

SPEAKING TO THE HOLLOW: SILENCE AND MEMORY IN THE LAST ARGENTINEAN

Erika Martínez Cabrera

University of Granada

erikamartinez79@gmail.com

Recommended citation || MARTÍNEZ CABRERA, Erika (2012): "Speaking to the Hollow: Silence and Memory in the Last Argentinean Dictatorship" [article on line], 452°F. *Electronic journal of theory of literature and comparative literature*, 6, 105-122, [Consulted on: dd/mm/aa], <http://www.452f.com/pdf/numero06/06_452f-mono-erika-martinez-cabrera-en.pdf>

Illustration || Nadia Sanmartín

Translation || Paula Meiss

Article || Received on: 31/07/2011 | International Advisory Board's suitability: 15/11/2011 | Published on: 01/2012

License || Creative Commons Attribution Published -Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License



Resumen || El presente artículo es un análisis discursivo de la última dictadura argentina y su articulación a través de las instancias del silencio y la memoria. Para dilucidarlas, ahondamos en la raíz de las tecnologías de la violencia y sus consecuencias discursivas: el agotamiento de la capacidad colectiva de contar historias, la negación de la aberración colectiva y la perversión del lenguaje. A partir de ahí, estudiamos los ejes discursivos sobre los que se construyó la ficción del Proceso: el mesianismo, el maniqueísmo y el organicismo. Evaluamos finalmente la elaboración de nuevos discursos simbólicos como respuesta al dogmatismo, la creación de ficciones parciales, fragmentadas y provisionarias que discutieron la historia oficial.

Palabras clave || Dictadura argentina | Tecnologías de la violencia | Memoria colectiva | Silencio | Ficción.

Abstract || This article is an analysis of the last Argentinean dictatorship discourse and its articulation through the instances of silence and memory. To elucidate them, we deal with the technologies of violence and its discursive consequences: the exhaustion of the collective ability to tell stories, the denial of collective aberration and the perversion of language. From there, we study the discursive axes through which the fiction of the Process was built on: messianism, manichaeism and organicism. Finally we evaluate the development of new symbolic discourses in response to dogmatism, the creation of partial, fragmented and provisional fictions that challenged the official story.

Keywords || Argentinean dictatorship | Technologies of violence | Collective memory | Silence | Memory.

No existen en la historia de los hombres paréntesis inexplicables. Y es precisamente en los periodos de 'excepción', en esos momentos molestos y desagradables que las sociedades pretenden olvidar, donde aparecen sin mediaciones ni atenuantes, los secretos y las vergüenzas del poder cotidiano.

Pilar Calveiro

0. Introduction. The History of Concealing, or the German Case

Which were the discursive practices of the last Argentinean dictatorship? In the next pages, we will try to clarify them while analysing their articulation through the different possibilities of silence and memory. An in-depth analysis of the roots of the technologies of violence will lead us to a final assessment of the elaboration of new symbolic discourses and their answer to the dogmatic official history.

As Nicolás Casullo (2001) points out, the academic discussion over the State of terror established in Argentina during the last military regime has often relied on Walter Benjamin's reflections on narration, violence and memory. Casullo argues that the main contribution of Benjamin's thought to the understanding of recent Argentinean history can be found in the figure of the listener, "que hospeda el contar del narrador [...], el lugar y el tiempo del relato de la historia, de los usos de la memoria, de la construcción de la experiencia" (2001: 5). The listener is —according to Benjamin—the other side of a narrator threatened with extinction, his or her only possibility of existence after the exhaustion of the narrator's ability to tell stories. In "The Storyteller" (1936), the philosopher of Berlin states that the art of storytelling has finished, that the ability to exchange experiences has been suspended as a consequence of World War I:

With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth (1991: 112).

The listener is someone who waits until the story has been told, and stores in the recollections of a time fragmented by tragedy. According to Casullo, this allows for discontinuities,

interrupciones y suspensiones que resisten a las políticas dominantes sobre la historia. No se trata de una operatoria de transmisión terminológica, de un calculismo teórico, de una traducción sistematizada de análisis. Se trata de una forma de existencia en el lenguaje, de una historia del narrar (2001: 6).

Following this line of thought, a brief analysis of the ideological

and discursive consequences of World War II in Germany can help us introduce some of the problematic concerns of Argentinean dictatorship and post-dictatorship periods. From 1945 onwards, W.G. Sebald recognizes in Germany a collective response similar to that noted by Benjamin¹. In his essay *On the Natural History of Destruction* (1999) Sebald stresses how the devastation of war was followed by a second elimination: that of memory, crushed by a new ahistoric reality which pointed to the future while keeping silence on what had happened (2003: 17).

In the collection of essays entitled *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (1967), George Steiner reflects on the ways in which the political atrocities of the 20th century together with mass production technologies affected everyday language, generating as a result two possible literary responses: the transmission of the vulnerability of the communicative act itself, or the rhetoric of silence (Steiner, 2003: 67-8). In "Silence and the Poet" (1966), Steiner reaches the following conclusion: the works of Kafka and his "bureaucratic jargon" constitute "an exact prophecy" of what Nazism would actually do decades later (2003: 68). Conversing with this idea, Ricardo Piglia proposes a reading of Kafka from Hitler in his novel *Respiración artificial* (1980) [*Artificial Respiration*, 1994]. Steiner offers hints of Kafka's prophecy. He points out how in *Letters to Milena* (1920-22) the Czech novelist constantly insists on the impossibility to achieve the adequate literary wording of his thoughts while using a language eroded by clichés (2003: 68).

According to Steiner, not only Kafka, but also Hofmannsthal, Wittgenstein, Broch and Schönberg are products of this deep distrust of language, developed during the period between the wars and exhausted by the certainty that "the German language was not innocent of the horrors of Nazism" (Steiner, 2003: 119-120). Language was used to destroy what makes a human being actually human, and words became vehicles of terror and falsehood. Anticipating Sebald's conclusions, Steiner states that oblivion was the key to German reconstruction, that "hollow miracle" he uses in his 1959 article. But language does not forget: "the post-war history of the German language has been one of dissimulation and deliberate forgetting" (2003: 128). This dissimulation would imply not only deliberate silences, but also the reproduction of colloquial gestures and idioms, of public clichés which are nothing but the reverse of freedom (2003: 94).

The controversies that surrounded language in Argentina during the last dictatorship and following transition do bear some similarities with the German case. From Bernardo Kordon to Osvaldo Bayer, through Juan Jacobo Timerman or Ricardo Piglia, there is a general consensus on the existence of similarities between the Holocaust

NOTES

1 | For Jorge Monteleone, during World War II the effect was "opposite" to that of the First War: the narrative block mentioned by Benjamin was replaced with "the Nazi verbiage" (2003: 27). Although it is beyond discussion that the sophistication of the "enunciative apparatus of crime" reached previously unattained levels during Nazism, the impossibility of narrating the experience, and the crisis of the memory are two phenomena that can be seen after both wars. Nazi discursiveness overlapped the established silence among those who witnessed the death of millions of civilians, and the destruction of German cities under the bombs.

and the Argentinean dirty war². Claudio Martyniuk wrote in *Clarín*, a national newspaper:

En nuestra propia dialéctica de progreso y de reacción, de luces y de terror, el pensamiento de Adorno no es superficial o propio de la historia de las ideas de un siglo pasado. No nos es ajeno. Todavía resta reflexionar sobre la escritura de un poema después de ESMA. Aún permanece apenas esbozado el imperativo de pensar y actuar de modo que ESMA no se repita (Martyniuk, 2003).

In his introduction to the essay *Nombrar lo innombrable*, Fernando Reati confirms the parallelism:

Al leer la literatura de 'la Violencia' colombiana (el periodo de guerra civil en aquel país a partir de 1948), comprendí que existían más puntos de contacto entre el caso argentino y el Holocausto judío, que entre el argentino y el colombiano [...]. Los escritores de Colombia [...] confiaban todavía en las posibilidades miméticas de la palabra [...]. Los argentinos, en cambio, nos habíamos enfrentado a la violencia treinta años después del Holocausto, cuando ya muchas de sus enseñanzas habían pasado a formar parte de la herencia cultural de Occidente (Reati, 1992: 11-12).

The technification and extreme banality of death embodied in the Holocaust permanently marked the image of human beings, who have become according to Steiner "post-Auschwitz homo sapiens". During the Argentinean dirty war of the last dictatorial regime, violence also revealed itself as a rational instrument of politics, as a perverse side-effect intrinsic to civilization. This historic experience set the basis in Argentina for the radicalization of a postmodern premise: the distrust of the logocentric subject³.

1. Las prácticas discursivas de la dictadura

La era del orden es el imperio de las ficciones, pues no hay poder capaz de fundar el orden con la sola represión de los cuerpos con los cuerpos. Se necesitan fuerzas ficticias.

Paul Valéry

According to Andrés Avellaneda, both the 1930 and 1976 Argentinean coup d'états had as an objective to make violence total, "en la vida social y en la individual, en la reflexión, en los afectos, en la actividad económica, en la práctica espiritual" (1989: 13). The authoritarian ideology of the last regime in Argentina did not restrict itself to controlling and making people disappear, but also had a role to play in culture and education, which were considered crucial areas of struggle. Marginal channels of ideological production were intercepted or eliminated (university, publishing houses, opposition press, political parties, etc). The institutional effort to impose a new system of national values was strong. The Argentinean lifestyle advocated by the dictatorship was based, according to Avellaneda

NOTES

2 | See Reati (1992: 76-77).

3 | It should be mentioned that, at a historical level, Argentina had direct contact with the refugees of World War II. On the one hand, it was the Latin American country that received the largest number of Jewish refugees between 1933 and 1945 (around 45,000). On the other hand, it gave refuge to a number of Nazi civil servants (this figure is obviously impossible to specify). Argentina was the last allied country to cut relations with the Axis powers, and the sympathies of Perón both for German Nazism, and Italian fascism were rather well-known. In 1998, a Commission for the Clarification of Nazi Activities in Argentina (CEANA) was set up in charge of organizing those documents related to the functioning of the so-called "Nazi paradise".

(1989: 14-15) on two axes: Catholic Christian morality and the respect of private property. Immorality, on the other hand, included three areas: obscenity, questioning the family, and attacking the Church or national security. For its task of ethic depuration, the *Junta* considered it necessary for the ruling classes to intervene, having been chosen from the elites that were fit to govern the masses. This messianic idea was developed together with the idea of a lost original greatness, of an Argentinean Golden Age (which would have ended at the end of the 19th century), that had been destroyed with the arrival of liberal laicism and democracy. In some cases, the messianic urge derived in a feeling of divine omnipotence, full of cynicism. This omnipotence would explain, for instance, that the detention centre of the Federal Police was known as *El Olimpo* [The Olympus], or that some torturers would maintain that: “Solo Dios da y quita la vida. Pero Dios está ocupado en otro lado, y somos nosotros quienes debemos ocuparnos de esa tarea en la Argentina” (Calveiro, 2004: 56)⁴.

From this national predominance, the regime soon moved onto a world scale: the values of the ‘Proceso’ were equated to those of the Western world, threatened by the materialism, atheism, communism and individualism of the international enemy. Arriving to these conclusions was possible only when the ideologists of the regime overlooked certain obstacles, such as the international condemnation to the violation of human rights in Argentina. This movement was not very difficult, since the abstraction of “the West” was far away from designating a real geographical or political unit, having real governments capable of condemnation of the Military Junta (Avellaneda, 1989: 20-21).

In its defence of the Argentinean way of life, the dictatorship not only activated the legal and military apparatuses of the dirty war, but also created a whole linguistic apparatus that ended up building that discursive fiction of the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* [National Reorganization Process], reproduced by the military forces, adherent civil servants, and the mass media, which transmitted it to the whole civil society. In a 1989 conference, Ricardo Piglia talks about the State as an institution that organises and centralises a whole network of political tales.

La dictadura militar construyó una ficción criminal para tratar de tapar la realidad. Y yo diría, y este será sin duda uno de los temas que vamos a discutir, que muchas de las ficciones que se gestaron en la época del terror de Estado todavía persisten en la Argentina (Piglia, 2001: 97).

In fact, for Piglia the antonymous of memory is not oblivion, but the construction of a false memory, a fictitious discourse that masks the collective experience. Society is a network of narrations and the

NOTES

4 | Catholic messianism and self-sacralization are only two of the elements of the Argentinean dictatorial program that could be related to Spanish Francoism, which had already been inspiring for General Onganía between 1966 and 1970. If the military members of the Junta vested themselves with the role of saviours of the Argentinean nation in the name of God, Franco used to parade under canopy, as was the tradition for images of the Virgin, Saints and the consecrated host.

State is a “machine for producing fictions” (2001: 102). In *Crítica y ficción* (1986) [Criticism and Fiction], Piglia tells the following story: when he returned to Buenos Aires in 1977 after a short trip, he noticed a change in road signs and signals; bus stops were announced with a new signal that stated “Zona de detención” [Detention Area]. Piglia comments this:

Tuve la impresión de que todo se había vuelto explícito, que esos carteles decían la verdad. La amenaza aparecía insinuada y dispersa por la ciudad. Como si se hiciera ver que Buenos Aires era una ciudad ocupada y que las tropas de ocupación habían empezado a organizar los traslados y el asesinato de la población sometida. La ciudad se alegorizaba. Por lo pronto ahí estaba el terror nocturno que invadía todo y a la vez seguía la normalidad [...]. El efecto siniestro de esa doble realidad era el efecto de la dictadura. La amenaza explícita pero invisible fue uno de los objetivos de la represión. Zona de detención: en ese cartel se condensaba la historia de la dictadura (2001: 107).

If everyday language had been colonized by the dictatorship’s lexicon, dictatorial language worked schizophrenically with euphemisms that avoided naming the mechanics of State terrorism, and oriented them to the lexicon of bureaucracy, progress and medicine. To torture was ‘to interrogate, to kill ‘ to send upwards’ or ‘ to give a ticket’, to kidnap ‘to suck’; the kidnapping squadrons were ‘gangs’, the dead were ‘bulges’ or “bags’, and to extract a confession through torture was ‘to snap’⁵. The collective schizophrenia generated by the regime’s discourse was also a result of the contrast between certain unintelligible doings of the State terror agents, and the rationality of the procedure inside the detention centres. This is what Pilar Calveiro (2004: 81) denominates the perverse logic of the concentrationary State.

2. Manicheism, Authoritarianism and Objectification

And which is the origin of so much authoritarianism? According to Sergio Bufano (1984) the Spanish conquest left in Latin America a tradition of strong messianic and dogmatic religious thought. This would explain for him certain power practices in Argentina, the ambition for totality, and the imposition of one truth as the absolute one. For Reati, the manichean discourse that characterized the Argentinean ideology of the 70s and 80s can also be explained with the Spanish tendency to political antagonism. Against the widespread notion of the European and civilized Argentina, Reati (1992: 39) also highlights the reflections of Eduardo Pavlovsky or Jorge B. Rivera, who explain the dirty war as the remains of a persistent primitivism which they compare with the Haitian events, and the violent indigenous foundation of the city of Buenos Aires. For Leopoldo Allub (1983), the origin of Latin American authoritarianism goes back to

NOTES

5 | Calveiro (2004) and Martyniuk (2004) collect throughout their essays a wide repertoire of euphemistic lexicon of the Military Junta.

the configuration of the capitalist states in the 19th century and the subsequent distrust of democracy by the ruling class. This would lead in the 20th century to a whole series of repressive states which alternated populisms behind a façade of democracy, and the military regimes.

Regardless its remote historical origin, from 1976 onwards the ideological Manicheism of previous military governments intensified its presence in Argentina, to reach levels of real paranoia that led to the attempt to annihilate every form of opposition to the regime. The dictatorship elaborated a discourse that justified the suspension of civil rights, and the massacre of thousands in the name of a supposed “defence of the nation”. The creation of two opposed social and ideological spheres is what Calveiro calls the “binary logic” of totalitarianism. For this logic, Argentina was going through a so called war against the subversive, something which the guerrilla did not deny according to Calveiro. The guerrilla «prefería representarse como un Ejército que desafiaba a otro antes que como una pequeña fuerza insurreccional» (2004: 89). Pointing out in the same direction, Reati writes that:

El tono mesiánico es evidente al traspolarse el conflicto social argentino a una lucha que no solo trasciende las fronteras geográficas («guerra mundial») sino incluso las temporales («atraviesa los siglos»), convirtiendo el enfrentamiento en parte del batallar eterno entre el Bien y el Mal. Los representantes del gobierno, imbuidos de una mística y una misión que creen divina, se sienten combatientes de una batalla que transcurre tanto en tierra como en las esferas celestiales (Reati, 1992: 44).

The Manicheism of the military right wing is analysed by Reati (1992: 46-47) in parallel to the construction of an Argentinean leftist imagery, no less messianic and manichaeic. Similarities can not only be explained by the general dissemination of authoritarian practices, but also because of the ideological evolution of the Peronist left wing. Militarization and the abolition of dissent weakened the guerrilla organizations, which by the time of the 1976 coup d'état were already quite dismantled. «La guerrilla había comenzado a reproducir en su interior, por lo menos en parte, el poder autoritario que intentaba cuestionar» (Calveiro, 2004: 17).

The antagonist structure of the social discourses that circulated in Argentina before the coup d'état was subsequently discussed within literary fiction, through the elaboration of new sidelong, symbolic discourses. These moved away from the more mimetic social realism identified with the dogmatic Left of the 60s. In front of the extremist portrait of the hero and the tyrant; in front of the monologic discourse of the regime, a new tendency —sometimes polyphonic— was imposed: the exploration of the voice of the other, which can be

traced both in fiction and poetry⁶. Andrés Avellaneda states that:

El alejamiento del canon realista, que hasta la década anterior había sido preponderante, se intensifica a partir de 1982-83, debido en parte a que el periodo represivo promovió un alejamiento de aquellas formas que evidenciaran el referente histórico e indicaran un interés o una interpretación de la realidad política (en Reati, 1992: 56).

Although its influence cannot be denied, it is not possible to attribute this change in style to the fear of repression. The flight from realistic mimesis is also found in the literature of exiles, and of those who wrote but did not publish during the regime. On the other hand, Manicheism operated through the dehumanization and even denial of the other, which would explain the greatest importance of otherness in the Argentinean literature of the period. The objectification that had to be fought was the result of a double passivity: that which was injected in the victims of State violence by the progressive dehumanization they were subject to; and that of a society that knew or suspected the massacre was taking place, but did nothing to stop it. The restriction of any activity was the strategy to maintain the country under control, a typical strategy of authoritarianism, which in this case provoked the collective perception of what Bakhtin called an “existence in the alien”, a “loss of self”. In his analysis of the relation between action and identity, Bakhtin exemplifies this as follows in his *Aesthetics of Verbal Creation*:

When we stop using a part of our body as a consequence of an illness, for instance a leg, it comes to us as something alien, ‘not mine’, even though in the external visible image of my body it continues to belong to the totality (Bakhtin, 1982: 45).

In *Language and Silence* (1967), Steiner analyses dehumanization as a desired effect of the logic of the concentration camp. Buchenwald and Auschwitz were authentic factories of mass annihilation, with assembly lines that finally produced death. However, before reaching those lines, prisoners were humiliated, tortured and weakened in their will, until they were forced to reject their own humanity in order to survive. The lack of resistance and the objectification are, from this point of view, the direct results of violence (2003: 191). In Argentina, many survivors have told that prisoners were considered belongings of the official or of the detention centre, and they were transferred to other centres as loans or gifts. Before Steiner, Simone Weil had reached similar conclusions about violence. In *Gravity and Grace* (1952), the French thinker wrote on the mirrored relation between the victim and the executioner:

Force makes from man a thing, the “useless weight of earth”, and the body is the maximum expression of that objectification, the supreme

NOTES

6 | In her essay “Literatura, ideología y figuración literaria”, Beatriz Sarlo seems to indirectly refer to the Bakhtinian model of analysis when she describes how the “monologue” of the Proceso was answered with “un modelo formalmente opuesto: el de la pluralidad de sentidos y la perspectiva dialógica” (1987, 40).

effect of force, as much as physical death is the maximum disgrace [...]. Contact with the sword causes the same defilement, whether it be through the handle or the point (Weil, 1997: 31 and 112).

NOTES

7 | In his *Aesthetics* (1979) Bakhtin writes that: "Within capitalism, objectification is a form of violence (economic, political and ideological), and one can only fight against it by external means: 'justified revolutionary violence'" (339).

Referring to the Argentinean dictatorship, Calveiro points out how "denigrarse y denigrarse son parte de una misma acción. En este sentido, la dinámica del campo, al buscar la humillación de los secuestrados, encontró el denigramiento de su propio personal" (2004: 103). The bureaucrats of the criminal machine of the regime were pieces of the gear, themselves also objects, however responsible for what they did from their positions. If humanity is an answer to the gaze of the other, as Levinas put it, then those who hooded and made people disappear are just "things without being", "terror-making artefacts" (Martyniuk, 2004: 114).

Against objectification and covert death, the fiction of the period elaborated a discourse in which otherness had a strong presence, violence was extremely visible, it had easily recognisable agents and was a result of a determination (murder, suicide, rape, etc). Referring to Dostoyevsky, Bakhtin points out that in the world of the Russian novelist "there is no death as objective organic fact in which the active and responsible conscience of man does not participate" (1982: 342). The function of those deaths is the same in the Argentinean fiction of the period under analysis. Within that fiction, dialogism was also a strategy for discursive resistance to the Manicheism of the authoritarian discourse. For Bakhtin, who paid special attention to the social and ethical conditions of objectification within capitalism⁷, a dialogic relationship is the only attitude that can guarantee the other his inconclusive character and freedom (1982: 332). The following quotation clarifies the relation between the monologic discourse and objectification, while including within the monologic discourse not only the dictatorial one, but also those fictions that offer an unambiguous vision of human beings and reality, from whatever ideology:

Monologism in itself denies the existence outside itself of equal consciences capable of giving an answer, denies the existence of another egalitarian I (the you). With a monologic focus (in a pure extreme case); the other continues to be an object of this conscience and does not represent another conscience [...]. Monologues are conclusive and deaf to the answer of the other, it does not expect an answer and it does not give this answer the right to exist as decisive force. The monologue survives without the other, and that is why it objectifies the whole reality. The monologue claims to have the last word. It covers the world and the represented men [...]. Unfinished dialogue is the only adequate form of verbal expression of an authentic human life (Bakhtin, 1982: 334).

The discourse and official history of the last Argentinean dictatorship were fought with partial, fragmented and provisional fictions. Monologues gave way to the presence of the voice of the other. As social realism was gradually understood as symptomatic of old

dogmatism, it was replaced with a new aesthetics of allegorical character and ambiguous reading. The search for a version of reality was declared obsolete in front of the setting in motion of the ideological debate (in the Bakhtinian sense). According to Beatriz Sarlo,

[e]nfrentada con una realidad difícil de captar, porque muchos de sus sentidos permanecían ocultos, la literatura buscó las modalidades más oblicuas (y no solo a causa de la censura) para colocarse en una relación significativa respecto del presente y comenzar a construir un sentido de la masa caótica de experiencias escindidas de sus explicaciones colectivas (1987: 34).

For Sarlo, breaking with the mimesis was (1987: 58-59) the strategy to debate with the logics of natural order raised by the regime in order to divide the citizenship between loyal patriots and enemies. Against this dictatorial discourse, the stressing of the conventional character of any representation was more necessary than ever before. This resistance to the realist representation of experience became commonplace for Argentinean writers, even for those in exile.

Assessing the different positions before finishing, there seems to be critical consensus on three basic features of the fiction of the period: dialogism as an answer to the ideological monologue of the dictators; the presence of the ghosts of subversion and conspiracy; and the allegory as an oblique way to reorganize chaos, while ambiguously answering to the unfathomable.

The plot of the authoritarian discourse was constructed as a way to legitimize the punitive action against the so-called subversive, those others considered strange, immoral, dangerous, guilty and subhuman, and which included not only guerrilla members, politicians and trade unionists, but also human rights' defenders, intellectuals or people uncertainly claimed to be part of the opposition. Calveiro quotes the explanation received by a kidnapped priest from his torturer: «Vos no sos un guerrillero, no estás en la violencia, pero vos no te das cuenta que al irte a vivir allí (a la villa de emergencia) con tu cultura, unís a la gente, unís a los pobres, y unir a los pobres es subversión» (2004: 90-91).

Avellaneda points out that the *Proceso* introduces the idea of a “plan diabólico maquinado pacientemente a lo largo de muchos años por obra de ideólogos que llevaron a cabo con éxito una tarea de ‘subversión intelectual’” (1989: 15). This conspiracy had required the infiltration of communist ideologists in art, culture and education, who were in fact endangering the most helpless part of the population, young people and children who had to be defended by the dictatorship. The measures taken to officially fight against this

conspiracy were the full reformation of the educational and cultural system, and the promotion of the moral values of the national being; informally, the dirty war was launched.

Within the discursive logic of the regime, subversion was enunciated as the in-visible, and the subversive as the unseen enemy: a flagless, faceless undercover agent, who acted in disguise. Pilar Calveiro quotes in *Poder y desaparición* [Power and Disappearance] these words by General Camps: “Aquí libramos una guerra. No desaparecieron personas, sino subversivos” (2004: 37 y 89). This national discourse did not start in 1976, but according to Avellaneda (1989: 15) goes back to the end of the 50s, when the idea of the censor as pedagogue and safeguarding of the country was instituted against the dangers of the subversive, corrupting ideological penetration of the enemy. In fact, the conspiracy and paranoia that go through the fiction of the last dictatorship had been circulating as a key axis of the national historical narration of Argentina. Piglia refers to this constant, by reading it as melodrama:

La concepción conspirativa de la historia tiene la estructura de un melodrama: una fuerza perversa, una maquinación oculta explica los acontecimientos. La política ocupa el lugar del destino. Y esto en la Argentina no es una metáfora: en los últimos años la política secreta del Estado decidía la vida privada de todos. Otra vez la figura de la amenaza que se planifica desde un centro oculto (en este caso la «inteligencia del Estado») y se le impone a la realidad. Es lo que sucedió con el golpe de 1976 (2001: 36).

Language was considered to be the most efficient tool of the enemy. It is not strange, then, that Armando Lambruschini saw as a military task to follow up the idioms, verbal trends, to know what kind of compulsive tendencies were affecting the freedom of collective reason, in the original: “una tarea militar seguir con atención los giros idiomáticos, ciertas modas verbales, para saber qué clase de compulsiones está sufriendo la libertad de raciocinio colectivo” (Avellaneda, 1989: 17). The intellectual field was conceived as a battlefield parallel to the military. Cultural persecution of the subversive (teachers, scientists, writers, journalists) included decrees, imprisonment, exile and disappearance which were part of what was called the “global strategy against subversion”. Interestingly enough, Perón himself, who would later on condemn those guerrilla members, in 1970 was capable of stating that: “La subversión debe progresar” [Subversion must progress]; or “Lo que está entronizado es la violencia. Y solo puede destruirse por otra violencia. Una vez que se ha empezado a caminar por ese camino no se puede retroceder un paso. La revolución tendrá que ser violenta”. [What has been enthroned is violence. And it can only be destroyed by violence. Once we start walking this road, one cannot take a step back. Revolution will have to be violent] (Calveiro, 2004: 15).

For Jorge Monteleone (2002: 21), making the enemy disappear was a way to show that they were invisible social undercover agents, as was explained by the official discourse. The State fought the alleged underground activity of the subversive with criminal underground action, which went publicly unmentioned and unseen. The words of General Bustamante are illustrating in this sense: “En este tipo de lucha el secreto que debe envolver las operaciones especiales hace que no deba divulgarse a quién se ha capturado y a quién se debe capturar. Debe existir una nube de silencio que lo rodee todo” [In this kind of fight, secrecy must surround special operations, who has been and who must be captured shall not be revealed. Everything must be surrounded by a cloud of silence] (Calveiro, 2004: 278). The logic of invisibility was taken to the detention centres, where the arrested was deprived of his or her name, hooded, tied up and silenced, while waiting for the torture that would make him or her speak before being murdered. Not leaving a trace of the body, or converting it into an N.N. (anonymous, unrecognizable, *nescio*) was the last step in the process of disappearance.

3. Technologies of Violence and the New Organicism

The dirty war set up by the Military Junta between 1976 and 1983 elaborated a new technology of repression which consisted in the systematic disappearance of the body of those citizens who had been tortured and murdered. Disappearances had different objectives: to hide the proofs of the existence of State terrorism; to deprive those close to the missing and the society to which they belonged of the rituals of death; and to create a state of collective psychosis, to which the calculated appearance of anonymous bodies in the streets, with traces of the violence exerted on them, was also added. As a discursive practice, the technology of violence developed by the dictatorship also transformed everyday communication, by inevitably permeating the whole social language.

Disappearance was a repressive technology of the military power, and the final gesture of the progressive denial of humanity to which thousand of people were subject under the dictatorship. Its institutional correlative were the detention centres, which appeared before the coup d'état, during the government of Isabel Perón. Everything that happened inside them adopted, as Calveiro points out (2004: 39), the appearance of a bureaucratic procedure, legalized by hierarchical superiors. The obligation to obey and the division of labours also favoured the feeling of a lack of moral responsibility among the personnel of the centres who kept the murder machine working.

As Reati points out (1992: 30), the destruction of the bodies involved in the dirty war reversed the evolution of punishment as it was in

bourgeois societies. These progressively replaced torture and public exhibition of the bodies with the imprisonment of the criminal body to convert it in object of power-knowledge. Torture was not an aberrant exception during the regime, but the systematization and deepening in the logic of physical punishment, which had been being applied on the military, political prisoners, conscripts and even common criminals since the beginning of the 20th century. “Cada soldado, cada cabo, cada oficial, en su proceso de asimilación y entrenamiento aprendió la prepotencia y la arbitrariedad del poder sobre su propio cuerpo y dentro del cuerpo colectivo de la institución armada” [each soldier, each private, each officer, in his assimilation and training process, learnt the arrogance and arbitrariness of power being exercised over his body, and within the collective body of the armed institution] (Calveiro, 2004: 11). The *Proceso* transformed torture and massacre into bureaucracy, and converted them in a routine hard to question⁸.

The same dictatorship that made the bodies of the dissident disappear also conceptualised society as an essential body in which Good and Evil were incarnated from a Christian perspective. The old organicism⁹ was changed following the new medical technologies of the body: in their capitalist version essential Good or Evil were either health or illness that had to be eliminated from the social body through the individual bodies. The regime’s military action was then qualified as a “retrenchment duty”, something that reveals —beyond the self-justifying euphemism— the internal coherence of the organic logic of the authoritarian state. According to Reati, this logic:

se trata a la sociedad como un cuerpo sujeto a posibles infecciones, cánceres, contagios de gérmenes extraños, y se cree necesaria la operación o extirpación de los órganos contaminados. La metáfora del cuerpo enfermo/cuerpo sano está implícita en la política represiva (1992: 44).

Also Piglia uses very similar words in this respect:

Antes que nada se construyó una versión de la realidad, los militares aparecían en ese mito como el reaseguro médico de la sociedad. Empezó a circular la teoría del cuerpo extraño que había penetrado en el tejido social y que debía ser extirpado. Se anticipó públicamente lo que en secreto se iba a hacer al cuerpo de las víctimas (2001: 36).

Juan Corradi (1985) explains how subversion was considered the unrest of the social body, an illness that had to be purged. Beatriz Sarlo points out to the presentation of the enemy as a pathologic and unbalanced individual, and quotes the words of Vice Admiral Lambruschini: “La subversión es un fenómeno psicótico que, enmascarado en una ideología, se crea en el campo político” (1987: 37). This is an abnormal behaviour; a deviation that has to be disciplined at all levels, because, as Foucault points out, the

NOTES

8 | Calveiro calls this sinister naturalization “vaciamiento de la muerte”, the voidance of death. (2004: 34).

9 | The term is used on several occasions by Reati (1992) and Sarlo (1987). Social organicism was defended in the Argentina of the beginnings of the 20th century by sociologist Carlos Octavio Bunge, who opened the way for future biological self-legitimizations of the State. The revival of these organicist values during the dictatorship owes much to that of the Nazis.

objectification of bodies is founded on language and the discourses of power. Of course, these technologies of violence not only impregnated everyday communication strategies, but also generated mechanisms of resistance —like all discursive practices.

4. Conclusions. The Crisis of Experience

After the dictatorship ended, the need for a closure of collective memory in Argentina was suggested, in order to help with the democratic reconstruction of the country. The attempt to wipe the slate clean was justified with the “theory of the two demons”, which equally shared the responsibility of what had happened between the military government and the revolutionary guerrilla, placing the Argentine people in the place of the victim. This theory was supported at the institutional level by the laws of *Punto Final* [Clean Slate] (1986), *Obediencia Debida* [Due Obedience] (1987) and *Indulto* [Pardon] (1989), fundamentally justified from the fragility of the civil government, and the need to stabilise the country. In 2004, after the official ceremony for the transfer of the ESMA to build the Museum of Memory, the newspaper *La Nación* still ratified its support to the pardon granted by Menem, while other newspapers as *Clarín* qualified their previous positions on the subject, stressing the impossibility to judge the regime’s repression and the actions of the guerrilla¹⁰ on an equal ground.

In 1996 a monographic issue of the *Confines* magazine was titled “Memoria y terror en la Argentina 1976-1996” [Memory and Terror in Argentina 1976-1996]. Its director, Casullo, Forster and Kaufman among others, stated the need not only to remember and condemn the dictatorial past, but also to politically think about it once again. This issue is part of a new revisionist wave that started in the middle of the 90s, known as the “memory boom”¹¹. A 1997 issue of another magazine, *Punto de Vista*, also belongs to this wave: “Cuando la política era joven: Eva Perón, años setenta, democracia, populismo”¹² [When Politics were Young: Eva Perón, the Sixties, Democracy, Populism]. This memory boom rescued from oblivion the collective amnesia on recent history, but at the same time transformed it into a commodity. This was mentioned in the same year by Calveiro (2004: 163) and Martyniuk (2004: 51 and 130), who regret the saturation of the public, the banalization of atrocities, and the ideological shallowness of the approaches to the dictatorship which helped spread the exculpatory theory of the two demons. Besides, Martyniuk writes that «con misticismo se hizo del desaparecido una figura vacía de sustancia, sacralizada, un absurdo sin sentido, una idolatría» (2004: 51).

NOTES

10 | The two editorials are dated 28 March 2004. On the subject, there is an article published on 31 March 2004 in the electronic magazine *Diario de diarios* (<http://www.diariosobrediaros.com.ar/dsd/diarios/-zona_dura/31-3-2004.htm>, [accessed 20/2/2008]).

11 | This memory boom was, according to Gabriela Cerrutti (1997), a new period in the relationship of the country with its last dictatorial government, starting in 1995 after the creation of H.I.J.O.S (*Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio*, [Sons & Daughters for Identity and Justice against Oblivion and Silence]).

12 | See *Confines* n° 3 and *Punto de Vista* n° 58 (año XX).

Blindness to, silence on or oblivion of the political abuse were not objects of a systematic critical analysis until the end of the 80s, but their effects structured the Argentinean fiction of the whole decade through what Francine Masiello calls the “internalization of the modes of terror” (1987: 11). Speaking about the film *Tiempo de revancha* (Adolfo Aristarain, 1981), Berkeley’s professor writes:

El protagonista que ya no podía seguir viviendo con la mentira de su silencio autoimpuesto, mediante el cual ocultaba la verdad de lo que había visto, se corta la lengua con una navaja; de una vez por todas su fingida mudez se convierte en una realidad permanente (1987: 11-12).

Repression was successful in paralysing popular resistance and minimizing the extension of the cultural apparatus. Its effects were somatised both by the population and the fiction of the period, and became in some cases modes of denunciation.

Fernando Kofman goes back to the aforementioned essay of Steiner’s, “Silence and the Poet” (1966), to defend that the idiom of the Argentinean was not innocent of the genocide discourse of the last dictatorship (Kofman, 1985: 13). He compares the Nazi period with the Argentine dictatorship of 1976-1983 (1985: 13-14). Following Kofman, Jorge Monteleone writes that after the restoration of democracy, the writers of the 80s found not only a guilty society but also a guilty language: “El desfase entre lo que podía ser dicho y lo que se hallaba oculto alteró toda la discursividad social y el régimen de lo visible en Argentina” (2003: 28). The horror of the regime was as silent and invisible as its victims, which caused the suspension of the narrations of experience and the questioning of memory. The word’s ability to designate was placed under suspicion, which allowed some poets (such as Gelman) to visit the limits of the grammatical. The very same gaze that gives ground to testimony went mad, was “eroded”: “El enunciado poético es un ojo en suspenso” (Monteleone, 2003: 208).

In the same line, Martyniuk states that in Argentina the disappearance precludes the narration of experience: violence took with it both witnesses and testimonies of the genocide. “La desaparición solo podría ser mostrada” (Martyniuk, 2004: 18). The impossible narration of what had happened generated a rejection of experience as a means to legitimise the discourse. In front of this reality, Martyniuk proposes to start from zero: “Insistir, aun chocando con el fracaso. Insistir en las correspondencias experiencia y conocimiento; experiencia y relato” (2004: 94). His essay *Fenomenología de la desaparición* [Phenomenology of Disappearance] formulates the paradox those who wish to study in depth the subject have to face, a phenomenon that embodies the abolition of the same phenomenon (the traces of the crime, the victims and the murderers are eroded). The mission of

the torturers was to make the body talk, and to silence it afterwards, to make it invisible. From that onwards, Martyniuk moves closer to Adorno's blind alley: "Creo inútil a la literatura [...], el arte está arruinándose" (2004: 91). However, he closes the impossibility to narrate the collective experience of genocide with the following imperative: "Escribir no sobre, escribir desde la desaparición" (2004: 89). Not to forget, and not to freeze in lifeless museums or archives of the past, but to maintain the estrangement.

Reflecting on the Nazi ideology, Arendt wrote that totalitarianism leaves the citizen in a fundamental state of loneliness. For Bakhtin, the irruption of the individual word finds shelter in the collective of a fair society where dialogic relations are possible. An authoritarian society, however, isolates the voices of the choir condemning them to an appalling silence:

The individual and absolutely lonely breaking of the absolute silence has a horrible and sinful character, it degenerates in a self-frightening scream, overwhelming itself with its untimely and naked existence; the solitary and totally arbitrary violation of silence imposes an infinite responsibility, or ends up being unjustifiably cynical; the voice can only sing in a warm environment, in the environment of a possible support from the choir, of a fundamental voiced un-loneliness (Bakhtin, 1982: 150)..

From 1976, the fracture generated by the coup d'état in Argentina isolated the social discourses which had been dialoguing before. The strategy of fragmentation was as socially effective as censorship, and even more. This partially explains the tendency to ellipsis, suggestion and allegory in the literature of the period. Bakhtin himself would stress that it is impossible to get rid of historical discourses because, no matter what man does, "the word does not forget its road" (1986: 283).

Works cited

- ALLUB, L. (1983): *Orígenes del autoritarismo en América Latina*, México: Katún.
- AVELLANEDA, A. (1989): «Argentina militar: los discursos del silencio» en Kohut, K. y Pagni, A. (eds.), *Literatura argentina hoy. De la dictadura a la democracia*, Frankfurt/Main: Vervuert Verlag, 13-30.
- BAJTÍN, M. (1982): *Estética de la creación verbal*, México: Siglo XXI.
- BAJTÍN, M. (1986): *Problemas de la poética de Dostoievski*, México: FCE.
- BALDERSTON, D.; et al. (1987): *Ficción y política. La narrativa argentina durante el proceso militar*, Buenos Aires: Alianza.
- BENJAMÍN, W. (1991): *Para una crítica de la violencia y otros ensayos, Iluminaciones IV*, Madrid: Taurus.
- BUFANO, S. (1984): «La violencia y la muerte, esos hábitos inmorales», *Clarín Cultura y Nación*, 4/10/1984, 4-5.
- CALVEIRO, P. (2004): *Poder y desaparición. Los campos de concentración en Argentina*, Buenos Aires: Colihue.
- CASULLO, N. (2001): «La figura del escucha en Benjamin», *Latin American Studies Association 2001 Paper Archive*, <<http://lasa.international.pitt.edu/members/congress-papers/lasa2001/files/CasulloNicolas.pdf>>, [29/11/2011].
- CORRADI, J. (1985): *The Fitful Republic. Economic, Society and Politics in Argentina*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- KOFMAN, F. (comp.) (1985): *Poesía entre dos épocas (Argentina 1976-1983, Inglaterra 1930-1939)*, Buenos Aires: Satura.
- MARTYNIUK, C. (2003): «Adorno, de Auschwitz a la ESMA», *Clarín*, 12/09/2003, de septiembre de 2003, <<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2003/09/12/o-02902.htm>>, [13/2/2008].
- MARTYNIUK, C. (2004): *ESMA, Fenomenología de la desaparición*, Buenos Aires: Prometeo.
- MASIELLO, F. (1987): «La Argentina durante el Proceso: las múltiples resistencias de la cultura» en Balderston et al., *Ficción y política. La narrativa argentina durante el proceso militar*, Buenos Aires: Alianza, 11-29.
- MONTELEONE, J. (2003): «Conjura contra la lengua culpable: relato y poesía», *Mil Palabras*, nº 5, 27-32.
- PIGLIA, R. (2001): *Crítica y ficción*, Barcelona: Anagrama.
- REATI, F. (1992): *Nombrar lo innombrable. Violencia política y novela argentina: 1975-1985*, Buenos Aires: Legasa.
- SARLO, B. (1987): «Literatura, ideología y figuración literaria» en Balderston et al., *Ficción y política. La narrativa argentina durante el proceso militar*, Buenos Aires: Alianza, 30-59.
- SEBALD, W. G. (2003): *Historia natural de la destrucción*, Barcelona, Anagrama.
- STEINER, G. (2003): *Lenguaje y silencio. Ensayos sobre la literatura, el lenguaje y lo inhumano*, Barcelona: Gedisa.
- WEIL, S. (1994): *La gravedad y la gracia*, Madrid: Trotta.