

Torture and Nation: A Diachronic Map of Argentine Violence¹

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(Translated by Kristin Beamish-Brown)

... la policía fundamentalmente tortura a los pobres,
sólo a los que son pobres o son obreros o están desahuciados y se ve que son negros,
los torturan los policías y los militares y muy excepcionalmente han torturado
a gente que pertenece a otra clase social y en estos casos se han desatado grandes
escándalos . . .

—Ricardo Piglia *La ciudad ausente* (151)

En mi país qué tristeza
la pobreza y el rencor.
Dice mi pueblo que puede leer
en su mano de obrero el destino que no hay adivino ni rey
que le pueda marcar el camino
que va a recorrer.

—Alfredo Zitarrosa (unpublished)

The following reflections seek to establish a diachronic map of Argentine violence as a way to discover more authentic and elaborated answers to the question of the persistent historical violations of the most basic human rights in Argentina. From the State terrorism to the popular uprising of December 2001, this essay analyzes some alternative cultural manifestations that allow a deeper understanding of the subject. The first section, “Possibilities for a Cognitive Map,” deals with the conditions, scope, and limits of such a map. It also discusses the problematic connection between human rights and the conceptual opposition of national vs. international, in order to establish the essential

Argentinean character of this map. The second section, “From Revolution is an Eternal Dream (1810) to Revolution as Impossibility (1976),” studies the connections and profound similarities of the logic that ruled Argentinean violence during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Like any other fundamental aspect of social life, human rights and violence are undoubtedly determined by history. The third segment, “The Sad and Dejected Fall from Guerrilla Fighter to Yuppie,” investigates a truly curious paradox produced by the passage from the Dictatorship (1976–1983) to the subsequent re-democratization of Argentinean society. The new hegemonic cultural logic of Neoliberalism has replaced the imaginary figure of the guerrilla fighter with that of the yuppie, and the image of the torturer with that of the common delinquent. The fourth part of the essay, “*¡Que se vayan todos!* (All Politicians Get Out!): All Prisoners are Political Prisoners,” gives an account of the events of December 2001, when President Fernando De La Rúa had to escape from the presidential offices in the *Casa Rosada* because of popular pressure. This section focuses on the reactions of the popular sectors after this historical moment, as well as the cultural representations of the so-called low and/or marginal culture. Finally, the concluding passage, “Riachuelo, Deafness, and Reconciliation,” analyzes how and why the narratives elaborated by high culture (Argentine art films) at the beginning of the twenty-first century offered a conciliatory representation of the brutal Argentine “security forces.” I propose that the voices of the people in the streets were much more progressive and active in the fight for a more just society, in stark contrast to the lack of conscience regarding human rights displayed in high culture productions.

Possibilities for a Cognitive Map

Is it possible to create a schema or map that explains—in a reasonably organized way and objective fashion—something as complex as the alternatives to a process that is historic and, for that very reason, intrinsically violent?² I believe that such an attempt is well worth the effort. First, it is necessary to define the parameters of such a proposition: on one hand, it is not possible to discuss history, or even counter-history, without making clear that any approach implies dealing with archives, memories, and recollections. Regardless of which perspective one chooses to privilege, it is impossible to escape the field of representations. In no way am I proposing that the atrocities through which we construct our social history and our present did not have a concrete existence; however, I cannot set aside the knowledge that we are always reflecting on fragments of representations of the facts (chosen for being truly representative, for being anti-hegemonic, or for meeting some other valid criterion).

The second parameter is that the map I am attempting to sketch is a

representation of a violence, or of the ideological conditions of its possibility, which are Argentinean. In one sense, the field is excessively large but this text at least represents an attempt of narrowing it. The question of human rights from the perspective of the application or elaboration and enforcement of said rights is proposed as a *universal* question. This becomes clear with the mention of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* promoted by the French Revolution (1789) and the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. But concerning violations, these are considered to be *national* aberrations, whether for the purposes of honoring the truth or from the political position of the accusers. Bartolomé de Las Casas, in what some consider the first major human rights campaign in Modernity, perceived nationality as one of the most distinctive or effective aspects of his cause:

. . . donde con tormentos más largos y que duran más que los que les dan metiéndoles espadas, al cabo perecen ellos, sus mujeres e hijos y toda su generación. [. . .] Y éstos son y no otros los servicios que **los españoles** han hecho a los dichos señores reyes en aquellas tierras y hoy hacen. (Xirau 32–33, destacado mío)

(. . . where with torment that lasts longer than that of running them through with swords, they finally die, along with their women and children and all of their descendants. [. . .] And these, not others, are the services that **the Spaniards** have provided and continue to provide today for said kings in those lands.) (Xirau 32–33, emphasis mine)

It could be said that from a Modern perspective, nationality and nationalism are defined more by a negative than by a positive logic. National identities are constructed through conflictive oppositions: the other nation must be the one deprived of freedom, human rights or civilization.

In a sense, German nationality in general, even at the beginning of the twenty-first century, is tainted by Nazism, and Yankee imperialism (whether in relation to Vietnam or Iraq) is perceived to be an atrocity deeply connected to the very roots of the U.S. national being. Other imperial powers, such as Portugal, Holland, France, Belgium, and even England have succeeded in maintaining (for various reasons related to the configuration of a repertoire of postmodern images) an image much less infamous than they deserve. Beyond the possibility of postulating national identities as something certain outside the *Imagined Communities* (1981) proposed by Benedict Anderson, or the possibility that in a world of increasing globalization that would have assumed an inescapable imperial format as proposed by Hardt and Negri (2000), we should give credit, at least within this essay, to the parameters of “Argentine-ness.” In other words, let us consider that, even treating Argentine-ness as an undefined category from several points of view, its use is still explanatory,

graphic, and efficient. Keeping in mind that we are working with representations of a history that, regardless of one's given political position, continues to exist balanced upon the bodies of the disappeared; of those who have been erased from history; of those who have been tortured; or of those who simply were afraid of death, torture, or the omnipresent power of those who abused their power. We have a good place to start.

I believe that at this point in time it is almost impossible to widely and deeply focus any human rights issues related to Argentine imaginary and history without taking into account the events of December 2001. Regardless of how we understand what happened: *Argentinazo*, revolution, populist coup, or even shady maneuvers, there is no doubt that our way of seeing, believing, understanding, and living the combination of objects and relations that we call Argentina has been essentially and irreversibly modified by the event. This has been studied, documented, thought, analyzed, lauded, criticized, represented, and commented (and will continue to be) infinitely from the most widely ranging political and ideological postures. Beyond any strictly partisan interpretation or individual reflection of this historical event, I would like to mention three of its basic elements: a) the beginning of a new type and intensity of popular participation; b) a momentary alliance between social sectors that considered each other enemies; and c) the simultaneous rejection of the ruling class, the financial powers (both local and multinational), and U.S. imperialism.

Although those historic days are not the focus of this essay, speaking about violence and its representations in Argentina is a radically different intellectual exercise since their occurrence. In some way, in 2009 we can all agree with complete certainty about what had to happen, retrospectively predict the future, and even risk predictions about new, decisive elements in the configuration of what constitutes Argentine identity. We have also been able to recuperate some of the traditional pride in being Argentine. For some sectors, ours is the anti-capitalist revolution that opened the 21st century: see the metal curtains in financial institutions and the factories taken over by their workers. In addition, we were able to lose, to some degree, the inconsolable shame of the re-election of Menem in 1995. I believe that the representations of violence created from the perspective of high culture, in general and especially at the time of the event, tended *not* to echo these changes. This essay will also discuss that disconnect.

In view of the actions of the Kirchner government until the middle of 2007, one may propose that his term has come to take charge, in a realistic manner (and not without symbolism) and in the measure of the possible, of popular mandates and the demands that exploded in December of 2001.³ If in the Menemist period not paying the external debt was a utopic delirium worthy of imbeciles and the insane, in twenty-first century Argentina it seems undeniable that the only action that seems a delirium, or at least wrong, is paying it. While

during the Menemist period the pardoning of the Dictatorship's genocide was the formula for pacifying a divided nation, in the twenty-first century to pardon State murderers and torturers is perceived as one of the conditions of the possibility for the proliferation of contemporary criminal violence. The permanent job of State self-purification by means of the expulsion of high ranking criminals in the National Gendarmerie, *La Bonaerense* (the Buenos Aires Provincial Police), or *La Federal* (the Federal Police) that is seen today as a necessity, a matter of common sense, was only five years ago an unresolvable dilemma even in the imaginary of some intellectuals who believed themselves to be confrontational as allowed within the confines of the reality defined by the hegemonic powers.

In these notes regarding violence and its representations, I will attempt, first of all, to lay out the logic constitutive of national identity and visualize how its very expressions already tend to configure our realities and their limits. Once the functioning of this logic has been introduced, I will try to analyze the transformation—from the 70s to the present moment of regressive changes—of the sketches or images that Argentina has collectively created in order to judge, condemn, or vindicate the social actors of such violence. This will create a map of these ideological representations, tracing the repertoire of mythic characters through which society has been able to determine which violence was justified and which was an atrocity, where reason had been lost and where it was found.

From Revolution is an Eternal Dream (1810) to Revolution as Impossibility (1976)

There are many, perhaps too many, stories of Argentine violence that are already well-known; and even though they are known in varying shades and diverse, even contradictory versions, it would be impossible to cover even a necessary minimum in common. And if such minimum were postulable, it would still be an arbitrary selection. I will try to establish a constitutive logic and state the possibility and necessity of formulating alternative models of articulation.

The constructive principles of Argentinean nineteenth century literary narrations are very often the same as those of the political accounts of Argentinean social conflicts of the same period. In principle, and simplified to the extreme, the fundamentals of Argentine-ness, applicable to both nineteenth and twentieth-century literary texts and political life, can be stated as different, unstable and incoherent elaborations that balance the opposing terms of a binary opposition. In this antagonistic division (hegemonic during both centuries) the "other" is always the torturer: Unitarianists and Federalists, Civilization and Barbarism, autochthonism as opposed to foreignism. What is even more interesting is that this Manichean dichotomy has been able to sustain

itself as the most immediately accepted version and is represented in a basic (and sometimes very successful) manner in a large part of our canonical literature, especially that of the nineteenth century, and in our school textbooks. The hegemonic version includes Sarmiento's *Facundo* (1845), Echeverría's "El matadero" (1871), and José Mármol's *Amalia* (1851), while the other extreme would be represented by Hernández's *Martín Fierro* (1872, 1879). In her book on gaucho literature, Ludmer has convincingly shown the opposition between voice and writing as another of the factors in this dichotomy as well as the postulation of exile as the space from which those writers who are not in power (nor in the country) realize their proposals regarding how the nation should be, or really is. Books such as Feinmann's *Filosofía y nación* (2004) and Rodríguez Molas's *Historia de la Tortura y el orden represivo en la Argentina* (1984) offer amplifying panoramas which rarely tend toward reductionism regarding the period starting with the formation of nationality until the blow that was the genocide of 1976. But one could name dozens of books that would be relevant to the study of such an extensive topic. I think that one of the decisive characters in this long history is the governor Juan Manuel de Rosas. In Felix Luna's *Breve historia de los argentinos* (1993), Rosas is the protagonist in a debate that (at least for Luna as a historian) is no longer interesting:

Al que valora la libertad como una categoría fundamental de la vida colectiva, nunca le va a gustar Rosas; el que cree en la soberanía como elemento articulador de la comunidad nacional, hablará bien de él. Y así seguirán durante años y años. (98)

(One who values liberty as a fundamental category of collective life will never like Rosas; one who believes in sovereignty as the element which articulates national community will speak well of him. And so it will continue for years and years.)

I believe, however, that escaping this dichotomy (which appears to be inescapable) and identifying the points of contact between the opposing terms can help us see the events in a different light. The film *Camila* (1984) by María Luisa Bemberg, made at a time in which dichotomous thought was an inevitable horizon, does, however, open up a path in this direction by pointing out the enthusiasm with which the exiled opposition struggled in favor of the couple's death sentence. I think that the article "Death and Liberalism: Capital Punishment after the Fall of Rosas" by Ricardo Salvatore decidedly marks a new way of understanding this history: a revision in which the fundamentals of the old categories of Western historiography are questioned. Felipe Pigna's books (2004 and 2005) have also brought new visions of this history. I recently

read a curious article by Martín Sorbille, “El martirio del unitario en ‘El matadero’ de Echeverría: el semblante materno como causante de la formación de su sueño-cuento,” which offers a Lacanian analysis of Echeverría’s text. What is surprising and interesting is that the Unitarianist/Federalist conflict becomes a form of covering up a tormented plot founded on the experiences within the family structure. For the purposes of this analysis, what is most relevant in Sorbille’s study is his relativization of the Manichean opposition: the other is suddenly familiar and recognizable as a human being. This change of perspective allows us to attempt the recovery of another history, one that finally reveals human groups truly without representation, who are therefore completely dehumanized and disappeared; the true others, absent and closed-off or represented by vampirized Indians that, like demons, run through the hallucinatory pages of Esteban Echeverría’s *La cautiva* (1837).

Perhaps one of the greatest successes of Borgesian writing has been exactly that oxymoronic constitution in which the opposing elements of the antithesis “Civilization and Barbarism” are put together to produce an overarching synthesis: Argentine-ness and its manifestations that succeed in encoding itself completely in Borges’s own writing.⁴ Inevitably this reunification is part of a fictional autobiography in which the family novel is central: “Esta ficción familiar es una interpretación de la cultura argentina: esas dos líneas son las dos líneas que, según Borges, han definido nuestra cultura desde su origen” (Piglia, “Ideología” 89) (This family fiction is an interpretation of Argentine culture: those two lines are the two lines that, according to Borges, have defined our culture since its origin).

In a book whose reprint Borges prevented as long as he could, *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (1926, 1993), one may read a vindicating declaration of that which had been (and would be again for him) antagonistic otherness. His enthusiastic identification with the much-loathed liberal Argentine history continues to be startling:

La Santa Federación fue el *dejarse vivir* porteño hecho norma, fue un genuino organismo criollo [. . .] Nuestro mayor varón sigue siendo don Juan Manuel: gran ejemplar de la fortaleza del individuo, gran certidumbre del saberse vivir. (Borges 12–13, 1993)

(The Sainted Federation was the normalization of the port city’s live and let live attitude, it was a genuine Creole organism [. . .] Our greatest man is still don Juan Manuel: the great model of individual fortitude, great certainty of knowing how to live.)

In my analysis of Borges’s 1923 poem “Rosas” from *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1969) in my book *Identidades secretas: La negritud argentina* (2003), I tried to demonstrate that behind the profound, at times inconceivable, hatred

towards Rosas, is a racist panic demonstrating the terror in the face of the apparition of the Afro-Argentine racial other, whose negation in Argentine culture has been both careful and successful (98–106). The Afro-Argentine poets Miguel Noguera, Gabino Ezeiza, and Horacio Mendizábal and their works have thus been conscientiously disappeared from the national imaginary (Solomianski 185–229, 2003).⁵ In those interstices of forgetting and in those identities that are sometimes so difficult for us to recognize, it seems possible to visualize a new and significant approach to other possible (and more realistic) maps of who we have been.

The Sad and Dejected Fall from Guerrilla Fighter to Yuppie

Now I will attempt to reformulate the ideologemes (that are so curiously contradictory and related) that the Dictatorship (1976–1983) and Neoliberalism succeeded in imposing on the Argentine imaginary. These ideologemes constitute a repertoire of social figures or characters whose identities are secretly interconnected, although it is hard for us to visualize it. The present, full of changes and transformations, which opens the twenty-first century in Argentina embodies a vindication of those ideals of the 70s that until then had not achieved an acceptance by the majority of the middle and lower strata of society. The murdered youth in 2001 join the victims of the Dictatorship and reaffirm for us that, despite the horror of their sacrifice, they have left us the legacy of a courageous and significant taking up of positions that we cannot forget. The disappeared, forever trapped in the final years of the 70s and, in their great majority, adolescents and young people under the age of thirty—69.13% according to *Nunca más* (1984)—cannot see their world from this side.⁶ They cannot critique themselves nor vindicate their truths, some of which are today both conclusive and presently relevant. I believe that one cannot continue to reflect on Argentine violence without invoking our dead: to be Argentine is as much to walk over their hidden cadavers as it is to think (or refuse to think) about their legacy.

The beginning of our journey through history, in this part of the essay, is situated in a period that begins at the end of the 1960s and stops at the middle of the 70s. The scene on the stage is that of the student revolts and national liberation movements. The protagonist is the guerrilla fighter. His essential traits are idealism, solidarity, a spirit of sacrifice, bravery, and intelligence; his project or his utopic horizon is “The Revolution,” a radical transformation of a historically determined society, a transformation that should extend across the entire face of the earth. This image includes both sexes: the “whole woman companion” praised by Uruguayan singer Daniel Viglietti or the mythological figure of Che Guevara.⁷ In the face of the complete failure of the revolutionary project and the following terrified stigmatization of the dedicated popular

combatant, the stage of genocidal authoritarianism is consolidated. Its protagonist is the torturer. His essential traits are cruelty, a hypocritical contradiction between his means and his ends, subordination to his hierarchical superiors (which supposedly makes him not responsible for his actions), and loyalty, or more accurately, mafia-like complicity with the members of his group or task force. His task or anti-utopic immediacy is the salvation of the Nation which is equivalent (in heroic code) to the detention by any means necessary of the revolutionary process or of any element that could imply a transformation to less hierarchical social relations. Or, in other words: the maximum reduction of the limits of possible reality, or even the reduction of reality to a set of terrifyingly and shamefully limited possibilities.

When the genocidal Dictatorship (the dinosaurs of 1976–1983) finished their task⁸ with an aberrant dose of excess, the stage changes and we come to the moment of neoliberal redemocratization. In this new context the strategy for the perpetuation of power is one of persuasion rather than authoritarianism. What is most paradoxical and shameful is not only the deepening of the same politics but also the reappearance on the political stage, through “free and democratic” elections, of, sometimes, the same people that in some cases had usurped institutionalized public space by force during the dictatorial context.⁹ The neoliberal environment of persuasion installs the yuppie and the cosmopolitan woman as the protagonists of the time. Their essential traits are elegance, good taste, sophistication, and the ability to earn and spend money. Their utopic horizon is the Promised Land of consumerism in which objects become symbols and are not valued for satisfying real needs but for sending a message, that of belonging in the Promised Land.¹⁰ The highest level of altruism, solidarity, and generosity of these subjects is represented in the theory of the trickle down of the great neoliberal pie. This panorama does not feature the peaceful image of the homeless (the weak counterpart of the yuppie); instead, the image that has come to saturate the repertoire of our ideological representations of violence is the terrorizing figure of the delinquent. His essential traits are cruel, irrational, gratuitous violence; terribly low social origins; drug-induced lack of conscience; and extreme youth. His anti-utopic immediacy is to obtain money through armed robbery, but he is not a professional criminal: such a disorganized and unpredictable subject may find himself killing uselessly and against his own interests. In the face of this figure, with whom it is impossible to even try to establish communication, the only option is the exercise of authoritarianism but in this case with the full support of all of those sectors of society that have something to lose. In this way, the disintegration of Neoliberalism annulled its strategies of persuasion in order to push society into increasingly authoritarian police practices.

It is interesting to point out, through the multiple and complex game of oppositions and continuities between the two commonly positive images (the guerrilla fighter and the yuppie), and the two negative ones (the torturer and the

delinquent), the manner in which the neoliberal colonization of the imaginary has operated. I am not referring to concrete persons but to images that have great power within the immense variety of ideological-social representations—it is a fact (truthful and easily verifiable) that many former “saviors of the nation” (torturers) have been recycled and persist (and survive economically) even today as common delinquents. Along the same lines, many people who adhered to revolutionary slogans in the pre-Dictatorship past later preached during the Menem period the gospel of property (very private, but trickling down)¹¹ of sophisticated automobiles, clothing and elegant accessories, and other elements of the constellation of celestial consumerism.

The neoliberal conjunction of police and financial authoritarianism (no longer through IMF cutbacks but now through the banking *corralito*, or account freeze, between 2001 and 2002) transformed the representations of Argentine violence. Now the yuppies stopped being the knights-errant of post-modernism to become, at best useful idiots, just as the idealistic youth had been in the worst of cases.¹² Again the protective police became the damn police, murderers and torturers, while the picketers valiantly faced their authoritarianism for the good of the Argentine community. Demonstrations and demonstrators, picketers and pot-bangers, came to redraw (or disrupt) the map of national violence and to reformulate the environment of dialogue and discussion that the Dictatorship and its Menemist continuation had closed off even as merely an imaginary possibility.

I believe that the agenda and work of the band *Patricio Rey y sus redonditos de ricota*, as well as some graffiti, express in artistic form something that can be thought of as an alternative, or anti-commercial and anti-system, a remarkable model of resistance against police authoritarianism. On the other hand, the film *El bonaerense* (2002) by Pablo Trapero, in terms of artistic form more conditioned by diverse symbolic and economic interests,¹³ and having much less spontaneous distribution, exemplifies a moment in which high culture lags behind, confused, or to the right of the social changes proposed and achieved by popular demonstrations.

¡Que se vayan todos! (All Politicians Get Out!): All Prisoners are Political Prisoners

December 20, 2001. The images are shown repeatedly on television screens. After a deliberately criminal act of police repression, shirtless youth—“bums,” “Argentines of the lowest category,” “innocent pawns” (maybe even “foreigners: those are not the acts of true Argentines”)—penetrate the Honorable Congress of the Argentine Nation. There they continue with their outrageous slogan: “let them all go.” The “filthy” shirtless youth burn some of the honorable chairs in which the official essence of the Nation mingled with

that of some “honorable representatives” of “honorable” multinational corporations. Beyond the instructive use of these images to frighten (immobilize) a cowardly middle class that had recently begun to react, and beyond the logic with which the truth of these events was supposedly brought to light, one may ask, which violence came first, which is more damaging for the country? After the bribery of IBM, the privatizations, the excessive taxation, the infinite stories of political-economic corruption that seemed to be our irremovable national horizon, which are the true acts of violence? In the end, if the unquestionable popular desire was “let them all go,” perhaps it was not such a bad idea to burn a few pieces of furniture of the usurper tenants. I think that in the evolution of the concerts of *Patricio Rey y los redondos de ricota* it is possible to see this same anti-institutional and markedly anti-police violence with which the marginalized youth challenged the authority of an unusually authoritarian and criminal police force and tried to manifest their profound discontent before a social organization that excluded them from the world of citizens (or merely of living beings). Their belligerence, understood by some sectors to be criminal violence, was an uncontrollable component, always on the verge of exploding, which in large part resulted in helping to bring about significant future transformations in Argentine social networks in December of 2001.

As an inevitable reaction to the Dictatorship and to its continuation through the *Ley de punto final* (Full Stop Law) and the *Ley de obediencia debida* (Law of Due Obedience), and definitely to the persistent action of a workforce whose work is never through; the youth in general, but above all those sectors deprived of access to a decent job, began to see the state’s security forces as their clearest and most direct enemy. I am citing some graffiti from the late 80s until 1990 that humorously expresses this somber opposition:

Terrorismo militar, tortura policial. No hubo cambios (Bombini y otros 40)
(Military terrorism, police torture. Nothing changed)

Robe, mate, torture y consiga a alguien que se lo ordene (38)
(Rob, kill, torture, and get someone to order you to do it)

Si lo sabe cante (Un torturador) (42)
(If you know it, sing it [A torturer])

¡Ojo! Polis en los bondis (47)
(Watch out! Police on the buses)

Colabore con la policía, péguese solo (51)
(Collaborate with the police: beat yourself)

La muerte va en patrullero (55)
(Death comes in a squad car)

Ladrones abstenerse. El Estado no admite competencia (48)
(Thieves, stop. The State needs no competition)

Votaste: esperá dos años y volvés a participar (57)
(You voted; wait two years and participate again)

Vos no desapareciste, por algo será (57)
(You aren't disappeared; there must be some reason)¹⁴

I believe that the voices of the street, written in the air, written (when possible) on the walls, are precise and eloquent. The manifestation of these voices and their stand against police authoritarianism is the only point that I will comment regarding the agenda of the rock band *Patricio Rey y los redondos de ricota*, this band being probably one of the most curious phenomena in Argentine cultural history. Its permanent, independent intransigence with respect to recording labels and circuits of mass media distribution demonstrates the possibility of a dense, complete, and profoundly significant existence outside of the hegemonic space of television and the usual paths of consumption and commercialization. This type of distribution, initially limited, resulted in a lagging in the popularity of their product: the band simultaneously embodied a proposal linked to the disintegration of Neoliberalism as much as to the utopic ideals of the 70s. This loyalty to their beliefs is what allows them to interpret the anguish of a postponed youth. One of the anonymous songs that the fan bands sang while waiting for the beginning of a concert is almost linear in this respect:

Vamos Redondos, pongan huevo
vayan al frente que se los pide toda la gente.
Una bandera que diga Che Guevara,
un par de rocanroles y un porro pa' fumar
matar un Rati para vengar a Walter
y en la Argentina empieza el carnaval.

(Let's go, Redondos, stand up to them
go to the front, all the people are asking you to.
A flag that says Che Guevara,
a couple rock 'n' roll songs and pot to smoke
kill a cop to avenge Walter
and in Argentina Carnival begins.)

The line “kill a cop to avenge Walter” is a good starting point for the topic of the violence that surrounded the concerts. In April of 1991, a fan named Walter Bulacio was killed in a police station after being arrested at a concert. Since then, the atmosphere of the concerts has become, generally, a true battleground. At the last concerts in Mar del Plata (June 1999), hundreds were arrested, dozens injured, fourteen train cars destroyed, eighty businesses damaged, and three cars burned. The seven hundred violent “low lifes” (of an audience of 15,000 people) were associated by the middle class with the figure of the irrational delinquent who is beyond the reach of communication. Police repression, in general, and one could say systematically (in my personal experience), began before the “criminals” were able to do anything concretely violent other than being who they were, holding up a mirror to the violence that is implicit in the general social system (many lines of *Martín Fierro* that define the condition and identity of the gaucho come to mind: to be a gaucho is a crime). At any rate, I am not interested here in determining responsibility. This violence was a symptom that demonstrated the pathetic absurdity of the broken neoliberal model and configured some of the first outbreaks of rebellion that would become the popular movements of December 2001.

Riachuelo, Deafness, and Reconciliation

This is the end of my map; here I attempt to delineate some of the alternatives that the present offers us in order to perceive and represent our current violence. It is evident that I am leaving out material of primary relevance from my analysis: it seemed to me more adequate to look more carefully at the configuration of logics and imaginaries than to delve more deeply into particular cases that would always end up being in some way incomplete or outside of the realm of what I am dealing with.¹⁵

I believe in the need to return to debate and dissidence. Menemism has produced an intellectual field that, even opposed to its program continues to function as its possible opposition. I am not talking about politics, but about ethics and aesthetics and the configuration of the intellectual field. The cultural sphere of Menemism is assimilated into the post-modern Latin American artistic orbit that Nestor García Canclini describes (and perhaps prescribes) in *Culturas híbridas* (1992) and in *Consumidores y ciudadanos* (1995), a world in which work, intelligence, and originality are subordinated to personal (if not economic and corporate) contacts and conveniences.¹⁶ If intellectuals and artists represent something or uncover something, this work has become more difficult and complex with the struggle against the continuity of the neoliberal logic that still survives in the intellectual Argentine field.

From 2001 to 2007, the voices of the streets, without intellectual interpreters, discovered how to make themselves heard and impose some of

their demands on the ruling class with a good deal of clarity. Intellectuals in general, and as a productive class, have been left behind by the utopias written in the air. I think that this is another of the unfortunate “successes” of the Menem administration: a considerable deactivation or subduing of artistic work. Perhaps the demand “let them all go” is directed at all types of representation and not only that of politics. I am not proposing an absurd return to socialist realism nor do I adhere to Jameson’s (1986) position that all “Third World” art inevitably functions as a national political allegory. But I cannot accept the validity of the socially immobilizing concept that works of art (and here the classist notion of high art is an obvious given) are products that are absolutely separate from their social context and which become “contaminated” if we interpret them in relation to that context.¹⁷

The particular case of *El bonaerense* is very interesting because while Pablo Trapero attempts to narrate, as well as possible, the story of a victimized individual whose circumstances force him to become a *rati*, an officer of the Bonaerense, the police force of Buenos Aires Province. The allegorical reading and the pseudo-denouncement of the evils of the institution (or the description of its disastrous state) turn out to be objectives that are widely dealt with by the film. In this case, the movie, as Rejtmann would propose, allows itself to become contaminated by the social reality (“it would lower its artistic value”), it attaches itself to the context in which it has been produced. The problem, in my opinion, is not that it artistically recreates a social conflict of immense relevance to Argentina today, but that there are limitations to how that socially conflictive space is treated.

The story narrated is very simple, moving, and verisimilar: Zapa, a very good kid from a small town in the province of Buenos Aires is tricked by his boss, el Polaco, into committing a crime. His only option to escape justice is incorporating himself into La Bonaerense. Within the institution and upon his arrival to the great city of Buenos Aires, he becomes trapped in a living hell. Mabel, a police officer and instructor at the school for non-commissioned officers, who is for a time Zapa’s lover, proves to be a human being of unyielding principles: she leaves him when he begins his (unofficial) ascent up the ladder of the institution by taking bribes for the police lieutenant, Gallo. Along the way we see a multitude of repugnant characters and scenes, but also very respectable people. La Bonaerense as an institution is itself buried in the disaster, as much because of the (remarkably mitigated) criminality of some of its members as because of the incomprehension, egotism, and lack of economic support from the community of the great Buenos Aires. Zapa’s picaresque tale ends when he is betrayed (and shot) by his own boss, Lieutenant Gallo, in a criminal operation that is misrepresented as an honorable act of service. With a transfer and a promotion, Zapa finally returns to the Buenos Aires inlands where human relations are considerably less alienated than in the periphery of the big city.

Although there are abundant representations of criminal behaviors on the part of the institution, they are much more trivial and infrequent than they were in reality and in part seem explained (if not justified) by the general social chaos, the ignorance of members of the force, and even the low salaries. Zapa, a common man from the country, is completely constructed as a victim: he is the kind of person who needs to request a transfer to his hometown because he cannot tolerate the inferno of La Bonaerense. The movie is remarkably conciliatory and expresses the moments of confusion, uncertainty, and insecurity that the middle sectors of the population felt during the misgovernment of Fernando de la Rúa. On one hand was the need for a police force that protected them, while on the other was the knowledge that the cure was not much different from the disease. Apart from showing the victimization of the *cana* (police), the film's most original and most difficult task is hiding the trigger-happy and sadistic police force entertaining themselves by throwing unarmed and beaten adolescents into the Riachuelo river. The movie has the shortcoming of representing much less police violence than what viewers knew was actually occurring. The advantage of this reduced representation of police violence and the conciliatory position of the film is that viewers, mostly middle class, were not in a position to demand profound structural changes and preferred a corrupt police force (and even one that murdered people of the poorer classes) to the complete lack of protection that would be the consequence of no police force at all. A final picturesque detail is that the police themselves worked with Pablo Trapero for the making of his movie. I would like to clarify that, despite my somewhat severe analysis of how *El bonaerense* articulates the sociopolitical moment in Argentina in which the movie was made and distributed, this is undoubtedly a movie of great value, both emotionally and aesthetically. I have taken time to discuss it because I also believe it will be incorporated in a significant way into our official history.

When *El bonaerense* was shown at the Egyptian Theater in Hollywood on October 26, 2002, as part of the series of the American Cinematheque, I could not resist asking Trapero how much the police had paid him to make such a sophisticated piece of propaganda. Certainly I was neither the first nor the last to make this joke to him.¹⁸ In any case, he told me that he had truly feared for his personal safety while making the film. After more concrete questioning, he explained that he had not wanted to denounce La Bonaerense, but instead to tell the personal story of one Bonaerense. Surely this argument relativizes the vigor of my criticism regarding the social function of his film, but it does not annul my fundamental point: the artistic production of high art has lagged behind the conclusive sounding of the voices of the street. These are the voices that inspire and represent future rebellions; these are the voices that express the truths hidden from our time and that erase the limits of what is possible, limits imposed by twenty-five years of Dictatorship and Neoliberalism (1976–2001). These voices, not found in the archives, are those that, without obligation and

without having anything to lose, encourage us to sing the impossible song.

I am not proposing the superiority of committed art or the primacy of militancy in aesthetic-intellectual production, and much less am I vindicating the utilitarian violence of diverse sectors of power. My proposal is deeper and perhaps simpler: the neoliberal paradigm has lost in great measure its past power of convocation. I believe that it is now anachronistic to discuss the space of absorbed opposition (and the consequent use of its logic) to which the oppressive years of neoliberal reality have relegated our intellectual life. Now it is time to propose the impossible as something that in effect does belong to the rein of this world. The voices of the street come shouting it out with an overwhelming force.

Notes

1. A less elaborated version of the last three parts of this article has appeared in *¡Dale nomás! ¡Dale que va! Ensayos testimoniales para la Argentina del siglo XXI*.
2. I am taking the notion of a cognitive map somewhat loosely from what Jameson proposes in “La abolición de la distancia crítica” of *Ensayos sobre el Posmodernismo*. This is an attempt to respond to the question about the location-signification of subjects in the confusing system of social networks.
3. One can argue what the principle of reality is and what is possible. Conformism to parameters established by others or to fulfill made-up interests generally does not change anything.
4. *Borges, un escritor en las orillas* by Beatriz Sarlo is an in-depth analysis of the oxymoronic aspect of Borges’s work.
5. I have published a study of Mendizábal in “Ensayo y utopía argentina en Horacio Mendizábal” and a partial recovery of his work entitled “Horacio Mendizábal: Horas de meditación, ‘Argentina’ that I consider central to a more objective and productive vision of the fundamental dichotomy of which the Argentine people are supposedly the result.
6. The book *Nunca Más* by the CONADEP (National Commission on the Disappeared) (Argentina) presents the following information about the disappeared, by age: 11–15 years old: 0.58%; 16–20: 10.61%; 21–25: 32.62% (the largest group); 26–30: 25.90%; 31–35: 12.26; 36–40: 6.73% and the curve continues to descend (294).
7. In spite of the internationalism of Che Guevara, his nationalist inflection has been very well represented in the films *Juan Moreira* (1973) by Leonardo Favio and *Los hijos de Fierro* (1972–78) by Fernando Solanas.
8. This is an allusion to the song by Charlie García, one of the most moving formulations, in my opinion, about the topic of the disappearances.
9. Astonishingly, many Argentines believe that after the Dictatorship (1976–1983), a free, democratic system really was restored. At minimum, this perception ignores the long-term effects evident during the legal proceedings that even in 2009 we still face.
10. The definition of object of consumption as sign (with all the arbitrariness that that implies) is found in the conclusion of Baudrillard’s *El sistema de objetos*.
11. The pathetic brotherhood between the avenging engineer Santos (for whom two human lives were worth less than a car tape player) and the pedagogical Doctor Mariano Grondona, former defender of the use of torture and supposed intellectual critical of the

- suicide of the Menemist state in the mass-media circus of that time.
12. In my personal opinion, reducing the Resistance to the savage, right-wing transformation of the country, to a group of “useful idiots” is an injustice that deprives the movement of its valor and historic dimension. I cite the term because it has crystalized as one way (not necessarily the most reactionary) that we Argentines try, uselessly, to face our feelings of guilt in the face of the massacre.
 13. It is difficult not to give relevance to these factors in a society cannibalized by economic recession and omnipresent violence.
 14. I have taken these quotes from *Las paredes limpias no dicen nada*, a compilation of street graffiti by Gustavo Bombini, Floyd, Istvan and Claudia Kozak. The order I present them reflects the historical process that I am proposing: continuity between *proceso* and democratic restoration and increasing disintegration of Neoliberalism (in the original, the graffiti is neither dated nor in chronological order).
 15. *Memorias y nomadías* by Ana Forcinito (2004), particularly in chapters 4 and 5, and the study “The Boundaries of Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo” by Ana Peluffo provide essential segments of what is not elaborated upon in this essay.
 16. Obviously the plurality of an intellectual field cannot be reduced to a single tonality and within the Menemist environment there were “de-Menemized” intellectual efforts. However, to give a transparent example of the changing times within the work of one intellectual as dissident as Piglia, *Respiración artificial* and *La ciudad ausente* have remarkably different ways of confronting power.
 17. The notion of contamination was given to me by Martín Rejtman on June 22, 2004, in a personal conversation after the showing of *Los guantes mágicos* (2003) in Encino, California, during the Los Angeles Film Festival. When I asked him if there was a minimal relationship between his film and the times Argentina was living during the filming, he told me he was tired of people connecting his movie with the “crisis” and that he hoped that within five years people would see it as the work of art that it was, when the social circumstances that had surrounded it were no longer in effect. I would like to add that Rejtman’s movies are very well done and very entertaining. I think they are very intensely expressive, which is to me one of their most brilliant merits, despite his personal theory about the autonomy of art and the “contaminating” moments in which they were made.
 18. Aside from the usual aberrations of the Bonaerense police, in October 2002, a dozen members of the Federal force murdered (after torturing several minors) 19-year-old Ezequiel Demonty and throwing him into the Riachuelo River. At the same time, news of crimes committed by the penitentiary service was coming out. It really was not a good time to see such a conciliatory movie about the security forces.

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