

# State Terrorism on Film

## *Argentine Cinema during the First Years of Democracy (1983–1990)*

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The construction of the Argentine past has found in cinema a fundamental ally, and many films have become historical references for entire generations. This contribution of movies to the history of the nation goes back at least to the 1940s. Works such as *La guerra gaucha* (*The Gaucho War*, directed by Lucas Demare, 1942), *El santo de la espada* (*The Knight of the Sword*, directed by Leopoldo Torre Nilsson, 1970), and *La hora de los hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*, directed by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, 1968) have taken ideas about the past that exist among the public and within the educational system and have expressed them in images, thus teaching their history to several generations of Argentinians.

The last title listed above – *The Hour of the Furnaces* – is a political film, in which Solanas and Getino try to denounce the excessive element of foreign interference and its implications – mainly the bad ones – for Argentina. *The Knight of the Sword* offers a representation of General José de San Martín, Argentinian hero and national icon. *The Gaucho War* depicts the war of independence against Spain at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which is narrated in an epic, Manichaean tone. All these films have managed to fix, in the national mind, stereotypes both about the subjects they cover and about the characters they depict. Most of them carry to the screen notions and representations that are present in literature, in the media, and above all in school textbooks. By assuming an educational role, film not only disseminates and reasserts certain ideas about the past (Mallimacci and Marrone 1997), but also induces a specific way of looking at it.

The past that this chapter focuses on is the latest Argentine military government of 1976–1983. The chapter studies how Argentine cinema – after the return of democracy – depicted this government's rule of terror. I will be able to analyze only a small number out of a wide and diverse range of films, so it is important to explain that my selection was governed by two factors, which imposed their own criteria: first, I chose the most popular and acclaimed films from the early years of

transition to democracy; second, I concentrated on particular works, which have marked key moments of rupture and change in the relations between Argentine society and its past (Hartog 2007).

### **The Historical Background and Some Characteristics of State Terrorism in Argentina**

To set the stage for my analysis, it is necessary to provide some historical context for the 1976 coup. This will let the reader have a better understanding of the challenges – in terms of a representation of the recent past – that Argentine filmmakers had to face at the end of the military regime in 1983. The overthrow of the president and seizure of power by the armed forces in March 1976, and the supposedly “temporary” suspension of individual liberties that ensued, were justified in reaction to the turbulent summer of 1975, which had been full of violence (guerilla attacks, agitation in trade unions, and overt corruption in the government). The coup was the sixth in Argentina’s twentieth-century history, and most Argentinians believed it was just another military intervention that would make way, after a prudent period of time, for a new government. This had happened before. In 1930, 1943, 1955, 1962, and 1966 the army had interrupted the political process in order to overthrow a president or proscribe a political party, and then it had returned the power to civilians.

This time it was different. The military and their civilian allies argued that they had carried out the putsch in order to fight a “battle” in the non-declared “Third World War” – the one against “international communism.” The subsequent and extended repression of political dissidents was then justified in the name of defending “Christian and western civilization.” The military government implemented economic policies that benefited the agricultural sector but canceled Argentina’s incipient industrial development. These economic policies and the repression of every kind of dissidence aim at reshaping the whole society: their main purpose is to return Argentina to conditions similar to those that had prevailed at the beginning of the twentieth century. Everyone who fought, either pacifically or violently, for a modern egalitarian society was seen as an enemy (Torre and De Riz 2002; Lewis 2002).

For the military and their supporters, the elimination of dissidents was the key to achieving their plans. They launched a widespread and clandestine campaign of repression not just against what remained of the guerrillas, but also against every form of dissidence – political, social, or religious; in labor unions, in universities, and everywhere else. So widely (or vaguely) defined was the notion of “dissidence” that any critic of the state could be arrested, since the perpetrators of state terrorism were free and virtually autonomous in their actions. Behind each political protest, or so the military imagined, lay the “hidden hand” of international communism,

and a clandestine organization within the government was free to kidnap, imprison, torment, humiliate, and murder those designated as “subversive.”

One major characteristic of this repression was that the state systematically denied the kidnappings, the existence of clandestine centers of detention, and even the problem of “missing persons.” For example, a(n) (in)famous press conference given by the first president of the military government, General Videla, in December 13, 1979 illustrates how the perpetrators of state terrorism publicly denied their crimes. In that conference Videla emphatically rejected the denunciations regarding “missing persons” by saying: “If the disappeared is not here, then it doesn’t exist.” The testimonies of those who were able to survive their captivity and outlived their captors agree on the fact that a large number of detainees, after being subjected to torture and humiliation, were murdered. Even today, the precise number of deaths is unknown, as is the full number of those disappeared (*desaparecidos*) (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas 1991).

### **The “Breakthrough” of the Recent Past and the Revelation of Horror**

When democracy returned to Argentina in 1987 and censorship came to an end, human rights organizations revealed the dark side of the recent past. As early as 1982, after the military government had been seriously defeated in a war against the United Kingdom for the possession of the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic, the question of clandestine repression became a very important subject for the whole society. Raúl Alfonsín, the first president of the democratic era, ordered the armed forces and the criminal justice system to investigate into the responsibilities of the military and the guerrillas during the so-called “Dirty War” (Malamud Goti 1996). In this way the “war against communist subversion” acquired a new face, previously unknown and very sinister, as Argentinians began to discover that many of their countrymen had been tortured and murdered. Thanks to the measures taken by Alfonsín, many of the crimes committed during the period of state terrorism were openly denounced, and the armed and security forces were deemed responsible for them. Revelations about the crimes committed by the military and the security forces – kidnapping, torture, murder, rape, child abduction, theft, and pillage of the property of “missing persons” – increased tensions within the society between those who sought truth and justice and those who considered this to be a risk to the young democracy. A political and symbolic struggle to establish an accurate version of the recent past raged in the media. For the first time, the main thrust of the narrative constructed by the military, the existence of an internal war in the seventies, was openly questioned by the same civil society that had supported the army almost unconditionally in the recent past.

For the military and their civilian allies, the armed forces had fought and won a “just war” in order to protect Argentina from “subversives.” Those defending this interpretation argued that the “subversion” defeated by the military was now recovering thanks to the revelations that came with restoration of democracy. Again, they complained, enemy forces were trying to stop the country from being “western and Christian.” Now it was not only the perpetrators themselves who were publicly defending their crimes, but also young professionals or other civilians, who began to write books, develop websites, and appear in the media to defend state terrorism. These groups called for the annulment of any judicial processes against the military and security forces and attacked the government for its policies on human rights and reparations for the victims of state terrorism. One of the main representatives of this new generation is attorney Nicolás Márquez, author of several books – two of them self-published best-sellers: *La otra parte de la verdad* (*The Other Face of Truth*, 2004) and *La mentira oficial: El setentismo como política de estado* (*The Official Lie: 1970s-ism as Public Policy*, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

### **State Terrorism in Argentina Bursts onto the Screen (1983–1985)**

Filmmakers in Argentina have been quite willing to consider the recent past from a cinematic point of view. This was a rather “natural” response after long years of censorship and repression. The approach toward this traumatic past was at first carried out largely through indirect means, state terrorism being referred to obliquely or suggested through metaphor. This did not necessarily mean that the camera assumed the perspective of the historian, but rather faced head-on the problem of representing the evil. The films of the first years of democracy did not depict the past directly, but created versions of events that allowed for its trauma to be bearable. The most ominous aspects of state terrorism were barely whispered about, narrated metaphorically, located in an era that was depicted as far away in the past. The first cinematic attempts were the product of a society waking up from a nightmare. Victims of state terrorism remained separate from the rest of the society. The films told stories that nobody seemed to be aware of or to understand fully. The victims spoke in coded languages, making gestures known only to those initiated, touching upon suffering and distress generally unknown to most citizens who had lived a “normal” life during the military regime. It took a long time for the specifics of the terror to appear on the screen.

For Argentinians as for their films, the problem of approaching their recent violent past is double-sided. On the one hand, it is necessary to confront the reality of the perpetration of an indeterminate number of aberrant crimes against humanity. This means that filmmakers are faced with the problem of establishing the – individual and collective – responsibilities of different groups in society. On the other hand, filmmakers must to adopt a position on another issue: the cause

of the social convulsions of the 1970s, which lead to the military coup. Debate on these matters continues in the country to this day (Vezzetti 2009).

The political campaign for the democratic elections held in October 1983 encouraged the first wave of films to touch the topic of state terrorism. A documentary entitled *The Lost Republic* (directed by Luis Gregorich and Miguel Pérez), released on September 1, 1983, launched a call to Argentinians to remember their recent past in order not to “repeat its mistakes.” A miscellaneous compilation that uses a montage of filmic, audio, and photographic materials, this piece offers a history of all the military coups from 1930 until 1976, emphasizing the role played by Unión Cívica Radical politicians throughout this long period. Conceived by a “think tank” connected to the presidential candidate of that party, the film had visible political goals, but it was generally seen as presenting an “objective” view of Argentina’s past and was widely used in schools.

The documentary also helped to launch an interpretation of the recent past that would become dominant, one known as the “two demons theory.” This interpretation attributes responsibility for the 1976 coup in the first place to the inadequate administration of the Peronist regimes between 1973 and 1976 and, second, to the violence of guerrillas. This view, which is still accepted by many people, ultimately tries to exonerate Argentine society as a whole by proposing that its members were ignorant of the crimes committed by the state or at least did not participate in them. The corollary of the state of mind generated by this explanation is that Argentinian society, in 1983, explicitly condemned those “two demons,” voting the candidate for the middle-class party, the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR), who promised to investigate the atrocities committed during 1976–1983 and to prosecute legally those responsible. The success of the film and the beginning of trials against the military for crimes against humanity encouraged the creators of *The Lost Republic* to prepare a sequel – another compilation organized around an off-screen narrative, which aimed at supporting the political aspirations of the Unión Cívica Radical, the then governing party. In this work the “two demons theory” was enunciated again and the recent past was presented as no more than a combination of chaos and violence. The moral was clear: we need to keep the UCR in power as a guarantee of democratization.

The first dramatic feature film to take up the problem of political violence was *No habrá más penas ni olvido* (*Funny Dirty Little War*), directed by Héctor Olivera and released a few days before the elections of October 30, 1983. Set in an imaginary country at no specific time, it clearly alluded to the seventies through characters, dialogue, and locations. This was a film of reunions, for it saw the return to the screen of major actors such as Federico Luppi, Héctor Bidonde, Miguel Ángel Solá, Lautaro Murúa, and Ulises Dumont, all of whom were unable to work during the time of the military government. Both the director and his screenwriter, Roberto Cossa, had previously fallen foul of military censorship. Olivera and Cossa adapted the film from a novel of the same name by Osvaldo Soriano, which deals with the internal conflicts of the seventies and depicts Peronism as a prelude to state terrorism.

The plot revolves around Ignacio Fuentes (played by Federico Luppi), the newly elected mayor of a small imaginary rural town named Colonia Vela (used in many of Soriano's narratives). Respected and well liked by his fellow citizens, the mayor is suddenly faced with an accusation that he is not, as he claims, a Peronist, but really a communist. Fuentes decides to ignore the lies and to continue doing his job, but some of the townspeople believe the accusation to be true. He thinks that his problems arose because those who lost the elections were not able to accept defeat, and he feels that the opposition of fellow citizens will be short-lived, the result of a normal political conflict. He soon discovers he is mistaken. The dispute becomes violent, as those who support Fuentes are murdered one by one as part of a violent campaign launched against his camp by the military and their civilian allies, and then legitimated by the people of Colonia Vela through silence and complicity.

The horrors of this injustice are somewhat mitigated by an unusual element in a historical film: the use of humor and of the grotesque in the representation of political violence. In one of the film's most famous scenes, when Fuentes and his allies are locked up in the Town Hall and rounded up by their enemies, Juan – one of Fuentes's allies (played by Miguel Angel Solá) – suggests that they request aid from the “aviation.” In fact he requests aid from Cerviño – a drunkard who, in one of his sober states, piloted a fumigating airplane. Cerviño agrees to help Fuentes and uses as “weapon” against the latter's enemies a load of animal excrement, which he drops on them from the air. But this intervention from the skies does not stop the enemies from entering the Town Hall, killing some of Fuentes's men, and taking him prisoner.

*Funny Dirty Little War* connected to *The Lost Republic*, for it showed that the employment of aberrant and extreme methods to control dissidents was already in place during the Peronist government, between 1973 and 1976; hence it could not be exclusively attributed to the military regime. The most recent researches on state terrorism in Argentina show that, before the *coup d'état* of March 1976, the army had already resorted to the practice of enforced disappearances of persons – a practice that defined Argentina's state terrorism. Torture as counter-insurgency tactics, against guerillas as well as against civilians, was also employed in the northern province of Tucumán (Verbitsky 2005).<sup>2</sup>

Another film adapted from one of Soriano's novels, *Cuarteles de invierno* (*Winter Barracks*), released in September 1984 and directed by Lautaro Murúa, is a political drama with satirical overtones. Also set in an imaginary place at an indeterminate time, the film has a paranoid and oppressive atmosphere, which easily points the audience toward the darkest aspects of the recent past. The two main characters, a tango singer and a boxer, both men in the declining years of their careers, seize what they think is a great opportunity when they are hired to perform at a party organized by the military government of – once again – Colonia Vela. The singer, Andrés Galván (played by Oscar Ferrigno), finds himself detained and brutally interrogated by the military shortly after arriving in town. He is then released as

mysteriously as he was arrested. Off to find the sponsor of the party in order to do his job, he meets boxer Tony Rocha (played by Eduardo "Tato" Pavlovsky), who has been hired to fight the undefeated local boxing idol. But, before he can get into the ring, Rocha is asked by the military to take a dive. Although neither Galván nor Rocha have any prior connection with the world of politics and military matters have no relevance for either of them, their lives are still affected by the arbitrariness and violence of the government. *Winter Barracks* seeks to show that even those uninvolved in politics could suffer the outcomes of state terrorism.

The films discussed so far deal with imaginary events or ones set in a distant past. This was an incipient nationwide effort to recover historical memory, a process characteristic of post-dictatorial countries. Other films of these early democratic years referred more explicitly to the military era, showing terror or corruption, but only in passing, or as part of the plots of thrillers. There are several examples: *Pasajeros de una pesadilla* (*Nightmare's Passengers*, directed by Fernando Ayala, 1984), *Todo o nada* (*All or Nothing*, directed by Emilio Vieyra, 1984), *En retirada* (*In Retirement*, directed by Juan Carlos Desanzo, 1984). Desanzo's film is a special case; for this is one of the few films of this period that dealt with the subject of state terrorism and its perpetrators, but it did so by situating its "retired" characters in the very different context of the new democratic era: not only had they ceased to be "useful" henchmen of the dictatorship, but most of them were free and were shown cohabitating with their victims.<sup>3</sup>

Critics and audiences regarded this film, however, as a simple and excessively violent thriller. On the whole, films produced in the first period discussed here seemed to be seeking a means of approaching the question of state terrorism more directly. It was as if the filmmakers were gathering the diverse pieces of a puzzle but had so far no strategy of putting them together into a larger tale. Only in a later period did films such as *Camila* (directed by María Luisa Bemberg), *La Rosales* (directed by David Lipszyc), and *Evita, quien quiera oír que oiga* (*Evita, Who Wants to Hear Should Hear*, directed by Eduardo Mario Mignogna; *Evita* was Perón's first wife) begin to explore various aspects of the past.

Indeed, *Camila* became one of the major box office hits in the history of Argentine cinema. The movie brings back the violence and cruelty of the Civil War of the 1840s in its depiction of a romance between a Buenos Aires high-society lady and a priest. Focusing on the rebellious activities and the clandestine romance of Camila O'Gorman (played by Susú Pecoraro) and Father Ladislao Gutiérrez (played by Imanol Arias), the film abounds in criticism of the ruling powers in society and politics. Camila buys books censored by the government, she rebels against family mandates, and engages in a love relationship with a Catholic, chastity-bound priest, who openly criticizes the government from the pulpit. These activities and the protagonists' relationship occur within a tense and intolerant political environment, and the attraction between the two grows along with their anti-government sentiments. Eventually the lovers run away, hide inland, and start a new life together; but they are discovered, incarcerated, and in

the end executed for having defied the government. Seen widely as a metaphor for life under the military regime of the 1970s, *Camila* attracted a record audience of 2 million people (Ciria 1995).

From an innovative feminist perspective, *Camila* offers a filmic reading of South American authoritarianism, emphasizing the role of women as oppressed subjects. The relation with the recent past as a period of authoritarianism and violence is quite easy to establish. The outstanding role played by women, symbolized by *Camila*'s character, correlates with the actions of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and other women leaders and important figures within the fight for justice and punishment for those responsible for state terrorism. The advertising campaign to promote *Camila*'s premiere employed a statement used by the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons in its final report: to the image showing *Camila* and Ladislao being executed was added, as an epilog, the nowadays well-known phrase *Nunca más* ("Never again") (Varea 1999).

The cruelties and horrors of remote times – such as the decade of the 1840s – were easily connected by the audience to revelations about the crimes and atrocities committed within the framework of the recent state terrorism. At the beginning of *Camila* a servant kills and throws into the river several newly born kittens. This scene undoubtedly refers to the so-called "death flights," a method used by Argentine marines to assassinate many of those detained/disappeared by heaving them into the Río de la Plata from Argentine navy airplanes while they were still alive (Verbitsky 2005).

There was an increasingly revisionist attitude to the past, both recent and distant. As part of it, in *La Rosales* director David Lipszyc used a forgotten historical event to raise issues about the military regime. The story centered on the shipwreck of the torpedo boat *Rosales* in July 1892: during its first voyage under the Argentine flag, this ship was caught in a heavy storm and broke up. Most of the crew died in the wreck, but somehow the officers survived. When the ship's fire officer, Francesco Battaglia, later came forward to allege that the captain, Leopoldo Funes, had locked the crew in a hold and this resulted in its members' deaths, a huge scandal ensued and the navy was asked to investigate the incident; that is, essentially, to investigate itself. A year and a half later, the navy predictably exonerated the captain.

The film based on this incident tells the story of the discovery of the criminal actions involved in the "Rosales affair" and explores the reactions to these revelations of the different social players involved: politicians, the military, journalists, survivors, and the relatives of the victims. The investigation harks back to what happened in 1985 in the trials of the military leaders of the previous regime, who were charged with crimes against humanity. The film director puts Battaglia (played by Ulises Dumont) in the foreground, and the plot highlights the absurdity of the military trying itself. The film may have no narrative complexity, its characters are no more than stereotypes, and the plot is entirely Manichaeian in mode, thus wasting an excellent production design, which reconstructed the atmosphere



of the period through well chosen locations and décor. But *La Rosales* uses this distant and forgotten incident to point the finger directly at the current issue: military culpability and the foolishness of allowing a branch of the government to judge itself. In a sense, the recent military regime had attempted to do just that; for, before leaving power in 1983, it promulgated an amnesty law designed to protect its members in advance from any accusations they might receive.

The film emphasizes another aspect of the judicial process around the *Rosales* shipwreck – one that refers to the current reality of Argentine society: the military's response to aberrant orders. In the actual shipwreck, the question was this: Did the officers who obeyed the captain's order to abandon the crew act in a correct and moral way? It is not a long step from this question to another, more urgent one for a contemporary audience: What sort of trial is appropriate for military men who complied with orders to torture and murder? The reaction of military authorities in the film coincides, at least in part, with the discourse of the military during the early years of the restored democracy: according to them, the nation's crucial task was to forget what happened and to avoid investigating state terrorism.

Another film that brings back fragments of a distant past, making them speak about the recent era, is *Evita* – a film of mixed genre, combining documentary and drama. Directed by Eduardo Mignogna, the film constituted an attempt to restore the political voice of Peronism, which had been silenced and persecuted for many years. Interested in a period of Eva Perón's life that had not yet been shown on film, Mignogna intercut dramatized moments of her life with newsreel sequences from the 1940s and 1950s and interviews with writers and politicians. The film begins with an adolescent Evita leaving her hometown on a train journey to Buenos Aires: she is the proverbial country girl who goes to the big city, determined to shape her own destiny. Using traditional story elements, Mignogna succeeds in getting the screen to help resuscitate Evita's reputation. The film stands in stark contrast to *The Lost Republic*, which sought to write history from the point of view of the major Peronist opposition, the Unión Cívica Radical.

### **The Argentine Past Popular Films: *The Official Story* and *The Night of the Pencils***

1985 was a great year for Argentine films, particularly dramatic works dealing with the recent past. It saw the release of the two movies – *The Official Story* (directed by Luis Puenzo) and *The Night of the Pencils* (directed by Héctor Olivera) – with the greatest impact on audiences in (and outside) Argentina. Their dramatic power was recognized in both box office receipts and awards: Puenzo's film was awarded Best Foreign Film at the 1986 Academy Awards, and, according to the publication *El Heraldo*, it also headed the ranking of most seen Argentine films during 1985, with an audience of 884,608. Like *The Lost Republic*, it soon became part of the essential educational materials used by teachers in both secondary and elementary schools.

The central issue of Puenzo's film is the seizure of new-born infants whose parents have been murdered by the state for being "subversives." The main characters are an upper-middle-class couple with close connections to the military government. Roberto, the husband (Héctor Alterio), is strongly committed to the status quo, and Alicia, his wife (Norma Aleandro), is a conservative high school history teacher whose politics is different from that of her spouse. The two live in a quiet, comfortable, and well-organized world, along with their adopted daughter, Gaby (Analía Castro). Only after Alicia, driven by an encounter with a close friend who has returned from a long exile, begins to wonder about the origins of their 5-year-old daughter, does the story kick into gear. When she asks Roberto for precise information on Gaby's origins, he reacts violently, at first only at a psychological level, later physically. A colleague at work provides enough information to heighten Alicia's growing doubts and her need to know. The colleague encourages her to contact the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Grandmothers of May Square), who march with signs asking about the whereabouts of their missing grandchildren. Her encounter with them confronts Alicia with the truth that her beloved daughter was in all likelihood kidnapped from opponents of the military regime. This knowledge, and her desire for more specifics, leads to a search for the truth, which is condemned and blocked by Roberto. But, for her, there is no way back. The past has returned to haunt Alicia and to destroy her peaceful world, and the information that she manages to unearth triggers multiple emotional and physical problems. When Gaby's real story is finally revealed, it is as if the world of state terrorism has entered Alicia's home. Roberto becomes so furious with her that, in one of the final and most crucial scenes of the film, he brutally beats Alicia, breaks her fingers by closing the door on them, and ends by smashing her head against the wall.

*The Official Story* touches several key issues in Argentinian society. It raises questions of who knows and who doesn't know about the theft of children and the violence used against prisoners in the clandestine centers of detention. It portrays the country, symbolically, as a land of ignorance, denial, and irresponsibility with regard to state terrorism. Moreover, when the truth does come to light and seems inconvenient, it triggers strong opposition. One question surrounding the film is: What message does it really seek to transmit? Is it a warning about the possibly violent reaction of terrorist perpetrators when faced with justice and the truth? One critic, when reviewing the film, wondered whether the problem of the couple was actually not the fact of having raised a stolen kid, but rather the fact of "not being able to wriggle out of the connection with the existing society" (Guebel 1986). However one judges it, the ending of the story is upbeat and calming; for, guided by a human rights organization and by Gaby's allegedly biological family, Alicia is more than ever determined to know the full story of how she acquired her adopted daughter. At this point the military and their civilian allies disappear from the screen, and their place is taken by demonstrators who demand the truth and justice about the recent past.

The other 1985 film that had a great impact on audiences, *The Night of the Pencils*, was based on the investigation led by journalists Héctor Ruiz Núñez and María

Seoane into the kidnapping, imprisonment, and assassination of ten high-school students from La Plata, a province of Buenos Aires, on September 16, 1976, in the middle of a demonstration demanding lower bus fares. Only one of the students, Pablo Díaz, survived the ordeal, and the film followed his testimony. It was the first film that showed directly the brutality of state terrorism. Shot in the actual homes of the abducted students, and full of scenes of torture and humiliation, *The Night of the Pencils* must be considered the most realistic feature film produced in the eighties about the period of military government.

Yet, however strong its portraits, the film does not deal with political history, but is rather centered on the personal psychological experiences of the teenagers. Rather than being an account of the social and political context within which the events took place, it is more like a collective biopic, which strongly contrasts the adolescence of kidnapped students with the horrific experiences they underwent in prison. The victims and the perpetrators are clearly defined in the film. With no place for subtlety or ambiguity, the audience cannot help identifying with the students, as well as with their desperate and desolate mothers, vainly seeking their children (Pérez Murillo and Fernández Fernández 2002). In comparison with *The Official Story*, *The Night of the Pencils* focuses more upon the darkest aspects of the regime and the innocence of the victims facing such a terrible punishment.<sup>4</sup>

### **1987–1990: The Military Reaction to the Trials for Crimes against Humanity**

Roberto's brutal aggression toward his wife in *The Official Story* soon found a parallel in public events. The late 1980s saw three military rebellions against the government, with strident demands for the termination of the ongoing trials against the perpetrators of state terrorism and for the rehabilitation of those who had been accused of crimes. Between 1987 and 1990 the young democracy found its continuity threatened by this reaction against the progress of judicial investigations. To placate the military and stop them from pressuring the government, laws were passed and presidential pardons were issued that allowed for the release of every perpetrator who had already been tried, sentenced, and imprisoned for having committed crimes against humanity. Due to those laws, every trial in progress was suspended. As the political power surrendered to military pressure, the wider social trend toward the recovery of memory seemed to fall into abeyance.

With the election of Peronist Carlos Menem as president in 1989, the question of human rights violations during the military government was officially downplayed. During his two terms of office (1989–1999) the government pursued a strategy of trying to make society forget the problem, letting it become no more than a private affair, of concern only to those who had suffered. Yet during this period human rights organizations and some few civilians worked to keep the search for truth and justice alive. In part, they achieved this goal. The reconsideration of the recent past as a social issue might gradually languish, but on screen it was raised in

a number of films, all of which lacked commercial distribution and never became box office hits. If the impunity of perpetrators seemed to be forever assured in court, cinema to some extent kept the issue alive by seeking new ways to speak about the traumatic past.

During Menem's time in office the matter of forced exile assumed a more important place in Argentine films, being perhaps spurred by a certain sense of optimism that resulted from the country's economic recovery. Probably the best film about exile is *Un muro de silencio* (*A Wall of Silence*, directed by Lita Stantic, 1993). Presenting once more the story of a woman, this film focuses on Silvia Cassini (Ofelia Medina), whose personal biography is being used as the basis for a film being made by British director Kate Benson (Vanessa Redgrave), from a screenplay written by Bruno (Lautaro Murúa), Silvia's former university professor. The screenplay reveals that Silvia's first husband, Julio, was kidnapped and disappeared. This is a painful part of her life that she decides to bury, but Kate and Bruno believe that her story must be shared with others. Initially Silvia refuses to be involved in the film, but then everything changes when she thinks she has caught a glimpse of Julio alive. Drawing on events taken from the personal and political life of the director, Lita Stantic – Stantic's first husband, filmmaker Pablo Szir, was detained by the military government of 1976 and now figures on the list of people who have disappeared – *A Wall of Silence* focuses on that recent and traumatic past that the government and certain groups pretend to be dead and overcome. However fictionalized, the film is brave enough to show the main workings of state terrorism: the acts of kidnapping and torture, the torment lived by the relatives of the persons who disappeared, and the misinformation spread by the military, along with its practices of economic extortion.

Through a fine use of color cinematography and incidental music, director Stantic manages to evoke the disheartening atmosphere of the Menem years, when the search for the truth about state terrorism and the fight to recover its memory had been officially canceled. One symbol of this cancellation is the social neglect that fell upon the once famous Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. A scene in the film shows the director, Kate, together with her screenwriter, attending the weekly demonstration of the group. Now – in contrast to the early 1990s – only a few women seem to take part in the demonstrations that once overflowed the Plaza, as can be seen in one of the final sequences of *The Official Story*. Like Alicia in that film, Kate becomes a living symbol of how society deals with (or ignores) the legacy of state terrorism.

### **The Emergence of the Guerrilla Memory**

In the mid-1990s, as public memory seemed to lose focus, films kept alive the issues linked to the military regime. Such films included documentaries dealing with the guerrilla movement, whose activities had been one of the original excuses for

the coup. These documentaries regarded the guerrilla fighters neither as terrorists nor as heroes. They saw their actions as being conditioned by two factors: the social inequalities of Argentine society; and the lengthy proscription of Peronism, a movement that had been supported by labor unions and the majority of the population. (Peronism was forbidden to participate in elections and to run labor unions between 1955 and 1973, a measure that was supported by the armed forces and every political party.)

Two films on this topic stand out: *Montoneros, una historia* (directed by Andrés Di Tella, 1995) and *Cazadores de utopías (Hunters of Utopia)*, directed by David Blaustein, 1996). Though taking different points of view and using different aesthetics, they both portray with a great deal of sympathy the men and women active in one of the most important guerrilla groups during the 1970s, the Montoneros. Even if the movement's founders came from the Catholic extreme right, this guerrilla group, created in 1970, soon joined Peronism and considered itself to be its armed avant-garde. In the middle of 1973 they confronted Perón, and thus they lost many of the sympathies they had aroused in society on account of their fight against the previous military governments. From then on their political influence began to dissolve, and it was eventually overshadowed by their resort to terrorism (Gillespie 1982; Moyano 1995). Di Tella's film tells a collective story based mostly on the testimony of a former member of the Montoneros, Ana, who had been kidnapped, tortured, clandestinely incarcerated in the infamous Navy School of Mechanics, and released after three years. The director privileges in his film the history of the simple militants, not that of the commanders, though he does use the testimony of Roberto Cirilo Perdía, former number-two man of the Montoneros, as well as a brief fragment of the only television interview given by a former commander in chief of the Montoneros, Mario Eduardo Firmenich (Ranalletti 2001).

Blaustein's film deals with the Montoneros as a part of twentieth-century Argentine history, providing some 30 interviews with the organization's former members and supporters. Di Tella mixes footage and fiction in order to narrate a collective history – the Montoneros' history – but he does so from the point of view of a simple militant, who underwent prison and torture through his participation in the guerrilla group. Blaustein's main purpose is, undoubtedly, to restore with little aesthetic or discursive mediation the voice of those who still have not told their version of the past. His film stands out for other aspects of its production, particularly the originality of the testimonies, many of them from people bearing witness for the first time. The film also includes archival images taken from news of the 1970s, which have great quality and novelty.

The films of Di Tella and Blaustein opened a pathway that was taken and enriched by others during the following decade. There have been since then, and particularly during the first decade of the twenty-first century, new approaches to the representation of state terrorism, including the reconstruction of personal itineraries by the children of dead and disappeared guerrillas: for example *Los rubios (The Blondes)*, directed by Albertina Carri, 2003) and *Papá Iván (Dad Iván)*, directed by

María Inés Roqué, 2000); both directors are daughters of “disappeared” persons, and they reconstruct their parents’ histories by combining documentary and fictional elements, the latter being the most prominent one. Another fictionalization of facts and characters connected to the experience of state terrorism is the reconstruction of the story of the other major guerrilla organization, the Trotskyite People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP). These approaches are part of a trend that continues to this day. Still, the full depiction of the internal functioning of state terrorism is an unfinished business for Argentine films. Few movies have been able to deal with the extreme violence that had been unleashed. Yet there is one film that deserves being highlighted for its narrative complexity and originality: *Garage Olimpo*, directed by Marco Bechis and released in 2000. The work tackles various sensitive subjects, such as the internal functioning and organization of a clandestine center of detention; the relations established between perpetrators and the “disappeared,” a subject also handled in *Montoneros*; the personal, political, and social loneliness of the relatives who went in search of the “disappeared”; and the profound moral and professional degradation that state terrorism generated in the military.

*Garage Olimpo* tells the story of María (Antonella Costa), a social worker, guerrilla sympathizer, and friend of a police chief’s daughter, who is kidnapped by a death squad. One of the members of this squad, Félix (Carlos Echevarría), falls in love with María, a fact she becomes aware of only after being brutally tortured by the military. While the director overtly plays with the historical record, altering facts to suit his larger theme, *Garage Olimpo* constructs an innovative and dramatic portrait of a detention center and its human relations – a portrait of a kind not previously seen in Argentine films.

## Conclusion

During the military government of 1976–1983 a number of individuals, still not determined to this very day, were kidnapped, subjected to torture in clandestine centers of detention, and murdered – all for being considered “subversive” by the authorities. With the return to democracy in 1983, Argentinians had to face the violent practices of their former government – practices that included the humiliation and torture of political detainees, assassinations of opponents, the theft of their possessions, and the tormenting of their families. All these atrocities were perpetrated by the military and their allies, in the name “of God and the Fatherland.” The Argentine cinema of the first democratic period reflected the evolution of the society’s relationship with its recent past. The filmic history writing analyzed in this essay presented a society largely ignorant of its government’s crimes. Films and fiction that gave the first accounts of state terrorism served as enlightening educational materials in schools. With the collaboration of my colleagues at Universidad Nacional de Buenos Aires, Palmira Dobaño

de Fernández, Mabel Senín, Liliana Romero, Carlos Cansanello, and Gustavo Pontoriero, I carried out interviews with students who were taking courses in “State and Society,” “Didactics of History,” and “Argentine History I” during the first semester of 1993. It could be observed that 74.7 percent of the 505 students interviewed had obtained their information on the last military government from films (basically from *The Night of the Pencils* and *The Official Story*). Only 3 percent of the sample had consulted books on the matter, and 17.8 percent recognized their school as the primary source of information for the period between 1976 and 1983.

Given the pedagogical role of these films and their rating among the most widely seen films in Argentine history, it can be said that they decisively helped to establish a certain cinematic truth about the recent past, quite appropriate to the political needs of the time when the films were produced. Their construction made previously unknown events available to the public.

What do these films express in terms of concrete historical information? Virtually nothing. The films analyzed here tell very little about the past they narrate, in terms of revelations about state terrorism. They rather speak of, and are constructed on, stereotypes related to accounts of the past at the end of the latest military government. Though they were widely seen, these films certainly did not replace history books as sources of information. From these movies we can learn less about the past than about the historical consciousness of the country at that time. They say a great deal about the time of their production and dissemination, and about how their creators saw the immediate future.

Films may have not taken the place of books as the main sources of historical knowledge in Argentina with respect to state terrorism, but they do constitute a writing of the country’s recent past. Ultimately there exists no competition between the page and the screen in history writing. Both are ways to access knowledge. Argentine historiography could only approach the problem of the seventies and state terrorism after a number of years (Romero 2007). The first period of democracy was given over to witnesses and victims. It was a time of memory and emotions, of political struggle and of denials that there even had been a problem of terrorism.

The films shown in the first years of the democracy, for instance *The Official Story* or *The Night of the Pencils*, depicted a society ignorant of the atrocities committed during the dictatorship. The films that came afterwards did not manage to challenge this predicament, best represented by Alicia in *The Official History*. The horror of the dictatorship was very real and very close, but, as she learns, nobody seems to realize this except the *desaparecidos*, the missing people. Yet the productions of the first democratic period fulfilled an effective pedagogic role. They successfully managed at least to address the recent past, even if its image was one that hid a good part of the historical truth. Faced with the avalanche of atrocious truths that emerged during the first trials against the perpetrators of terrorism, the films – viewed massively in theaters and in schools – transmitted a more reassuring recent version of history. Incapable of putting the horrors of state

terrorism into words, college professors and high school teachers let films like *The Lost Republic* and *The Official Story* discuss the past, investing them with the role of negotiating between the historical truth and society's willingness to accept it.

During those first democratic years, both on screen and in public discourse, a small part of the military and some guerrillas were made responsible for the crimes of state terrorism. It would take more than a quarter century for this image to be revised into one from which Argentina could learn more about, and come to terms with, the massacres committed by the armed forces. This began to happen in 2003, when a new Peronist president, Néstor Carlos Kirchner, had all the exculpatory legislation annulled, and trials against the military were initiated afresh, with new vigor and new judges. The following administration continued promoting the work of justice and the search for the truth and reparations with regard to the consequences of state terrorism.

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### Notes

- 1 His most recent work of this sort was published in 2008 and is called *El Vietnam argentino: La guerrilla marxista en Tucumán* (Ranalletti 2010; Ferrari 2009).
- 2 When Fuentes tries to escape, he is wildly tortured and assassinated by his Colonia Vela enemies.
- 3 The film shows an accidental encounter between a torturer and his victim, an unusual situation in the Argentine cinema of the first years of democracy.
- 4 During the first years of democracy many other films dealing with the recent past were produced, though none was as successful as the ones just discussed. One new theme raised in some films, particularly those of Fernando E. Solanas, was the issue of Argentinians who had been forced into exile for political reasons. Though not blockbusters, Solanas's films – *Tangos, el exilio de Gardel* (*Tangos, Gardel's Exile*, 1986) or *Sur* (*The South*, 1987) – employed metaphor and allegory in order to show exile as another painful consequence of state terrorism.

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