

**Uncanny Oscar Winners: Memory, Affect, and Oppositional Cinema
in Postdictatorial Argentina**

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In an October 2011 interview with Associated Press reporter Michael Warren, a few days after Brazil and Uruguay's congresses took legal action to facilitate the investigation of dictatorship era crimes that have long gone unpunished due to amnesty laws, Argentine-Chilean playwright Ariel Dorfman remarked: "The past has been haunting Argentina, and Chile and Brazil and Uruguay for many years now, and unless you bury it well, it turns into a ghost, and you can't kill a ghost" ("New Rules"). The difficulty lies in the fact that before a nation can bury and transcend its haunting past, civil society must unearth and acknowledge it, come face to face with the monstrosities it engendered, and tend to the wound this past has persistently inflicted. However, given that this task has not been politically feasible or convenient for the democratic governments that assumed power in the wake of these dictatorships, the past (as Dorfman correctly observes) continues to haunt the present. It is against this backdrop of state prescribed amnesia, mandated amnesties, and all the nightmares such policies have spawned, that this paper situates the only two Argentine and Latin American Oscar winners in the Best Foreign Language Film category within the oppositional corpus of a redefined New Latin American Cinema movement.¹ A movement that, paradoxically, emerged in open defiance to a Hollywood film

¹ For a comprehensive introduction to the New Latin American Cinema movement, I suggest the reader consult the two volume work edited by Michael T. Martin. It is titled *New Latin American Cinema* and both of its volumes were published in 1997. Volume one is subtitled "Theory, Practices and Transcontinental Articulations," and volume two's subtitle is "Studies of National Cinemas." The following working definition of the movement comes from, Ana M. López, one of the contributors to the second volume:

When the term is used today [1988] it always implies a socio-political attitude that constitutes the principal source of unity for these films and practices. That attitude can be summarized as a desire to change the social function of cinema, to transform the Latin American cinema into an instrument of change and of consciousness-raising or *concientización*. Always conceived of as a

industry that its founders denounced as a tool of cultural imperialism and a facilitator of the neocolonial order and all the nefarious dependencies it engendered. As postdictatorial expressions of a recalibrated oppositional cinema, I argue that *The Official Story* (1985) and *The Secret in Their Eyes* (2009), in spite of their Hollywood triumph, strategically undertake the revolutionary task of memory at two key moments in the life of a nation still haunted by the ghosts of its violent, recent past. Moreover, and given Gothic fiction's formal characteristics as well as its psychosocial functions, this argument takes into account those aspects of the genre that, present in them, shape these two films as strategic and revolutionary returns to the repressed; as films that simultaneously disguise and reveal "something—some entity, knowledge, emotion, or feeling—which has been submerged or held at bay because it threatens the established order of things" (Clemens 3-4).

Luis Puenzo's *The Official Story* debuts in April of 1985, during the early stages of the redemocratization period in national film making (1983-89). At this juncture, President Raúl Alfonsín's administration was making a concerted effort to use a particular brand of cinema to both resuscitate the national film industry by penetrating the European/U.S. markets, and to recreate the nation's image abroad by promoting "a more positive image of a democratic Argentina liberated from the military dictatorship" (Falicov 48). Timothy Barnard notes, for example, that *The Official Story*'s "bland international style and thematic attention to the

challenge to the hegemony of the Hollywood import and foreign control of cinematic institutions and as an active agent in the process of cultural decolonization, the New Latin American Cinema is not just a filmmaking movement; it is a social practice intimately related to other movements struggling for the socio-cultural, political, and economic autonomy of Latin America. And it is a social practice that revels in the diversity and multiplicity of its efforts to create an "other" cinema with "other" social effects as a prerequisite of its principal goal to reveal and analyze the "reality," the underdevelopment and national characteristics that decades of dependency have concealed. (138-39)

In terms of its birthdates, birthplaces, signs of identity, and continuity, as Michael T. Martin adds, New Latin American Cinema is a "loosely constituted, dynamic, and unfinished movement of films [that began] in Argentina, Brazil, and Cuba in the late 1950s and 1960s" (16), where it initially became known, respectively, as "a third cinema," "a cinema of hunger," and "an imperfect cinema."

Argentine middle class” allowed it to spearhead the national industry’s “reorientation towards the national middle class and the European and U.S. markets” (452). Film scholar Tamara Falicov, for her part, views *The Official Story* as an exemplary product of this agenda given that while it “appears to unmask the realities of the dictatorship,” it actually serves to “sanitize the images” of the regime through strategic absences that help the film “conform to the established conventions of an international style of filmmaking,” that is, to “an aesthetic that reinforces palatability” (71-2). Falicov goes on to note the fading in this film of any trace of a progressive ideology capable of creating a more equitable society. Unlike the revolutionary films made in the New Latin American Cinema vein, Falicov accuses *The Official Story*, and most films of this period, of merely extolling “the virtues of individual self-realisation” (67). In Falicov’s assessment, while many films of this era “served as a form of catharsis for national audiences and worked to discredit the past regime” (66), they merely functioned as therapeutic *testimonios* of a revelatory, but not a revolutionary nature. For foreign viewers, Falicov asserts, these *apertura* films served a different, yet still soothing purpose, for they were “framed for international art-house consumption in ways that were politically, socially and culturally palatable to the bourgeoisie” (73). Thus, the glossy commercial style of films such as *The Official Story* appealed to the values of the national and international middle-classes, while their content had sufficient references to recent Argentine history to render them “critical” or “foreign” enough to these respective audiences.

A quarter of a century after the commercial and critical “success” of *The Official Story*, *The Secret in Their Eyes* (2009) wins Argentina’s and Latin America’s only other Oscar in the Best Foreign Language Film category.² Given that Juan José Campanella’s film, in addition to

² The national film scene in 2009, in part due to the funding structure changes introduced by the 1994 New Cinema Law, and in part due to the disenchantment with Democracy’s possibilities experienced in the 1990s and 2000s,

sharing this distinction with *The Official Story*, also constitutes the journey of a middleclass protagonist towards a personal awareness that only comes after grappling with the same painful period of Argentina's past evoked by Puenzo in 1985, one wonders if this second Oscar winner represents another concerted effort to individualize the struggle and convey it through a bourgeois filter, thus robbing the film of its revolutionary potential (in terms of the social action it could trigger) and turning it into emotionally, but not socially moving entertainment for the same national and international audience targeted by the National Film Institute in the mid to late 1980s. Otherwise put, to what extent can one level at *The Secret* the same criticism that Falicov directs toward *The Official Story* when she writes that “instead of focusing on building coalitions and working collectively to construct a democratic way of life, films were now extolling the virtues of individual self-realization” (67).

Such a comparative approach, however, presupposes that Falicov's conventionally accepted reading³ of *The Official Story*, as a film that breaks with the call to social action expressed by films of the New Latin American Cinema tradition, is beyond criticism. I propose

looked different than it did in the mid-1980s, when Manuel Antín directed the National Film Institute and through it sought to “mould the film industry into a public relations mechanism for the [once again democratic] state” (Falicov 48). Argentina's film production model during Menem's two presidencies (1989-1995 and 1995-1999) “shifted towards the commercial model traditionally embraced by Hollywood” and this led to a shift in the type of films being financed (Falicov 8). The 1990s were thus characterized by the birth of the national blockbusters, commercially successful films that imitated the Hollywood action film but were not destined for consumption outside of Argentina. Sharing the scene with the national blockbuster in the mid to late 1990s and then competing with each other into the 2000s, there were the films made by industrial auteurs (like Campanella) and those of the new generation of directors whose films are grouped under the category of New Independent Argentine Cinema. The latter, younger group of directors sought to refocus the nation's attention on the marginalized members of Argentine society but, unlike their 1960s and 1970s predecessors from the New Latin American Cinema, their gritty, realistic, low budget films “are not necessarily openly polemic or ideological” (Falicov 120). Laura Podalsky describes filmmakers of this new generation as self-described orphans “that have been particularly vocal about their disinterest in politics” and who “generally disavow any connection to earlier Argentine films, particularly to the explicit political engagement of both “Third Cinema” advocates [...] and directors of “redemocratization” like Luis Puenzo” (3).

³ Cultural critic Jean Franco, for example, agreeing with Nelly Snaith's characterization of the film as a “repellant melodrama” argues that “films and literature that disidentify—that is, that interrupt the process of identification—are more effective in disturbing the spectator or reader” (Podalsky 6). Laura Podalsky, critical of the perspective through which the plot is structured, notes that “in focusing attention on the emotional discoveries of an individual ‘bystander,’ the film ignores the traumatic suffering of those who were tortured and killed and, one might add, handily avoids the difficult question of societal complicity” (6).

that it is not. In her revisionist interpretation of the history of New Latin American Cinema, B. Ruby Rich proposes that in the second half of the 1980s oppositional cinema returned to aspects of the movement heretofore unacknowledged by film critics who had stereotyped it based on the traits of its seminal masterpieces. This return is characterized by the filmic, postdictatorial reconfiguration of the political domain to include the private, the personal, and the quotidian—a reconfiguration expressed by a series of shifts that mark this new wave of oppositional films, revealing a transition from exteriority to interiority, from public events to private emotions, from collective action to personal agency, from epic to chronicle, from agitprop to the telling of secrets, from the explicitly and predictably political to the implicitly political, from the revolutionary to the revelatory. These shifts at the level of content are, in Rich’s words, accompanied by “a corresponding shift in aesthetic strategies” (12).

As the 1980s drew to a close, Rich insisted that this readjustment, far from signaling the end of a progressive cinema of opposition, pointed to the fact that its form and content had evolved in order to continue the struggle against oppressive forces in a changed, postdictatorial, socio-political and economic landscape:

[T]he democratic (or pseudo-democratic) process has itself become the foremost aesthetic influence on contemporary New Latin American Cinema, given its shift in emphasis from the “revolutionary” to the “revelatory.” Just as oppositional political action demanded one kind of cinema, so does the individual’s open participation in a newly-legitimized form of government demand another. (14)

This “other” type of cinema demanded by the return of democracy after years of repressive regimes is defined by its new revolutionary mission: the emotional restoration and reactivation of traumatized individuals, without whose healing/awareness civil society will not be able to

overcome past crimes and injustices. As Rich puts it, in the new democratic environment of the 1980s “a cinema which turns inward and which begins to enable viewers to construct an alternate relationship—not only with their government but with an authentic sense of self—is an indispensable element in the evolution of a new sociopolitical environment” (13-14). If “slogans, pamphlets, and organizing have been key to political change; character, identity, empathy, and, most importantly,” Rich continues, “a sense of personal agency, now are of equal importance to political evolution” (14). The introspective impulse, the desire to look inward, that defines the films of the New Latin American Cinema of the 1980s thus “offers the possibility of a radical break with [an oppressive] past” by putting on screen “the interior world of persons⁴ whose lives [were first projected] in their stage of [collective] struggle, more than thirty years ago” (Rich 12-3).

Complementing Rich’s work with films of the 1980s, Laura Podalsky’s 2011 study argues for the persistence of New Latin American Cinema into the 1990s and 2000s. In the first chapter of *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema*, Podalsky “challenges the dominant scholarly framework that characterizes the NLAC as a [cerebral] movement favoring Brechtian techniques of distanciation over emotional appeals” by pointing out how prototypes of the movement also engage their audiences on a sensorial level (21). Through this reassessment of oppositional cinema from the 1960s and 1970s, Podalsky seeks to “better situate and contextualize [a] present-day Latin American cinema whose sensorial appeals have often been denigrated as indulgent and depoliticizing” by cultural critics such as Nelly Richards, Jean Franco, Beatriz Sarlo and Ivana Bentes (32). Moreover, in a move that

⁴ Although Rich is here referring to the oppressed and marginalized “persons” that the New Latin American Cinema of the 60s and 70s was portraying and trying to educate and mobilize in order to change society, I propose that *The Official Story*’s and *The Secret*’s portrayal of the personal discovery of their upper and lower middle class protagonists (Alicia and Benjamín) is also strategically advancing the cause of a more just society.

reflects the impetus of my subsequent analyses, Podalsky's approach to certain contemporary films as nuanced continuations of the New Latin American Cinema project, reconnects emotion and reason, thus affirming "the epistemic status of emotion and knowledge and reclaim[ing] the social function of emotion" (57).

Echoing Rich, and anticipating Podalsky's work, in the concluding section of her 1988 article "An 'Other' History," Ana M. López points out that "to claim that the New Latin American Cinema is dead [...] is to deny the movement the ability to adapt to changing conditions" (153). One such adaptation, which had prompted many critics to argue by the end of the 1980s that the New Latin American Cinema was dead, is the fact that in many countries it had shed its marginal status with the advent of democracy. But López points out that this mainstreaming of the movement is not necessarily corrosive because many of the movement's concerns cannot be addressed from the margins. Concerns such as making the national cinema strong, encouraging sustained production, maintaining and raising popular interest in the cinema, argues López, "demand discussion in the context of mainstream national cinematic production, state protection of the national cinema, and that cinema's commercial or popular potential" (152). In countries like Argentina, with a developed cinematic infrastructure, López points out that, in its search for ways to become popular, the New Latin American Cinema "gradually found itself incorporated into mainstream commercial operations" (152). According to López, therefore, the fact that the New Latin American Cinema is "no longer necessarily marginal [...] does not mean that it has given up its politics" (153). Therefore, commercially successful, internationally acclaimed Argentine Oscar winners that feature middle class protagonists, I suggest, should not be readily dismissed as cultural sellouts or commodities that highlight the unviability of New Latin American Cinema in postdictatorial times. Rather than proclaim its

death, López concludes that “what seems more appropriate is to call for an analysis of how [the New Latin American Cinema] has changed, for close studies of its expressive and social strategies and commitments” (153).

Rich’s study makes significant inroads in the research agenda prescribed above by López and, along with Silvia Tandeciarz’s recent complementary study of Dirty War memorials in Buenos Aires, shapes my approach to the two Oscar winners under discussion. Tandeciarz’s 2007 article makes it clear that Rich is not alone in recognizing the importance, in postdictatorial times, of cultivating citizens through creative representations that facilitate acts of recollection and discovery crucial to rehabilitating civil society and democratic institutions. In fact, what Tandeciarz argues vis-à-vis the potential impact of public memorials on the performance of Argentine citizenship in postdictatorial times, echoes Rich’s assessment of what many Latin American films are doing during the return to democracy. In “Citizens of Memory: Refiguring the Past in Postdictatorship Argentina,” Tandeciarz reasons that cities, like the oppositional cinema that Rich studied in the 1980s (and the films I am presently considering), can take people to transformative places, to places of memory through which the 1960s/1970s’ struggle for sociopolitical and economic justice can be taken up by a new generation. Hailed as citizens of memory in public parks and movie theaters, this new generation of citizens can learn to process contemporary circumstances as allegorical ruins⁵ which “can activate the feelings shut down during years of military rule” (Rich 20) and ignite the conceptual awareness necessary to transcend its haunting legacy. As Podalsky notes with regard to the impact of Patricio Guzmán’s

⁵ Here I use the expression “allegorical ruins” as Tandeciarz does in “Citizens of Memory” where, inspired by Idelber Avelar’s conceptualization of the revelatory role allegory plays in postdictatorial Latin American societies, she refers to the site of the excavation of the Club Atlético as that of an allegorical ruin: “It is a place where conflicting memories erupt, where the will of the dictatorship—and subsequently of democratic regimes of neoliberal transition—to bury its violence under a discourse of progress is undone by the will of the victims to recall their trauma and to map it onto the city’s facades” (159).

Chile: La memoria obstinada (1997), the two Oscar winners under consideration contest the dictatorship's persistent "anesthetizing tactics of repression" by allowing audiences "to be moved to think not only about what happened in the past but also to consider what it means for the present?" (27).

Encouraged by Lopez's request to consider the change in strategies and commitments of a New Latin American Cinema that by 1990 was no longer marginal, and in dialogue with Tandeciarz's thesis on the relationship between public memorials and the type of civic engagement they facilitate, with Rich's argument on the evolutionary turn taken by oppositional cinema in the 1980s, and with Podalsky's recasting of the New Latin American Cinema and defense of its contemporary articulations, I propose that both *The Official Story* and *The Secret in Their Eyes*, despite being critically acclaimed by cultural institutions of the Metropolis, further the progressive agenda necessary to transform Argentine society. I argue that they do so by projecting stirring acts of memory capable of shaping new citizens after two critical periods in national life during which, first the military junta, and then democratic governments under neoliberal transition, tried "to bury [their] violence under a discourse of progress" (Tandeciarz 159); a discourse which could only be effective if citizens forgot, in Avelar's words, "its barbaric origins" (2). By conveying social realities through the terrifying personal experiences of middle class protagonists, instead of condemning themselves to revelatory impotence and sacrificing themselves as sellouts on Oscar's altar, these films constitute timely returns to the past that are both strategic and revolutionary. They are strategic in the sense that, by individualizing the struggle and shifting the social class of its protagonists, both films effectively hail different, and

variously important,⁶ audiences, differently. They are revolutionary films given that they facilitate collective acts of discovery and remembrance that promote an understanding of the present as allegorical ruin. As such, their revolutionary work consists of undermining the politics of progress and forgetfulness, by horrifying their contemporary audiences into realizing “everything that was left unaccomplished and mournful in the past” (Avelar 2); as well as the magnitude of the emotional recovery work that still needs to be done if the country is to exorcise its demons, to overcome the “soporific inducements” of the “rationalized politics” of postdictatorial governments that could not, or would not, deal with past traumas (Podalsky 63).

The Official Story is the tale of Alicia (Norma Aleandro), an upper-middle-class woman, who comes to the horrific realization of her (tacit) and her husband’s (active) complicity with the military junta responsible for the disappearance of tens of thousands of Argentines during the Proceso years (1976-83). She is a history teacher at a Buenos Aires high school, and her husband Roberto (Héctor Alterio) is an executive at a company that has flourished thanks to its compliance with the military junta and its murky dealings with American finance companies and high-ranking officers of the regime. The story begins with the first day of class, in March of 1983. The nation is in the midst of the military government’s unraveling in the wake of the Malvinas War fiasco and the economic crisis that have eroded most of its power and legitimacy. Through her own observations and the eye-opening testimony of her students, her friend Ana who has recently returned from exile (Chunchuna Villafañe), the leftist colleague Benítez (Patricio Contreras), and Sara (an Abuela de Plaza de Mayo played by Chela Ruiz), Alicia arrives at two shocking discoveries: Gaby (Analia Castro), the baby girl she adopted as a newborn in 1978, is very likely the daughter of a disappeared couple; and her husband is an

⁶ While it is important for these films to win over international audiences given the economic repercussions of their success abroad on the financial health of the national film industry, their ability to engage the national public is important in terms of its potential impact on the socio-political health of the nation.

immoral monster who knowingly profited from the economic, physical, and emotional pain of others.

One particular scene that highlights the strategic nature of Puenzo's film is that of the testimony of Ana's abduction and thirty six days of detainment and torture at the hands of the Argentine military. The scene is strategic because it represents different things for its different audiences. The international bourgeois audience; which Argentina supposedly needed to satisfy in order to rebuild its damaged reputation and financially revive its film industry; identifies with the blonde, middle class Ana, whose individual testimony is delivered in a moving scene that is, nonetheless, devoid of any visual or ideological content that may alienate or shock it by blatantly highlighting its complicity or staging a torture session. As Falicov points out, this scene is touching, disturbing, but vague enough to be palatable to an internationalized middle class/film festival audience. The national audience, however, is hailed by, and responds to, this scene in a very different way. Namely, as Tzvi Tal points out, the Argentine public is emotionally and historically positioned to recognize the allegoric and symbolic aspects of Puenzo's cinematic language, aspects that subvert the film's apparently hegemonic or mainstream cinematographic language.⁷ Given the historical context of the film's debut, when many Argentines were themselves discovering the horrors of the Dirty War along with Puenzo's Alicia, this scene's minimalist *mise-en-scène* transforms Ana's account into a therapeutic historical testimony. As Clara Kriger points out with regard to its impact on national audiences, "the political function of *La historia oficial* is closely related to this simultaneity of experience." In Kriger's analysis,

⁷ The inclusion of famous actors who recently returned from exile, as Tal notes, also worked to deconstruct (in the eyes of a national audience in the know) the film's apparently hegemonic, mainstream, narrative style. Ana's character, for example, is played by Chunchuna Villafaña, the exiled wife of the famous New Latin American Cinema director, Fernando Solanas. Alicia's husband, Roberto, is played by Héctor Alterio, who had been exiled in Spain. And Benítez, the literature professor who helps to open Alicia's eyes, is played by Chilean actor Patricio Contreras, also exiled during (in his case) the Pinochet regime.

“the film does not propose itself as a conventional political film, appealing instead to a kind of unveiling” (181).

However, Kriger (as does Falicov) characterizes the film as lacking a radical, denunciatory voice precisely because of its revelatory nature and its failure to give protagonist status to the actual victims of the Dirty War. I, on the other hand, insist that to do so is to overlook the film’s strategic role vis-à-vis its function at home and abroad. Abroad, it presents a complex social struggle through a familiar cinematic aesthetic, the conventions of a recognizable genre⁸ (melodrama), and a vantage point that facilitates digestion. Abroad, it is an implicitly political narrative filtered through the perspective of a middle class protagonist who is herself (conveniently) also uncovering historical truths. At home, though, it strategically hails a middle class who, although complicit with the regime for actively or tacitly buying into its promises of law and order, will have to be rehabilitated and not alienated if it is to play its key role in the unfolding process of re-democratization. And the latter need to reengage this sector of society is not lost on Puenzo: “I deliberately used the format of intimate, not political cinema, because I believe that usually traditional political cinema – from *La hora de los hornos* to the films of Costa-Gravas, Pontecorvo or others – only catches the attention of people who are previously convinced” (Kriger 181). Thus, in early post-dictatorial Argentina, Puenzo’s box office success and Oscar winner shapes a critical sector of Argentine civil society by facilitating its emotional identification with the victims of state terrorism and expediting its role in the sociopolitical reforms necessitated by such empathy and awareness. A fact that is not lost on the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, who considered the film a great contribution to their cause: “With a human touching story it contributes to abolish oblivion, stirring people to collaborate, and at the same

⁸ Here I echo Marvin D’Lugo, who sees the 1980s return to genre films by Argentine auteurs wishing to politically explore the national past as motivated by the fact that recognizable genres “compensate foreign audiences for their ignorance of local culture and history” (113).

time aiding us, *The Grandmothers of the Plaza*, in our search” (Kriger 181-82). Consequently, although B. Ruby Rich does not include *The Official Story* in the list of 1980s films that she considers part of an evolving New Latin American Cinema, I believe that it plays an important role in the emotional recovery and political reengagement of a national middle class without which Rich’s so called “radical break with the past” cannot take place.

The revolutionary dimension of *The Official Story*, in turn, is exemplified by the prophetic scene of a failed family reconciliation. It’s a beautiful weekend afternoon, and Roberto’s father, José (Guillermo Battaglia), has invited Alicia’s family over to his house he shares with his other son, Enrique (Hugo Arana). Given that José is a former Spanish Republican and that Enrique is unemployed and struggling to keep his family afloat, they share neither Roberto’s political ideology nor in his recent economic success. The small family reunion appears to be going well until José makes a joke highlighting Roberto’s obsession with making money. Roberto explodes and a heated exchange ensues between him, his father (José) and his working class brother (Enrique).

José: Todo el país se fue para abajo. Solamente los hijos de puta, los ladrones, ¡los cómplices!, y el mayor de mis hijos... se fueron pa[ra] [a]rriba.

Roberto: Y te vas a morir creyendo eso, ¿no viejo? Nunca vas a admitir que a ustedes les fue como la mierda. ¡A los que son como ustedes!

(Madre de Roberto: ¿Qué pasa? Roberto, por favor...)

Roberto: Pero si tenés las mismas máquinas de hace cuarenta años. El mundo sigue andando, ¡¿entendés?! Y les pasa por encima a los que se quedan mirando las nubes.

Enrique: Pero no te da vergüenza seguir repitiendo ese verso tan estúpido y tan inmoral mientras la gente se muere de hambre.

Roberto: ¡¿Hambre?! ¿Y dónde está el hambre? ¿Quién carajo pasa hambre?, me querés decir. Pero si en esta casa se empachan sobre todo de palabras que no quieren decir nada. Siguen repitiendo las mismas boludeces anarquistas de toda la vida. ¡La guerra de España terminó! Y ustedes la perdieron. ¡PER-DIE-RON! ¿Y me quieren hacer sentir culpable a mí porque yo no soy un perdedor? No, no. Yo no soy un perdedor. Eso métanselo bien en la cabeza. No soy un perdedor.

Enrique: ¿Y esta otra guerra? La guerra que ganaste vos con los de tu bando, ¿quién la perdió? ¿Sabés quién la perdió hermano? Los pibes. Los pibes como los míos, porque ellos van a pagar los dólares que se afanaron; y los van a tener que pagar no comiendo y no pudiendo estudiar. Porque vos no vas a pagar, claro... vos... ¿Qué vas a pagar vos? Si vos no sos un perdedor.

This powerful scene blatantly reveals as immoral lies the false promises of progress pedaled by the crony capitalists protected by the junta, and describes the cost of such progress as acts of trans-generational and social violence. Moreover, the old Spanish Republican's participation forces the audience to cast a backwards glance, to reflect on the social costs of the Left's historical defeats, in the hope of vindicating its ideals, if not its violent methods, as civil society and democratic institutions reconstitute themselves.

Unfortunately, as attested by the two decades of neoliberal politics of forgetting that followed the End Point and Due Obedience laws of (late) 1985 and 1986,⁹ such efforts to

⁹ These laws came on the heels the Truth Commission's *Nunca más* report on the crimes of the Dirty War, which "led to the trials and jailing of, among others, nine former junta leaders" (Goldman 57). Their passing resulted from President Alfonsín's (1983-89) perceived political need to both establish some time limits on the trials of military officers and to distinguish between those officers "who gave the orders that led to genocide, those who simply

remember the past would prove to be no match for the proponents of amnesty in a postdictatorial Argentina that purportedly needed to forgive and forget, to bury its past for the sake of “national security, economic stability, and progress” (Tandeciarz 152). And so it is that when *The Secret in Their Eyes*¹⁰ premieres in 2009, four years after Argentina’s Supreme Court has ruled unconstitutional the two key amnesty laws passed in the 1980s,¹¹ an entire generation, that has come of age in a country of suppressed memories and justice denied, is given the chance to undertake, along with the film’s protagonist, the revolutionary work of memory. Alejandro Solomiansky calls attention to this very dynamic by describing the psychological environment into which the film erupts (in 2009) as one characterized by the ongoing repression of that which is most familiar. He notes that the terrifying power of the secret that lies at the heart of the film’s plot “se acrecienta con la ocultación-exposición de una verdad socialmente evidente pero inaguantable al punto de entrar en el terreno de lo olvidado (psicoanalíticamente)” (774). Picking up where *The Official Story* left off, *The Secret* thus encourages the national audience, I argue, to acknowledge, to re-familiarize itself with truths which have been turned into secrets. Social truths de-familiarized by means of what Solomiansky, evoking Freud’s concept of the “uncanny,” refers to as “a strong mechanism of psychological repression” (774).

carried out orders, and those who exceeded them by committing aberrant crimes” (Romero 262). Alfonsín’s assessment of the situation was determined by the threat to democracy posed by the military unrest that followed the initial round of trials. Elected in 1989, President Menem further eroded civil society’s punishment of those guilty of human rights abuses by subscribing to a general policy of reconciliation which included pardons (in 1990) “for the incarcerated ex-junta members, sentenced in 1985” (Romero 301).

¹⁰ Campanella’s 2009 film is based on Eduardo Sacheri’s 2005 novel: *La pregunta de sus ojos*. Sacheri and Campanella co-wrote the film’s script.

¹¹ The June, 2005, decision by the Supreme Court of Argentina, as then interpreted by Kevin Gray (Reuters senior correspondent in Buenos Aires) essentially cleared “the last legal obstacle for a lot of cases that have been presented before Argentina’s judicial system” and marked “the beginning of what will be a long process of investigations and cases making their way through the courts” in the coming years (“Argentina Moves to Face Past Crimes”). So, by the time *The Secret* premiered, many of these cases had been making headlines for some time.

Podalsky, for her part, supports my reading of The Secret as a revolutionary film by highlighting the relative advantage postdictatorial thrillers have at the moment of productively engaging the audience with a traumatic past that, although repressed, can still be felt:

In this postdictatorial context [1990s] of “rationalized” politics and tightly constrained public discussion about the trauma of dictatorship, thrillers offered an alternative way to address the past’s sensorially dense hold on the present. Indeed, the popularity of these films might be attributable, at least in part, to the way they provide an outlet for the affective charge of memory and reckoning. As with all thrillers, *O Que É Isso*, *Companheiro?*, *Ação Entre Amigos*, and *Death and the Maiden* are built around questions of knowledge and time in ways that involve both the characters and the spectators. In creating a sense of epistemic urgency and cultivating the desire to know in a timely fashion, the thriller offers a generic apparatus particularly suited for queries about a past that troubles the present. (64)

Moreover, the fact that the protagonist in Campanella’s thriller decides to come to terms with the past by writing a novel, doubly underscores the inadequacy of understanding past crimes through legal investigations subject to the rules and regulations of a judicial system that failed society before, during, and after the Dirty War.

The year is 1999 and Benjamín Espósito (Ricardo Darín), a recently retired judicial investigator in the federal justice system, decides to write a novel based on a 1974 case which still haunts him. The story is told in a series of chronologically arranged flashbacks whose content coincides with that of the chapters of the novel Benjamín is drafting as the film unfolds. The flashbacks are interrupted by the eruption of the writing present (1999) whenever Benjamín

shares his evolving manuscript with his former boss Irene (now a federal judge, played by Soledad Villamil) and with Morales (Pablo Rago), the surviving widow of Liliana Colotto (Carla Quevedo). In June of 1974 (a month before Perón's death), the twenty-three-year-old Liliana, a recently married school teacher, is brutally raped and murdered by Isidoro Gómez, a childhood acquaintance (played by Javier Godino). Soon afterward, Gómez goes into hiding after being inadvertently tipped off by the grieving husband's desperate attempt to him by calling his mother. A year later, in 1975, Benjamín and his assistant Pablo Sandoval (Guillermo Francella), inspired by the grieving widow's unrelenting love and desire to bring the killer to justice, manage to "unofficially" reopen the case, track down Gómez, and extract a confession that lands him in jail for life.

In a matter of months, however, Gómez is set free by an executive order to work for the secret intelligence services of Peron's widow, now President María Estela Martínez de Perón (Isabelita).¹² As Romano (Mariano Argento) makes brutally clear in his conversation with Benjamín and Irene (right before the elevator scene), the military commanders really running the show in 1975 need thugs like Gómez to carry out the early stages of what will soon become a full blown Dirty War: "Ustedes no pueden hacer nada. Porque la Argentina que se viene no se enseña en Harvard." Eventually, Gómez decides to exact his revenge on Benjamín, but on the night of the planned killing Gómez is kidnapped by Morales, who has decided to take justice into his own hands. Therefore, Gómez's accomplices have to carry out the operation without him, and instead of murdering Benjamín (whom they do not know), they murder his friend Sandoval, who happens to be at Benjamín's house that evening recovering from an afternoon of habitual,

¹² Solomianski affirms, and I think it most likely, that Gómez is recruited to work for the infamous Triple A (the Anti- Communist Argentine Alliance, or AAA). The AAA was an ultra-nationalist, paramilitary group "drawn from union thugs, the ranks of Peronism's fascist groups, and paid gunmen of the ministry of social welfare" (Romero 212).

heavy drinking. That very night, Benjamín is supposed to go on a date with Irene, who, although engaged, has decided to explore her feelings for him. Needless to say, in the wake of Sandoval's murder, this date never materializes. The next morning, Irene escorts Benjamín to the train station and sends him off to the remote province of Jujuy, where her aristocratic family has the influence necessary to protect him.

In 1985, with the nation's re-democratization firmly under way, after a failed marriage, several affairs, and ten years in provincial exile, Benjamín returns to Buenos Aires to resume his interrupted life. But, by now, Irene has married and started a family with the wealthier and younger fiancé that Benjamín was supposed to have replaced back in 1975. Given that the only past events actually portrayed on screen are those that relate to events that take place in 1974 and 1975, the audience only finds out what happens between 1975 and 1999 through conversations Benjamín and Irene have in the 1999 present, as she reviews his novel's manuscript. In 1999, Benjamín's writing project, in addition to putting him back in touch with Irene, leads him to a gruesome discovery in the country house of the widowed Morales. In the film's next-to-last scene, Benjamín discovers that Morales has taken it upon himself to imprison his wife's rapist and murderer for the past twenty four years. Morales, in effect, has meted out the punishment that the justice system would not, by keeping Gómez alive, in solitary confinement, in a cell he built on his own property. Armed with this revelation, Benjamín manages to make sense of the unresolved case and can finally bring his novel to a close. The film ends as Benjamín delivers the novel's final draft, and himself, to Irene's office.

Given that the strategic success of *The Secret*'s ability to simultaneously and differently hail a national and a Hollywood audience is lost on film reviewers such as the *New York Times*' Manohla Dargis and the *Christian Science Monitor*'s Peter Rainer, it is easy to see how the

palatability accusation of film scholars like Falicov and Bentes¹³ also could be leveled at this film; especially given its director's familiarity with the dramatic sensibilities of American audiences.¹⁴ Dargis, for example, writes that the film's use of the military dictatorship, "which takes on ugly human form primarily in the characters of a violent criminal and a bureaucrat who facilitates his brutality," is not very persuasive. She adds that although blunt and effective, the scenes with these thugs "frame the dictatorship in terms of individual pathologies, with little evident politics to make anyone feel uncomfortable." Rainer, for his part, writes that he has a hard time believing Benjamín Espósito's existential malaise, which he categorizes as "a plot convenience designed to propel the narrative forward" and as "too symbolic for its own good [...], standing in for all the abused functionaries who were crushed by the repressive political regime of the 1970s." For a 2009 national audience still coming to terms with the trauma of its Dirty War and institutional collapse of 2001, however, this film is political, it is uncomfortable, and its protagonist's existential condition is not "too symbolic for its own good." Indeed, Espósito's 1999 intellectual and emotional bewilderment ("¿Cómo se hace parar vivir una vida vacía?"), and the purposeful return to the past it triggers, dramatically represent the "effusive eruption of memory" that Argentine society was itself still experiencing given "the juridical vacuum in which the democratic process [had] floundered for almost two decades" (Jelin and Kaufman 93). Benjamín Espósito's 1999 novel, as the creative, grassroots, and public acts of recollection performed by civil society with increasing vigor since the mid-1990s, in essence, is

¹³ In her critique of the 1998 Brazilian film *Central Station*, Ivana Bentes points out its "undue preoccupation with style" and its "superficial engagement with socioeconomic issues," both symptoms of what she identifies as a desire "to attract the eye of foreign consumers" by dressing up Brazil's poverty in a film that lacks an "overarching political project" (Podalsky 2).

¹⁴ In fact, Juan José Campanella is a longtime American TV veteran with experience directing shows such as the popular police procedural "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit."

an attempt to discover and recover the past in order to make sense of the present and have hope for the future.

And this transcendent quest is what constitutes the revolutionary dimension of *The Secret*. Benjamín's journey from a fear and confusion born of repressed desires (TEMO) to a newfound hope and awareness (TEAMO) through retrospective discovery upsets both Morales and Irene precisely because it forces them to remember a past full of pain and aborted possibilities. It is a past, nonetheless, that needs to be dug up, if Benjamín and Argentina's deferred dreams/desires are to stand a chance in the future. This is where Benjamín's novel comes in, as the creative tool through which his persistent desire to remember and understand performs its revolution, one which like Campanella's film and the public memorials cited by Tandeciarz, consists of making the past emotionally present and socially relevant in spite of the resistance it encounters from Morales, Irene, and postdictatorial governments who, for different reasons, would simply like to forget. Irene, with statements like "Fue otra vida" and "El pasado no es mi jurisdicción," turns down Benjamín's initial offer to monitor the novel's progress because reliving the Morales Case would force her to conjure up two major disenchantments: her justice system's inability to do its job; and her own inability to pursue happiness by giving up on a relationship with Benjamín and entering into a convenient, but unhappy marriage.

Morales, for his part, all too aware of the cost of living with the past, pleads with Benjamín to forget about it, to move on with his life, to not let something that happened more than two decades ago consume his present and destroy his future: "¡Pasaron veinticinco años, Espósito! ¡Pasaron veinticinco años! ¡Olvídese!" But Benjamín insists precisely because he cannot move forward without first returning to the past and making sense of how Morales, he, and Irene (and an entire country, in fact) have managed to continue living, have managed to

pick-up the pieces of all that was shattered in the violence of the 1970s, and the amnesty and impunity that followed it for decades. How does one manage to live a life without love, without justice, without passion? This is the unsettling question Benjamín repeatedly asks himself, Irene, Morales, and the audience.

What Benjamín discovers towards the Edgar Allan Poe-ish end of the film, as he returns unnoticed to Morales' country house, is that neither Morales, he, nor Irene have moved on, have overcome the destruction inflicted by a case that, in Irene's words: "no muere nunca". Like Argentina itself, all three have been arrested, imprisoned for decades by brutal acts of violence that, perpetuated through official amnesty and suppressed by state sponsored amnesia, have prevented everyone from transcending them. The film's climactic scene conveys the monumental cost of policies designed to forget crimes that, in the absence of due justice, were never forgiven and continue haunting its victims. It does so with a series of camera shots that by the scene's conclusion have situated Gómez, Morales, Benjamín, and the entire audience behind bars: simultaneously witnessing the ruins of lives that could have been.

This comparative study of how *The Official Story* and *The Secret in Their Eyes* filter the social through the personal, without compromising their role in the struggle for social justice initially and differently waged by its New Latin American Cinema predecessors, exposes both films as engines of strategic and revolutionary remembrances in line with the movement's evolving praxis. At two critical junctures, after a dictatorship and after the two decades of neoliberal policies it ushered in attempted to erase the past, to bury the ruins that could serve as sign posts of all that was lost, these two Argentine Oscar winners, manage to remember, to (in Avelar's words) "remind the present that it is the product of a past catastrophe" (3). They do so by creating affective memory experiences with the potential to shape new citizens for a new

Argentina. In so doing, these films function as the empowering city that Gustavo Remedi has in mind when he observes that memory cannot survive without citizens, and that citizenship depends on a city that welcomes memory, “that cultivates it, [and] that makes it possible” (365).

As Ariel Dorfman reminds us in the introduction to this paper, exiling memory or suppressing the truth about past crimes by enacting a politics of forgetting only begets nations haunted by the past, by the return of the repressed. Given these films’ efforts to reveal the awful secrets and repressed memories responsible for the present ruins inhabited by their horrified protagonists and audiences alike, the aspects of Gothic fiction shared by them should not come as much of a surprise. After all, Puenzo’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Roberto) and Campanella’s homicidal rapist turned secret government agent, as the ghosts, specters, and monsters that haunt the ruins of Gothic fiction, “manifest unresolved crimes or conflicts that can no longer be successfully buried from view” (Hogle 2). Moreover, the fact that, as Hogle notes, the Gothic brings to light such conflicts in simultaneously revolutionary and conservative ways, both addressing and disguising society’s most important sources of fear (4), reminds us of the uncanny ability of these two Oscar winners to strategically represent different things to different national and international (middle class) audiences, potentially triggering in the former, through its strong emotional engagement, the transformative process of mournful discovery to which Avelar refers as allegorization,¹⁵ that revolutionary breakthrough that “takes place when that which is most familiar reveals itself as (an)other, when the most customary is interpreted as a ruin, and the pile of past catastrophes hitherto concealed under that storm called “progress” at last begins to be unearthed” (233). Uncanny indeed, these two Oscar winners invite us to dwell

¹⁵ In the context of her study on Gothic fiction and what it shares with the tradition of proverbial wisdom, Valdine Clemens also calls attention to this link between the Gothic’s emotional arousal of audiences and its potential to intellectually transform them: “Not only do Gothic stories convey admonitory, prophetic, and instructional messages, but also they perform a literary (or cinematic) type of psychosocial therapy. That is, in frightening us out of our habitual “wits,” Gothic fiction can actually shock us into using them in more viable ways” (1).

on the strategic and revolutionary tension between the familiar and the foreign; a tension that leaves some audiences feeling comfortably strange (entertained) and others, horrified by the abject familiar.

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