

## Diary of a documentary in the making: filming the local imaginaries of post-dictatorship Argentina\*

*Diario del making of de un documental: imaginarios locales de la posdictadura argentina*

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### Abstract

This article constitutes the diary of a documentary in the making, one that aims to create a cinematic map of the local imaginaries of post-dictatorship transition. The unfolding project it charts uses film as a medium—both its reception by audiences and its creative potential as a mode of documenting and expressing social phenomena artistically—in order to map and produce fresh understanding of the multifaceted and layered, polysemous set of social imaginaries of the memory of Argentina's civic-military dictatorship and the ensuing post-dictatorship transition to democracy. This cinematic journey into the Dantesque labyrinth of the imaginary unfolds in the liminal space between the imagination and the real. In doing so, intimate lived experience resonates through public displays of trauma and pleasure, taking us into a yet-to-be-defined space that is neither documentary nor fiction.

**Keywords:** Imaginaries, Documentary, Fiction, Post-dictatorship, Argentina

### Resumen

*Este artículo constituye el diario del proceso de producción de un documental que busca crear un mapa cinematográfico de los imaginarios locales de la posdictadura argentina. De este modo, traza el desarrollo y despliegue de un proyecto que utiliza el cine como medio, tanto en su recepción como en su potencial creativo para documentar y dar cuenta de manera artística de fenómenos sociales que permiten comprender el multifacético, entreverado y polisémico conjunto de imaginarios sociales de la memoria de la dictadura cívico-militar argentina y la consiguiente transición democrática. Este viaje cinematográfico supone un ingreso al laberinto dantesco que se desarrolla en el espacio liminal entre lo imaginario y lo real. En este despliegue, experiencias vividas de manera íntima resuenan en demostraciones públicas del placer y del trauma que conducen a un espacio aún por definir entre el documental y la ficción.*

**Palabras claves:** Imaginarios, Documental, Ficción, Posdictadura, Argentina.

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*"Beyond the theater is life, and behind life, the theater. My point of departure was the imaginary and I discovered the real; but behind the real there was the imaginary"*

*(Jean-Luc Godard).*

## 1. Introduction: snippets of an imaginary

"Nos reímos. Nos íbamos a reír a carcajadas toda la noche. Desde que el entierro tenía fecha, mi cuerpo era la caja de resonancia de unas risas cristalinhas que sonaban a cada rato como perlas sueltas de un collar cayendo por una escalera de mármol interminable"<sup>1</sup> (2015 p.188): a young, female performer reads from Marta Dillon's novel, *Aparecida*, on a balcony looking out onto the Avenida de Mayo. A burgeoning crowd bustles below. Thousands of people prepare to march to remember the 43<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the military coup that took place on 24<sup>th</sup> March 1976, marking the beginning of seven years of violent repression under authoritarian rule. The atmosphere is festive: a collective commemoration also takes form as a celebration of resistance against forgetting. A father and his 7-year-old twins draw a silhouette on the street. This starkly evocative, featureless figure condenses the powerful symbolic weight of the 30,000 disappeared across Argentina. As the camera zooms in, we can see that the twins have named their figure after their grandmother, who died last year. "Apagón": the lights go out and the screen suddenly goes blank. At the attempted screening of Joshua Oppenheimer's delirious documentary, *The Act of Killing*, a disobedient daughter describes her ambivalent feelings towards her father whom she calls "genocida": "[a]mé profundamente a mi padre, con sus aciertos y errores. También repudié con la misma intensidad sus actos como hombre. Me va a doler en el alma siempre, siempre, lo que hizo durante la dictadura"<sup>2</sup> (Raggio, 2018: 96). A group of retirees—students at the University of the Third Age in Greater Buenos Aires—discuss a Colombian film on that country's armed conflict. They all lived through the dictatorship: some are reminded of lost friends and the violent intimidation of being followed; others are adamant that it was impossible to know what was really happening. A camera captures dozens of schoolgirls jostling to get selfies with Nora Cortiñas, one of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, who wears not only the iconic whi-

te headscarf of the Madres, but also a green one of the pro-choice abortion campaign, embracing struggles new and old.



Photo 1: Agustín Mendilaharsu framing the camera on March 24, 2019, Argentina's National Day of Memory.

In November 2018, we embarked on the first phase of fieldwork and documentary production for a project that aims over a period of three years to map out—visually, thematically, discursively, affectively—the multi-layered and faceted amalgamation of social imaginaries of dictatorship and post-dictatorship transition in Argentina. The project is titled *Screening Violence: A Transnational Approach to the Local Imaginaries of Post-Conflict Transition*. These are just some fragments of this initial experience. Together, they represent the first steps in piecing together the kaleidoscopic cacophony of voices, images, gestures, stories, illusions, truths, lies, silences that compose the "magma of social imaginary significations" (Castoriadis, 1987: 344) of Argentina's 1976-83 civic-military-ecclesiastic dictatorship. The haunting memory of a violent past and its very material legacy in the present overlay, as the palimpsestic layers of celluloid draw the diffuse line between past and present.

Our filmmaker and co-cartographer of these imaginaries, Alejo Mogueillansky, reflects: “Cuando nos sentemos a editar, siento que vamos a tener que escribir un largo poema dividido en cantos, como los cantos de la Divina Comedia, para capturar todo el horizonte que estamos contemplando”<sup>3</sup> (2018: n.p.). He confirms that we have embarked upon a cinematic journey into the Dantesque labyrinth of the imaginary, one which will unfold in the liminal space between the imagination and the real. Intimate lived experience resonates through public displays of trauma in a way that is taking us into a yet-to-be-defined space that is neither documentary nor fiction.

This article constitutes the diary of a documentary in the making that aims to create a cinematic map of the local imaginaries of post-dictatorship transition. It hopes to shed light on the dynamic nature of this imaginary and its evolution over nearly four decades since the transition to democracy. This is still very much a work-in-progress, yet to yield substantial results in terms of fieldwork. It is also one part in a larger project entitled “Screening Violence” that composes a five-piece jigsaw and aims to provide fresh understanding of how social imaginaries shape civil conflicts and transitions to peace in Algeria, Argentina, Colombia, Indonesia and Northern Ireland. In order to fully grasp the complexities and local idiosyncrasies of civil conflict, this project uses in-depth, people-focused analysis of how local communities imagine conflict and post-conflict transitions from specific locations and historical contexts (Strauss, 2006: 323). The conceptual lens we have chosen to approach the local textures of conflict is that of the social imaginary, or imaginaries to be more precise.

## 2. Location filming: former Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada (ex-ESMA)

November 23, 2018: The collective “Historias Desobedientes” [Disobedient (Hi)stories], a recently formed group that brings together the sons and daughters of military perpetrators—to whom they refer as “genocidas”, or authors of genocide—is visiting the ESMA, the former military headquarters and largest clandestine detention centre in the country, for the first time. Our crew has decided to

accompany the visit to capture what is for many of the Historias Desobedientes a first encounter with a location of repression.

Walking through the former Officers’ Casino, which was used as a unit of detention and torture, is always an experience that is visceral. During the dictatorship, approximately 5000 people, mostly left-wing activists, were held captive there. The invisible presence of the past inscribes itself on the skin. The walls we see today, whose layers of paint have peeled away, were witness to the most sordid and atrocious human rights abuses. Since the building constitutes the crime scene of an open and unfinished investigation, its materiality is protected by ongoing legal proceedings. Therefore, the building itself cannot be touched. The visitor’s passage through this space along a floating walkway is literally removed from any contact with the building, although its materiality makes itself felt affectively. Might our camera be able to account for the visceral forces that inhabit this haunted scenario? Might our documentary be *expressive* of what Steven Shaviro terms “blocs of affect”, the “free-floating sensibility” which is condensed in and permeates every corner of the ESMA? After all, the Officers’ Casino could be considered a “machine for generating affect”, affects of various kinds that our documentary tries to pursue (Shaviro, 2010: 3, original emphasis).

Historias Desobedientes is the latest group to have emerged in relation to the powerful and eminent post-dictatorship trope of the “wounded family” (Sosa, 2014: 64), the network of victims affiliated through blood ties, that includes the internationally recognised *Madres*, *Abuelas*, and successive generation(s) of “children/H.I.J.O.S.” and relatives of the disappeared. The “disobedient” daughters, sons and wider set of relatives represent a non-normative lineage which is in the process of profoundly marking the memory of terror in post-dictatorial Argentina. This new branch of Argentina’s “wounded family” not only enlarges the mourning community, but also demonstrates the unprecedented ways in which bloodline ties can be the source of new forms of dissent. All this has taken place against the grain of an official politics, installed by businessman Mauricio Macri’s regressive neoliberal government, which has sought to depoliticise the question of memory, displacing it from the centre of domestic politics. In doing so, the current

administration has revived the dangerously apologetic discourse of the “two demons/dos demonios” (Dandán, 2016; Castilla, 2016), a classic reconciliatory contortion of the past evoking “violence on both sides” (Pittaluga, 2007). This is a notion that has become synonymous with impunity and forgetting, more so in its most recent “reloaded” version which, as Daniel Feierstein argues, utilises its logic “en un contexto distinto y con otra intencionalidad, mucho más grave que la de su versión original”<sup>4</sup> (2018: 10).<sup>5</sup>

Lizy Raggio is perched nervously on the curb outside the “sótano”—the ESMA’s sinister basement—where prisoners were tortured during what was usually the last stage of their captivity before receiving the pentothal injection that drugged those detainees selected to be “transferred” or “traslados”, a euphemism for the so-called “vuelos de la muerte” [death flights]. While offering a light to her cigarette, Lizy asks: “¿Cómo imaginás que nos sentimos nosotras estando acá?”. The question seems impossible to answer. Lizy continues: “algunos eran monstruos por fuera, y también por dentro [...] pero otros, no”.<sup>6</sup> Her reflection is clearly a very personal one. She is referring to her own father as she mimics the way he used to stroke her hair when she was little. Visibly shaken and torn by the impossible task of reconciling the figure of a father who loved her and her unfaltering condemnation of his actions during the dictatorship, she finally decides to go into the basement and places herself in a corner, as if to make her presence invisible.

There is a clear ethical decision to make: do we get the camera to film this moment? It seems invasive and inappropriate. We decide to wait. We are both conscious of the tremendous power of Lizy’s testimony, but how could we dare to place a camera in front of her when she does not seem even to be able to hold her own body together? The decision is right. She will recall the physical pain of this day during a subsequent encounter: “La primera vez que entré a la ex-ESMA fue el 23 de noviembre. ¡Y fui con mi terapeuta! No podía... Caminaba y me circulaban por todo el cuerpo distintos dolores. Tenía la sensación de que no podía respirar”.<sup>7</sup>

The visit continues up the main stairs, passing by the officers’ bedrooms that remain closed to the public. On the third-floor, visitors queue to enter



Photo 2: Condenados ESMA’s Salón Dorado: Members of the Historias Desobedientes’ collective, that brings together the children and family members of perpetrators, embrace one another in front of a video installation that lists the names of those repressors sentenced for crimes against humanity.

the tiny room designated for women who were pregnant. “¿Cómo es posible que hayan nacido niños aquí?”,<sup>8</sup> is stencilled onto the floor. Will the camera be able to sense the disquietingly surgical atmosphere of this room? What kind of cinematography will be able to evoke the disturbing chills that this empty little room awakens? When we reach Capucha, maybe the darkest space in the building, we ask Alejo to record the narrow staircase that leads up to Capuchita. We hope this will provide footage for a future sequence in which the ESMA’s stairs will be re-staged through a frame provided by fiction.

### 3. Thinking the transnational from the local

The emergence of “disobedience” as a simultaneously public and private stance in relation to dictatorship is very specific to Argentina’s current articulation of post-dictatorship memory. It demonstrates not only how memory is an ongoing process that continues to unfold 36 years since the military junta was ousted and democratic elections held, but also how locally specific this unfolding memory project is. The emergence of Historias Desobedientes is just one example of why it is so vital to engage with international discourses on

democratic transition through the lens afforded by local understandings of conflict.

Criticism of researchers and policy-makers who fail to explore conflicts in their own terms, instead adhering to a “highly-standardized”, one-size-fits-all —or so-called “flat-pack” (Mac Ginty, 2008: 145)—approaches is now fairly common currency in the areas of Transitional Justice and Peace Studies. Our approach instead aims to engage, in an immersive sense, with the multifaceted life-worlds of real subjects. The question of how local imaginaries structure popular understandings of conflict, rather than their articulation in terms of a universalising (global) rhetoric, seems vital.

In the case of Argentina, for instance, the intersection between the memory of dictatorship and gender politics propelled by a feminist “wave”, most notably the “Ni una menos” collective, has become unavoidable in the past few years.<sup>9</sup> Alejandra Nafatal, Director of ESMA’s Memory Museum, confesses that her dialogues with a younger generation of women cast light on how the patriarchal structures of gender-based violence have affected her own reading of her captivity when she was just 17: “Me emociona y alegra haber sido despertada por las jóvenes. Es un mandato al revés”. “Son las pibas con los pañuelos verdes las que interpelan al movimiento de derechos humanos como ente autónomo. Hay un proceso de transmisión de memoria que sigue abierto”, she says.<sup>10</sup>

April 12: “What is this time that we share? Do we share a time?” asks the international feminist scholar Judith Butler to a bursting room at the Centro Cultural Haroldo Conti inside the ESMA’s premises. It is the end of a three-day conference entitled “Memory at the crossroads of the present”. We have arrived eager for further conversations on the fissures between local and global approaches to understanding violence. While Butler praises the decades of “prodigious, ethical accomplishment” of memory work undertaken in Argentina against state terrorism, she also alerts that new forms of authoritarianism and fascism currently spreading across Latin America not only involve a denial of distinctive forms of violence, but also “seek to revive the longing for military rules, the security, the xenophobia, the intense nationalism, the excitement of violent repression”. Although it is not easy to generalise across national borders, Butler insists that “there is a possibility to forge transna-

tional solidarity” against contemporary forms of negationism. In what she considers a “disturbing, bewildering, and enraging present moment”, she argues that we need to cultivate a critical capacity for “translation” between space and time. The future of memory relies on listening transnationally, as much as listening locally, to achieve more nuanced articulations of violence. Our camera tries to navigate between the two.

#### 4. Film as method: a cinematic cartography of local imaginaries

The conceptual lens we have chosen to frame the transnational through the perspective afforded by the local is what Cornelius Castoriadis originally termed “the social imaginary” (1987: 364). Yet, the social imaginary—or imaginaries—is a notoriously difficult concept to harness. The more it unfolds, the more complex and nebulous it seems to become. As a point of departure, we take Dilip Parameshwar Goankar’s definition of the imaginary as a “creative force in the making of worlds” (2002: 1). As an intrinsically imaginary space, the medium of film provides an excellent pathway into this multiplicity. It also becomes a privileged means of interlacing academic and creative practices in a manner that cross-fertilises the two.

Methodologically, then, this project begins and ends with cinema. It initiates its search by screening films about the conflicts that have taken place in the other four sites. It “ends” by creating its own cinematic expression of the imaginary, a documentary that will also have the capacity to be reproduced at different times and in different contexts so as to continue circulating and animating discussions. To chart local imaginaries and to encourage participants to reflect on post-dictatorship transition, we use the medium of film both as conceptual frame and method, adapting practices from reception studies to elicit and record spectator responses to each film. Film becomes a form of address, a way of exploring what might be termed “ordinary feelings” in relation to violence that resonate within and across different groups in the country. Films are our way of creating “a contact zone for analysis”, to use Kathleen Stewart’s words (2017: 2), a surface of affective engagement exploring the various, intricate ways in which Argentina’s society negotiates, on an everyday basis, the aftermath

of its dictatorship. Our approach to mapping the imaginaries of post-conflict also takes on board Giuliana Bruno's invitation to consider films as a "landscape" (2018: loc. 394). Post-screening discussions become a space of conversation to discover how the past continues to shape the present in both small and omnipresent ways.

Our methodology is mixed, interdisciplinary and participatory. We screen films from each of the other sites involved in our transnational network of exchanges. This transnational exchange gives the project a comparative architecture that enables nuanced rather than reductive comparison. It also provides our participants with a critical distance to engage with representations/expressions of conflicts that are not their "own". In displacing the lens, we attempt to dislocate local hierarchies of conflict making room for new voices to emerge, whether neglected, unuttered or unheard. To adopt a cinematographic metaphor, we are seeking deep focus that makes space for voices not necessarily located in the "foreground"—those associated with lineages of victimhood or collaboration—but in the "background", for whom the questions of dictatorship and transition are not usual topics of discussion.

## 5. Chiaroscuro: first attempt at a film reception study

December 21, 2018: we invite some members of *Historias Desobedientes*, along with members and associates of the organisation H.I.J.O.S. to watch Joshua Oppenheimer's controversial documentary, *The Act of Killing* (2012), which depicts the staging of a film about the massacre of real and perceived "communists" in Indonesia in 1965 by the perpetrators. This small gathering is an opportunity to pilot the methods for our focus groups. The evening does not go to plan. Right as we are about to press "play", the lights suddenly go out and the entire neighbourhood is plunged into darkness. Someone turns on the spotlight on their telephone. The power cut imposes its aesthetic of chiaroscuro on the encounter and this private living room starts to take on the air of a set from an early 20th Century German expressionist film. The discussion begins without the film screening being part of the process. The group is well-versed at discussing memory politics. The younger women are in their

late thirties/early forties—one is the daughter of a disappeared father, the other two are members of the Grupo de Arte Callejero [Street Art Group], an artists' collective that has been working closely with the children of the disappeared for the last two decades.<sup>11</sup> All actively involved in human rights and feminist activism, we wonder to what extent discussing with a group holding such a shared conviction for memory, truth and justice will be useful to our study. However, the name "*Historias Desobedientes*" does not resound as we had assumed it would and we are witnesses to an inadvertently controversial exchange. When the daughters of two Argentine perpetrators reveal their ties of kinship, the younger women take exception. For them, the name "hijos" can only legitimately be identified with the children of the disappeared, not with those of the military repressors.

The emergence of the *Historias Desobedientes* collective bears nevertheless certain resonance of the first meetings held by H.I.J.O.S. in the mid-1990s. Inside their respective organisations, they have forged alternative bonds and a sense of empowerment breaking out of the pact of silence. Most of its members had to stand up against their families. Although both groups propose alternative forms of (af)iliation beyond familial bloodline ties, the question about who the "real" children are comes back and forth: "Para mí también los "hijos" son los hijos de los desaparecidos. Y me da mucho terror que se equipare".<sup>12</sup> The older women listen in silence. They seem completely aware that they are touching on a very sensitive issue: "No somos víctimas, somos afectados como cualquier ciudadano. Con un plus: que el terror lo generaron nuestros padres",<sup>13</sup> says Lizy.

For some activists, *Historias Desobedientes*'s public "coming out" on May 10, 2017, as part of an overwhelming civic response to the judicial provocation of the "2x1" retrospective reduction of convicted repressor Luis Muiño's (and potentially many others') sentence, is inherently problematic. In the haphazardly-lit room, where everyone seems to have forgotten about the camera, opinion is divided. Some see *Historias Desobedientes* as a victory of the local Human Rights' movement. Others are more reluctant to recognise their legitimacy as such, and question what they see as an appropriation of the values of "memory, truth and justice". Can this group of relatives of the perpetrators be part of the "wounded family"? The chia-

roscuro imposed by the power outage turns into a poignant metaphor for questions of visibility, ethics and ownership. The agonistic discussion eventually gives way to a productive exchange of positions. The lights come back on and we watch a fragment of the film.

## 6. Close up: focus groups

We expect that screening films to different audiences will allow us to map various facets of the imaginary. After each screening, with as varied a set of groups as possible, we try to capture immediate, visceral reactions to the film, then individual reflections via a questionnaire, followed by a group discussion to better elucidate the more fraught collective interpretations and understandings. It is the methodological “hope” that these phases of reception might facilitate a more reflexive approach to the resonances of violence in the local context. Since imaginaries cannot be fully captured discursively, innovation is needed alongside these classic reception methods in order to capture and preserve these haptic reflections, metaphorically, visually, aurally, gesturally, affectively.

April 2: the bank holiday that marks the anniversary of the beginning of the Malvinas-Falklands’ war becomes the date for our first focus group with five young women in their early twenties. After a brief introduction to the project, we screen the Colombian documentary *Falsos Positivos* (Simone Bruno and Dado Carillo, 2009). The film addresses the scandal uncovered in 2008 during President Uribe’s doctrine of so-called “Democratic Security”, whereby members of the Colombian Army, motivated by the prospect of state bonus payments, lured innocent bystanders with job offers only to murder them. Corpses were dressed in military apparel so as to disguise them as members of the FARC guerrilla. The young women are from Valentín Alsina, a modest and increasingly precarious southern neighbourhood belonging to Greater Buenos Aires. They know little or nothing about the sixty-year Colombian armed conflict. Shy and somewhat nervous, they seem both intimidated and secretly excited by the camera that records their reactions to the film. After the screening, we ask them to list those words that spring to mind about the film. “Crime”, “violence”, “injustice”, “impunity”, “abuse of power”, “fear”, “violence”,

“helplessness”, are some of the words that appear. They then complete the anonymous questionnaires, which are conducted in each focus group across the project to gather comparative empirical data for the more traditional scholarly-based side of the study. During the discussion, voices timidly start to emerge. Yet the resonances of the Colombian documentary within the local context of dictatorship violence are not forthcoming. Still, four out of five participants eventually associate the case of the *falsos positivos* with Argentina’s military-led state terror in their responses.

April 5, 9 pm: we are at a local make-up salon in Ramos Mejía, another of Greater Buenos Aires’ suburbs, this time to the west. The salon is now closed to the public, but every Friday evening it is transformed into a quirky little cinema and a group of local people, mainly retired, meet to discuss individual films and the history of cinema. They call themselves the *Novelle Vague* of Ramos. We wonder what this predominantly middle-class audience will say about *Falsos positivos*. This time, the participants are keen to talk about the violence portrayed in the film and its resonance within the local context. They openly share personal stories, making rich connections between films, local contexts, their experiences of dictatorship violence during the 1970s, as well as contemporary resonances. “Antes tenía miedo. Ahora no”, states one of the few male participants. We leave the make-up salon gone midnight, buzzing with impressions.

April 9: the next focus group takes place with a lively group of elderly students at UNITE, a study programme for the third age at the Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora, again in Greater Buenos Aires. They are excited about the presence of the camera and participating in a transnational documentary project. Aside from their age, this is a less homogeneous group than previously. As soon as the screening has finished, the differences among the group start to emerge. While many of the participants do not hesitate to connect the images of the graves in *Falsos Positivos* with the local dictatorship violence, others prefer to step aside: “Yo no sabía”, argues one of the ladies in the front row quite adamantly, contending that it was impossible to “imagine” such systematised barbarism. Although more than 20 participants fill in the questionnaires, by the end of the debate only six remain. We wonder how many will return for the next screening.



This set of focus groups has opened up a reasonably broad spectrum of ideas and opinions, enabling us to start sketching our map of the imaginary. But the aim is to capture as wide a range as possible. We have already agreed to record the youth branch of the incumbent conservative coalition, Cambiemos-PRO. We have yet to travel to Argentina's extensive rural "Interior". A perspective that is hard to locate, albeit we suspect rather pervasive, is the one that quite simply does not think about politics and eschews any interrogation of the past. With this problem in mind, we also head out onto the streets in search of the resilient textures of the "ordinary" imaginary that cut across Argentine society.

## 7. Deep focus: into the fields of ordinary feelings.

23 March 2019, the eve of the 43<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the 1976 military coup: our excursion begins at Constitución railway station, deliberately chosen as a highly transited pedestrian crossroads. We want to test randomly-selected passers-by about their recollections of March 24th, 1976 (if age-appropriate), and what the date means to them personally. We invite as interviewers Félix Bruzzone, a well-known local writer whose parents were disappeared during the dictatorship, and Franco-Argentine lawyer, Mónica Zwaig, a tireless "fan" of human rights trials, as described by her creative partner Félix. We take inspiration from one of the scenes of their performance, *Cuarto intermedio. Guía para audiencias de lesa humanidad*, an original and often playful piece on the current trials in which they engage with people transiting through Retiro station, on the opposite side of downtown Buenos Aires. Footage projected during their performance attempts to demonstrate what regular bystanders know—or, more to the point, do not know—about the trials for crimes against humanity committed under dictatorship. The montage reveals that, despite the location of the federal tribunal just the other side of Retiro, few have any idea whatsoever that the trials are currently taking place.

"What are you planning to do tomorrow?" is the suggested opening question for Mónica and Félix. We want to see how many people engage with the reason for this national holiday. It soon becomes clear that our chosen location is not the best. Despite its refurbished elegance, *Constitución* remains

a "hot spot". We shift operations to Costanera Sur, a popular leisure area at weekends, particularly on such a sunny day, and a short distance away. The new location offers numerous opportunities to interview passers-by and those selling their produce at the weekly market. Our first interviewee runs a stall selling homemade cakes. Mónica is audacious and charming; Félix is understated, quietly witty and an attentive listener. Responses vary. Some enthusiastically discuss their plans for the demonstration the following day; others reject any connection whatsoever with the dictatorial period and are unaware of the annual commemorative march.

At a stall selling basic attire, we also meet Bautista, a Peruvian community leader from Rodrigo Bueno, a precarious four-block neighbourhood located just a few minutes walk from the market. Trapped between the ecological reserve and a millionaire's enterprise about to be launched at the Boca Juniors Sport City, the *barrio* is currently the subject of a controversial government housing relocation scheme: a brand-new set of apartment blocks which are rapidly being built against the clock as the presidential election approaches. But, as Bautista explains, the new buildings do not fit the inhabitants' requirements. Despite the precarious situation, he agrees to discuss the common links between the Peruvian and Argentine dictatorships on camera. As he speaks, a sweater that hangs from the roof of his stand places its arms reassuringly on his shoulders helped by a small gust of wind. "It is the embrace of the disappeared", someone in our crew later remarks. The eerie hug is framed as if it were a subtle figure of fiction intervening spectrally in our documentary scene.



Photo 3: Bautista, a Peruvian community leader from Rodrigo Bueno neighbourhood, engages in a Star Wars fight with writer Félix Bruzzone and Franco-Argentine lawyer Mónica Zwaig at his stall along the Costanera Sur. The sweater that hangs behind him will, helped by the breeze, eventually place its arms on his shoulders extending him "the embrace of the disappeared".



Bautista invites us to visit the canteen run by the collective in his *barrio*. We promise a visit wondering whether it would be possible—ethical, even—to propose a screening session with members of such a fragile community. Despite the intensified forms of unuttered violence, the community still seems lively fighting for its autonomous future. The capacity of the camera’s gaze to capture such realities is a constant source of reflection. Will our camera be able to provide a sensitive and ethical “sphere of appearance” for Rodrigo Bueno’s community? (Butler, 2010: 1). We are unsure if the *barrio* and its residents will even still be there when we return in three months’ time.

## 8. Staging the Real: matching staircases

January 14, 2019: Mariana stands at the top of a small spiral staircase in the courtyard at the centre of Alejo’s house. She holds a book in her hands—her own *Diario de una princesa montonera. 110% verdad*—a playful dissection of what she calls the local human rights “ghetto” (Perez, 2012: 126). It is a searingly hot afternoon. Alejo and cameraman Agustín squint up at the sky as they search for a suitable angle for the camera’s gaze upon Mariana and the staircase. A vivid cobalt wall illuminates her from behind. The stairs on which she is perched take centre stage, as does she. Backlit by the sunlight streaming in to the rear, they create a striking silhouette in sharp contrast to the backdrop in bright blue. The framing seems characteristically fictional.

At the agreed cue, performer and choreographer Luciana Acuña starts reading from a copy of the same book from the balcony that looks out over the stairs. The extract recounts the tension-filled guided tour of the ESMA organised for families of the disappeared. Mariana lost both her parents—Montonero activists—during the dictatorship and her brother, Guillermo Perez Rosinblit, whom she finally located in 2000, was born in captivity inside the ESMA. “Deberían poner el nombre de mi vieja en la puerta, porque esta es su pieza”, Mariana states in her diary. From the room where her mother gave birth to her brother, the group makes its way to Capucha (Hood). Mariana recounts suggesting that she and her partner follow along. Luciana reads: “Suben la escalera que va a Capuchita, ella anteúl-



Photo 4-Montage. The staircase that goes from Capucha to Capuchita at the ESMA is re-staged within a fictional landscape at our filmmaker’s home. Luciana Acuña reads a fragment from *Diario de una princesa montonera. 110% verdad* in which Mariana Eva Perez portrays an erotic scene that took place inside the ESMA. The staircase becomes the imaginary space where different layers of documentary and fiction come together.

tima, Jota al final. Jota aprovecha y le toca el culo. Ella es feliz. En la escalera que va de Capucha a Capuchita”. (2012: 18)<sup>14</sup> The last admission is intimate and comfortingly irreverent. Luciana laughs briefly; they both crack a smile and chuckle in unison. Mariana would later tell us that she could see the goose bumps prickling on Luciana’s arm as she read; the transmission of one voice to another, the *mise-en-scène* of this ludic testimony as a deliberately staged fiction releases affective shivers that ripple through our camera’s gaze.

Mariana is part of a generation—many of whom are direct descendants of the disappeared—that has introduced new vocabularies and images into the public sphere in relation to their own, very intimate experience of loss. Their production has introduced empowered and non-victimizing accounts of trauma into the narratives of memory. As a writer, Mariana has, like others in her generation, confronted the official duty of memory established during the 2003–2015 Kirchnerist administrations which she mocks quite disparagingly as the “*Disneyland des Droits de l’Homme*” [the Disneyland of human rights] (Perez, 2012: 126).

Although Mariana was reluctant to participate in the scene, she seems to have enjoyed this fictional recasting. Yet, what happens when the image of the asphyxiating narrow stairs joining Capucha with Capuchita, filmed originally on location during the guided tour with *Historias Desobedientes* around ESMA, is re-staged in a private, relaxed space and

deliberately framed in a way in which it becomes fictionalised? Match cutting the luminous stairs in Alejo's courtyard with the staircase joining the squalid spaces where inmates were kept may seem incongruous, but it is part of a broader conceptual/creative strategy of layering. For French philosopher Jacques Rancière, "a fiction is the construction of a set of relations [...] between things that are said to be perceptible and the sense that can be made of those things", for example (2013: n.p.). Moreover, in a film project that finds it impossible to identify as either documentary or fiction, Jean-Luc Godard's guide to being through cinema that opens this essay seems vital. Alejo's filmmaking inscribes itself precisely in the interstitial space that is neither fiction nor documentary, or a zone of overlap perhaps that is both and neither at once.

## 9. Conclusion

Stories, fictions, metaphors, myths, fantasies and illusions are all the stuff of the imaginary. They are so deeply embedded in our perceptions of the Real, that an aesthetics of the imaginary would seem to require a non-binary approach to genre, whereby documentary and fictional forms could fuse seamlessly. Just as a staircase has been opened to unusual projections and appropriations, our film project navigates in between documentary and fiction. Taking inspiration from the cinematography of Godard, our camera seeks to explore how past and present lives are not only "[b]eyond the theatre", but also the ways in which theatre can suggest another way of staging lives. Somehow, the juxtaposed and contradictory set of impressions condensed within our "matching" staircases helps to create this map. It takes the form of an affective cartography that unfurls as the process of making our documentary unfolds. The fictional frames of a testimonial scene shed light on the continually precarious, albeit resilient, dimension of playfulness and novelty that resonates through the local imaginaries of the post-dictatorship transition. By proposing these kinds of exchanges between fiction and reality, our project seeks not only to interrogate conventional—and rather sacral—acts of mourning that have persisted throughout the period, but it also suggests to what extent both pain and pleasure might unexpectedly interlace within the aftermath of grief. Ultimately, it seeks to en-

gage new and hereunto unheard voices within the broader imaginary of the dictatorship's violence.

## End notes

1 "We laughed. We were going to laugh out loud all night. Since we had a date for the funeral, my body was the soundboard of a crystalline laughter that sounded every few minutes like loose pearls on a necklace falling down an endless marble staircase" (all translations have been done by the authors).

2 "the author of a genocide": "I loved my father profoundly, with his wise choices and his errors. I also repudiated his actions as a man with the same intensity. What he did during the dictatorship will always, always hurt deep in my soul".

3 "When we sit down to edit all this, I feel we are going to have to write a long poem, divided into songs, like those of the Divine Comedy, in order to be able to capture the full horizon of what we are contemplating".

4 "the logic implicit in the theory of the "two demons" in a context that is distinct, and with other intentions, that are much more serious than in its original version".

5 For the 30th anniversary of the military coup, the National Human Rights' Secretary presented a new edition of *Nunca Más*, in which only the 1985 prologue was included. In contrast, the prologue written by Eduardo Luis Duhalde and Rodolfo Mattarollo, which had been added in 2006 was surreptitiously omitted (See Dandán, 2016).

6 "How do you imagine that we feel being here?" / "some were monsters outwardly, and also monsters inside [...] but others weren't". Extracts of the conversation we had with Lizy at the ESMA Memory Museum on November 23, 2018.

7 "The first time that I entered the former ESMA was on 23 November. I went with my therapist! I couldn't do it... I was walking and different pains circulated throughout my body. I had the sensation that I was unable to breathe".

8 "How is it possible that babies were born here?".

9 The Ni una menos collective emerged on June 3, 2015, but it was only during Macri's administration, which began in December of that year, that the group became widely known, especially among the youngest generations. Its anniversary demonstrations, three women's strikes and other actions/events have congregated millions of women in the streets. See: <http://niunamenos.org.ar/>

10 "I am moved and happy to have been awakened by these young women. It is a reversed mandate." / "It is

the young women with their green headscarves who are calling upon the human rights movement, as an autonomous entity. There is a process of transmission that remains open”.

11 GAC intervenes directly in the street to publicly map impunity using road signs or staging the *escraches*, developed by H.I.J.O.S. during the mid-1990s in order to target the unpunished perpetrators.

12 “For me, too, the “hijos” are the children of the disappeared. And it horrifies me that they might be put on the same level and considered as victims of the same thing”.

13 “We are not victims, but citizens affected like any other. With an added plus: that the terror was generated by our own fathers”.

14 “They should put my mum’s name on the door, because this is her room.” / “They go up the stairs that lead to Capuchita (Little Hood). She is the penultimate person, Jota is the final one. Jota takes advantage and caresses her arse. She is happy. On the staircase that joins Capucha with Capuchita”.

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