PHOTOGRAPHY AND MEMORY

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ARTICLE

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THE REPRESENTATION OF THE UNREPRESENTABLE IN GUSTAVO GERMANO'S *ABSENCES*

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Abstract

This paper intends to analyze the relationship between memory, aesthetics, and politics in Gustavo Germano *Ausencias's* (Absences) series. The text will consist of three parts.

In the first section, it is presented a brief journey from photography as a "mirror with memory" to photography as art.

The second section reviews the political power of the image during the post-dictatorship.

The third section makes a brief analysis of photography as artistic creation and memory builder, as well as its political function, through Gustavo Germano's photographic essay *Ausencias* (*Absences*).

INTRODUCTION

More than 46 years ago, Argentina experienced a violent dictatorship that has been considered a milestone in regional history. This process did not end with the disappeared, murdered, and exiles that emerged during the dictatorial process, because as the years went by, information continued to emerge. Gradually, a vast bibliography, government documents, documentaries, photographs, iconographic material, films, and testimonies came to light and provided new data. Therefore, the (re)construction of the dictatorship cannot be considered finished, we are still trying to unveil what happened in those years and above all, we are constantly redefining the impact it has had on Argentine and Latin American society.
Thus, little by little, the symbolic weight (to the point of mythification) assigned to such a process has been accentuated, considering it as part of "our history" as a fragment of a past that constitutes and identifies us, where social memories containing representations of the dictatorship are constantly being shaped.
These memories do not only imply transporting part of that past to the present (not to mention that the resignifications of the past materialize in the present) but also entail future expectations.

Keywords

photography
memory
disappeared
Argentina

In the context of the transition to democracy, some photographs were recovered by Víctor Basterra[1], who was the last detainee-disappeared released. During his captivity, he recovered negatives that testified to the clandestine detention, the perpetrators, and the marks of torture of some of the disappeared (Figure 1), images that represent the abyss of representation, of political and symbolic representation: of representation as the general way in which the modern is established as "the epoch of the image of the world" (García, 2009).

Photographs in this context functioned not only as a support to imagine the unimaginable and/or the untestimoniable as Didi-Huberman (2008) puts it in his criticism of other authors who bet on the unspeakable. These photographs function in this sense, not only as an image that allows us to go beyond itself, but also as a symbol that contains multiple representations.

Figure 1. Victor Basterra Report (Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales - CELS)

CONSIDERATIONS OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND PHOTOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

It is almost evident that photography is not only a chemical process of image fixation. It is, above all, a social product that, when observed properly, can reveal structures of meaning, values, hierarchies, and cultural models (Suárez, 2007), consequently, it can be analyzed not only from its testimonial dimension – as a record of the event – but also from its uses.

The first dimension assumes that the photograph shows a specific object or situation, that is, it presumes "what is really seen" (of course only in the temporal and geographical space photographed). This type of photographic analysis seeks in the image a "testimony" that shows us what it *was*[2]: the *spectrum*[3] (Barthes, 1981), which is what is photographed.

The second possible dimension of analysis focuses on a visual analysis of the messages that require analytical reading, followed by the interpretation of the visual language, comparing the images with all kinds of written and unwritten documentation (Castillo, 2004), since the context in which the photograph is inserted gives us much more information about it; for example, in which newspaper, magazine, exhibition or museum the image is shown, with which written elements, captions or articles on the side with small plates that guide the interpretation of the photographs in a certain direction etc.

From the above, we can elucidate that the analysis of the photographs can offer us a sample of some event, a memory of something that for some circumstance was thought to deserve to be remembered, and an interpretation of the reality that later appeared fixed. This aspect is very important in the photographs that we propose to analyze since the actors who use them are playing with this testimonial role of the image of the dictatorship, with the veracity of what is portrayed and with the impact of a supposed irrefutable proof.

1. Victor Melchor Basterra was kidnapped along with his wife and daughter and taken to the ESMA, where he remained as a detainee-disappeared for more than four years, from 1979 until 1983 weeks before the beginning of the democratic transition, however, he remained under surveillance until 1984. He was a graphic designer and Peronist activist. During his captivity in ESMA, he was forced to forge documents (passports, identity cards, weapons licenses) for officers and people close to the Military Forces. During his captivity, he made copies of copies of the photos and documents requested, and hid them in a box of photosensitive paper, as he discovered that every time they searched the place, they did not open the boxes for fear of veiling and rendering the photographic paper useless.
    Finally, when they began to give out the exit signs, he began to take out the material, first hiding photos between the testicles and the penis. Then he took the courage to take out several of them, taped to his ribs or legs with adhesive tape. When he arrived home, he hid them in a hole in a wall and told a colleague who had already been released about it in case he was "transferred" at some point.
    See: https://proyectoidis.org/victor-basterra/

2. This should not be confused with the veracity of the meaning of what is shown in the photograph, since images can be biased, however, it is an indication of the existence of something. I take these theoretical principles from Hugo José Suárez, (Suárez, 2007, p. 448).

3. That is to say, the photograph labelled with a word that "retains, through its root, a relation to "spectacle" and adds to it that something terrible is in every photograph: the return of the dead." (Barthes, 1981, p.9).

However, as Alberto del Castillo rightly states – concerning photojournalism in the case of the student movement in Mexico, and which can be applied to other regions and subsequent periods – the attitude of the photographer is not innocent, the reproductions he makes are not incidental, on the contrary, they contain a visual strategy that has to do with the social, cultural, and political environment to which he belongs.

Such a strategy is not the exclusive work of photographers but must be understood from the tension generated between the author of the image and the place and space it occupies within the corresponding journalistic publication, which gives it a specific ideological orientation, among other things, from the caption (Castillo, 2004).

That is to say – resorting to Angenot (2010), in each society, the accumulation of signs and models (discursive memory) produced in the past for previous states of the social order, produce the dominance of certain semiotic facts that overdetermine (condition) what can be enunciated and deprive of means of enunciation the unthinkable "not yet said".

Thus, if we understand that photography has two messages, one without code (reality) and the other with code – the content and meaning of the image (Barthes, 1981), where denotation is the analysis that concerns the first type of message, it is the closeness to reality, objectivity, the fidelity of the image, taking the information in the photo as a faithful reflection of reality -inventing places, objects, characters, etc. (Suárez, 2007) – and then, the connotative and semiotic analysis (from visual and linguistic anthropology) that belongs to the second type of message, that is, messages that are read and understood by a particular collective.

Therefore, we can see that the photographs of the dictatorship, both those owned by the official newspapers, as well as those of the newspapers and magazines critical of the government, the books that contain these images in their pages, and the Memorial, were published with the clear message of the dictatorship; they published them with the clear message of making the population notice something about the dictatorship, highlighting certain points and integrating them within a narrative that marks a path of interpretation, with the intention of molding in their favor the social memories regarding the social mobilization from a discursive hegemony, where the set of 'repertoires' and the rules and topology of 'statuses' that confer to these discursive entities positions of influence and prestige, procure them styles, forms, micro-narratives, and arguments that contribute to their acceptability, that is, to a regulatory system that predetermines the production of concrete discursive forms (Angenot, 2010).

REPRESENTING THE UNREPRESENTABLE

As a consequence of the dictatorial experience, various strategies of artistic resistance emerged in the public space, trying to dislocate the discourse of authoritarianism through the creation of new aesthetic proposals, which showed the urgency of re-politicizing art, that is, to sharpen the insurgent cut of forms and concepts that sought to undermine the social and cultural representations of the authoritarian discourse (Richard, 2007).

After the transition to democracy, a close relationship was consolidated between images and socio-cultural processes around the recovery of the recent past. In this emergence, photography emerged as a support for the narration of the violent processes in the region and photographic essays began to be developed from the images of some of the disappeared. These essays generated multiple questions about representation and the ways of constructing a visual memory, playing not only with the construction of history but also with autobiographical and identity narratives, for from where to look at and think about these photos? What to do with them?

In this sense, the new artistic production tried to counterpose a poetic contest to the militarized structure of the city, because the dictatorship transformed the space into a guarded territory where the traffic of everyday life was emptied of meaning, retreating into zones of silence and invisibility. In the face of this symbolic emptying, the irruption of diverse artistic practices was not only configured as an expansion or overflow of conventional supports but essentially as a way of re-symbolizing the space of the social and contending with the unequivocal and unshakeable meanings of the dictatorial order. But is it possible to represent the unrepresentable? Is it possible for the materiality of the images to return a little of the absence of the bodies?

ABSENCES

In post-dictatorship Argentina, and a few years after the foundation, in 1995, of the organization H.I.J.O.S. (Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio), a series of cultural products created by descendants of the disappeared and their generational contemporaries began to emerge in the artistic, literary, and cinematographic spheres. These projects have made it possible to represent and reread a history that – in many cases – had been veiled from them. Within the framework of these productions, several works emerged that addressed not only the need to search for those who disappeared during the dictatorship but also questioned the emptiness of absence and its symbolic significance in order to reconstruct the present. Photographer Gustavo Germano, whose brother was arrested and disappeared in 1976, generated a photographic essay entitled *Absences*, where he seeks to make visible, from old and new photographs, the gaps caused by the disappearance of people [Figure 2].

The narrative that Germano intends to make through photographs, bursts into the studies of memory and the representation of violence that have abused the condition of impossibility, as Rancière (2003) warns when he mentions that there is:

> "L'usage inflationniste de la notion d'irreprésentable et de la constellation des notions voisines: l'imprésentable, l'impensable, l'intraitable, l'irrachetable. Cet usage inflationniste fait en effet tomber sous un même concept et entoure d'une même aura de terreur sacrée toutes sortes de phénomènes, de processus et de notions, qui vont de l'interdit mosaïque de la représentation à la Shoah, en passant par le sublime kantien, la scène primitive freudienne, le Grand Verre de Duchamp ou le Carré blanc sur fond blanc de Malevitch." (Rancière, 2003)

Germano's work with photographs starts from the visual construction of memory, he uses photography as a narrative or a trace of what is no longer and still (Richard, 2000), which determines materiality and a presence, since its corporeality testifies the trace of a being that is not only past and otherness, not only a "having been", but still an insistence on becoming. The use of photography in this essay is important since it refers to something that really existed, something that has been (Barthes, 1981). Perhaps from Barthes' point of view, the punctum of this essay lies not only in that arrow that comes out of the image, without having sought it, to hurt and shock us but in the coexistence between the impossibility of time and desire.
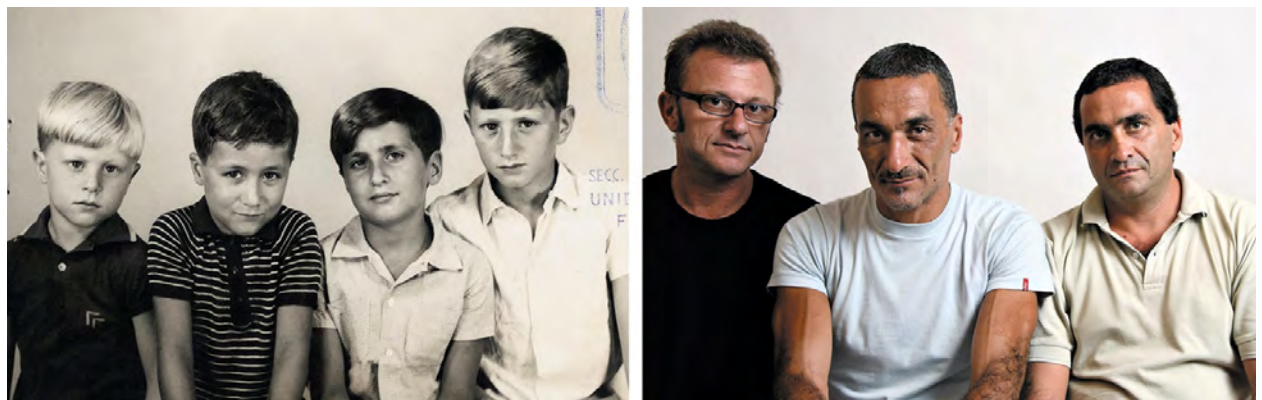

Figure 2. Germano brothers[4]. (Gustavo Germano Archive).

Ausencias consists of a series of fifteen pairs of photographs that present different images referring to the disappeared detainees of the province of Entre Ríos. The first [old] photograph in each pair was taken from family albums. The second image [the new one] is a reconstruction of the first one more than thirty years later. The scenarios are repeated, the actors, perhaps the gestures, but in each of the photos, there is someone missing, that is, the actors now coexist with the empty space of someone who is not there. The past and present are violently opposed, emotionally and sensitively, as they are aware of the absence of empty space.

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4.   In the picture [top]: Gustavo Germano, Guillermo Germano, Diego Germano, Eduardo Germano. In the picture [below]: Gustavo Germano, Guillermo Germano, Diego Germano.

Figure 3. "La Tortuga Alegre" Río Uruguay, Entre Ríos[5]. (Gustavo Germano Archive).
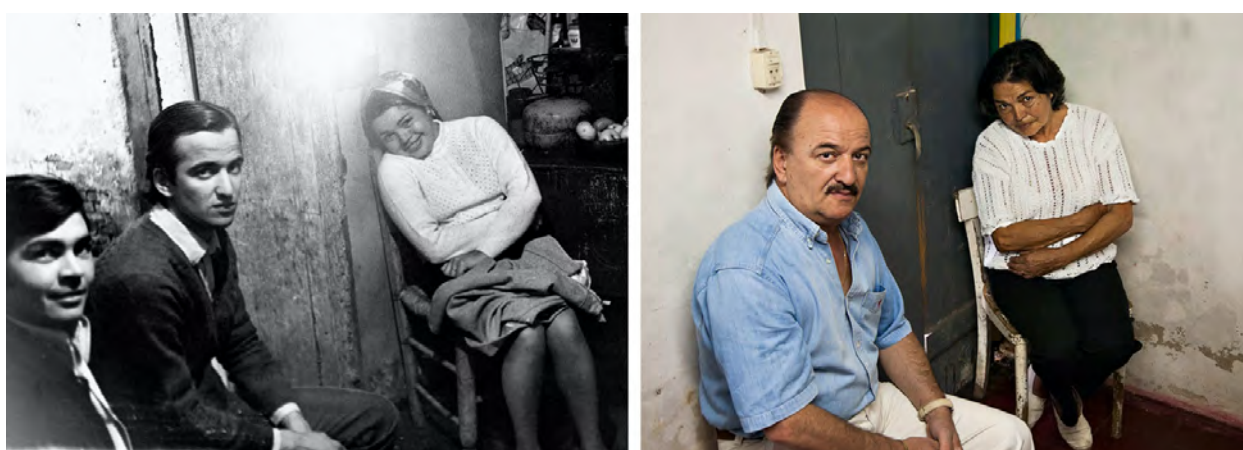

Figure 4. Snapshot by Roberto Ismael Sorba[6]. (Gustavo Germano Archive)

Under each of the first photos, Germano indicates the year it was taken and the names of those who appear in the images, in the second ones a dot is what refers to the disappearance (Figures 3 and 4).

Finally, returning to the question that led us to rethink the photographic essay *Absences*, is it possible to represent the unrepresentable? It is perhaps from this reflection that we can clarify that the visual narration of what happened during the last Argentine dictatorship is neither in the realm of the decipherable nor in the unspeakable, neither in the representable nor in the unrepresentable, but always in the gap that separates them, and that keeps them together in that separation (García, 2009).

Perhaps the path lies in pointing out, as Didi-Huberman enunciated, that images inexorably have a powerful capacity to dis-cover the real.

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5.   En la foto [arriba]: Orlando René Méndez y Leticia Margarita Oliva. En la foto [abajo]: [La playa]

6.   In the picture [top]: Roberto Ismael Sorba, Jorge Cresta, Azucena Sorba. In the picture [below]: Jorge Cresta, Azucena Sorba. Roberto Ismael was born on October 12, 1949, in Chiqueros District, Nogoyá (Entre Ríos). In his childhood, due to the economic situation of the family (his mother was a widow with nine children), he had to work in a kiosk and take care of an elderly couple. He attended high school as a commercial expert, standing out for his ability, intelligence, and responsibility. A handsome young man, when he was a child, he was called "El Lindo", and later he was nicknamed "Pilunchi". In 1968 he moved to Santa Fe to enter the university and study Chemical Engineering. It is in this city where he starts to join the Partido Revolucionario de los trabajadores-Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (PRT-ERP). He is married and has two children. He is kidnapped on January 21, 1976, at 4.265 Hernandarias Street in the city of Santa Fe. The snapshot is taken by Roberto Ismael himself - a great amateur photographer- with the automatic shutter of his camera, which he places on top of the refrigerator in the house. He is accompanied by his childhood friend Jorge Cresta and his sister Azucena Sorba. In March 2009, Roberto Ismael is still detained and disappeared.
See: Room card of the Ausencias exhibition. Available at: http://conti.derhuman.jus.gov.ar/2010/09/f_ausencias.pdf

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