with the third component, which consists of the “other” (e.g. parents, friends, the state etc.) and his opinion, implying that the other and what the other thinks about someone, influence the identity of such person. Thus, the self-image we create can be constructed through the opinion of others. Axel Honneth (1992) also endorses this in *The Struggle of Recognition* as he states the construction of identity is a process of mutual recognition between persons, which is expressed by means of (mutual) love and concerns of the needs of persons and (mutual) respect for the rights and contributions of the persons. Moreover, important is that self-recognition is the key to the formation of identity; self-recognition consists of three elements, namely self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem, which thus together form self- recognition (1992: 92-95, 129).

However, the formation of the identity can be problematic and can create social conflicts, the result being that a person experiences difficulties with maintaining



the three-abovementioned elements. According to Honneth there are three forms of disrespect, which are also the counterparts of the three components that together form one's self-recognition. I only pay attention to the one that harms the second form "self-respect", because the other two are less or not applicable to the main figure in the film. This form of disrespect implies that when a person is systematically and structurally excluded from having certain rights the self-respect of a person can be extremely damaged, which results in a problematic construction of the identity. This is also the case with Christina in the film. Her raising parents have systematically and structurally excluded their "adoptive" daughter from the right to know her biological family and the possibility to remember the past, or in other words from the right to know the truth. They more or less erased her past and lied about it during her life. A logical consequence is that if a person found out that he has been restrained to discover his true origin and moreover that he has been lied to about it, developing a well-integrated identity could work out problematically, due to the fact that the self-respect is harmed.

The case with Christina is that she feels betrayed by her parents because they have excluded her from the right to know the truth and therefore she cannot trust them anymore. In addition, she does not know to whom she has to turn with her problems. Because her self-respect is damaged, she has the feeling that she must make a "new" start to figure out who her raising parents exactly are, who her true family is, what they have done and thereby she also has to find out how to reconstruct her self-respect. Furthermore, she is forced to live with other people than her raising parents, therefore she must rediscover where to find love, trust and safety in this environment, surrounded by new people and new rules. To put it briefly, her life has been disturbed and changed for good and she realizes she has to follow a new route. To sort out what is going on and to rebuild her self-respect, Christina is obliged to do research and to approach people who might be able to help her.

Therefore, one of the first things she does when she knows she is a child of *desaparecidos* is making contact to another child of disappeared namely Angélica. She is aware that Angélica has also a disappeared father and she hopes the girl can help reconstructing her past. Angélica is very friendly and genuine and immediately

throws herself into this case. It is obvious that she has more experience with it, for she has already found records, newspapers and witnesses of Christina's parents' disappearance after a few days. Angélica also participates in a group with other children of missing parents that frequently come together in a secret basement. Christina also becomes part of this group. This new situation therefore could lead to a new environment. Particularly being part of a group or category with members that have the same difficulties can be very supportive for people who have struggles constructing the personal identity or whose identity has been damaged. As already mentioned above, Larrain (2000) also claims that being part of an imagined category is one of the component parts that would positively influence the identity formation. This membership can be especially suitable for children of disappeared in Argentina - or other countries - that have to overcome struggles for recognition and identity. Thus there are two imagined categories for Christina, the one with her raising family, of which she was part of until she found out she was illegally adopted and another one of which she becomes part after the disclosure. The film thereby demonstrates that the first category becomes less valuable than the new imagined category, the latter being a "better" place, which has been idealised and justified through disdaining the other.

For many children of disappeared the collective identity becomes important when they start "looking" for their own identity within social movements, just like H.I.J.O.S.: a movement dedicated to the search for identity, demanding for justice and against forgetting and silence.<sup>16</sup> It is not explicitly mentioned that the organization in the film that Angélica and Christina are part of is H.I.J.O.S., but the group also constitutes of children of disappeared parents. Within this movement the members are able to form both a collective as well as an individual identity. Fearon (1999) also argues there is always an implicit linkage between these two; a collective identity can be part of a personal identity. Polletta and Jasper (2001: 285) have defined this notion of collective identity as "an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and it is distinct from personal identities, although it may be part of a personal identity". The function of being part of such organizations for Christina is that it can help recovering her individual identity and self-respect, and the membership

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<sup>16</sup> <<http://www.hijos-capital.org.ar/>>, consulted on February 1, 2011.

simultaneously lead to a collective or social identity. However, it is important to note that membership of this imagined category is merely a surrogate for her lost situation. The film thus again represents that the “old” situation has to be substituted because it has been considered inferior to the new surrogate situation.

The collective search for identity is also a perspective of new social movements that were created since the eighties (Laraña et al. 1994: 10) and H.I.J.O.S. is one of these. Although the members of H.I.J.O.S. created a collective identity - they were all children of the disappeared and in most cases found out who they were when they already had grown up - the individual identity also played an important role in the association. The relation between the collective and individual identity became more or less blurred. As Laraña et al. also points out with regard to new social movements and what also can be applied to H.I.J.O.S. “(...) the movement becomes the focus for the individual’s definition of himself or herself, and action within the movement is a complex mix of the collective and individual confirmations of identity” (1994: 8). Thus as we can see, through participating in a social movement Christina seems to confirm and justify her new identity.

The members are thus searching for their individual identity through participating in the movement and at the same time they are creating a collective identity. This collective identity is again important for the collective action (Holland et al. 2008: 97). Melucci (1995) also emphasizes the importance of identity for the solidarity within the group and for individual belonging. For the members of H.I.J.O.S., or other similar organizations, sharing their memories and struggles through participating in activities plays thus an important role for the strengthening of the solidarity and for both the individual as the collective identity. Thus, the collective struggle for memory is important for the construction of an identity. *Cautiva* therefore seems to contribute to a solution of how to overcome struggles for identity of children of disappeared in case of having rejected the old situation. However, it is also possible that children of disappeared do not choose to substitute the situation with their raising parents simply because they do not consider it to be bad, or because they cannot identify themselves with *hijos*.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In Chapter 2 and 3 I extend on other possible ways of experience.

## Section 2: Loss and comfort, the crucial role of the other

As already mentioned above, main character Christina approaches another child of disappeared parents when she has found out that she is one too. Although it is hard to believe she is, she still has to deal with the new situation. Christina's biological parents are dead and her "adoptive" parents might have played a part in their death or are somehow involved. However, it is even more traumatic that her raising parents are not her real parents. Initially she is afraid that she is going to lose them, as they might have to spend some years in prison for illegal appropriation. The shocking information about her "adoptive" family changes her life. She has to cope with the lost situation, although this is mostly an intern process, extern factors also play a significant role in the recovery. This already became evident in the previous section, in which I showed that being part of a group could help reconstructing one's identity. For people that are faced with a traumatic experience it is important that they are taking action; it does not matter whether this is only a simple action like calling someone or an extensive activity like signing up for a three-week class (Janoff-Bulman 1992).

Other persons not only play a crucial role in one's identity construction, but also for one's recovery of a traumatic event and during a mourning process. Through taking action people find out that life is still worth it, which is usually because of the positive feedback they receive from other persons. Taking action contributes to a feeling that the world is not meaningless, because being part of an activity produces results that are worth it (Janoff-Bulman 1992). Action will not take away the pain or the trauma, but in time it will ease the negative emotion. This is also what we see in *Cautiva*. Christina exposes herself to Angélica. This happens first in a literally way, when they are facing each other under the shower after having played volleyball. The camera gives a shot of the two vulnerable naked girls from the side, which marks the beginning of a deeper metaphorical exposure of Christina's life. Angélica's social support helps her to go on during her mourning process, as her new friend is eager to assist Christina with recovering her psychological well-being. There are different sources of support that Christina receives in the film that helps her to recognize her situation. Her friend Angélica for example gives her information about what happened to many people during the military dictatorship in their country. She gives

her concrete data about her missing parents, including the place where they were arrested, the police station where they stayed and the detention centre where they were detained. The information confirms that her raising parents are not her real parents.

Moreover, Angélica assorts numbers that were given to prisoners and who could be witnesses of her parents' captivity and eventually she also arranges a meeting with one of these witnesses. This type of support is classified "informational support", which implies information that will help for a better understanding and to cope better with a problem (Janoff-Bulman 1992). For Christina this is all significant information that helps her to accept and understand that her lost situation is real. Important here is the informational (also instrumental) support the doctor provides, through giving the results of the DNA test that proves that her "adoptive" parents are not her true parents. In addition, also grandmother Elisa gives relevant information that helps Christina; she tells a lot about her biological parents' past, which makes her even more realize her raising parents are not her real parents and that she finds herself in a lost situation. In fact, the information also contributes to the acceptance of the surrogate situation with the new family.

Another type of support is social companionship (Janoff-Bulman 1992), which Christina finds at her aunt's, uncle's and cousins' place. The visits are informal activities that provide pleasure: they have dinner in the garden, they laugh and they play football together. Christina feels like she has a real trusty family and the support gives her courage to go on without her raising parents. Her biological family, including her grandmother, also provides esteem support, which entails that they give her information that she is worth it, esteemed and accepted in the family. They impress her she is always welcome at their place, to ask help for anything. Christina accepts this warm-hearted gesture and visits her family more often. Her family tells about her real parents and provides her the music collection of the Beatles that were once her mother's. The last form of support can also be subdivided in instrumental support, which consists of people who help one another with needed services (Janoff-Bulman 1992). Other instrumental support that grandmother Elisa provides is offering her the home where her real mother used to live, new clothes and other material resources that will help to rebuild her life.

Christina is fifteen years old when she finds out that her real parents have been disappeared and her raising parents are not her real parents. Her experience of this

loss is immense, for she finds herself in a situation without parents. She asks her grandmother if the disappearance is forever, however, her grandmother does not respond, Christina therefore starts crying in the arms of her grandmother, which the more emphasizes her lost situation: she really is alone now, her raising parents are gone and she thus has no parental figures in her life anymore. The sadness seems to be eternal. However, Bonanno (2009) states that sadness because of loss, like all other emotions, is ephemeral, although it seems to last long at the moment of sorrow, it will always ease. Hence, sadness is not the only emotion people have during the mourning process; one could also experience positive emotions like happiness and gaiety. Mourning therefore does not imply an endless road of being sad all the time, instead, mourning people do have moments, days or weeks of happiness, which make them see that the mourning process may end some day (Bonanno 2009: 33, 43).

This is also depicted in the film: Christina experiences moments and days of happiness: especially when she is at her aunt's and uncle's house, she is laughing with her family, playing piano with her grandmother, in sum, she is having good times. However, the image created here also resembles that of a perfect "happy family", it thereby seems that Biraben intended to emphasize that the biological family is more valuable than the raising family and that the former is best for Christina's recovery. Christina's experience of loss is thus not merely a sad experience, which in general belief is expected, but it also entails periods of rehabilitation, the latter particularly being when she is with her biological family. The whole social world has changed for Christina: the relationships with her raising parents, with old friends and old family members are being ignored, and new friends and her biological family comes to the foreground. Therefore, it is not a strange phenomenon that other emotions than sadness appear, as all these changes produce a variety of emotional reactions (Bonanno 2009). Nevertheless, the film makes us believe that these positive emotions mainly appear when Christina is with her biological family. The film therefore creates an image, in which the traditional biological family, from which the victim has been deprived, is being romanticized and idealized. Afterwards, it suddenly seems that Christina's raising within the lost family always has been bad.

Bonanno furthermore argues that the mourning process implicates a regular oscillation (like waves), which implies an alternation between a "loss-oriented" period and a "restoration-oriented" period (2009: 41). The first one focuses on the loss experience and lost situation, the latter focuses on life – and how to go on – with the

lost situation. In the film Christina finds herself in a period during which she needs to find out everything about her disappeared parents to seek confirmation that her raising parents are truly not her real parents. First, she has to be acquainted with the fact that she has other parents than she has always thought, then she has to deal with the fact that the raising parents are “gone” and most important, that the parental safety is absent forever. She thus experiences a loss-oriented period during which she only focuses on her lost situation with her lost family. Although the film mostly encircles around this period, there are moments that Christina also finds herself in the “restoration-oriented” period as described above: she experiences how life could be at her “new” family’s place as she might be going to live with her aunt, uncle and cousins in the near future. The film has an open end, yet it is clearly suggested that Christina is going to live with her biological family. Therefore, she will soon accept and substitute the lost situation.

Bonanno found out after many years of research that there are three common patterns of mourning, the “chronic grief” – about ten to fifteen percent of mourning people suffer terribly from chronic pain, by which it is impossible to go back to a normal daily routine as before the loss and who experience a significant change of life and identity –; the “recovery” – people that at first suffer a lot, but experience that they can slowly go on with life – and the “resilience” pattern, that consists of people who cope very affectively, they do suffer, but manage to go on with life soon (2009: 6-7, 53-54). Bonanno reveals that this “resilience” pattern is the rule rather than the exception (2009: 47). Given these facts, it thus seems that Christina also suffers the resilience pattern. Although we do not know for sure whether she does, Biraben suggests that she will cope well because she is surrounded with her biological family. That is, after Christina just has discovered the truth about her life, she is confused and sad. However, she has enough energy to approach other people to help her to move forward. Although there are moments of sadness, she seems to manage her feelings well and with the support of relatives and new friends she experiences she is not alone and rediscovers a new reliable world.

The reason that mourning people often deal so well with loss, is because they are “well equipped”: most people are able to feel and express sadness and to think positive, when they do this they thus often experience a better recovering of the mourning process. They are able to look inwardly, to reflect and to adapt oneself to life with loss and they talk about the lost situation, their pain, struggles and the care

they need during the mourning process (Bonano 2009: 78, 198). This also happens to Christina: she is able to cope well because she has the skills to survive and to ask help when needed. She distances herself from her raising family and finds comfort with her biological family and within the social movement.

## **Conclusion**

Biraben creates a specific image of the identity struggles and mourning processes of children of disappeared. He thereby indicates that this generation mainly could seek safety in each other, through participating in social movements, in which they are able to develop oneself into a new person with a new (surrogate) identity, different from the ones they constructed within their raising families. They have been urged to do this, since their raising parents have damaged their self-respect. At the same time, it is suggested that the option to choose for a “new” life, obviously will lead to a happy existence. Biraben thereby clearly indicates that the biological family and – growing up within this family – is of great importance and withal indirectly demonstrates that everything with regard to the raising family is bad, keeping in mind the fact that these children had been illegally adopted, against the will of the true parents.

Therefore an image is created of Christina being unhappy, sad and angry and feeling insecure due to the lost situation owing to her raising parents. The disclosure of the truth implies that she has to mourn the lost situation, which is that her whole social world has changed and she has no parents anymore. According to Biraben knowing and revealing the truth is significant. He however loses sight of the fact that the child might have been happy with its “adoptive” parents and therefore will find itself in a very difficult situation. At first, *Cautiva* exactly points to the immense shock these children experience; however, it does not examine what these children really want, because they have no choice. That is why they are just children, they are being forced to change the situation: living with a new strange family, which however (in this case) seems to work out all right. Christina therefore takes the path toward a new home: with her friend Angélica (and the new social category) and her biological family. Thus, this new situation has been justified through rejecting and looking down on the raising family.



## Chapter 3. *Eva y Lola*

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### Introduction

In *Eva y Lola* (2010, Argentina, Sabrina Farji) two young women found out that their life stories are even closer than they thought. The friends not only share the same passion, performing on stage, but apart from that also a part of their history, as they are both children of disappeared. *Eva y Lola* came out in 2010 and proves that the “children of disappeared” case is more than ever a current topic that nowadays attracts the attention of viewers all over the world as it is featured at film festivals in the USA, Europe and Latin America.<sup>18</sup> The narration is based on true stories of Victoria Donda and Victoria Griguera Dupuy, as a result of which the film gives a trustful representation of the different struggles concerning identity and loss. Director Sabrina Farji gives insight into the difficult problems that a child of disappeared runs into; she thereby represents the shock, the dilemmas and the consequences of the children’s choices for themselves and their family.

The film contains different important scenes; there is however one scene in particular that exactly indicates the essence of this specific case. It is another day in theatre, Eva has just arrived and Lola is already waiting for her. In the dressing room Lola shows some new dresses, but suddenly changes the subject saying she is happy with her family and that “no one has the right to remove me from my family”. Eva responds that she has already been taken away from her family. Lola however does not care and underlines that they have raised her and contributed to the person she is nowadays. There is nothing wrong with “adoption”, she continues, it is a good case, because she is happy. When Eva reminds her of the significant difference between adoption and appropriation, implying that exactly her “parents” has taken her from her real family, Lola replies she does not want to argue about the truth. Eva thereby indicates she just cannot face it.

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<sup>18</sup> <[http://iffmh.de/en/Comp\\_Eva\\_y\\_Lola](http://iffmh.de/en/Comp_Eva_y_Lola)>; <<http://www.evaylola.blogspot.com/>>, consulted on July 29, 2011.

Then, Lola angrily reacts to her friend that she herself has neither accepted the truth; the fact is that making daily imaginary phone calls with a disappeared father has everything to do with losing sight of reality. Due to this conversation both women are exactly confronted with the truth and they therefore feel miserable, reality turns out to be really hard. Especially this scene is important because it mainly contains a significant element that gives the film a twist concerning this case, which is the child's love for the raising parents. Although they have illegally appropriated her, it does not mean the raising as such was also bad. However, it is hard to accept she has no real parents and at that moment also no real family anymore. Eva finds herself in a similar situation, which is she has also no parents. Both girls are confronted with a lost situation.

*Eva y Lola* takes place in the period between Christmas and New Year's Eve in Buenos Aires. Best friends Eva and Lola are preparing a punk rock cabaret performance for a theatre show in Deluxe and spend a lot of time together on stage. It is during this time that Eva finds out that her friend Lola is an *hija de desaparecidos*, when she reads in the newspaper that Lola's raising father Attilo del Cerro tried to commit suicide. This attempt succeeded after the disclosure of his involvement during the military dictatorship, during which he was implicated in the kidnapping of newborns of imprisoned women and other crimes against humanity. Del Cerro was a prison camp commander, known as "the Bear" who, together with his wife, had illegally appropriated baby girl Lola. Eva, whose father also had been disappeared during this terrible regime and whose mother has passed away only a few years ago, does everything to help her friend accepting the truth.

The girls share a similar fate, since they both belong to the generation of children of disappeared. At first, Lola cannot really accept she is a stolen child; she thinks it belongs to the past and she is fine with the situation staying the same. Moreover, she loves her raising parents and does not want to hurt them. In spite of her refusal to get to know her real family and real past, she nevertheless feels uncomfortable that her real family might be looking for her and that she is simply ignoring it. Together with Eva she has her blood taken for a DNA test and eventually meets her real grandmother. Eva, on the contrary, has accepted that her father has been disappeared. Since her mother has passed away she lives with her homosexual uncle. However, she feels really alone. Therefore when she is on her own, she makes imaginary phone calls with her deceased father.

*Eva y Lola* contributes to the understanding of struggles of children of disappeared. Already in the previous chapter it appeared that they experience an immense shock, when they found out in which position they are. Different from *Cautiva*, *Eva y Lola* gives insight into another possible reaction of these children, although they are in fact shocked, they are also really loyal to their raising family. Nevertheless, Lola is faced with difficult choices, prior to the decision to choose a specific route. Soon, it becomes entirely clear that, taking into account Donda's story, there are different paths these children enter. *Eva y Lola* demonstrates these ways and reveals different expressions of mourning, in the course of which also appear different routes, which could be linked with the ones they eventually select. Thus, we are also introduced to Lola's mourning process, who especially reveals always having been happy, and now is really confused, but still wants to go on how she is started. Besides that, there is also another side of the story, regarding children who experience a lot of anger and sadness and therefore want to distance themselves from their raising parents, because they think that the raising was bad from the moment it started owing to bad intentions. Then, the last theme comes to the foreground, which is the point of view of the raising parents (and supporters of military values) to "adopt" these children and whether it can be considered successfully or not.

### **Section 1: The shock, the dilemma and the new route**

Given that *Eva y Lola* is based on the story of Victoria Donda and her friend "Vicky" or Victoria Griguera, I therefore use the story of Donda as a guideline to analyze the film. Donda, who in the first 27 years of her life listened to the name Analía found out that she was a child of disappeared parents in 2003, the year that marks the beginning of an arduous period of identity struggles and searching for the truth. Victoria was born in the *Escuela de Suboficiales de Mecánica de la Armada* (ESMA, Navy Mechanics School), a facility of the Argentine navy that was used as an illegal detention centre. Her mother Cori was five months pregnant when she disappeared. Testimonies of survivors elucidated that Cori gave birth to a girl in the ESMA in 1977 when her brother-in-law was the head of the intelligence service. Lidia Vieyra who was imprisoned together with Victoria's mother, explained that when the girl was born, Cori was strong enough to call her "Victoria" and she had wired a blue thread

through her earlobes, in hopes that someone would once recognize her daughter (Donda 2010).

Victoria's case is especially outstanding, because her biological uncle Adolfo Donda was involved in the disappearance, torture and murder of his own brother (her father) José María and sister-in-law (her mother) Cori. Moreover, Analía was a leftist militant activist, implying that this is the first case in the course of which a leftist activist daughter of a retired military man was at the same time a child of disappeared parents (Donda 2010). At the faculty of law Donda met Griguera who would later become one of her best friends. However their relationship started pretty complicated, as Griguera was the daughter of a disappeared (like Eva in the film) and Donda had a military family (Lola's role is based on Donda). At the time they both had no idea that they shared a history: the father of Griguera and the mother of Donda were both imprisoned in the ESMA.<sup>19</sup>

The consequential enforced psychological legacy of being a child of disappeared people has its dark sides. In *Eva y Lola* Lola encounters various intricate identity struggles when she found out she is a child of *desaparecidos*. It starts with the immense shock that she might be a child of disappeared, which in fact means she has no parents anymore; she is on her own now. It is because of this realization that she turns her back on the whole issue to move one, because why would she voluntarily distinguish herself from her raising parents if she is happy with them? Her best friend Eva however stresses the fact that her behaviour is in conflict with the truth. This new situation leads to confusion and disorder in her life. It is actually hard enough that her raising father tried to commit suicide. Lola experiences similar intense feelings like Donda: at the beginning, it is hard to accept that her life has suddenly changed drastically. Donda could neither believe what was happening. She felt her whole life was turned upside down; from one moment to the other her raising father had been changed from a businessman into a former tormentor, who eventually was not even her real father (Donda 2010: 18-19). This is exactly the case with Lola.

In the film Lola states that her "adoptive" parents raised her well, she moreover believes that her "adoption" is a good case, because they have made her happy and most important of all they contributed to the person she is nowadays, which in fact stresses the essence other "children" also might experience. Still, facing

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<sup>19</sup> <<http://www.hcdiputados-ba.gov.ar/asuntos/asuntos13533.pdf>>, consulted on July 29, 2011.

the truth of not being the child of her raising parents causes doubts about the identity. Although this whole situation at first leads to a temporary identity crisis due to the feeling to be deceived and torn in parts, in the end it turns out that the real “self” has not really changed a lot. However, the time between the first signs of an identity crisis and the realization of being mostly the “same” takes time and entails a lot of confusion and powerlessness. In *Mijn naam is Victoria* (My name is Victoria) Donda (2010) explains she was inwardly torn because of the new situation; she had to divide it in little pieces, because she could not handle the situation all at once. She had to straighten out for herself who she was first. The shock because of the changed situation and of suddenly “being another person” also took a lot of time for Claudia Poblete – formerly Mercedes Beatriz Landa – child of disappeared parents, as she states in an interview:

It took me six months to take the decision to change my name. For a while, it was like having a split personality. I behaved in one way at home and in another way outside, maintaining Claudia and Mercedes as two separate people. It was only with time - and I continue to struggle with this even now - that I felt that I was only one person and could accept myself as such.<sup>20</sup>

Like Donda she had to combine the new “I” and the old “I”, which was difficult because she felt the old “I” was based on lies. It turned out to be difficult to talk about her past as a reality, although she did experience it as such. Reality thus became blurred, which made everything even tougher (Donda 2009: 201-205). However, eventually she discovered that Analía and Victoria are one and the same person; a conclusion Lola also draws in the film before even knowing her real origin. After children of disappeared have experienced the first shock of “having no parents anymore” and “who actually am I?” they encounter a second identity struggle, implying the dilemma of what to do next.

After months of intense emotions during which Donda would rather hide herself to “protect” her from the past, she finally felt strong enough and decided to have a DNA test done, so that the truth would come to the fore. In fact, Donda (and other children of disappeared) do not have the choice to do this test, because the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* are able to enforce DNA testing through taking the case to

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<sup>20</sup> <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2007/aug/04/familyandrelationships.family2>>, consulted on June 21, 2011.

court.<sup>21</sup> However, the *Abuelas*' sense of humanity lets Donda take the decision, which in this case turned out well. In the film Lola also experiences this difficult "choice". The fact is she thinks she betrays her raising parents, if she agrees to search for the truth about herself and her real family: she really loves them, therefore why would she put herself first? They have always treated her right; hence she does not want to injure the harmony within her family and contribute to losing them. On the other side, her biological family has probably been looking for her since she was born and she cannot suppress the curious feeling inside to find her real family. Lola is confronted with the dilemma to start the search for her biological family (including doing a DNA test voluntarily) or not, which at the same time would imply an accusation against her raising parents for withholding the truth about the identity and the appropriation of a child. Especially the latter is the hardest reason that initially restrained her from making the decision, because it would even confirm what her raising parents have done.

This is also one of the identity struggles recovered children have to cope with. In her writing Donda (2010) narrates about the fear she felt before deciding to have her blood taken. At first, it was an almost impossible decision; she could not do the test because of fear for the consequences for her "adoptive" family who might end up in prison. On the contrary, deciding not to do a test was in fact out of the question, since she would never know her real origin. Poblete also experienced such a dilemma stating: "To begin with, I wanted to protect them, I was afraid of what could happen to them. Later on, I managed to make them feel responsible for their actions and to make them understand that they could face a trial for the decision to keep me the way they did".<sup>22</sup> Deciding to choose for oneself or for the raising family thus becomes a big dilemma. A broadcast on television during which a grandmother emotionally expresses she is looking for her *nieta*, makes Lola realize she is one of the missing grandchildren and it therefore helps recognizing her situation. Paralyzed with sadness she visits Eva to let her hair dye, which symbolizes her changing identity and the acceptance of the truth. It thereby stresses the fact she is going to face a changed social circle of family.

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<sup>21</sup> <<http://www.elargentino.com/nota-66737-La-ley-de-ADN-Videla-y-el-caso-Noble.html>>, consulted on August 8, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2007/aug/04/familyandrelationships.family2>>, consulted on June 21, 2011.

As we have seen the generation of recovered children has to cope with different difficult dilemmas with regard to identity. Lola and Donda experienced it as an almost impossible choice to condemn the persons they have always called “mum” and “dad”. The voluntary decision to do a DNA test would according to their view imply renouncing their biological family, which does not merely consist of their *apropiadores*, but also of brothers, sisters, grandparents and other family members. However, when Lola eventually decided to do the test, she is somehow relieved, which Donda (2010) in her case explains as finally having decided to start a new life and to participate in social and political life again. It confirms they have chosen to follow a specific path: searching for the real family and finally meeting the biological family.

However, finding the truth for children of disappeared does not always mean they distance themselves from their raising family. Now that they know who they are, they have to deal with two families. It usually begins with meeting the biological family, which also happens in the film. In the last scene Eva has arranged a meeting with Lola’s biological grandmother Azusana. Lola and her grandmother walk away from the camera; Eva however approaches the camera putting a note with number 299 on it. This is a fictive number that implies that in the film there are still 299 children that have not yet been recovered. Earlier in the film Eva indicates that there are still 300 missing children. Now that Lola has been recovered, there are still 299 to go. Like *La historia oficial* and *Cautiva* this film has an open end that symbolizes again the uncertain future of this generation of which in fact about 400 children have not yet been recovered.<sup>23</sup>

Lola gets the opportunity to meet her grandmother and in the future possibly other members of the family. However, it does not always work out this way as in some cases members of the real family could have been passed away, live abroad or do not share the same willingness to reconcile with the other. A consequential difficulty around the struggle for identity therefore could imply that, like in the case with Donda, her sister Daniela does not want to have anything to do with her real parents and her true sister. She blames them (the parents) for rather being involved in criminality than in raising their own children. According to her they would have abandoned her (Donda 2010: 197). In contrary to Donda’s opinion (represented by

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<sup>23</sup> <<http://www.abuelas.org.ar/>>, consulted on February 1, 2011.

Eva's view in the film), Daniela believes their *apropiadores* did nothing wrong (like Lola's view). Hence, another consequential problem is that her sister does not want to give her the only remaining pictures of their biological father, which eventually would lead Donda to institute proceedings against her. Donda thereby indicates that the sister she grew up with is more a sister to her than her biological sister (Donda 2010: 58). Obviously, this is not a strange phenomenon as the two girls developed a close bond during their lives, which she does not have with her real sister who she only met a few times.

In spite of the urge to recover the real origin and meet her relatives, Lola has also no uncomfortable feelings toward her "adoptive" family. On the contrary, she wants to help them and even suggests talking with the judge to mitigate the circumstances. Although she still wants to meet her real family, it is thus not suggested she would distance herself from her raising parents. She in fact chooses to stay in between. Donda thereby explains that her "family" did not shrink, but actually grew bigger: without making any value judgement, she draws a distinction between her biological family and the family she grew up in. Because she loves both of them, just like Lola in the film, she refuses to choose sides (2010: 206). She thereby finds herself particularly surrounded by friends (like Vicky) that could be considered a substitute family for her. In contrast with her sister, Daniela stayed with her appropriators, just like twins Matías and Gonzalo Reggiardo Tolosa, other children of disappeared, who also preferred staying with their raising parents. They were forced to live with a biological uncle in 1993, which however turned out differently, because of their intense close bond with their "adoptive" parents and they therefore returned to their raising parents. Although they have contact with their biological family nowadays, they still maintain intense ties with their raising parents.<sup>24</sup> As the film also suggests, it is thus possible that these children choose to stay with their raising parents.

However, taking into account these two routes, they can also decide to go for the opposite way, like "stolen child" Horacio Pietragalla who distances himself from his raising parents stating in the documentary *The Disappeared* (2007, Argentina, Peter Sanders): "Solo les puedo agradecer por todo lo que fue material. Porque no les

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<sup>24</sup> <<http://lavueltaencontinental.blogspot.com/2009/03/matias-reggiardo-tolosa-ex-miara.html>>, <<http://edant.clarin.com/diario/96/08/26/melli.htm>>, <[http://www.perfil.com/contenidos/2008/12/21/noticia\\_0032.html](http://www.perfil.com/contenidos/2008/12/21/noticia_0032.html)>, consulted on June 21, 2011.



puedo agradecer por haberme dado amor. Porque sinceramente, en este siempre me sentí solo. (...) Yo, 'mama' no le volvería a decir, porque no lo siento. No siento que sea mi madre" [I am grateful to my adoptive parents for giving me material things. But I can't thank them for giving me love. In that I've honestly always felt alone. (...) I couldn't call her "mum" again, because in my heart she is not my mother]. He furthermore blames his raising parents for withholding the truth and keeping him away from his biological family. It is thus evident that children of disappeared always have to make a choice: some choose to stay with their raising family, other children stay with their biological relatives and others choose to follow a path in between and thereby possibly take part in a surrogate family composed of friends or other people.

## **Section 2: Experiencing loss and sadness**

*Eva y Lola* gives a clear insight into the mourning processes of two young women. Yet there is a significant contrast, given that Eva, who was raised by her biological mother, has known her whole life that her father had been disappeared and Lola just found this out about her parents. Since Eva's mother passed away she realizes all the more that she is on her own now. The mourning process she experiences is therefore directed at overcoming both the grief due to the loss of her mother, as well as directed at the lost situation. The loneliness intensively affects her life. She is thus particularly sad because she has no parents anymore. The latter is the second similarity with Lola's experience. She just finds out that her parents are disappeared when she is already a mature woman. Her raising parents are not her true parents, they have illegally adopted her and they have distorted the truth during her whole life. This implies she also has no real parents; just like Eva she is on her own. This realization makes her want to go back to her "old" situation: just forgetting about what happened and moving on, because she does not want to lose her raising parents. Although the gap is much larger for Lola than for Eva, they both experience a changed situation and have to deal with a lost life.

Therefore, Eva and Lola spend days practising an act for a theatre performance, which mainly resembles a circus act. For them theatre is a way to make it through the mourning period during which they mostly feel alone; presented here is the struggle to overcome sadness and to accept their fate. Remarkable is that the two

women seek safety in the other, which again stresses the crucial role of the other (Janoff-Bulman 1992). Performing in theatre is also a metaphor for the struggle of their parents when they joined the politico-military organization the *Montoneros* in the last years of their lives (Donda 2010). Just like them, Eva and Lola seek publicity, although in a different way; they express the legacy imposed by the military regime through demonstrating dissatisfaction and struggles for identity. In this way they thus continue fighting for their rights and at the same time they break the silence, the permanent restriction imposed on their parents. In their act they perform “*La niña rabiosa*” (The anger child) (Deborah Turza), a song that might have been written for them, two children of disappeared. The song refers to the theme of being an “angry” stolen child, not able to endure its fate, however there is no other possible way than to accept it. This also happened to Eva and Lola at the end of the show when they appear in their underwear, marking a literally exposure and submission to the truth.

A parallel can also be drawn between this performance and *Vic y Vic*, a show based on Donda and Griguera’s stories, which was performed in *Teatro por la Identidad* in 2007 en 2009. This theatre is oriented toward depicting themes of trauma, memory and identity, particularly focussing on children of disappeared.<sup>25</sup> These and other post conflict narratives<sup>26</sup> are mostly oriented at showing the sad “stolen child” who tells about its parents’ brave life, the importance about the truth, how much it misses life with a parent, it even confuses its sadness of lost life with grief of its missing parents. In many documentaries these “children” often visit the detention centres where their parents spend their last moments of their lives. Inside these places they show where exactly the parents were tortured and moreover (in case of having been born in captivity) where they themselves were born.<sup>27</sup> They also visit memorial places, which also appear in *Eva y Lola*: the two friends search for the names of their parents on a wall in the *Parque de la Memoria* (Memorial Park). Doing this they confront themselves with the lost life due to the fact that they have no parents anymore. These narratives suggest that these children try to create a bond with their deceased parents, to understand their choices and to feel what their parents must have felt; they thus try to restore their “stolen” lives and those of their parents.

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<sup>25</sup> <<http://www.teatroxlaidentidad.net/>>, consulted on July 20, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> *The Disappeared* (2007), *Our Disappeared/Nuestros Desaparecidos* (2008), *Victoria* (2008), *Mijn naam is Victoria* (2010) and *¿Quién soy yo?* (2007).

<sup>27</sup> *Victoria* (2008), *The Disappeared* (2007).

However, they are being disappointed, because creating a true bond with the deceased, just like reconstructing their lives, is not possible.<sup>28</sup>

Children of disappeared are in fact “forced” to mourn the people they do not know; as it is not possible to mourn people you do not know, the mourning process is therefore directed at the lost situation. They ease the pain of loss through finding comfort in things like pictures, diaries and memories about their parents or they seek salvation in friends, work, hobby or other activities. For instance, in the film Eva makes imaginary phone calls with her missing father, which at first sight seems to make her life less lonely and makes her feel she has a father. However, the more she makes the phone calls, the more she realizes she really is alone. She therefore spends days on the streets, or in the theatre with Lola. Hanging around the theatre is therefore an important way of release for both, doing an activity thereby contributes to overcome their struggles and to accept their destiny (Janoff-Bulman 1992).

The main reason why Lola is so scared and why she is experiencing an extremely painful and confusing period is because she is afraid of hurting her raising family when she makes contact with her biological family. Donda also had such a complicated relationship with her two families, not wanting to hurt or neglect either one of them. In the hardest period, Lola focuses therefore on theatre and Donda the more on her political work, which was the only thing that did not “collapsed like a house of cards” owing to the personal conviction the work was based on (Donda 206-207). In fact they continue their parents’ struggle and keep the memory alive: theatre becomes a way of memory and “not forgetting” and the political work contributes actively to a better life and social justice. It thus seems to be important to keep the “ordinary” things going on, for oneself and for society.

However, there is also another side of the story. In the previous section I already indicated the different routes these children could take. Lola puts her energy in theatre, not concerning about her origin a lot, she merely needs to continue being happy. Many post conflict narratives make us however believe that children of disappeared have suffered intensely during their whole life. When they found out they belong to the *generación robada* (stolen generation) it seems that they experienced a revaluation of their lives and they believe that in any case life would be much better if they had grown up with their biological family. In this case they thus oppose Lola

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<sup>28</sup> See chapter 4 *Los rubios*.

beliefs that her raising parents did a good job. Moreover, according to these children, growing up with their raising parents suddenly seem to have become bad.

For instance, Pietragalla, who thus experienced the mourning process differently than Lola and Donda, was not afraid of losing or hurting his raising parents; he only focused on his biological family and did not even consider the former family as family anymore. In *The Disappeared* he narrates about the hard period after the disclosure of being a stolen child, during which he mostly felt horrible, angry and sad because of the reason that his raising parents deprived him from his real family, as a result of which it is now too late to get acquainted with his grandparents - the people who were closest to his parents - because they are not alive anymore. He furthermore points out that he always had doubts about being his parents' child and that he always was very unhappy. In fact he is not sad because his biological parents are dead, but because he finds himself in a lost situation due to the loss of the raising parents.

Other "stolen children" can also identify with Pietragalla. For instance, Francisco Madariaga Quintela who experienced similar feelings after having been recovered by the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* in 2010 stating in a press conference that his life had always been a "dark story", during which he had to suffer from violence and lived with an "inexplicable void inside".<sup>29</sup> This is also comparable to Cabandié's feelings who believes he has always "missed" something in his life.<sup>30</sup> For these children there is no greater truth than that their raising parents are bad and their biological parents are good. Osorio seems to endorse this view who with her novel *Luz* (2000) also illustrates that children of disappeared are better off without their raising parents, demonstrating protagonist Luz being unhappy because of her raising parents who have illegally adopted her and treated her badly during her whole life.

It thus seems that, just like *Cautiva*, these narratives create a romanticized and idealised image of the traditional (biological) family and condemn the upbringing by the raising parents, whether the raising as such was bad or not. Doing this, Osorio and other filmmakers seem to lose their objectivity, because they condemn, afterwards, a situation (the raising) of which they actually do not know whether it would have been better if the circumstances were different. Comparing this to *Eva y Lola*, it appears that the film is more truthful than Osorios' and Sanders' reproduction, which could be

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<sup>29</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0iKF0wJ2MU>>, consulted on April 12, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Cabandié narrates about his doubts during his life in the documentary *¿Quién soy yo?* (2007, Argentina, Estela Bravo).

explained by the fact that *Eva y Lola* is constructed with the help of *hija* or “insider” Victoria Griguera and *The Disappeared* and *Luz* are created by “outsiders”.<sup>31</sup>

### **Section 3: The accused**

*Eva y Lola* gives a clear perception of what we consider “the perpetrators”: who are in this case the parents (particularly the father) of Lola. Her father, who mainly represents the culprits of the military regime, attempted to commit suicide, he however survived and is now chained to the hospital bed. Besides participating in illegally adopting children and thus stealing babies from their mothers, he also played a significant part in a detention centre where he had a responsible role as camp commander. Now that he is detained, he awaits a trial, during which he will be punished for his involvement. His biological daughter Alma - “adoptive” sister of Lola - played a crucial role in revealing the truth, as she charged him for having illegally adopted a baby. She was merely ten years old when her parents came home with a newborn baby and told her a stork had come by that night. Later, she found a letter of the true mother of Lola directed at her baby girl, which would later become evidence against her father. This situation in the film is similar to those of many offenders nowadays. During the nineties many of them were dispensed for trials. Given that, after the end of the military regime, the democratic governments of Argentina turned its back on society, as under president Raúl Alfonsín amnesty laws were enacted that protected many people responsible for both the disappearances, tortures and killings of around 30,000 victims, as well as those accountable for the appropriation of their children.

Although Jorge Videla and a dozen of other military men were already sentenced to life in prison in 1985, they were pardoned five years later by then president Carlos Menem. Yet between 1998 and 1999 a judge had ordered to detain many military men again, among them Jorge Videla, Reynaldo Bignone and Emilio Massera. Since the *Abuelas* found out that the impunity laws and the presidential pardons did not include baby theft and discovered that there was a systematic plan to steal babies from pregnant women, there was hope again that the perpetrators would

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<sup>31</sup> <<http://www.elsaosorio.com/blog/bio-bibliografia>>, <<http://www.thedisappearedmovie.com/espanol.html>>, consulted on July 29, 2011.

be punished (Van Drunen 2010). On February 28, 2011 Videla and Bignone appeared on court to face charges of baby theft.<sup>32</sup> Throughout the year, other trials have been planned, during which around 350 witnesses (about 800 hours of testimonies on video), among them survivors, family of disappeared and also *hijos*, will testify against them.<sup>33</sup> To date, July 16, 2011, 80 testimonies have been heard in trials against Videla, Bignone and six others charged for 34 cases of appropriation of minors.<sup>34</sup>

In the film *Lola* however still thinks it is unacceptable if her raising father will get punished, she would rather help him than testify against him. Although it is a bit naïve and protective, she thinks her parents did well when they decided to raise her. She possibly cannot really comprehend the situation and the other cases her father will be charged for. However, “adoptive” sister Alma could never accept that her parents did something horrible as stealing a child. As soon as she could, she left the parental home and she never came back. At the end of the film she gives Lola the letter of her true mother, which helps her to accept her situation and to start the search for her biological family.

Donda also finds it hard to understand that her beloved “adoptive” father is involved in crimes against humanity, but at least he admits he was involved. Different from the parents of Christina in *Cautiva*, the father of Lola admits he was wrong, yet Christina’s parents are acting completely innocent. In *La historia oficial* there is a dichotomy, as Alicia comes to realize she appropriated a child from its mother, in contrast with her husband who adopted military values to safe society, and thus believes he saved Gaby. The military and the fathers of all *hijas* in the films considered themselves protectors of the state and family and tradition were thereby of paramount importance. They thereby strongly believed that children had to be raised according to modern, Christian and western values, which they thought were absolutely not the criteria their “subversive” parents would educate them. It is because of this reason that they invented a plan to steal children from their pregnant

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<sup>32</sup> <[http://www.clarin.com/politica/Acusaron-Videla-robo-bebes-desaparecidos\\_0\\_436756361.html](http://www.clarin.com/politica/Acusaron-Videla-robo-bebes-desaparecidos_0_436756361.html)>, consulted on March 3, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> <[http://www.memoriaabierta.org.ar/materiales/pdf/la\\_construccion\\_del\\_archivo\\_oral.pdf](http://www.memoriaabierta.org.ar/materiales/pdf/la_construccion_del_archivo_oral.pdf)>, consulted on July 16, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> <<http://www.cij.gov.ar/nota-7292-Lesa-humanidad--cerca-de-80-testigos-ya-declararon-en-el-juicio-oral-por-robo-de-bebes.html>>, consulted on July 16, 2011.

mothers, who were kept alive until the baby had been born, after which they were killed or drugged and thrown alive in the ocean (CONADEP 1984). They took care of the child, giving it another name, birth license, family and so on, all with the reason to protect them from their “evil” parents.

However, many narratives demonstrate that these children do not agree with this, they are angry because they deprived them from their true families: sad because they are alone now, and because they do not know their family and moreover in some cases they will not even get the opportunity to meet them. Society enforces them to mourn their parents, but they cannot, which makes it even harder. They encounter various struggles and difficult periods during which they have to make intricate decisions that even more change their lives and destroy families for good. It is therefore open to question whether the military consider the task of saving them - the children of the disappeared - successful or not. Donda emphasizes comprehensibly that restraining children from their true identity and family could never be out of protection (Donda 2010: 74). In the broadcast *Mijn naam is Victoria* (My name is Victoria)<sup>35</sup> from the Dutch current affairs program *Netwerk* Donda demands all military men to be punished including all politicians who supported the regime. It is because of this reason that *hijos*, Leonardo Fossati and Manuel Goncalves appear on court to testify; the latter against his raising father, who is responsible for the death of his true father.<sup>36</sup>

The main films in this research give a specific image of the perpetrators; they both appear as careful parents (within the family to their “adoptive” child) as well as unsympathetic characters (when we find out they lie and committed crimes against innocents outside the family). Demonstrated is that they are considered family figures, the family regarded as the mainstay of society according to military perceptions. Yet, it is clearly presented that they belong to a dark part of history, a period that traumatized Argentina’s population. Especially *Cautiva* and *La historia oficial* contribute to this image depicting the appropriators as pervert figures and idealize the

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<sup>35</sup> <<http://www.netwerk.tv/uitzending/2010-02-15/victoria-donda-26-jaar-voorgelogen-geroofd-van-ontvoerde-ouders#>>, consulted on January 30, 2011.

<sup>36</sup> <[http://www.democracynow.org/2010/11/12/nieto\\_recuperado\\_born\\_to\\_parents\\_disappeared](http://www.democracynow.org/2010/11/12/nieto_recuperado_born_to_parents_disappeared)>, consulted on July 16, 2011.

biological family. *Eva y Lola* displays the raising parents as more human although the children of disappeared appear lonely and confused. So in both films that are created by “outsiders” (*Cautiva* and *La historia oficial*) as well as “insiders” (*Eva y Lola*) the stolen children do not seem to be “saved”.

## **Conclusion**

*Eva y Lola* demonstrates a variety of insights with respect to identity struggles. It therefore appears that children of disappeared are very upset when it is revealed they are *hijos*. Soon they realize, and this turns out to be a true shock, that they have no real parents anymore. These children therefore start doubting their own identity, because of the reason that their raising parents are not their real parents, therefore questions arise: to whom do I look like and who am I? Suddenly, the past has become vague and unreal. They experience a profound identity crisis. When they got over the first shock, they are focused on the “recuperation”, which occurs to be a problem. Voluntarily agreeing to do a DNA test is difficult because it also implies betraying the raising parents (and other members of the family), because there will be evidence against them for having illegally adopted a child, however, doing this will in fact expedite the recovery of the “self”. In some cases the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* let the child make the decision itself, in hopes of a positive result. In many other cases however, children are being enforced to do the test. Afterwards they decide which route to follow. This film gives mainly insight in the route “in between”; the child does not take sides between the raising family and the biological family. This leads to the conclusion that there are also paths that respectively lead to the raising family or to the biological family.

The film also demonstrates two choices with regard to experiences of loss. It shows that children of disappeared have difficulties with the lost situation; they therefore feel lonely or they are truly scared for the loneliness that awaits them. Lola is terrified that she will hurt her raising parents and therefore will lose them too. To cope with loss, Eva and Lola engage in theatre. Performing on stage is thereby a means to continue their parent’s struggle and “against silence and forgetting”. After having analyzed the film a second view is perceived, which is the possibility of the child to completely distance itself from its raising family. Afterwards, the latter is



being blamed for having destroyed the child's life and has become entirely bad. In some cases this would also lead to testifying against the raising parent. We already saw this negative image in the previous chapter. A consequent, more general conclusion is that *Eva y Lola* seems more realistic and veracious than narratives that are made by outsiders, which tend to demonstrate a lack of objectiveness and failure to exercise the necessary.

## Chapter 4. *Los rubios*

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### Introduction

*Los rubios* (The blonds) (2003, Argentina, Albertina Carri) is a mixture of a documentary and a drama film. The film is therefore different from the previous films that are considered fictional feature films. Besides that, it differs because the main figure is not born in captivity and illegally appropriated, but she was already three years old when her parents disappeared. Nevertheless I have chosen for this film, because it clearly portrays similar difficulties that the “children” also have in the other films. *Los rubios* is a reflection on the loss of protagonist and director Albertina Carri’s parents. Roberto Carri and Ana Maria Caruso were left-wing militants that were tortured and disappeared in 1977 during the military regime. In the film Carri travels across Buenos Aires with her film crew, to find answers and explanations about the mysterious disappearance of her parents, their life and their death. Questions like “Who were they?” and “How did they disappear?” have come to her mind. Family, friends and neighbours are interviewed in this film, all relating their own version of history. The truth is, it is hard to find answers for this generation of children and constructing the past turns out to be impossible. The film won several awards and is featured in many countries. Winning awards are amongst others the Audience Award for best film, the Jury Award for best Argentine film, the Special Jury Mention and the New Cinema Award at the Buenos Aires International Film Festival in 2003 and the Clarín Award for best documentary, best actress and best music at the Clarín Entertainments Awards in 2003.<sup>37</sup>

There is one remarkable scene that deserves being mentioned, which only consists of moving Playmobil toys: during the evening; a toy couple drives a car on a dark road, suddenly an UFO appears in the air and starts descending toward the roadway. When it is low enough, the model spaceship takes the couple, one by one, away and disappears. Three blond Playmobil toys come along on the street after the

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<sup>37</sup> <<http://www.wmm.com/filmcatalog/pages/c629.shtml>>, consulted on May 17, 2011.

disappearance. These three blonds represent Albertina Carri and her two sisters, who were left behind when their parents had disappeared. Since they were just children at the time, the vanishing of their parents became a confusing traumatic event, which they in fact could not comprehend. In this scene Carri stresses the inability of children to grasp reality through representing their experience and confusion by means of Playmobil toys and the appearance of a spaceship. Furthermore, the three Playmobil girls are blond - the Carri's actually were not - but according to the memory of many neighbours they were. This scene therefore contains the three main themes of the film: memory, the struggle for identity and loss.

*Los rubios* embodies three narrative threads that twist and fuse together throughout the film. The first one is Albertina Carri's search for information about her parents. Within this part the actress named Analía Couceyro portrays Carri, as she introduces herself near the beginning of the film, but Carri herself also appears as herself. The two persons thus alternate with each other, but are also shot together in this strand. The film crew travels around several neighbourhoods to interview old neighbours, family and friends, who all have their own interpretation of the past. The second strand consists of a documentary about the making of the first thread. These two threads also intertwine, for instance, when they are making the first thread, it will not yield the desired results if the actress's blood is taken at a forensic anthropology lab, because she herself is not the concerned child. Therefore, after her blood has been taken for the "film part", Couceyro alternates with Carri for the real blood test for the "documentary part". The scenes in the last narrative strand are made of Playmobil toys, filmed in stop motion animation, representing the generation of children of disappeared, depicting memories and themes of loss and trauma as experienced through the eyes of the child. During this strand Carri reflects on the other two narrative threads.

It is obvious that the significant themes of this film are similar to the ones in the previous chapters. The three main themes of loss, identity and memory are subjects that intertwine with each other, as identity struggles are a consequence of the loss the children suffer. The need to remember is at the same time a consequence of loss as a way of dealing with it, but also a means to overcome the identity struggle. Thus, *Los rubios* encircles around the memory of Carri's parents, their history, and the history of the nation. Her parents disappeared when she was a child, therefore the memories she has merely comprises fragments of events, or are constructed through

the ones of her sisters. The documented search for answers about her parents' life became a personal journey for memory, in the course of which it is difficult to distinguish the personal from the collective memory. The memory of Carri's parents is at the same time a way of mourning and dealing with her trauma, as a tool for the identity construction.<sup>38</sup> Therefore the next sections discuss the way Carri and her generation of children of disappeared experience loss, how their identities are influenced by their past and how this is represented in the film.

## **Section 1: The fragility of memory**

In *Los rubios* Carri and her film crew start a journey toward the memory of the past. The absence of (knowing) history makes this a difficult task, yet Carri seeks to use memory as a means to place history in the present. This notion of memory has several meanings, as it can be identified with “the capacity [of a person] for acquiring, retaining and using information, (...) or the content of the information itself, or, the subjective experience of reliving our past” (McNally 2003: 28). Although in the film memory encompasses a mixture of the three abovementioned significations, since making a film about the memories refers to the capacity of acquiring and using the information, just as merely the acquired recollection (the content) itself, it more or less focuses on Carri's attempt to relive and understand the past through the interviews with neighbours, family and other significant people and visits to places where her parents once were, or where she herself used to live.

However, it soon becomes evident that Carri's personal memory and subjective experience of the past is restricted due to the few things she knew about it. During the wandering between memories, it thereby seems that her personal memory is oppressed and substituted by the memory of others and the memory of others therefore becomes blurred with her own. A visit to an old neighbourhood brings her to a new memory, a woman explains that she does not know the Carri's and cannot remember them, however she contradictorily claims that she was nice to them, because she was always nice to everyone and suddenly she can remember the three girls, because they were blondes, and no one in the *barrio* (neighbourhood) was.

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<sup>38</sup> Discussed in chapter 1 *La historia oficial*.

Therefore, soon it will be clear that this memory (partly) lacks the truth. In general the Carri's were believed to be blondes, this is rather strange however, as we witness Albertina in the film being a brunette. This collective memory constructed by neighbours, becomes blurred with Carri's personal memory. Page (2009) also claims that *Los rubios* contributes to the understanding of how collective memory is constructed. There is however a problematic relation with the personal memory, given that it is difficult to distinguish the individual memory with the collective memory.

Although many interviews are held, Carri does not discover much about the history of her parents, since many revelations are superficial, in some way exaggerated, or simply not true. She states in *Los rubios*: “Lo único que tengo es mi recuerdo difuso y contaminado por todas estas versiones. Y mientras más intente acercarme a la verdad, más voy a estar alejándome” [The only thing I have is my vague memory contaminated by all these other versions. The more I try to get closer to the truth, the more I distance myself from it]. It therefore becomes evident that the collective memory is different from the personal memory of Carri and her sisters and the internal memories between the sisters also differ. As endorsed by Page (2009: 169) “with every step that is intended to take her closer to the truth, she feels farther from it, unable to distinguish between her own personal memories and those of her sisters”, who themselves also merely have a fragmented memory, which becomes the more contaminated due to other memories. Besides that, the unreliability of the outcomes of the interviews brings the notion of post memory to the foreground, which explains why it is so difficult to “remember” the ones they cannot remember. The fact is, the generation of children of disappeared consists of a second generation, which has a post memory, meaning that the memory they created about the past have reached them, after having passed other people.

According to Hirsh (2008: 106-107) “postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up (...)”. She further examines the notion saying that certain memories are transmitted so extremely, that it is not merely recalling but also an “imaginative investment, projection and creation”. This is also what is happening in *Los rubios*, the information

Carri finds out, is told by another generation consisting of people who are sometimes afraid to say anything, but still manage to tell or distort a few things; even like others who indirectly state they were involved and people that claims ignorance. Yet they manage to assume and reveal information, even though it is tangible or not reliable.

However, Carri knew beforehand rebuilding the past was an impossible task stating: “I never wanted to do a historical movie about the 70s, I thought it was important to construct a narrative about memory, which is in fact what’s left from that past, glorious or not, and to think about memory, you inevitably have to do it from the present point of view. I’m obliged to reconstruct my parents, and that’s exactly what’s so terrible about this story: They are not reconstructable”.<sup>39</sup> Carri stresses the difficulty of reconstructing the past and particularly her parents; true information about them is intangible and will never be obtained, as they are not here anymore. This absence of trustworthy information obstructs the representation in the film, given that there is, except for the “official memory”, (almost) nothing valid to present.

The film therefore stresses the fact that memory is fragile. This is clearly expressed when Couceyro says: “El campo es el lugar de fantasía, o donde comienza mi memoria. Cuántas veces vi llegar a mis padres, a caballo, en auto o en colectivo” [The countryside is the place of fantasy, or where my memory begins. How many times did I see my parents arriving, by horse, car or bus]. Here, memory and fiction interlace: the memory of Carri’s past contains fictional elements (her parents never came back), yet these fantasies belong to her experience of the past. This fragility emerges not only in the unreliable content of interviewees’ information and Carri’s own memories, but also in the film techniques. Interviews about the past, filmed outside, are constantly interrupted by noises of passing traffic, as a result of which the memories become less reliable and unclear. Other interviewees, expressing their memories, are shown on a television on the background in a room while the camera is focused on Couceyro who is working on her computer, moreover the images are often fragmented and indistinctly presented from behind Couceyro’s back. The distance demonstrated in this scene between Carri and those recalling her parents’ past, indicates that Carri feels estranged from it.

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<sup>39</sup> <<http://www.judycantor.com/moxie/film/la-mezcla-influenced-by-h.shtml>>, consulted on June 9, 2011.

The vulnerability of memory is also revealed through the use of Playmobil toys. As memory creates fiction, these toys represent an unreliability of the content of the memories. Still, these images are created to tell a story, although it is based on memories, the underlying meaning is significant: it draws the attention to the problem concerned. The film therefore does not suggest that memory is useless. Although “memory is founded in ‘emotion and magic’, and consequently, is vague, selective, and impressionistic...” it is a means to give us knowledge, which we can use to keep us conscious and to control our lives (Ferguson 2009: 110-111). This is what happens in the film with Carri, as she is able to accept and leave behind the past (with all intrusions and deceptions) and to move on. In *Los rubios* it thus becomes clear that memory is vivid and unsteady, as the memories of Carri and the old neighbours could change every other minute. It moreover becomes evident that memory is subjected to what a person remembers and expresses one day and the other; it is thereby vulnerable due to its subjective side.

Memory is a habit that belongs to daily life; it is always a present “thing”. It wells up between persons and is therefore linked to social relations (Ferguson 2009: 108-113). Social relations are again important for the recovery from loss, and for the recovery people need memory (see section 3: The experience of loss). Thus, again the notions of memory, social relations and recovery meet and intertwine. Memory brought Carri more closely to her friends than to her parents. In addition, Ferguson endorses that “the adequacy of memory is not what it reveals of the past, but how it creates the present” and that is precisely what is suggested in the film. Many recollections about the past are expressed, however, the absence of adequate information results in the fact that Carri discovers nothing new about the past. It creates a consciousness about her life nowadays; she alienates herself from her (parents’) past, because in fact the memories are not relevant for her. She does not know whether the narrations are true or not: for some people her parents were heroes, for others they were enemies, but to her it does not matter. The consciousness establishes her life today; it therefore creates a desire to move forward.

## Section 2: Identity

Carri's struggle for identity, the second major theme in *Los rubios*, stems from the fact that the director grew up as an orphan under a government during which withholding the truth was the rule rather than the exception. The film focuses on the subject interrelating it with memory. The search for the identity throughout the film therefore takes its position next to that of memory, the latter being a necessary condition for the construction of the identity (see chapter 1). In *Los rubios* Carri intend to reflect on her past trying to understand the present so that she is able to construct a social-cultural identity. Given that most parts of her past are unknown, it is difficult to build a well-integrated identity (Ferguson 2009, Ben-Amos and Weissberg 1999). This is also represented in the film, particularly in a self-reflective monologue of the director:

(...) la necesidad de construir la propia identidad se desata cuando ésta se ve amenazado, cuando no es posible la unicidad. En mi caso, el estigma de la amenaza, perdura desde aquellas épocas de terror y violencia, en las que decir mi apellido, implicaba peligro o rechazo, y hoy, decir mi apellido en determinados círculos, todavía implica miradas extrañas, mezcla de desconcierto y piedad. Construirse a sí mismo sin aquella figura que fue la que dio comienzo a la propia existencia se convierte en una obsesión, no siempre muy acorde a la propia cotidianeidad, no siempre muy alentadora ya que la mayoría de las respuestas se han perdido en la bruma de la memoria.

[the necessity to construct your own identity emerges when you feel threatened, when there is no room for uniqueness. In my case, the stigma of feeling threatened continues ever since those periods of terror and violence, during which saying my last name implied danger and rejection. Nowadays saying my last name in certain circles still provokes strange looks from others, a mixture of discomfort and pity. Constructing an identity without that specific person that gave you your own existence in the first place then becomes an obsession which is not always in accordance with daily nature and not always very encouraging, since most of the answers got lost in the mysterious thing called memory.]

Although it is hard to find answers on many questions about the past, since the memory of people is subjected to their own subjectivity, constructing an identity is still an obsession for Carri. She argues that the necessity to construct it emerges because unicity is absence in her life. During the monologue an animation scene is



played: a singular Playmobil figure is presented, the hair and head dressing of the toy is continuously changing colour and type through stop motion. The identity of the toy, which is represented as Carri herself, can be seen as a repeatedly switching entity. Throughout her life (also film) her identity is a shifting entity that follows her wherever she goes. The interview with an old neighbour about the Carri's (and their imagined hair colour) for instance, points to this shift and the change of appearance (and partly change of identity) is incorporated later on in the film when Carri and the film crew appears with blonde wigs, symbolizing being her "substitute" family.

Although the former neighbours in the film are not directly hostile toward the Carri's, indirectly they are passing judgment on the parents, which could also influence the identity construction of their children. Since one's identity is formed, amongst others, as a result of a struggle to be recognized by the other (Larrain 2000), in Carri's case the recognition of the other is hard to find. As she states that during different periods of her life, merely saying her family name meant "danger", "rejection" and "pity" for people, it is evident that this devaluation created by other people would constitute a danger for the construction of her identity. The formation of one's identity is always connected to a process of differentiation with the other. However, in Carri's case this implies an antagonistic disparity, which could lead to social conflicts and a struggle for recognition (Larrain 2000).

The imagined blonde family created in the memory of the neighbours were in fact brunettes. However, it seems that they remember or deliberately place them as outsiders or foreigners in the neighbourhood. They characterize them as "others" and apparently create an appropriate appearance, as blond-haired persons were not quite common in the region. The neighbours therefore seem to distance themselves from this revolutionary family creating for them a different identity, which is explained by Lazarra (2009) as an expression of fear for the unknown other. In an interview another neighbour recalled that when the military forces came and asked where the Carri's lived, she pointed at their house. Although this in fact means that she turned in the family, she does not feel any guilt or shame, which again stresses the fact that it does not matter to her, because they were anyhow "different" and "subversive". Detention of the family would in this case mean that other residents were "safe" again, which also confirms what Carri claims that her last name is associated with "danger". This disrespect of the family could again contribute to identity problems.

Yet again these struggles appear when Carri visits the Centre of Forensic Anthropology, where blood samples are taken for the identification of children who were taken from their mothers and given to other families. However it is rather strange that Carri went to this centre given that she had no reason to trace her ancestry, because she does already have her sisters and other members of her biological family. Although Carri decisively claims: “(...) nunca sentí que el dolor propio fuera algo tan fácil de identificar con el de otro. En ese sentido me quedé muy sola” [I never considered my own pain easy to identify with that of others. In that sense, I’ve felt really lonely] (2007: 111). Implying that she could never identify with other children of disappeared and also never had the need to participate in H.I.J.O.S. it still seems an attempt to identify with other *hijos*, as most of them seek to re-establish the ties between them and their biological connection, to reconstruct their identities linking the “old” self with the “new” self.

However, for Carri there is nothing to re-establish and she again remains alone. This scene therefore represents the impossibility to confirm a connection (even with other children) and points to the void in Carri’s life through the absence of her parents. However, her feelings are not openly expressed in the film, therefore Carri does not seem to be affected. Page (2009) also claims that *Los rubios* would disturb the identification process, due to a refusal to mourn and release emotionally. The consequences of an absence of possibilities to mourn, not knowing the history (and origin) and an absence of experience would hamper the identity and agency in the present. Carri thus finds herself alienated from her lineage – and partly from herself as *hija* – and from her parents’ life, which this scene emphasizes even more.

Given that the construction of the identity in *Los rubios* is in danger and causes struggles, in the final scene, however, acceptance comes to the foreground. In this scene, Carri, the actress and the film crew, who spend a night in the countryside the place where Carri’s memory begins, are waking up and each putting on a blonde wig. First, actress Couceyro (as Carri) walks down a country path, frequently looking behind, which symbolizes what Carri actually did: walking the path of life and looking behind (at the past). Then, we see the whole crew, side by side, walking down the same path toward an unknown destiny; none of them is looking behind. Carri and her crew have assumed the identity imposed by old neighbours, forming thereby their own family. Wearing the blonde wig while walking toward the future indicates that

Carri will always carry her past with her and that, although it belongs to the past, it has become something of her own.

The scene thereby initiates that Carri has chosen to follow a specific path together with her friends who seem to form a surrogate family to her. The scene therefore suggests Carri has accepted the irreversibility of the past, the subjectivity of memories, the unreliable memories of her family and consequently she distances herself from it. It does not signify that she is not going to look back at the past anymore, but it means she cannot do anything with the memories nowadays. Presented here is also the failure of finding the truth and confirming a connection with the parents, however, as Lazzara (2009) points out this does not imply that Carri has been defeated, “in fact, the very difficulty of telling is precisely what requires the filmmaker to walk the path (uncertain as it may be) and tell her story, even if, admittedly, the only story she can really tell is that of struggle, frustration, and impossibility”. The lyrics of the song *Influencia* (Influence) (Charly García) that is played during the last scene fits perfectly in Carri’s situation and stresses the fact she has accepted her fate: “Puedo ver y decir, puedo ver y decir y sentir: algo ha cambiado, para mí no es extraño. Yo no voy a correr, yo no voy a correr ni a escapar de mi destino, yo no pienso en peligro” [I can see and say, I can see and say and feel that something has changed, which is no surprise for me. I’m not going to run, I’m not going to run nor escape from my destiny, I don’t think in terms of risk].

### **Section 3: The experience of loss**

As mentioned above, for Albertina Carri it is a different situation than for Cristina (*Cautiva*), Gaby (*La historia oficial*) and Eva and Lola (*Eva y Lola*), given that she was already three years old when her parents disappeared and she was not illegally appropriated and did not grow up in a “military” family. It is especially so hard, because she finds herself alone in this situation. Given that her sisters were old enough to remember the parents, she on the contrary was not and therefore has no bond with them. The film is not a source of answers for her, but it is more a journey to “remember” what she in fact cannot remember. This could be a way to find comfort in her loss, it is however not suggested that making a film about it can dissolve the

gap (and anger) left by her parents. She only allows others (the viewer) to become acquainted with her experiences with loss and the meaning of memory.

In the film Carri wonders why her mother did not choose to flee the country, why she has left her behind in this world instead of bringing her to stay with her. While answering this question however, she always gets angry, and then thinks about the anger her father had to pursue his ideals until his death. Every time this thought gets vague because she does not know what to do with it and it makes her wondering if the spirits go to the same place as their murderers. This anger indicates she is still in mourning and it even more emphasizes the impossibility to feel connected with her parents. It is not an unusual phenomenon that children of disappeared parents question why their parents had made the choices they did. After all, they ended up without them. When she was just a child, other children frequently asked Carri why they lived with her aunt and uncle and where her parents lived. Carri relates that this was one of the worst and painful situations when she was a child. An important thing that a child of disappeared has to overcome is the shock of being “alone” and as we can see she still feels angry about it. The parental figures are gone and the social situation has changed drastically. The film therefore can be seen as a journey of memories, which is part of her mourning process and which has no actual end, because there will always be many different memories of different people.

Bonanno (2009) also states that the notion of memory is important for the mourning process. He claims that memory is important, because it is the only thing that is left when a person has passed away or when a situation has changed drastically. Memory becomes a device for the recovering process. For Carri, there were little memories left about her parents, therefore she wanted to make a film about memory with the help of others that could share their memories. Since Carri works with memories, *Los rubios* can be considered an important project during her mourning process. Because of the film we however experience that it is difficult to obtain true facts about the past, because memories merely consist of subjective recollections composed of people’s own truths and beliefs. Nevertheless, making a film can be considered a means to find comfort during the mourning period, both

because of the content – and most important: what we do with it – of memories, as well as through the process to collect them.

Namely, “taking action” during periods of grief would help people a lot (Janoff-Bulman 1992), thus making a film is a step in the right direction. Although people think it is strange that people need comfort during the mourning process, comfort is a necessary means for them (Bonanno 2009). In chapter 2, it is suggested that support (a tool for achieving comfort) would help the mourner in many ways. Two of the mentioned sources of support were informational and instrumental support. The making of *Los rubios* is also a tool for these types of help: as it gives information (although not everything is genuine) that helps Carri to understand and accept her parents’ (and her) past and instrumental support through access to material resources and other needed services (a camera crew to make a film; permission to accomplish it on different locations (a detention centre) etc.). Yet, the (esteem) support received from her friends would turn out to be most valuable. They made the whole journey possible; they were not merely a crew, but also friends. These social relations are important because Carri has no parental persons to find comfort and affection with; therefore the crew becomes a substitute for her family. So the experience of loss becomes a landscape to form a new imaginative social category.

Memory - and searching for memories – together with friends gives thus comfort during the mourning process. Mourning people need other people to find comfort, which expresses itself in talking about loss, bringing back memories or just a shoulder to cry on or a person to laugh with. Having a person who listens to you can be a helpful support for many people confronted with pain of loss. However, it can also be hard to talk about memories and sometimes the pain can dissolve all good memories. The latter does not count for Carri, since she herself is exactly searching for memories and she is aware that memories could be fragile and painful. In the film she visits the clandestine centre *El Sheraton*, which is also a police station, where her parents were detained and tortured. On the way she claims it is the first time she is afraid of doing something, that she prefers seeing the centre on video, however, she perseveres and enters the building. Doing this she confronts herself with the pain of loss and trauma, which is good for the recovery (Bonanno 2009).

The void due to the absence of her parents seems to be eternal. The social and cultural shock was especially intensive for Carri's sisters, because they had to move to the countryside at the age of 13 and 14, which was for them a significant change of social atmosphere. Not only leaving "everything" behind was difficult, also leaving the safe place where they lived with their parents and where they had contact with them for the last time. They moreover had to get used to the fact that their "heroes" were never coming back and that the social factory of family had been destroyed. When Carri was a child every year she wished that her parents would come back, that they would appear on her birthday, she thereby often had fantasies about their arrival. Still, when she can make a wish (as an adult), one immediately arises in her mind: "que vuelva mamá, que vuelva papá, y que vuelvan rápido" [that mummy comes back, that daddy comes back, and that they come back soon]. She makes thereby sure that these are three separate wishes, so that the strength to come true becomes much stronger. Making a wish nevertheless is a symbolic way to deal with something; as we all know that most wishes never come true. In Carri's case she therefore indicates that the "distance" appearing in the film is not definite; that in fact she does not distance herself from the past, or that she looks down on it either. It simply implies it is a way to make the viewer believe that memory takes different routes and that it does not always fit yours (Carri 2007).

Carri (2007) states that she and her sisters all constructed a different relationship with the absence in their lives. They experienced the disappearance of their parents like it was a film, each having their own projection and each experiencing differently the pain and impotence due to what had happened. In *Los rubios* she states that when her family needed to avoid the pain, they thought of her parents as two "beautiful, intelligent, genial" persons. Having good memories and positive thoughts and emotions normally keeps our heads above water and helps to manage or overcome the pain (Bonanno 2009: 73-74). For Carri it merely meant that her parents became symbolic for one big enigma, sometimes it was pleasant and heroic, more often it was violent and painful. Carri takes the contrast between her own memories and those of her sisters for granted, accepting that she experiences loss differently. In contrast with her sisters, Carri has never got to know their parents. Carri's experience

of loss therefore indicates that, although she is sometimes lost in thoughts about the past and her parents, principally, she feels isolated from them. For Carri's sisters, memory is a tool for the recovering progress, for Carri it is actually the acceptance of the fragility of memory that makes her recovery possible and results in moving forward.

## **Conclusion**

*Los rubios* gives insight into the psychological legacy imposed on the children of disappeared, in this case on director Abertina Carri, due to the political violence of the military regime, which has taken her parents from her. Initially, the film indicates that because of this legacy Carri does not feel at ease on her "place" in the world, which according to her is imbued with disharmony, because her origin is insecure, her past chases her and she feels obliged to mourn the people she does not know (which makes her angry). When she strives to disentangle this "mystery" being her life – and her origin – she is confronted with the fact that this is not possible. This impossibility contributes even more to struggles for the identity, moreover because her past tries to impose upon her a specific identity being that of an *hija* and a stranger. Given that she is not able to adopt this identity as an *hija* (amongst others to a lack of willingness) and she is neither capable of identifying with her biological family (both parents as well as sisters), she feels isolated from them and her ancestry, resulting in feeling even more a "stranger".

At the end of the film it is demonstrated how she copes with these social conflicts, which is mainly because she has become conscious and has accepted that the "fragile" memories of others are not relevant for her at the present. The making of the film, aiming at representing the meaning of memory, also entails something completely different: the relationship with her film crew. The bond they created with each other leads to the fact that Carri is considering them as a surrogate family. Her identity becomes steady, her "place" united and these will not be affected by the past anymore. This is also closely connected to Carri's experience of loss presented throughout the film. Within her biological family she is an outsider, the only one who cannot remember her parents and who did not have had the possibility to build a bond with them, which resulted in a completely different experience of the "lost situation"

that makes her still angry. Carri mourns the imposed situation she finds herself in. It is exactly because her sisters presented a specific positive image of her parents during her mourning process, whereas she merely felt emptiness and anger, that she distanced herself from her biological parents and her past.



## Conclusion

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When we rehearse the arguments and the different insights of the four films, a clear distinction appears between the first two films of this study (*La historia oficial*, *Cautiva*) and the last two films (*Eva y Lola*, *Los rubios*). *La historia oficial* and *Cautiva* mainly give insight into the fact that the situation with the raising family has to be changed immediately. Important thereby is that the truth must be revealed and that the child must return to its biological family. Staying in contact with the raising family is considered bad for the child. *Eva y Lola* and *Los rubios* do not focus on this solution, yet give insight in other “routes”, implicating that the children do not bear malice against their raising parents. Another story is that the child even distances oneself from the biological parents and its “true past”, because it just cannot be restored anymore. These two films are more realistic than the first two, which perchance can be explained by the fact that *Eva y Lola* is based on the true stories of two women, one even being the scriptwriter of the film, Victoria Griguera. The explanation of *Los rubios* is obvious: it is made by a child of disappeared itself, Albertina Carri.

Post conflict narratives indicate it is important that children of disappeared know the truth about their past, origin and true identity, in spite of the difficulties they will have to face. There is one thing that becomes clear: all children face a deep identity crisis, during which they experience the loss of the situation as an immense shock. It takes time to overcome this source of distress. They encounter a situation, in which they wonder who they are and during which they feel the urge to recuperate the “wounded” identity. Thereby, some children voluntarily decide to do a DNA test, others are being forced. Some children experience the voluntary agreement to do a test as a difficult situation. The problem implies that if they decide to do the test, they will also “betray” their raising family and even contribute to losing them. Given that the results of a DNA test will confirm that the child indeed is illegally adopted, the parents will face a trial and imprisonment. However, not everybody experiences such a dilemma; the ones who reject the raising family do not hesitate to do a test.

After these first identity struggles, the children will decide which route to follow to continue the identity reconstruction. The films thus demonstrate the

different paths they can choose when they discover they were “stolen”. One of the three routes that are presented is that children decide to keep in contact with both the biological family as well as the raising family. They do not take sides, but are surrounded by friends (a surrogate family). A variation on this route is that they do not recognize both families as true families, but seek to find a family among friends with whom they can identify. They thus also do not take sides, but take a path in between. Then, there are still two routes left, one leading to the raising family, the other to the biological family. Children that decide to pick the latter, completely reject their raising family. Particularly this last point of view has been encouraged and denoted as the ideal choice by many narratives. A romanticised and idealised image is given of the traditional biological family, of which the children have been pulled out. Due to this, the makers and writers of these narratives lose sight of their objectivity. The allegations of many recovered children notwithstanding that the upbringing was bad make arise the question whether this is the truth.

However, they have considered this afterwards. When the disclosure of the true origin is confirmed, the raising family is thus depicted as the “bad guy”. Suddenly the whole past has been rejected and considered to be a lie. Nevertheless, the only true lie was that the raising parents were not the true parents. The past is being rejected to justify the present and its situation with the biological family. These children thus complain about the bad raising and about never having the possibility to develop the true identity. There can be no doubt that this is incorrect, for they have developed an identity and they have learned standards and values during the upbringing, perhaps in a different way, because of other “parents”, however this does not imply that the raising as such was bad. Thus they condemn their raising parents, whereas they do not even know whether it would have been different, yet they criticize the old situation. Afterwards, they would have rather preferred another environment to be raised in (with their biological family), probably because it would have been more “natural”. As they feel like victims and it is socially accepted to condemn the dictatorship, they also deplore the raising (closely related to the regime).

Besides these identity struggles the films also focus on mourning processes. During the experience of loss, children are broken-hearted because they do not have a parent anymore. The consciousness entails intense periods of sadness and loneliness. To overcome these negative emotions, they engage in activities that differ from participating in social movements to making a film or performing in theatre with

themes concerning this specific matter. They also visit memorial places or friends and family of the disappeared persons to share their memories. They generally do these activities to continue the struggle of their parents for justice, memory and against “silence”. Some children therefore testify against their raising parents in court. Here, anger also plays an important role, and it is also a common emotion during the mourning process. It is because of this sentiment that children distance themselves from the raising family, because they think it is their “parents” to blame, or because they have been left alone. In this case, the children do anything possible to reconstruct a bond with the deceased parents, but soon are being disappointed because of the impossibility to do this. Although they mourn the lost situation, they often confuse their emotions with grief about their missing biological parents.

At last, other children think their past is not relevant for them at the present, whereas society “forces” them to mourn about their disappeared parents. They distance themselves from the unknown past to move forward, leaving behind the feelings of anger and the gap left by the biological parents. The films and documentaries analyzed in this study thus clearly indicate the choices children make during the mourning process. In conclusion we can say that these choices intertwine with the ones made to overcome the identity crisis, as they all decide to follow a specific route to reconstruct the identity, but they also do this, because they experience the loss of the raising parents. The urge to take a specific path (due to the lost situation and the lost identity) depends on the relationship the children have with the raising parents. Post conflict narratives give thus insight into a diversity of experiences, decisions and solutions concerning identity struggles and mourning processes of children of disappeared.

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