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The Ghostly Arts

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Ghosts are apparitions of the dead, but in the case of the disappeared of the Southern Cone, there were no ghostly apparitions but rather a photographic image. The image itself became an enigma, a question mark on the border between the hope for survival and likely death. While *testimonio* and survivor stories proliferated at the end of the military regimes, the silence of the disappeared was absolute. In this essay I take photographs, films, and art installations to be hauntings.

Disappearance was a form of cruelty that affected families for whom there could be no closure and whose agony turned into public uproar as the Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina and the Families of the Disappeared in Chile began their vigils in places (the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the Chamber of Deputies in Santiago) whose historic associations lent pointed significance to the absence of justice. As evidence of an existence, the mothers and family members carried snapshots taken at birthday parties, at graduations, on holiday or on outings with friends, photographs that had once been intended as spontaneous documentation for the perusal of family and friends but now became icons of the disappeared. They were often reminders of happy times, since these are the ones we tend to photograph. In their very normality they defied the ferocity of an end that could only be surmised, and they put in sharp relief an intolerable connection between the normal and the abnormal, the innocuous and the criminal.¹ The silence of the demonstrating mothers and the silence of the disappeared were met by the silence of the authorities, all of which converged in the silence of the photograph.

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Photographs publicizing disappearance were not confined to the Southern Cone. They were also displayed in Colombia after the Trujillo massacre.² The frontispiece of *Yuyanapaq: Para recordar* (Yuyanapaq: In Order to Remember), the collection of photographs of the civil war published by the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, shows a rough hand holding a tiny photograph like those pasted on identity cards or passports, a pathetic reminder of an identity recorded only to be reduced to this single memento.³ Snapshots were affixed to the crosses erected by the mothers of the girls assassinated in Ciudad Juárez. Although, unlike the families of the disappeared in the Southern Cone, many of these women had seen the mangled bodies of their daughters, the photographs of unfinished lives foreground the unfinished business of bringing the perpetrators to justice.

Roland Barthes believed that photographs are linked to early theater in which actors played the role of the dead, for “however lifelike we make it (and this frenzy to be lifelike can only be our mythic denial of an apprehension of death), photography is a kind of primitive theater, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead” (32). Perhaps that is why the photographs of the disappeared, displayed as evidence, have come to seem uncanny. The families’ demand that their loved ones be returned “with life,” the answered call “present” in response to the name of a disappeared person during a roll call—this presence-in-absence is a haunting that underscores the simultaneous and impossible meeting of hope and despair. Moreover, the photographs themselves grow old, as Nelly Richard, writing of Chile, pointed out: “The families must incessantly reproduce the social appearance of the memory of this disappearance, that is so fragile in its threatened narrative that it must struggle against oblivion and forgetting” (50). Although the faces in the photographs remain young, the technology has advanced since they were taken. Richard draws a contrast between the touched-up, technologically sophisticated color photographs of General Pinochet held by the women supporters who welcomed him on his return from detention in London in 1989 wearing T-shirts printed with “Yo amo a Pinochet” (I love Pinochet) and the archaic-looking snapshots of the disappeared daughters and sons displayed by family members, snapshots that seemed anachronistic because they were taken before the use of more advanced technologies and were often photocopied. The cosmetically enhanced images of Pinochet were an apt metaphor for the cosmetically enhanced appearance of national reconciliation displayed by the coalition government. Richard suggests that the photographs of the disappeared, frozen in time, inadvertently introduced an unwelcome reminder of the past into the sophisticated glamour of the market economy: “The families of the victims know the difficulty of maintaining alive and relevant, the memory of

the past when all the consumer society's rituals are set to distract and take away the meaning and force of concentration" (51).

This unanticipated gap between the technological sophistication of the present and the not-so-distant past—a past that was supposed to have been buried—was bridged by the tenuous strands of memory, a faculty that has come under some suspicion. Indeed, Susan Sontag asserts flatly there is no such thing as collective memory and suggests that “perhaps too much value is assigned to memory, not enough to thinking” (115).

True, she is writing of war photographs, but her downgrading of the memory of ancient grievances (Bosnian Serbs? The Irish?) suggests that the privilege of the metropolis is to ignore what does not directly afflict them, a dangerous assumption given the media curtain that prevents “us” in the First World from recognizing our own responsibility. And this is not to mention the ancient grievances of slavery, of the Indian wars, of Chinese coolies and the internment of Japanese citizens—one could go on. Sontag does not appreciate that ancient grievances are also those that account for the narratives of defeat and repression of those for whom collective memory is often the only access to their buried history. How else could the remaining indigenous Salvadorians make sense of their impoverished present if there were no transmitted memories of the 1932 massacre in which thousands of them were slaughtered? How else could the disappeared continue to haunt Argentina and Chile, Colombia and Peru, decades after they were killed? The involuntary memories of the relatives of the disappeared became deliberate memory thanks to the mechanical reproduction of photography that haunted the present. Benjamin's beautiful comparison of remembrance and forgetting with Penelope's web best expresses its workings:

And is not this work of spontaneous recollection, in which remembrance is the wove and forgetting the warf, a counterpart to Penelope's work rather than its likeness? For here the day unravels what the night has woven. When we awake each morning, we hold in our hands, usually weakly and loosely, but a few fringes of the tapestry of a lived life, as loomed for us by forgetting. However with our purposeful activity and, even more, our purposive remembering each day unravels the web and the ornaments of forgetting. (“The Image of Proust” 204)

Remembering, in this sense is a work, not simply a spontaneous occurrence, and it is the haunting that energizes it.

Andreas Huyssen considers the present memory boom a response to “the capitalist culture with its continuing frenetic pace, its television politics of quick oblivion, and its dissolution of public space in ever more channels of instant entertainment” (7). Thus, “our obsession with memory functions as a reaction formation against the accelerating technical processes that are transforming our *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) in quite distinct ways” (Huyssen 7).

In Latin America, particularly in Chile and Brazil, these transformations occurred precisely at a moment of severe repression, when memory became the only resource for the families of the disappeared, the photograph the only trace. The coalition government that followed the dictatorship in Chile needed a public culture of amnesia to sustain its fiction of national unity. But this official history was challenged by what the filmmaker Patricio Guzmán has termed “obstinate memory.” Disappearance, designed to obliterate an existence, became one sure way of keeping memory alive since, for the families, there was no possible closure as long as there was no body. That is why the photographs of the disappeared came to haunt the military in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil, despite the protection of amnesty laws, for they exposed the official lie that hundreds of (mainly young) people had voluntarily left home.

This humble and democratic art, available to anyone with a camera, has been the target of important theorists such as Siegfried Kracauer, who stated that “the flood of photos sweeps away the dams of memory. The blizzard of photographs betrays an indifference toward what the things mean” (quoted in Linfield 19). For Kracauer, writing during the Weimar Republic, there were reasons for skepticism of mass-produced images. Sontag, alarmed by the mass of images of war, protests that they can’t convey its reality:

We don’t get it. We truly can’t imagine what it was like. We can’t imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes. Can’t understand, can’t imagine what every soldier, and every journalist and aid worker and independent observer who has put in time under fire, and had the luck to elude death that struck down others nearby, stubbornly feels. And they are right. (125–6)

But surely people do not mistake photographs for experience. Documenting cruelty does not mean reproducing its initial impact, and photographs, as Susan Linfield claims, have an important role in “robbing us of the alibi of ignorance” (11). For Barthes, “painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse combines signs, which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and are most often ‘chimeras.’ Contrary to these imitations, in photography I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past” (76). Although this statement has been contested by falsified photographs, it remains essentially true.

“Disappearing” thousands of executed victims, erasing them from existence, was, for the military governments of the Southern Cone, simply a disposal problem. Given their project of fighting “everything contrary to western and Christian ideology” (Feitlowitz 24–5), the large number of deaths that this involved, and the need to conceal the extent of the slaughter from the prying eyes of international observers, the military was forced to

hide the extrajudicial deaths from the public eye. The audience for this massive masquerade was both international and national, and the goal was to create an atmosphere of normality behind whose façade all kinds of atrocities were perpetrated. General Videla, president of Argentina, presented an official explanation in an interview on U.S. television, blaming disappearance on the victims and minimizing the responsibility of the military:

They have disappeared in order to live clandestinely and to dedicate themselves to subversion; they have disappeared because the subversive organizations have eliminated them as traitors to the cause; they have disappeared because in a shootout with fire and explosions the corpse was mutilated beyond identification; and I accept that some persons might have disappeared owing to excesses committed by the repression. That is our responsibility and we have taken steps that it not be repeated: the other factors are beyond our control. (quoted in Feitlowitz 28)

In a television speech included in the film *The Disappeared*, he says impatiently, “Disappearance simply means that the person is not there.” *Nunca más*, published by the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons in 1984 on the basis of thousands of testimonies, charged that “with the technique of disappearance and its consequences, all ethical principles that the great religions and the most lofty philosophies enacted during millennia of suffering and calamities were trodden down and barbarously ignored” (17).

What the military did not anticipate was that the disappeared would return to haunt them. In these societies of masquerades, the counterfactual demand by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina and the Families of the Disappeared in Chile that they be returned with life exposed the prevarications of the military by taking the lie as literal truth, creating a new form of opposition, one that relied on this ghostly pretense. With the passage of time, this demand appealed “not to immediate political action but rather to a ritual or even redemptive dimension” (Longoni 25). This spirituality was not always channeled by the church, although in Chile, where the Association of the Families of the Disappeared, founded in 1974, received church support, demonstrations by family members who chained themselves to the railings of the National Congress (closed since the coup) and to the Cathedral underscored both the lay and the religious aspects of disappearance. The demonstrations placed the government in a dilemma: by coming down on the protestors, they showed their authoritarian hand to the world, but if they ignored them, they risked undermining their carefully constructed wall of silence (Vidal 9). The families created a rift in the very center of sovereign power between their demonstration of the integrity of the family (which the military rhetorically protected) and the pretense that their

children and relatives were runaways. The photographs then acquired a significance that could not have been anticipated at the moment when they were taken, for they demanded a response, not by showing an event but by displaying the photographed face as a call in Levinas fashion. Of course, Levinas is referring not to a photograph but to a face that in its mortality “calls for me, begs for me, as if the invisible death that must be faced by the Other, pure otherness, separated, in some way, from any whole were my business” (Hand 83). Nevertheless, in a ghostly fashion, the photographed faces of the disappeared were an appeal to the living from a place that the living could not occupy. Nelly Richard finds photographs of the Chilean disappeared profoundly disturbing. Quoting Pierre Bourdieu on the function of photography in funeral rites “to recall that they had been alive and that they are dead and buried,” she asks “how to interpret the dual ghostliness [*fantasmalidad*] of the bodies and the destinies of the bodies and the destinies of these victims of ‘presumed deaths’ that materially lack the traces of a proof of truth to confirm the objective outcome of the dilemma of life-death” (Richard 67). The families confronted injustice by showing a face as a visible accusation “of the scandalous anonymity that still protects the executioners” (67).

That the disappeared were dead was not immediately obvious to the families. It took unanticipated revelations for that truth to be brought home. In Chile, it was the discovery of the bodies of executed prisoners that had been thrown into abandoned furnaces in Lonquén, a discovery that confirmed suspicions of mass executions and clandestine burial grounds. Lonquén undermined the hopes that disappeared detainees might still be alive. Supported by the Vicariato, an office of the Catholic Church, the members of the Coalition of Families of Disappeared Prisoners made a pilgrimage to the site. For the Catholic Church, the Lonquén discovery meant “redirecting the energy of the mourners from the hope that their loved ones be restored with life to an emphasis on suffering as the basis for a just society” (Vidal 113–14). Members of the Communist Party, on the other hand, adopted the secular comfort of a poem by Neruda, and its promise that the martyred would be “with us” in the final struggle (Vidal 115). But this is only the beginning of a story for which there is no neat conclusion. In snuffing out lives in secret, the military governments let loose the ghosts that haunt them in the present.

Before being executed, some of the prisoners in the ESMA (Navy Mechanical School) detention center in Buenos Aires were photographed. The photographs smuggled out by Victor Bastera, a former detainee who continued to work there after his release, show the faces of young people who know they have no future. These photographs cannot in any way speak to hope. In his books, *Nexo* and *Memory under Construction*, in which these photographs are reproduced, Marcelo Brodsky underscores the fact that memory is not necessarily a spontaneous recall but requires a conscious

effort, especially when there are gaps between the moment of disappearance and the ultimate acknowledgment of death. The ESMA photographs presented a different image of the disappeared, one in which no hope could be invested, for they show that period of suffering between life and death. In *Nexo* (Connection) a photo essay by Brodsky is accompanied by photographs of moldering files of habeas corpus proceedings, “each one presented in the hope of finding a son, a father or a brother alive” (58), the visible traces of the legality that has been abandoned. The yellowing documents shelved in storerooms are now the “buried books” of the disappeared, the record of “steps taken to no avail, proceedings that have ended without providing an answer and that now have come to rest stored on the shelves” (59). The damaged books, buried by their owners during the military regime, and the fragment of a video by Eduardo Feller (2001) titled “The Wretched of the Earth” were displayed in an installation at the Buenos Aires book fair in 2000, accompanied by a text that included the statement, “We, the generation that lived through the dictatorship, burned our own books, a part of our identity” (*Nexo* 75). The dusty title of Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (reproduced from Feller’s video) is a reminder of an unfinished project of emancipation. The damaged books refer to a truncated culture that had, in the 1960s, aspired to liberate the “wretched of the earth,” the very class of people who are once again victims, the “wasted lives” of neoliberal expenditure. The exhumed books testify to the profound cultural shift between the 1960s and the present, between the world that the disappeared had inhabited and what it has now become.

The tipping point for Brodsky, who lived for some years in exile in Spain, was the disappearance of his older brother, Fernando, whose activities before his capture in 1979 are summarized in his secret dossier; they amounted to distributing leaflets, taking part in shooting practice, joining small political parties, and attending political meetings and study groups. Brodsky’s first attempt to represent Fernando’s disappearance, an installation ironically titled, “Buena Memoria” (Good Memory), highlighted the fact that a “good memory” makes it impossible to forget a bad event. The installation exhibited a blown-up photograph of the 1967 first-year class at the Colegio Nacional with notes and crosses over the faces of those who had disappeared, been killed, or gone into exile. The installation closed with a photograph of a churning sea into which the bodies of many detainees had been thrown.⁴ Over the years, Brodsky constantly came back to the many meanings and frustrations of memory. In his book *Nexo*, he shows images of trees planted in the Tucumán memory park by relatives of the disappeared who attached notes and photographs. Exposed to the elements, these had “deteriorated, implying a kind of second disappearance for those who would have been remembered” (“El bosque”). What this tells us is that memory is not a hold-all that can be drawn on as needed but must constantly be reconstructed from fragments and fortuitous remains. The memory of

atrocities are not simply available; they are constituted post hoc with the aim not only of clarifying the fate of the disappeared but of documenting a crime. And it is always fragile.

Memory under Construction, an anthology of essays and photographs, was published as a contribution to the debate over the conversion of the ESMA detention center into a memory museum. This came about in 2004 when, under President Nestor Kirchner, it was designated a space for memory and for the promotion and defense of human rights. It is one of the many “places of memory” in the Southern Cone. The ESMA museum now includes a memory archive (*archivo de memoria*), a cultural center (the Centro Cultural Haroldo Conti, named after the disappeared writer), and a center organized by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. For a present-day visitor, for myself, it was hard to imagine that such a small space could accommodate so much nefarious activity—offices for registering new inmates and for making false identity cards for traveling officers, torture chambers, a delivery room for pregnant women, accommodation for navy personnel, and, on the third floor, the *capucha*, where the prisoners were kept cuffed to their mattresses and where the loot from raids on suspects’ homes was kept.⁵

Searching archives for evidence of his brother’s fate, Brodsky was presented with a secret intelligence report containing a photograph of Fernando taken shortly after his arrest and a second photograph, taken after torture, that had been among those smuggled out of the detention center by Victor Basterra. In this later photograph, Fernando is wearing an undershirt, his hair is unkempt, and the deep bags under his eyes show the effects of torture and sleeplessness. In *Memory under Construction*, published in 2005, this photograph is reproduced as the first of a series showing detainees, several of whom were listed as disappeared. These photographs are a stark contrast to the photographs carried in demonstrations, for they make visible the extinction of hope. The eyes, as they gaze fixedly at the camera, express weariness and resignation, as if they already know their fate. One of the most moving is the photograph of a middle-aged woman wearing a pinafore dress and a flowered blouse that she had probably made herself. She is the kind of lower-middle-class woman one might meet in the marketplace or grocery store, except that she has shackles around her ankles. Her name is given as Ida Adad. What could she (or the others) have done to merit brutal extermination?

After nearly thirty years, there is no “getting over” this particular loss. This is the truth that photography reveals to us in the portraits of the forever young. Nor does the disappearance that disrupts the lives of the wives, husbands, children, parents, and grandparents end with the disinterment of bodies and identification of remains. The ESMA photographs show us the faces of those who have been deprived of all youthful élan, who have forgotten any optimism or plans for the future. They tell us about fear. In

Regarding the Pain of Others, Sontag was reacting against what she sees as the exaggerated claims of photography's power to represent a violent event. But these photographs are terrible because it is not the event they capture but a foregone conclusion. We read death in their faces. Andreas Huyssen argues that contemporary installations such as those of Brodsky transgress the boundaries between installation, photograph, monument, and memory, addressing the spectator not only as an individual but as a member of a community confronting the task of commemoration (Huyssen "The Mnemonic"). But they also confront us with the terrible truth that ours is an age of excavation and exhumation as we seek lost generations.

This was brought home in the documentary film *The Disappeared*, in which a man strives to discover his true identity and finds that after his parents were murdered by the military, an army officer gave him to a working-class family for adoption. Far from being a happy ending, this discovery introduces a belated mourning in which he finds not a mother but a corpse that he must now rebury.

The title of Catalina Parra's video installation, *Fosa*, filmed in 2004 in the Atacama desert in northern Chile, is the unequivocal reminder that the desert was the tomb, the graveyard, the sepulcher of several hundred of those "disappeared" by the military during the Pinochet regime. In this brief video, the spectator confronts not Žižek's "desert of the real," but the real of a desert on which rain never falls, where nothing grows, where some places have not seen rain for four hundred years and where the few human traces are the artifacts of nomadic tribes and the disinterred bones of the recent dead. A wind blows incessantly over the barren landscape in which the only other sound is that of a backhoe excavating and filling sacks with desert soil in a simulation of production. The only human presence is the operator. The video reminds the viewer not only that victims of the Pinochet government were buried in the desert but that they were exhumed by mechanical shovels that removed the bodies, which were then reburied elsewhere or thrown into the ocean, leaving only fragments. Because exhumation in the installation is a mechanical task whose product is dirt, it speaks to the reduction of the human being to mere matter. At the same time, the sacks of dirt are strangely humanoid, recalling the mythical *imbunche* of Chilean folklore, which Parra described in reference to a 1987 exhibition as a creature who has all the orifices of the body sewn up so that the evil spirits cannot escape.⁶ Compressed in those sack figures is the hidden fate of men and women who were killed and buried in the desert so that they would then be forgotten, as if the national amnesia decreed by both the Pinochet regime and the coalition government that followed it could forever guard the secret of their deaths in the suppression of dissidence, the extermination of the opposition so that the government could reinvent the nation as a neoliberal paradise. The distant monument to the disappeared is the visible sign of the burial of utopian promise that would be replaced by regimes that wanted no reminder

of the past. In much of her previous work, especially in her collages, Parra deployed irony and ambiguity by using newspaper headlines, posters, or simply her own ironic comments. In *Fosa*, the spectator is put to work as he or she processes a rich array of meanings and the multiple strands that link extraction, excavation, exhumation, exposure, and exploitation while the grating noise of the machine underscores dissonance. But what is most striking about the video is the reiteration of the reduction of the human being, who is restored only as a simulacrum by a machine operated by a worker who has become part of its mechanism. This is the desert of the real.

Patricio Guzmán's film *Nostalgia for the Light*, also shot in the Atacama Desert, sutures two seemingly incompatible temporalities—that of the universe and that of present-day Chile still searching for remains. Human time shrinks before the eons of the time of the universe, visible in the brilliant star-studded sky and measured by the astronomers who work the immense telescopes. Their gyrations are the opening images to the film. The desert is first shown as uninhabited and uninhabitable, although gradually the human trace becomes visible—the rock drawings of ancient travelers, the mining camp that once housed exploited workers and, later, Pinochet's prisoners. It is the task of the filmmaker to give all these traces their due. When a survivor of the Chacabuco concentration camp describes how the prisoners studied the night sky, the film makes explicit the connections between the short life spans of the human and the *longue durée* of the universe.

In the desert we see some distant figures who turn out to be women still searching for the remains of their husbands, brothers, and sons. One of them has found part of skull and a foot in a sneaker that had belonged to her young brother. Her photograph shows an adolescent whose bones now reveal that he was executed by two gunshots. It is hard for her to understand the executioner's fury. Another woman, who gives her age as seventy, searches for her husband's remains. She has been searching for many years and will go on searching for fragments. What the film wants us to know is that there is a spirituality that is not only available to religious speech but is also expressed in devotion to the dead.

A young woman working as an astrologer is the daughter of disappeared parents. Brought up by grandparents and now herself a mother, she knows that her parents can never be returned with life and that, measured against the time of the universe, human lives are minuscule, although life, if we think beyond the individual, does not end. The indestructible calcium in our bones belongs to the immense time of the universe. It is comfort of a sort, but not enough to overcome the incurable melancholy and cruelty that cannot be understood or explained. Against the eons of universe time, Guzmán measures memories of his childhood and the ephemeral lives of those who have been obliterated. It is the brevity of the latter that gives the film its pathos.

Atrocities are not photographic material, although their results—the strewn bodies, the exhumed corpses—are photographed as evidence. It is possible that we have, as Susan Linfield argues, lost “the capacity to respond to photographs, especially those of political violence, as citizens who seek to learn something useful from them and connect to others through them” (24). Speaking of the photographs that the Commission collected, put on display, and published as *Yuyanapaq: Para recordar*, the president of the Peruvian Truth Commission, Solomon Lerner Febres, described them as a prolongation of the truth “that we undertook to recuperate when we allied ourselves with memory along with justice” (Lerner Febres 17). But the “truth” is difficult to extract from these photographs. What they do display over and over again are the faces of hardship, the stubborn enigma of death and the desolate aftermath of war. The frontispiece shows rough hands holding a photograph of a middle-aged man, one of the disappeared. The tiny photograph, the size of a postage-stamp, transmits the pathos of the loss of an unrecorded life, a life of labor, now reduced to this insignificant record.

But the book also mirrors the dissensions that still linger in Peru. While the army and police in the photographs are described as “forces of order,” the guerrillas are labeled “subversives” and the photographs often show the Shining Path and the MRTA in a bizarre or exotic light. In one photograph, a group of accused terrorists in vivid black-and-white-striped prison outfits waits outside a gate through which an army detachment is preparing to march. The photograph establishes a clear distinction between the upright beefy soldiers in camouflage and the “terrorists,” three of whom are crouching and hiding their faces. One of the young men stands looking at the camera. He cannot be more than fifteen years old. Although there is no doubt that the Shining Path were responsible for atrocities, the photograph cannot tell us whether these individuals were guilty. Rather, it relies on the contrast between the force of order and the disorder of the prisoners, who are made to appear not only abject but exotic and foreign.

In another photograph, a group of Huamanga women sit under a placard announcing that they are constructing “a Latin America without disappeared.” Echoing the Argentine Women of the Plaza de Mayo, their placard reads, “They took them away alive, and alive we want them,” the mantra of the families of the disappeared all over Latin America. Poorly dressed, hands folded on their laps, the women are portraits of grim determination. But there is a deep vacuum where information should be. At the viewer’s spatial and temporal remove, questions—for instance, were their men killed as “subversives”? and what makes people become “subversives” in the first place?—have no answers. Many critics have written of the deep discontent felt especially among young people, who, after years of university, found they had no prospects and embraced the change promised by the Shining Path, but there is little indication in

Yuyanapaq that the gross inequities in Peruvian society could have had anything to do with the uprising.

In a photograph by Ernesto Jiménez, an indigenous woman standing before the exhumed and decaying bodies is clearly in shock. This anonymous mourner is a modern Antigone, her dead buried outside the walls of the *civis*. The area is barren, a no man's land. If the figures against the rocky barren background have a story to tell, the photograph can only tell us part of it. Who were the men who are now bodies? What was their crime? I turn the pages of *Yuyanapaq* and encounter the photograph of a girl's body being thrown into the bed of a truck. The caption tells us that she is a political activist, but we cannot know how she met her death. Her body is soiled, her battered face unrecognizable, and her shirt has been pulled up to expose her young breasts; but there is nothing erotic in the soiled and scratched torso, and nobody is looking. The men removing the body are concentrating on the task, and other people in the photograph do not seem particularly interested, as if the event were no more out of the ordinary than the daily garbage collection. In the background, groups of men seem to be gossiping. The bodies are clearly being disposed of as rubbish, but we can never know what drew the teenager to rebel and fight nor how she met her death.

In another haunting photograph, a solitary girl in black is shown sweeping an enclosed patio surrounded by a brick wall and a covered walkway. Arched walls reminiscent of a convent frame the patio as if were a stage, so that her activity (sweeping up scraps of paper) appears exaggeratedly vigorous, even desperate. The caption tells us that she is thirteen years old and is in an orphanage for war victims, having witnessed the assassination of her parents. But that story cannot be photographed. What we see instead is a muted desperation enclosed within the walls of the orphanage, like a metaphor for a life enclosed in grief and hardship. Viewing these photographs, I cannot quite accept Sontag's assertion that "the illustrative function of photographs leaves opinions, prejudices, fantasies, misinformation untouched" (84).

The photojournalist, Susan Meiselas, who was in Nicaragua and El Salvador during the civil wars, understands the ambiguous role of the photographer as a witness to conflicts that are not immediately understandable. She asks, "What does it mean to be doing this? . . . For whom am I doing this work?" (quoted in Lippard 210). Some of her photographs—such as that of the skeletons of the Salvadorian villagers killed in El Mozote by the army—provided evidence of the massacre that took place there. But Meiselas is also keenly aware not only of the responsibility of the photographer but also of spectatorship, especially when the spectator belongs to a different culture. A 1983 photograph of the funeral of a mother and child killed during a clash between the military and insurgents in El Salvador shows a coffin in the foreground in which the two

bodies lie, clothed in white. The open coffin is surrounded by a group of men, evidently peasants standing in contemplation; behind them are women and children, their faces exhibiting stunned grief. One of the men in the forefront has his hands spread in what seems to be a gesture of despair and impotence. Outside the frame are the distant spectators, ourselves, temporally and spatially removed from the event. It is as if the photograph were telling us that we cannot be part of it.

These photographs force us to think about spectatorship and about the difference between presence and temporal and spatial distance from an event. This is explicit in Meiselas's photograph of a group of adolescents crowded in front of a small patio, staring at a bloodstain on the floor. The bloodstain, we learn from the caption, is the visible trace of a young man who was shot while distributing leaflets. Kept back by a small hedge, the poorly dressed boys on the threshold of adulthood express the avid curiosity of those drawn to the scene of a crime. And we, in turn, are drawn to it because, like the boys, part of us wants sensation, a show of violence that we can safely watch. The photograph forces us to confront our own distance from the event, about which we can learn nothing. What the photograph tells us is something else, something about the fascination with violence that draws in spectators both near and distant (Meiselas 179).

In 2004, Meiselas returned to Nicaragua, where she had formerly photographed the uprising against Somoza in 1978 and 1979 that culminated in the Sandinista victory, this time to shoot a video in the very places where she had documented the episodes of war. The juxtaposition of past and present is at once an *aide-mémoire* through which the present remembers or relives the past, and a comment on the present, showing how mobile history is, how it is constantly reiterated and reformulated. As Diana Taylor writes, "The staging of the photographs . . . forms part of a living and ever-shifting repertoire of cultural imaginings. Reinserting them where they were taken twenty-five years after the fact allows people to participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge of that past by 'being there' now, being a part of the transmission" (Taylor 232–34). While this is true, there is also a poignancy that is disconcerting, for the photographs record the banality of the present in its everydayness, as it blankets and obliterates the fervor of revolution and the intoxication of war.

Notes

1. For a reflection on photographs of Jewish child victims of the Holocaust, see Marianne Hirsch.
2. See the cover of Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación, *Trujillo: Una tragedia que no cesa*.
3. See *Yuyanapaq*.

4. See Brodsky, *Buena Memoria/Good Memory*. In this book Brodsky incorporates a family history.
5. A plan of the building is included in *Memoria en construcción: El debate sobre la ESMA/Una convocatoria*, 49.
6. The exhibition “Imbunches” was shown in the Galería Época, Santiago de Chile. See Paulina Varas, *Catalina Parra*.

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