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Gastón Biraben's *Cautiva* (2005): An Instance of Enduring Grief

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Abstract

Despite its rather conventional representation of the relationship between acquired memories and recovered identities, Gastón Biraben's *Cautiva* (2005) draws attention to a forceful symbiosis between memory and grief. Biraben's film invites its spectators to contemplate grief as a catalyst for promoting memory, both social and individual, beyond the film's diegetic present. In a sequel of sorts to Luis Puenzo's *The Official Story* (1985), *Cautiva*'s focus on grief remains worthy of analytical attention, as it represents grief that complicates but also enables personal and communal memories of the recent past. The film, in essence, recalls a particular type of grief, portrayed as resulting from and sustained by unshared intimate memories relevant to the illegal appropriations during Argentine state terror (1976–1983). By situating the story in the mid-1990s, Biraben undergirds grief not solely as a complex emotion but also as a relentless emotional state. This article contemplates *Cautiva* as an uncomplicated cinematic portrayal of the memories that continue at once present, suspended, unshared, and, therefore, punctuated by enduring grief.

Resumen

A pesar de su representación convencional de la relación entre memorias adquiridas e identidades recuperadas, la película *Cautiva* (2005) de Gastón Biraben destaca una contundente simbiosis entre la memoria y el sufrimiento. *Cautiva* invita a sus espectadores a contemplar el sufrimiento como un catalizador para fomentar la memoria social e individual más allá del presente diegético de la película. En una especie de secuela a la película de Luis Puenzo, *La historia oficial*, el enfoque que tiene *Cautiva* en el sufrimiento merece atención analítica, ya que este sufrimiento complica al mismo tiempo que propicia memorias individuales y comunales de un pasado reciente. La película, en esencia, rememora un sufrimiento particular que es el resultado de y sustentado por las memorias íntimas de las apropiaciones ilegales durante el Terrorismo de Estado en Argentina (1976–1983). Al situar la historia a mediados de los noventa, Biraben afianza el sufrimiento no sólo como un sentimiento complejo, sino que también como un estado emocional inquebrant-

[*] I would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful feedback and comments on my article.

able. Este artículo contempla a la película *Cautiva* como un sencillo retrato cinematográfico de las memorias que siguen presentes, suspendidas, sin compartir, y por consecuencia, sufren de un dolor imperecedero.

Aesthetic representations of a violent political past – including cinematic narratives – nearly always run the risk of producing monochromatic, simplified, or reductive mnemonic artifacts.[1] In the Argentine democratic context, Elizabeth Jelin reminds us of such perils when negotiating both 'subjective perceptions and objective actions' as part of aesthetic attempts to remember traumatic pasts.[2] Such negotiations of cultural memories, as Jelin stated in a keynote address in November of 2013, are unquestionably significant when seeking to firm up our responsibilities for 'legacies and transmissions to the new generations […] as both material and symbolic markings of memory and promoters of meanings'. Jelin's references to rites of memory in the Argentine democratic context resonate strongly with what Tzvetan Todorov states in *Memory as a Remedy for Evil* (2010). According to Todorov, 'the appeals to memory as an effective cure against evil are not in short supply. The past is well preserved and commemorated' (Todorov 2010: 6). In addition to the long-standing, tenacious, and symbolic 'promoters of memory' – such as the Asociación Madres Plaza de Mayo and Asociación Civil Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, as well as their most vocal successors, Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio (H.I.J.O.S.), among other human rights entities – mnemonic vigour towards the political violence of the recent Argentine state terror (1976–1983) continues to be ubiquitous in different aesthetic productions, especially film.[3]

Repeated aesthetic returns to unforgettable or haunting events, eras or periods have been conceptualized by Astrid Erll as processes of 'remediation'. 'Remediation manifestations' are described as 'memorable events […] usually represented again and again, over decades and centuries in different media:

1 The cross- and intra-generational transmissions of trauma regarding appropriated children in Argentina have inspired boundless aesthetic productions and have produced an ever-expanding bibliography on cultural memory in Argentina and abroad, especially in the last few years. In addition to Amado 2005 and Page 2009, discussed in this essay, see David Foster's *Contemporary Argentine Cinema* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), Tamara Falicov's *The Cinematic Tango: Contemporary Argentine Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), Jens Andermann's *New Argentine Cinema* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), and Jessica Stites Mor's *Transition Cinema* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), among others.

2 Elizabeth Jelin keynote lecture on Democracy and Memory delivered on 1 November 2013 at Harvard University (see Jelin 2016).

3 The period from 1976 to 1983 is recognized as a military dictatorship. It is estimated that, under the command of generals Videla, Massera and Agosti, by 1983 in Argentina close to 30,000 individuals had disappeared as political dissidents. According to Antonius Robben, '[t]he practices of abduction, torture, and disappearance may have been originally designed as effective counterinsurgency methods but they were soon used to spread terror through Argentine society and unleash a repression extending beyond the military arena into the realms of family and self' (2005: 277). As early as 1978, the surviving families of the disappeared initiated searches for their daughters, sons, and grandchildren. The most recent reappropriation (the 120th) took place in December 2015.

in newspaper articles, photography, diaries, historiography, novels, films […] [where] the boundaries between documentary material and fictional reenactment (cf. Sturken) are often blurred' (Erll 2010: 392, 394). Remediation processes are, therefore, intrinsically linked to archives. Jacques Derrida viewed the latter in an 'aporetic' flux, thus coining the term 'archive fever' (1995: 10). For Derrida, according to Leonard Lawlor, an archive 'consists in both a fever to safeguard information within for one person and a fever to expose information to the outside for others' (1998: 797). Viewed in this way, remediation is an obsessive aesthetic devotion to preserving or fossilizing the past through cultural memory.

As a remediation of the illegal adoptions of political dissidents' offspring during Argentine state terror, Biraben's *Cautiva* is a rather straightforward appeal to memory.[4] This straightforwardness furthermore echoes through the film's plot. *Cautiva* is, above all, remarkably similar to the Oscar-winning film *The Official Story* released in 1985.[5] Yet the story of appropriation in Biraben's film is told from the point of view of the child rather than the wife of the appropriator. More precisely, it is the story of a fifteen-year-old *porteña*, whose fairly ordered academic routine at a Catholic school in Buenos Aires becomes interrupted when she learns that her identity was falsified during the 1970s. Upon learning of her biological parents' origins, lives, and disappearances, Cristina Quadri embarks on an emotional journey of negotiating both the lived and

4 Its mnemonic straightforwardness rests with, above all, the uncomplicated thematic representation of the persons with recovered identities. In accordance with this film's approach, they are expected to react to their new identities in a homogeneous and predictable way: shattered by the discovery, initially reluctant to assimilate it, but, ultimately, coming to terms with it in a reconciliatory way. Biraben's absence from the cultural milieu of Argentina during the past two decades (he has spent them mostly in Hollywood) may have contributed to such an uncomplicated approach to the latest trends in cinematographic representations of these topics. This absence does not necessarily prevent him from being in sync with cinematographic approaches to the Argentine recent past, but might have contributed to his unawareness of current debates on the politics of memory in Argentina from the local cinematographic perspectives. I am thankful to one of the reviewers for drawing my attention to the reasons for this unquestionably monochromatic element of the film.

5 *The Official Story,* one of the most known Argentine post-dictatorial films that tackles the theme of illegally adopted children, keeps the illegally adopted child (Gabby) thematically central but omits her agentic voice. *The Official Story* allegorically engages the transitional period towards democracy in Argentina through a human rights perspective in a divided and unhealed setting governed by betrayed, betraying, guilty, and emotionally bruised survivors of state terror. Unlike the adolescent protagonist in *Cautiva*, the child in Puenzo's film remains deprived of any agency or ability to self-actualize, understand or challenge the socio-political negotiations of her birth identity. At the heart of Puenzo's film rest the struggles of the infantilized adult character, Gabby's adoptive mother, as she attempts to break free from a false livelihood. Even when the spectators learn of Gabby's true identity, the child's agentic voice stays narratively marginalized, socially dormant, and ultimately ineffective. Regardless of its simplicity towards the politics of memory, Biraben's film offers an insightful approach towards grief by engaging the agency of adolescent subjectivities (Cristina-Sofía's as well as Angélica's) with acts of remembrance, commemoration, and loss. The grieving processes in the film come to life exclusively through representations of the adolescent protagonists' mnemonic engagements.

acquired memories of her past. The film thus unfolds into two largely interconnected parts. The first is a *quinceañera* celebration through which the spectator learns of the protagonist's adoptive family during the first few minutes of the film. The rest of the film predictably focuses on the protagonist's mobilized incursions into her biological parents' pasts through encounters with family members, photographs, and archives. The trope (child or adolescent subjectivity as a symbolic repository for memorial incursions into the past) has prompted critics such as Carolina Rocha, Verónica Garibotto and Ana Ros, to mention just a few, to align this film's central theme largely with those in Pablo Agüero's *Salamandra* (2008), Daniel Bustamante's *Andrés no quiere dormir la siesta* (2009), Sabrina Farji's *Eva y Lola* (2010), Paula Markovitch's *El Premio* (2011), or the TV series *Televisión por la identidad* (2007), among others.[6] Ana Amado infers that such aesthetic attempts, above all, possess 'the willingness to join traumatic remembrances with representation' (2004: 46).

Although produced within a context of aesthetic experimentation on cross- and intra-generational transmissions of the recent past – especially if we consider Albertina Carri's *Los rubios* (2003) or Luis César D'Angiolillo's *Potestad* (2002) – *Cautiva*'s central theme is not surprising given the context it portrays. In *Postmemories of Terror* (2005), Susana Kaiser underscores the torrential push of the recent past into the 1990s, viewing the latter as 'a time when the past had decisively intensified its presence in the public sphere. Local initiatives and major developments in the globalization of justice had reinvigorated the challenges to impunity' (Kaiser 2005: 8). Keeping this in mind, the context that Biraben's film captures is also a time when H.I.J.O.S. had emerged for the first time, giving an altered public voice to this particular generation. Yet what appears surprising is that *Cautiva*, released in 2005, strikes us as a film made in the mid-1990s rather than a post-*Los rubios* production.[7] *Los rubios* symbolized a shift in the way cinema has approached the recent past and the issue of generational transmission aesthetically and politically. Joanna Page insightfully remarks that '[a]ll memory in *Los rubios* is subject to intrusions and derailments' (Page 2009: 170), as if to show Carri's rejection of, in Michael Lazzara's words, 'the facile essentialization of identity' (Lazzara 2009: 154). When scrutinized against films such as *Los rubios*, *Potestad*, or even the more recent *Infancia clandestina*, *Cautiva* appears to omit (or perhaps overlook) their aesthetic shifts as well as their political implications.[8] Yet just like these experimental or politically more complex cinematic productions, Biraben's film is also endowed with the notion of unsettled memorial meanings. The latter come to life directly through the implicated socio-individual permanence of grief.

6 This list is far from exhaustive yet it includes a variety of genres, ranging from fiction-based films to TV series to documentaries. Additional films, such as David Blaustein's *Botín de guerra* (2000), Andrés Habegger's *(h)istorias cotidianas* (2000), María Inés Roqué's *Papá Iván* (2004) and Silvia Malagrino's *Burnt Oranges* (2005), should not be overlooked.

7 See note 4 of this essay.

8 I am thankful to the reviewer at the *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* for stimulating this remark.

The Persistence of Grief through Photographic Standoffs

Classic psychoanalytical theories hold that overcoming grief requires incremental, delicate and progressive undertakings, carried out, according to Freud, 'piece by piece, with an expenditure of time and energy' (1976: 243). The most basic stage of grieving implies acknowledgment of the loss, even if one remains unready to accept it. In his theoretical piece, 'Grief', Donald Gustafson views grief as 'a special case of emotion. It tends to fit the image of emotion as intellectually and practically incapacitating' (1989: 477). Gustafson goes on to clarify that grief 'is emotion most closely tied to death as a person encounters death in experience, that is, in the death of a loved other person' (1989: 477). This scholar's theorization ultimately separates grief from other similar emotions (such as 'sorrow' or 'regret') due to its direct connection to the irreplaceable loss of persons' lives. 'Grief' he further argues, 'will not be removed by the prospect of a replica; the very idea is offensive' (477). Ricoeur's and La Capra's discussions, though, remind us that grief possesses a supple side. For Ricoeur, that malleability depends on memory as 'the work of remembering [which] is the benefit of the work of mourning' (Ricoeur 2006: 72). LaCapra, moreover, views the malleability of grief as an opportunity for the person to become an effective agent. According to LaCapra, 'the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem and to distinguish between past, present and future… There may be other possibilities, but it is via working through that one acquires the possibility of being an ethical and political agent' (2001: 143–44). Ridding oneself of grief entails laborious and lengthy undertakings. Yet certain grief experiences stretch across one's past, present, and into the future, especially those stemming from utterly unresolved pasts, continuously unsettled presents, and equally threatened futures.

Biraben's film can be viewed as a fascinating example of grief that is mediated, 'replica' – revealing, and enduring. By centre-staging the well-known cases of biological identity negotiations in post-dictatorial Argentina in 2005, the film underscores grief as an encrusted, persistent, and retrospective emotion. This grief is encrusted and persistent as it symbolically and concretely endures prior to and beyond the film's diegetic present (mid-1990s) or the film's release (2005), but also beyond the spectators' present. And it is equally retrospective, for learning about such losses has been both ongoing and entirely delayed for those directly stricken by such grief since 1985. The closing captions of the film remind us of this delay straightforwardly: '[t]o date, 74 children of disappeared people have been identified. The fate of many more is still unknown. The search for them continues'. It is not surprising, then, that Biraben builds his remediation around some of the most socio-culturally recognizable elements of invented biographical origins (individual vs. collective memories, family photographs, DNA tests, and Buenos Aires as a site of contested social remembrances) to elucidate or pay homage to the complexity of such grieving processes.[9]

9 Max Page's *Memories of Buenos Aires* (2013) is worthy of consideration for its detailed and insightful tracings of the concrete, urban, and contemporary making of 'public memory'

Although *Cautiva*'s main thematic focus centres on the negotiations of recovered identity origins – represented in undoubtedly clichéd ways – it also implicitly (or even unintentionally) echoes the endurance of a specific grief that has permeated Argentine society since the end of dictatorial rule and gained more traction in the mid-1990s, a time when appropriated children became adults and started to have doubts about their family histories.

One such elucidation turns the film into a stimulating case for testing the notion of the collective memory of the family through photography, as coined by Maurice Halbwachs' *On Collective Memory* (1992). Broadly speaking, Halbwachs argues for the synergetic relationship between the emergence of collective memories and the individual's mnemonic participation. At the heart of his discussion rests the interdependence between collective memories and individual remembrances. In his view, 'the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember' (Halbwachs 1992: 48). Within this broader framework on the mutual interdependence of the individual and society for generating collective memories, the family assumes a particularly significant social role regarding remembrance processes. Halbwachs roots his explanation in material and psychological rituals the family undergoes to generate, maintain, and perpetuate its collective memory. Since Biraben's remediation centres the mnemonic dis- and re-integrations of the state terror-affected families in *Cautiva* through grief, Halbwachs' explication merits lengthy consideration: 'family recollections in fact develop […] in the consciousness of various members of the domestic group. […] Constant exchanges of impressions and opinions among family members will have reinforced the bonds, which they sometimes feel just as strongly when they try to break them' (Halbwachs 1992: 54). If the relationship between the collective and the individual is mnemonically interdependent, then the invented biographical origins of the children in Argentina test this 'base' through mnemonic postponements. Debated extensively, the notion of mnemonic postponements refers to recollections of the circumstances of birth by those in the kidnapped newborn's immediate social unit that were suspended for the sake of fostering another life narrative. The film's representation of the interruption of such life narratives confirms a multidimensional grief towards, against or beyond what has been lost more than once.

Biraben employs family photographs as significant elements of that testing. Photography functions as Biraben's most potent visual mechanism for placing the protagonist's identity, memory and present in an antagonistic standoff mode. The spectators gain access to two types of identity-related photographs in the film: those that celebrate the protagonist's *quinceañera* and her present and the others that question this present and the collective memory of her *quinceañera* family. This simple aesthetic juxtaposition invites us to contemplate the complexity of its imminent grief outcomes. In their introductory remarks to *Photography and Writing in Latin America: Double Exposures* (2006), Marcy E. Schwartz

in relation to and across Buenos Aires.

and Mary Beth Tierney-Tello explain the aesthetic, social, cultural and political role of photographs, viewing them as both catalysts for aesthetic production and defiance towards more conventional forms of visual representations. 'Whether for testimonial immediacy', these scholars argue, 'historical memory, narrative, or poetic intertextuality, photographs *encourage* verbalization' (Schwartz and Tierney-Tello 2006: 13, emphasis in the original). Photographs in *Cautiva*, though, come forth as a medium for negotiating affect-based attachments to the past, thus drawing attention to the delayed processes of grief. These affects oscillate between the emotionally invested ones (lived past) and those introduced relatively recently (discovered biological belonging).

The impact of the first photographs on the *quinceañera* guests weighs significantly on the spectator's familiarization with those who seemingly make up Cristina's intimate family structure of memory. Such memories – formed, influenced, or perpetuated – among family members echo that which Halbwachs calls the 'framework of memory' (1992: 48). Such a framework mainly holds and depends on a complex matrix of interpersonal relationships within the family, producing their own traditions, history, and memory. The images of the protagonist (from a newborn to a young woman) trigger laughs, smiles, and applauses, thus alluding to, if not confirming, an intimate base for the Quadris' 'framework' of past experiences and comfort with the present guests. These gestures imply a social conviviality, but also announce a familial bond based on a recognition of and respect for shared values both obvious and concealed: appreciation of certain common traditions (i.e. the *quinceañera*), schooling preferences (i.e. Catholic), and, as we subsequently learn, political sympathies. As the camera closes in on the protagonist's godmother, seated just behind Cristina during the slide show, the spectator hears the godmother's words ('she is already a young woman') as if sharing in her own, additionally intimate, knowledge or testimony of Cristina's past to which the spectator seemingly lacks access in this diegetic segment.

Upon viewing a photograph of the protagonist and her best friend (her godparents' daughter Susana) at the beach, both young women (Cristina and Susana) give one another spirited glances, thus confirming the captured moment as a particularly joyous, momentous, and familiar one. Although the spectator – including perhaps certain guests – remain(s) deprived of the intimate particulars that photograph might entail, it unquestionably communicates a sister-like adolescent closeness between the two young women. The guests present clap in acknowledgement and sing her birthday song together, enveloping the group in an experience of collective bonding. While successful in confirming a collective bond, each photograph also elicits a spectrum of levels of intimacy that these attendees hold individually towards the protagonist's life. Capturing these familial moments through photographs allows for an uncomplicated tracing of the seemingly grief-free environment of those who may have been directly involved in causing another family's grieved loss.

In this context, Biraben also pushes for the act of remembering the past as mostly an effortless process for the protagonist initially. Such mnemonic activi-

ties are set in motion in an accommodating mode at the outset of the film as the protagonist enjoys dancing to Johann Strauss' 'Blue Danube' waltz with her father, views a set of photo-slides of her childhood, and exchanges warm glances with her parents and family members in anticipation of a *quinceañera* cake. The protagonist's celebration, which takes less than a few initial minutes of the film, remains worthy of our concentrated attention due to the vulnerabilities her tender subjectivity undergoes with several familial experiences conveyed through photographs. Preceded by readily recognizable footage of the Argentine World Cup victory in 1978, this brief scene clearly presents a rite of passage in which those present fondly acknowledge, celebrate, and even nostalgically remember certain fragments of the protagonist's childhood. These initial minutes of the film emphasize the need to engage with photography in a perceptive way in order to avoid one-dimensional recollections of past experiences.

In thinking about perceiving photography, Roland Barthes' lyrical *Camera Lucida* (1980) immediately comes to mind. In his delicate assertions on photography, Barthes reminds us that the photograph might also be viewed as a poignant intermediary for that which existed, can move considerably, and remains absent: 'a bizarre medium, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time' (Barthes 1980: 115). Photographs might be viewed as aesthetic media that both invite – as they may also complicate – the spectator's connection with that which was photographed. Yet when isolated and without context, photographs solely function as evidential bearers of possible or hazy meanings. Context-free photographs may be viewed as potent triggers for unbound imaginative interpretations, thus displacing their potential function, in Barthes' terms, as 'extended, loaded evidence' (1980: 115). Conversely, most photographs that drive Biraben's fictitious film forward are largely context-bound and predictably function as deliberate memory triggers across three familial generations. This is particularly relevant for the photographs that capture the moments of the protagonist's biologically close yet unlived past, which, in turn, trigger the imagining of (or refusing to engage with) that which had been suspended abruptly.

Apart from zooming in on the protagonist's familial associations and kinship-inspired social belonging, *Cautiva*'s initial photo-presentation creates a dimension apt for a basic self-reflective/ mnemonic undertaking. This group's collective viewing of the chosen photographs may be perceived as an evidential possibility for the protagonist's mnemonic or self-narrative. Drawing on Halbwachs' work, Harald Welzer discusses relevant processes, which he calls 'autobiographical memory' (2010: 290). Welzer explains that such memory 'allows us not only to mark memories as our memories; it also forms the temporal feedback matrix of our self, with which we can measure where and how we have changed and where and how we have remained the same. It also offers a matrix, which allows us to coordinate the attributions, assessments, and judgments of our person that our social environment carries out almost ceaselessly' (292). This theoretical suggestion warns that a functional autobiographical memory is contingent upon

several synchronized factors. Such synchronization permits gaining 'an understanding of the self in time [that happens] through language […] [whereby] a cognitive self becomes an autobiographical I which integrates earlier and future experiences into a life story, which is simultaneously social and individual' (293). This scholar's remarks underscore the melange of past and present experiences as equally central to the creation of concrete platforms for personal memories. Viewing Cristina's initial photographs becomes, in essence, an act of weaving publicly – yet silently, as she hardly speaks during her party – her rudimentary and tender memories regarding her past in the film's diegetic present.[10] For the spectator, who enters the *quinceañera* in medias res (even if most spectators understand the film's undertones of historical symbolism) this memory is similarly rudimentary and tender, since one can only begin to imagine several basic particulars of Cristina's socio-individual self solely on the basis of a few isolated family photographs.

Such photos nonetheless produce their varied effects on the protagonist as well as the spectator. This remark brings in Dudley Andrew's discussion of the effects of photographs in *The Image in Dispute* (1997). In Andrew's discussion, each element in the photo potentially breathes significance, especially if viewed from a psychoanalytical vantage point. 'The photographic plate is', explains Andrew, 'etched with experience, like the unconscious; and like the unconscious it invites a symptomatic reading of the images that escape from it to reach the surface' (Andrew 1997: x). If we follow this theoretical suggestion, several preliminary and potentially significant suppositions come forth from the film's photo slide show. At the basic level of family, the repetitious photographs of Cristina alone or with her parents suggest that the protagonist may be an only child. Her bright content and summery images with two teen friends, one of whom is Susana, offer a glimpse into agreeable social pastimes. Although insufficient on their own – and also far from neutral – the photographs' repetitive settings and its subjects' attire signal what could be considered a middle-class family background. The final photograph, in which Cristina wears her school uniform, reveals that she attends a Catholic school. Lastly, the fifteen candles on her birthday cake not only allow her to engage in a rite of passage towards early womanhood but also indicate that she was an infant during the beginning of Argentina's recent dictatorial rule. This element not only shifts the film's focus to a drastically different 'framework of family memory' in Halbwachs' terms but also challenges the foundations of these initially displayed glimpses into the protagonist's life narrative.

In Retrospect Towards the Future: Remediation and Mnemonic Attachments

The protagonist's *quinceañera* clearly emerges as a discursive bridge between the past and the present, thus coalescing certain traits of her evolving self as well as social identity. Social identity, though, tends to depend on the acquisition of a

10 Cristina utters solely two words –'que lindo'– while viewing the photo slide show during the party.

group's collective past so that the former may establish political or social rights by claiming historical priority. Eviatar Zerubavel's and Hugo Vezzetti's works are relevant here for thinking about fostering and ultimately preserving social memories in general and in post-dictatorial Argentina in particular. In his *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (2003), Zerubavel unpacks the structural features of social memory. According to Zerubavel, 'the social meaning of past events is essentially a function of the way they are structurally positioned in our minds vis-à-vis other events' (2003: 7). Social meanings of past events therefore depend on and are formulated through their systematic and interrelational positioning with reference to other events. For Vezzetti, such mnemonic efforts are at the core of social memory. In *Sobre la violencia revolucionaria: memoria y olvidos* (2009) Vezzetti views the formation of social memory as a manifestation that cuts into the past and present simultaneously and thus confirms a shared past. According to Vezzetti, 'el fundamento social de memoria […] es lo que se construye como pasado compartido' (2009: 14). Zerubavel's discussion warns against perceiving memory either as a stringed portrayal of objective facts or as an activity that is entirely subjective. Vezzetti's perception of memory, especially social memory, as a largely impure and complex pursuit, implies the need to prevent the past, especially traumatic pasts, from being mnemonically dislocated or officially manipulated for the sake of national commitments.

When negotiating such mnemonic attachments to the past, Biraben's film continues to take a rather conventional political viewpoint. This is particularly evident in the film's tackling of identity reappropriations. These moments in the film re-enact certain legal procedures one finds in the human rights efforts by the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo or H.I.J.O.S.[11] It is not surprising, then, that the spectator witnesses a legal request Cristina receives in order to learn about her false identity in a direct and historically recognizable mode. Through the film's depiction of Judge Miguel Barrenechea, the protagonist learns the true reason for her recently conducted blood test and her true name, Sofía Lombardi. This moment is particularly significant to the initiation of personal grieving of what had been lost. The deaths for which the protagonist grieves are experienced only through imaginative and indirect experiential modes. But it is also a moment when the film fortifies its role as a clear-cut remediation in a documentary-like way:

> You are young, but not a child anymore. I am confident it is time you learned the truth. Several studies were done, and the results show conclusively that your real identity and age are different than the ones indicated on this document. Your real name is not the one you have always used. Your parents are two persons whose names you surely will not recognize, Leticia Dominich and Agustín Lombardi. Your blood matches the Lombardis and the Dominichs. (*Cautiva*, 2005)

11 The list of works related to this topic is almost infinite. Several recent studies stand out for their insightfulness and comprehensive approaches to the matter in question: Robben 2005; Forcinito 2012; Ros 2012; and Jean Franco's *Cruel Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), to mention just a few.

Critics remain divided on the film's aesthetic worthiness and political viewpoint. Garibotto repudiates the film as a suitable instance for historical examination, stating that 'the configuration of a teenage subjectivity can be the exact opposite: the basis for converting the 1970s into a static mandate that precludes further interpretation' (2011: 186). In *Representing History, Class, and Gender in Spain and Latin America: Children and Adolescents in Film* (2012), Carolina Rocha and Georgia Seminet conversely include *Cautiva* as an apt cinematic production in which adolescent subjectivity is engaged in a 'manner critical of the authoritarian past' (2012: 10). Yet the years of *Cautiva*'s making (2001 and 2002) and the year of its release (2005) coincide with a time when Argentine society was forced to face its past directly, as the Argentine Supreme Court overruled a pardon granted to members of the military juntas by former president Carlos Menem. This overruling confirmed that there were no further obstacles to reinitiating ordinary criminal judicial proceedings against members of the military responsible for violations of human rights during the state terror campaigns. While this contextual reference is unquestionably valuable, the film – with its symbolic paraphernalia of the appropriations – goes beyond the merely 'allegoric' aesthetics (Rocha and Seminet 2012), or the 'iconic' (Garibotto 2011). Both critics suggest a one-directional signification of the film: the past or its iconicity. Yet Biraben's film, perhaps unintentionally, signals a preoccupation with the unresolved future. Despite its lack of complexity towards contemporary debates on the politics of memory that its contemporary, Mariana Eva Pérez's stage play *Instrucciones para un coleccionista de mariposas* (2002), portrays head-on, *Cautiva* reticently implies that the acknowledgment of identified as well as yet to be identified losses stimulates and feeds off unfinished mourning processes.[12]

Viewing this film, in fact, reminds us of Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory* and his discussion of the 'anachronistic quality of memory' (Rothberg 2009: 5). According to Rothberg, possessing memories militantly is an impossible act. When attempted, though, such a process is never static, stationary or stable. Rothberg's lengthy explication is worthy of recalling:

> Memories are not owned by groups – nor are groups 'owned' by memories. Rather, the borders of memory and identity are jagged […]. Memory's anachronistic quality – its bringing together of now and then, here and there – is actually the source of its powerful creativity, its ability to build new worlds out of the materials of older ones. Finally, those who understand memory as a form of competition see only winners and losers in the struggle for collective articulation and recognition. But attention to memory's multidirectionality suggests a more supple social logic. (Rothberg 2009: 5)

In light of Rothberg's comment, Biraben's film appears to fall closer to the notion of 'competitive memories', as it latently communicates that ceasing to live under

12 *Instrucciones para un coleccionista de mariposas* was written for *Teatroxlaidentidad* in 2002. The play was directed by Leonor Manso and debuted in the Teatro del Pueblo in Buenos Aires in 2005. It was subsequently shown in Brussels, Madrid, Edinburgh, and Glasgow through 2011.

an imposed identity must imply remembering focused on inner conflict; must complicate forgiveness; and unquestionably must initiate certain degrees of reinscribing one's selfhood. Yet if, in Rothberg's terms, 'the borders of memory and identity are jagged' (5), then broadening one's current selfhood, based on inherited memories through objects and stories from the past, can be an equally grief-stricken process. The personal processes of grieving in this film – the protagonist's struggles before (and after) merging her inherited memories with the lived ones – leave the spectator to ponder the circumstances in which the past can potently incapacitate one's free will in one's present, even if intermittently.

Beneath this aesthetically unadventurous filmic narrative on the invented biographical origins of the children, there also rest indirect references to the public humiliation of those directly involved in conducting state terror in the 1970s. Consequently, *Cautiva* may indeed be viewed as a cinematic *escrache* of sorts.[13] With each viewing, it re-enacts a very basic act of humiliation: not only of guilty individuals for their crime but also the socio-political matrix responsible for the still largely unresolved, invented biographical origins of the appropriated children. This ongoing cinematic *escrache* exposes, to borrow Gustafson's sentiment, those who sought to cover the potential grief by latently creating adoptive families or family 'replicas'.

Photographs – but now of the protagonist's biological family – continue to be fascinating catalysts for further complicating the notion of collective memories. Yet unlike the photos that seem to catalyse a bonding experience during the *quinceañera* gathering, these new photographs are initially simple artifacts that produce confusion, familial threat and emotional fragmentation before Cristina's subjectivity. When the protagonist faces her biological parents in a photograph for the first time at the judge's office, the image triggers a physical flight into the bustling streets of Buenos Aires. The sequence of camera shots that visually map out her escape create a slight light-headedness on the spectator's part as the camera follows the protagonist rushing hastily down the curvy staircases through the courthouse's interior; heading out into a busy street; and hopping onto the first available city bus.

In this quick flight from the ordered, authority-ridden, and emotionally charged space of the judge's office to a metropolitan site mobbed by random urbanites, public transport and the mightiness of aural multi-directionality, the protagonist lives an abrupt, chaotic and disorienting experience that ultimately brims with symbolism of emotional distress. This scene in the film brings forth Diana Taylor's remark that 'photography and DNA offer radically different proofs of "presence", of course, each one making visible what is totally inaccessible to the other' (2003: 176). More specifically, running from this unsettling discovery – which appears to have smashed the core elements of her recently celebrated non-child self – into an unfamiliar corner of Buenos Aires foreshadows the

13 Conducted by activists across Latin America and Spain since 1995, *escraches* are public demonstrations aimed at exposing individuals for their crimes. These demonstrations are usually held in front of the targeted individuals' home or work places. See Kaiser 2005: 8.

inception of her existential bewilderment before an unclaimed past. This bewilderment reminds us of Ricoeur's discussion of the importance of the built-in self when remembering. 'In remembering something', states Ricoeur, 'one remembers oneself', which subsequently assures that it is in memory that the 'original tie of consciousness to the past appears to reside' (2006: 96). Viewed from this perspective, the protagonist's escape not only alludes to her emotional puzzlement but also underscores the challenges of engaging with what is presented as part of her present self because she cannot identify it in her own consciousness. These competing traits of her selfhood cause the most potent pang of grief in the protagonist. It is unsurprising, then, that the protagonist instantly seeks to return to her old present principally associated with the Quadris' home, where the possibility of the reflexivity of the self appears safer and her agency seemingly less threatened. The Quadris couple, at this point of the film, assure the protagonist's 'temporal continuity of the person' in Ricoeur's terms (2004: 96) without destroying the key traits of the relationship between the remembered past and the crumbling present.

Agentic Adolescent Inter-subjectivities and Spatial Urban Palimpsests

The protagonist's interactions with most city spaces suggest that they might be perceived as discursively mnemonic palimpsests. This is not to be understood solely in Kevin Lynch's terms of the city as a text, namely the city's anatomical concreteness as outlined in *The Image of the City* (1960), but perhaps more directly as a symbolically malleable space as suggested in Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). De Certeau claims that nearly each itinerary inevitably results in a different narration of the walked space, for the city is 'a place of transformations and appropriations, the object of various kinds of interference but also a subject that is constantly enriched by new attributes' (1984: 5). Urban walking, then, is a creative process of constructing the city, whereby the latter continuously brims with the competing discourses its urbanites express, imply or represent through their interactions with the city.

Viewed in this mode, the urban spaces of Buenos Aires in the film figure in as mnemonic palimpsests precisely as they continuously host temporary discursive inscriptions stimulated by the conflictive relationship that the protagonist's family photographs fuel between the recent past and present. These inscriptions – which are singularly intimate in de Certeau's terms – stay closely tied to the protagonist's unsettling movement across the city. Yet most urban sites she treats as a platform for her search have little in common with the officially designated spaces for commemorative national patrimony across the city. One instance, nonetheless, does bring the protagonist closer to those officially commemorative sites: like the appropriator's wife in *The Official Story*, Cristina happens upon the Madres' marches in the Plaza de Mayo yet appears visibly puzzled by their peaceful march. This quick tribute to Puenzo's film apart, the spaces the spectator visits with the protagonist are not solely the recognizable physical

realities of contemporary Buenos Aires, but are also those that host personally symbolic meanings. These are the sites where the loss becomes intensified on an intimate level and beyond the domestic sphere. Regardless of the social scale these national traumas occupy, the film reminds us that all grieving processes are also utterly private, lonely, and singular. Consequently, such territories eventually affect the reconstructions of the protagonist's progressively independent agency, ranging from a dependent teen to an unmoored urban explorer to a fully fledged griever.[14]

The protagonist's discovery of her biological identity also intensifies her interactions with the city, thus mobilizing her agency physically and discursively. At the film's outset, her mobility is starkly confined to her home, a hospital visit, and school attendances. Except for the hospital visit for a blood test, during which the protagonist remains in the company of Adela Quadri, most of these spaces (classrooms, school bathrooms, her room in the Quadris' home) are the repetitive settings of her urban routine. The first time the spectator witnesses the protagonist's direct, if unwilling, contact with the city unfolds upon her learning of the appropriation and her dramatic refusal to succumb to an imposed and authoritative demand to reconnect with the unclaimed past. Learning of her legal reappropriation, furthermore, changes the protagonist's residence from her adoptive parents' to her maternal grandmother's home. This abrupt shift of homes turns her into an urban roamer, who frequents cafés, bookshops, plazas, school premises and unidentifiable seedy sites for information on the disappearance of her parents. Apart from these spaces' normative ascriptions (spaces of leisure, work, schooling or livelihood), they also serve as investigative insertions into a suspended mnemonic life narrative of the Lombardis.

The film unfolds the materialization of such findings largely through the protagonist's urban rummages, often turning ordinary urban sites into discursively mutable and mutating territories. Such a spatial metamorphosis reminds us of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (2004), in which they discuss 'smooth and striated spaces' (2004: 479). Although these two spatial manifestations mostly coexist in a symbiotic relationship, it is a smooth space that becomes particularly relevant to the film's depiction of the city as a discursively mnemonic palimpsest in conjunction with the protagonist's agency. In these critics' theorizations, smooth spaces, due to their vibrancy, are hardly ever phlegmatic and, as such, are ridden with a potential to influence. Conceptually, a smooth space is event-bound; it is 'a space filled by events […], far more than by formed and perceived things. It is a space of affects, more than one of properties' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 479). As the fragments of the suspended past unfold via the protagonist's urban outings, each space becomes fleetingly inscribed with the mnemonic particulars of the Lombardis' fate as it does with the particulars of the Argentine tragedy in question. Nearly each visited urban site hosts – and recollects – an event crucial for Cristina-Sofía's incursions into

14 See Rocha and Seminet 2014 for more discussion on the cinematographic fascinations with children's and adolescents' ethnographies, both emancipatory as well as restrictive.

the past. With each outing into the public, the spectator is made aware that the loss intensifies as well. These recognizable methods of learning the past are part of rather non-experimental modes of filmic representation of the politics of memory in Argentina. Yet this 2005 narrative also gently implies that, regardless of the way one chooses to remember or is simply confronted with disturbing past experiences, a degree of grieving inevitably escorts such mnemonic acts.

Such incursions and urban outings are not unaided undertakings in the film. An outspoken and politically active school peer, Angélica, assumes a compass-like role in Cristina-Sofía's own excavations of her biological family's suspended memories. As the child of a disappeared father, an emblem of the H.I.J.O.S. presence, Angélica becomes Cristina-Sofía's direct and private guide in deciphering the past their parents might have shared in the 1970s. Unlike the protagonist, Angélica grew up knowing of her father's disappearance. Angélica's character therefore broadens the symbolic meaning of adolescents in the film's remediation-focused relevance to the cultural present not solely as social agents seeking to 'preserve the "unofficial memories" of horrific and violent events' (Rocha and Seminet 2012: 13) from the past but also as orphaned subjects with a complex mnemonic inheritance for the future. More specifically, one can argue that Angélica's character embodies that which Gabriel Gatti (2012) terms 'post-orphan', that is, an existential reality that expresses, in accordance with Ana Ros, the 'need of overcoming the orphan condition without ever ceasing to be an orphan' (Ros 2012: 27). Angélica's post-orphanhood, laden with defiant activism that ultimately expels her from a Catholic school, also spills beyond her personal search for the particulars of her father's disappearance, torture and death. Angélica quite straightforwardly symbolizes an advanced form of grief, as she grew up knowing of her father's demise. Marked by the dictatorship in an overt mode, Angélica essentially assists the protagonist in building a dossier on the Lombardis, largely by meeting with her across the city in search of potentially promising leads in this urban excavation.

One such excavation, which Angélica mediates, stands out in particular. Set in an indefinable urban basement, this encounter further deepens the palimpsest quality of this urban territory. Its conceptual smoothness – in Deleuze's terms – hosts, above all, a mnemonic event. Within it, Angélica and Cristina-Sofía meet a middle-aged nurse, Marta, who had worked in Hospital Olmos at the penitentiary during the military junta. This site's semi-darkness, chipped walls and an overall ambient greyness foreshadow the horrid findings the protagonist garners from Marta. Resembling the ambiance of detention centres during the dictatorship, this socially deserted space also stands in stark contrast with the rest of the urban sites the young women have frequented in the same search: cafés, bookshops and school facilities. More specifically, this site's grey walls and dim lights serve as a fleeting testimonial platform for Marta's personal and grim recollections of pregnant and imprisoned political dissidents.

In *Tiempo Pasado*, Beatriz Sarlo comments on the contested position testimonial discourses have held in Argentina. According to Sarlo, 'la confianza en los testimo-

nios de las víctimas es necesaria para la instalación de los regímenes democráticos y el arraigo de un principio de reparación y justicia' whereby such discourses 'no deberían quedar encerrados en una cristalización inabordable' (2005: 62). The moment with Marta in Biraben's filmic remediation exemplifies a form of testimonial discourse 'locked in an incontestable crystallization', as the witness's direct and descriptive narrative of the protagonist's birth spills into a recognizable historical testimony that had often led to 'the ritualized melancholy of the disappeared' (Lazzara 2009: 154). This set of chaotic and disquieting flashbacks the spectator witnesses as a visual enactment of the nurse's recollections may, on the other hand, function as a subtle confirmation that language, as Elaine Scarry noted in *The Body in Pain* (1985), often fails us in our attempts to speak of committed atrocities. The metamorphosis of the chronological contours of this space (the accounted recollections within the still unresolved diegetic present) allows us nonetheless to observe a gradual effect on the protagonist's adolescent subjectivity. Biraben opts for solidifying a subject, who is removed from the aftermath of the 1970s political turmoil, yet who must connect with, comprehend and reconcile the new findings socially as well as personally through a mediated mourning.

Mediated Grief

In *State Repression and the Labors of Memory* (2003), Jelin underscores the contention-oriented fibres that stream through nearly all memories.[15] In the last few minutes of the film, several prolonged shots bring forth this mnemonic conflict in an indirect way. In a camera-prolonged shot where Cristina-Sofía's personal photos sit on her desk merged with her biological parents' ones, the spectator witnesses the ultimate instance of terminated mnemonic postponements. The next shot overpowers the photographs by focusing on the protagonist's unaccompanied gaze towards the darkness of the city from her biological mother's home. Ros notes that mediated memories are both necessary as they are problematic, since most of what the children of the disappeared 'have are memories shared by others and photographs, but these are never sufficient, and become just another reminder of the impossible encounter' (Ros 2012: 31). The protagonist's physical separation from the united photographs exposes the remnants that underlie mnemonic postponements, leaving the spectator to ponder the unambiguous intricacies of identity with those of altered subjectivity in the face of trauma and loss. Biraben's film ultimately draws attention to an appropriated adolescent self that continues to execute self-knowing through mourning.

This process of continuous becoming, in this case through grief, is particularly captured in the final shot of the evening's starry night, which exudes incompleteness, mystery, and uncertainty, but also expectations. As an aesthetic remediation,

15 Jelin invites readers to consider that memories should always be understood as 'objects of disputes' within and around the complexity nearly all power positions usually entail (Jelin 2003: 2).

as well as a tangible cultural artifact, Biraben's film leaves its spectator in an uncomplicated contemplation regarding the ways mnemonic postponements permanently marked the restituted subjectivities' identities in fundamental, immutable and enduring ways. This is particularly true if we consider Alison Landsberg's *Prosthetic Memory* (2004). Although referring to American contemporary society, Landsberg draws attention to the power of cinema to intellectually and emotionally bridge its spectators to settings beyond their immediate, personal and lived experiences. In her words, the 'cinema had authorized and enabled people to inhabit subject positions and pasts through which they might not themselves have lived' (Landsberg 2004: 14). Biraben's rudimentary commitment appears to rest with those unidentified mourners who have yet to be – or may never be – confronted with their grief personally. The film's conventional deployment of the restituted adolescent identity in 2005, roughly twenty years after the dictatorship ended, continues to shed light emblematically on the ongoing, grief-stricken, and unfinished mnemonic socio-cultural incursions into the recent Argentine totalitarian and harrowing past, thus presenting much more than solely an aesthetic expression of an archival reality.

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