

## Luz y Memoria / The Illumination of Memory

*Alberto Gomez*

I never met my father because they kidnapped him several days before I was born. But you are helping me to know him. I am reminded here of a song that has always made me think a lot and that I would like to sing ... when we don't remember what has happened to us then the same things happen again. It is these things that marginalize us, that murder our memory, burn our ideas, steal our words. ... if history is written by those who have won, then this means there must be another history, a true history that those who want to hear will hear. They can extinguish our words, they silence us, but the voice of the people will always be heard. To murder the people is of no avail, for in death lies the proof that life exists.

—Alejandra Manzur (19 years old). Transcription from a public memorial for her father who was murdered by torture during the “Dirty War” in Argentina. Recorded in Rosario, Argentina, 1995.<sup>1</sup>

Cloning is thus the last stage in the history of the modelling of the body—the stage at which the individual, having been reduced to his abstract and genetic formula, is destined for serial propagation. It is worth recalling in this context what Walter Benjamin had to say about the work of art in the age of its mechanical reproduction. What is lost when a work is massively reproduced is the work's aura, its unique here-and-now quality, its aesthetic form; at the same time the work fated to reproduction in this manner assumes a political form, according to Benjamin.

—Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, 1993.<sup>2</sup>

**I**n Baudrillard's interpretation of the cloned body there emerges one more variation on the theme of the individual stripped of his or her identity. As a variation on a theme, it plays in ideological harmony with the dominant discourse that late capitalism has established in relationship to the individual body: a discourse formed by the technological and scientific perspective of the industrial centre that many progressive intellectuals have helped to mould through their postmodern analyses and positions. In the reorientation of the body as the objective material of cloning and genetics, what withers away is not only the uniqueness of the individual, but the relationship of the body to a history of collective experience and remembrance.

In contrast to the way in which the body of industrial capitalism is theorized and redesigned for serial propagation, the body of the periphery remains imbued with an aura of individual and social identity. The peripheral body is that which has not been absorbed into an Enlightenment project to chart a scientific passage from darkness and barbarity to light and progress. It is the site of the unfinished project of colonization; it remains to be conquered or sacrificed. While contemporary theorists such as Baudrillard contemplate the conceptual “disappearance” of the individual body through the scientific advances of genetics, those who have witnessed the literal “disappearance” of bodies struggle to reclaim its corporeal and metaphysical specificity. Through their efforts to bring to light the identities of the missing bodies, they call into question the ways in which the scientific and theoretical paradigms of the centre have cast into darkness a memory of social and political resistance.

During the recent political confrontation in Argentina of the Dirty War (1976-1983), the military junta developed, in advance of their coup d'état of March 24, 1976, a Doctrine of War: The General Order of Battle. In this doctrine, they contemplated the physical elimination of the enemy through the practical method of “disappearing” the bodies of their opponents. They did so with the clear determination to annihilate any opposition within the population and to destroy any identification with the popular forces that the military had decided to wage battle against. This method of repression not only affected the militants and sympathizers of the revolutionary organizations that had begun to operate in Argentina after 1968 (of which the two most powerful were the Marxist People's Revolutionary Army and the left wing Peronist Montoneros), but the population as a whole. By “disappearing” the bodies of their rivals, the military sought to obtain immediate political objectives that were well defined: for example, seeding terror throughout the society, paralyzing the opposition in order to prevent any type of future resistance. At the same time, the Doctrine of War permitted the military to reimplement their political and economic project of neoliberalism that they perceived as threatened by the labour unrest and progressive political forces of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In applying a methodology of the kidnapping, torture and disappearance, the Argentinean military was not unique. The Nazi regime of Hitler was one of the first to implement the method of disappearing the opponent. In his testimony given at the Nuremberg Trials, Field Marshall Wilhelm Keitel, Chief of the German High Command described how the process of repression in the occupied territories involved the secret transportation to Germany of prisoners who were not to be immediately executed. Outlined in the *Nacht und Nebel Erlass* (Night and Fog Decree) issued by Hitler on December 7, 1941, this process was based on the rationale that “efficient intimidation can only

be achieved by either capital punishment or by measures by which the relatives of the criminal and the population do not know his fate.”<sup>3</sup> According to Keitel, the method had a deterrent effect because “a) prisoners will vanish without a trace; b) no information may be given as to the whereabouts of their fate.”<sup>4</sup>

While the Nazis, and the Argentinean military that followed them, conceived of their macabre tactic in scientific terms of efficiency and deterrence, its effect was also dependent upon the cultural and subjective dimensions of how the body is mourned and remembered. Beyond spiritual and religious beliefs about whether death is clothed in darkness or light, whether it is a pathway to another plane of existence or a doorway back to life—there lies with the burial of the body the idea to preserve it from oblivion. If to intern the body is to guard against forgetfulness, then does its disappearance signify the intent to eradicate the collective memory that the body represents? A body without identification and without history is nothing more than scientifically analyzable and quantifiable chemical elements. The body as only a body has no metaphysical value. What gives the body meaning before and after death is the history that it carries within it, and fundamentally the memory of it that rests with the living. A body as a corpse entombed in the ground may vanish into dust and become indistinguishable from the earth that envelops it, but those who are living remember it as it was before death, and thus rescue it from oblivion.

Through the act of remembrance, the presence of the body is affirmed; in its absence, a space is opened for theoretical speculation and historical revision. At the industrial centre, the formation of postmodern theory emphasizes the separation of the body and memory, objective science and subjective remembrance. As part of a dominant discourse that negates the intertwining of collective and individual experience, this separation of the body from how it is remembered creates a cybernetic interpretation of social forces in which ideological opposition (as opposed to ideological duplication) and collective struggle (as opposed to the isolation of terrorism) is obscured. By severing the bond between the body and the memory of the living the process of abstraction as history occurs.

In the case of the political conflict of Argentina’s Dirty War and the “disappeared,” Frank Graziano’s interpretation of the psychoanalytical and psychological dimensions of the military’s methodology has become a key reference for subsequent discussion amongst intellectuals about the *desaparecidos* of Argentina. In his book, *Divine Violence*, Graziano (applying Lacan and Foucault) argues that the uses of torture and disappearances by the military regime were sacrificial in origin and manifestations of Christian thought. For Graziano, the *desaparecidos* were sacrificed to service the belief that their absence restored the presence of Western and Christian civilization.” Accordingly, “one disappearance thus replaced the fear of another.”<sup>5</sup> Continuing and complicating this semiotic reasoning,

Graziano compares the contemporary sacrifice of the “disappeared” with Aztec rituals. Citing Yotolt Gonzalez Torres’ analysis of sacrifice as one of the most extreme forms of exploitation in which “through ritual murder of a human being, diverse benefits, which ultimately fell back upon the state, were pursued,” Graziano concludes that

Predominant among the benefits of ritualized murder in “dirty war” Argentina as much in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica were material gains (spoils of war, tribute, slaves) and, more importantly, the “spoils” of abstract commodities — power, legitimacy, hegemony, apotheosis. These abstract commodities ascended purified from bloody spectacle to the politico-religious leaders as its direct beneficiaries, providing them ‘the vital force they thought necessary to carry out their work.’ The more the Junta sacrificed, the more it was empowered to sacrifice, the ritual perpetuated not only itself but also its numinous authors.<sup>6</sup>

Through his affirmation of the religious nature of military atrocity, Graziano removes the bodies of the “disappeared” from the context of a political conflict and elides the use of torture as a scientific technique and disappearance as a method of counterrevolutionary warfare. Resituating the absent body and the use of torture on a religious-spiritual plane, Graziano serves to reinforce a dominant ideology that locates in political confrontation of the periphery, one darkness meeting another darkness. By tracing the genealogy of “disappearance” to medieval Christianity and the “barbarity” of Aztec ritual murder, he dissociates the military’s tactics from an Enlightenment legacy of science and progress and separates himself as a Western-trained academic from the violence of the periphery. Yet, in his transformation of military confrontation into a religious psychopathology, he echoes the reactionary intellectuals of Argentina who ascribe to the Dirty War “*la teoria de los dos demonios*” or “the theory of the two evils” that equated the violence of the guerrillas with that of the military regime. For these intellectuals, the terror that the military unleashed on society (which included the kidnapping, torture, mutilation, and rape of not only militants, but of sympathizers, students, workers, and, in general, women and children) was a necessary and unavoidable response to the violence of guerrilla struggle.

While Graziano’s semiotic discourse equates torture with human sacrifice and a Christian mission to punish the body for its sins, there is a much simpler and more brutal explanation for the military’s actions during the Dirty War. The use of torture and disappearance by the Argentinean military, like the Nazi Germans before them, originated in the tactical objective to obtain information about the enemy and to avoid providing the enemy any counter-information about military activities. Torture and disappearance as a cruel and scientifically refined technique (if in fact there exists in the

field of war a technique that is not cruel) of intelligence gathering had been applied by previous armies in a more individual and selective manner. In the hands of the Argentine military, it developed into a massive and widespread terrorist practice. According to the testimony of an Argentinean torturer about the period of the Dirty War, the High Command “thought that the war would be won by killing a generation of Argentines.”<sup>7</sup>



This same torturer affirmed that the wide-spread use of torture was a rapid and efficient form of securing information, and that the practice of disappearing bodies was part of the same tactic. In his testimony, he rhetorically asks why torture would be deployed if it was not for its efficacy in extracting information in less than three hours—the amount of time he claimed he was allotted for each interrogation. While his claim that prisoners were only detained for three hours is false — many of the prisoners were sequestered for years and thousands never appeared again — his answer to his own rhetorical question reveals a chilling and crude tactical logic. He states that:

There was no sense in holding a prisoner for more than three hours in order to make him talk. After that period of time, the organization he or she belonged to would be alerted to his/her absence, emergency measures would be enacted, and the cell to which the prisoner belonged would be frozen. After three hours, the cell (the secret political-military base structure of the urban guerrilla) would know that the missing member was either dead, detained or collaborating with us. We never released the bodies of prisoners. If we did so, the guerrilla organization would be able to reorganize the cell and reactivate the structure. But if they did not know whether the missing person was dead or was working in collaboration with us, then they had no other option than to dismantle the cell that depended on the presence of this person.<sup>8</sup>

From the mouth of a torturer comes a pitiless exposition of how torture and disappearance are used in the armed struggles of the periphery, an exposition that contradicts the sophisticated analyses of the centre. While academic theoreticians such as Graziano enwrap the bodies of the disappeared in semiotic layers and elevate tactical strategy to a religious plane, the torturer reminds us of the crude and materialist context in which



the use of torture and disappearance is conceived and executed. From the decolonization wars fought in Algeria and Vietnam to Argentina's Dirty War, totalitarian armies have scientifically designed and refined a methodology to defeat the liberation armies that opposed them. As a pedagogy of fear and terror deployed by authoritarian and repressive governments, the use of torture and disappearance as a calculated response to specific conjunctions of social forces

and political conflict has existed for thousands of years. Many religions—Christian or not—have been used to ideologically mask and to justify social and political repression. In our continent, this justification had its inauguration in the sixteenth century. Disappearance is an old form of conquest. Intolerance of the other results in annihilation. And so unfolded the extermination of peoples, languages, nature. In the context of the colonization of the Americas, the sacrificial rituals of the Aztecs have no relationship to torture, nor with disappearance as a strategy of annihilation. Between discourse and action, between writing about and living an historical moment, there lies a vast ground for dissimulation. For Graziano, sacrificial ritual and a messianic Christianity explains the atrocities of the Dirty War. A Catholic priest from the city of Rosario who collaborated with the military had a much different version. For him, “without torture, there is no information.”<sup>9</sup>

In both the Nazi decree of *Nacht und Nebel* and in the General Order of Battle of the Argentinean military, the political objectives were the same: the annihilation of the enemy. Their actions demonstrated this and the declarations of the Argentinean torturer confirm it. They believed that with their triumph history would demand of them no explanation. The Nazis had a thousand-year plan to secure their place in history; the Argentinean military didn't even want to limit their triumph to any specific date. But what neither the Nazis nor the Argentine military accounted for in their battle plans and methodology of repression was the capacity of the people to resist attempts to subjugate them. While the military could make the bodies of their opponents disappear, traces of these bodies' memory were left behind with the families and the society to

which they belonged. The families of the disappeared in Argentina had no political training or experience, and thus were not perceived as a threat by the military. What they did have was a great determination to illuminate the fate (*suerte corrida*) of their loved ones, to cast light on a military tactic that took place under the cover of darkness.

From the obscurity of their grief, mothers and grandmothers began to search for their missing children. In their quest to recuperate the memory of those who disappeared, they did not limit the goal of their search to a recognition by society of their personal plight and the whereabouts of absent bodies. They also demanded of history an acknowledgment of what happened, and that those responsible for atrocities of torture and murder be brought to public light and justice. Truly “professional” investigators, they transformed their private search for the individual body of their son or daughter, grandson or granddaughter, into a social and collective task. Notwithstanding the obstacles placed in their path, they struggled against the indignity of society’s indifference and the opposition of the military, establishing over the years their own archives where the information collected about the disappeared was organized and preserved.

The grandmothers of the children who were kidnapped by the military or who had disappeared along with their parents were conscious of their limitations, and of the little time they had left to live. Once they too were dead, who could identify the bodies? And so they crossed over the emotional frontier from subjective remembrance to objective science in their quest to preserve their children and grandchildren from oblivion. Through their persistent efforts they convinced a group of scientists to work with them in developing the technology to establish a DNA information bank for the missing children called the “Indice de Abuelidad” (Grandmother’s Index). In their insistence to explore all the possible ways to recuperate the memory of the disappeared, the intangibility of love and the quantifiability of science became inextricable.

As Maria Isabel de Mariani, one of the grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo explained in her own words:

During this era (1979) I bought two or three newspapers each day. One morning I was reading *El Dia de La Plata* when I found a brief report, no more than five lines, that announced that something had been discovered, a component of the blood specific to the genetic makeup of an individual that enabled the identification of a person without needing to use the actual blood of the parents. I cut out this small report and saved it inside my diary. The report did not explain how such a process worked, nor even where the discovery had been made. Yet it spoke to me of a utopian possibility: it said to me “it could be permitted.”

During this time I always carried with me a few hairs from my granddaughter and several baby milk teeth from my son that I had saved as childhood memorabilia. I took them to Amnesty International in London but they told me they were of no use. Yet I was convinced that there had to be some way to identify a person with these things. When I had read the report it was as if the sky had opened up. A few months later in 1980, we made our first extensive journey outside the country. In each place we visited we asked: doesn't there exist an element of the blood that can be used to identify a person? We asked when we stayed at the University of Upsala in Sweden, and also at the Piedad Hospital in Paris, whose director found our questions very strange and eccentric. We began to call doctor after doctor. They had no idea what element of the blood we were talking about. In the end, we were left without any hope. And after all this, I lost my diary with the newspaper report from *El Dia de La Plata* in an airplane.

Finally, we saw a doctor in New York who had invented blood changes for babies who were HR Negative, and we told him about what we were looking for. He replied that he thought it would be possible to develop a formula for an analysis, if we could give him several months to work on it. After this meeting, we went to Washington to visit the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Some time later, they contacted us to tell us that they had been working together with the doctor from New York on the question of DNA analysis, that it was feasible, and that they were planning an international symposium to discuss their findings. This was in 1983. We asked if we could participate in the symposium, and they replied: "Of course you are going to participate as it is to you we owe this discovery." At the symposium, we established what we called the *Indice de Abuelidad*, and so was born the DNA testing that permitted us to identify our disappeared grandchildren.<sup>10</sup>

From the science of genetics, the same science that has advanced cloning and cast a shadow upon the uniqueness of the human condition, the grandmothers of the disappeared found a way to identify their missing children and grandchildren. Faced with the legacy of a military repression that sought to reduce the body to a clinical anonymity, and thus reproduce a cycle of terror, they searched for a way to affirm the existence of those the military sought to destroy, and thus to vindicate the history of collective struggle for which they had died. Bringing to the arena of science their personal grief and their quest for social justice, they transformed Baudrillard's pessimistic theory of genetic engineering as the source of individual annihilation into a social tool of remembrance and of resistance.

For Walter Benjamin, the duplication or mass-reproduction of an image or object assumes a political form. For the grandmothers of the disappeared, the political form of industrial and scientific reproduction is inseparable from the personal and public func-





tion of memory. In their hands, the abstract formula of DNA or the ephemerality of a photograph is made concrete through its use-value as a tool for the reclamation of identity. Laura Bonaparte, one of the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (*linea fundadora*), tells of how “little by little we incorporated photographs of our missing family members in our demonstrations rather than using blank silhouettes of their faces. In these photos I began to discover many things. I saw how my children looked at me. I was happy to see



a smile on the face of my daughter. I began to rediscover them.”<sup>11</sup> In their relentless pursuit for information about their missing children — whether through genetics or documents or photographs — the families of the disappeared never lost sight of the pain and emotion from which their search originated. “For many years,” recounts Laura Bonaparte, “I left the door of the house open in case my children came home, and I always prepared a lot of food, thinking that they would be hungry when they arrived.”<sup>12</sup>

Genetics can prove the origin of an individual body; the photograph can fix in time a specific moment of the past. Yet it is in the struggle to remember and to reclaim the social and political dimension of identity that meaning is given to the material traces of human existence. Those who have survived the military dictatorship in Argentina are able to speak about what happened, yet the official history of the “Dirty War” is being

written by others as a confrontation of “two evils.” The families of the disappeared struggle to recuperate the memory of the disappeared, yet the absent bodies of their children become the object of semiotic analyses. In the theory of darkness meeting darkness in the periphery, the possibility of light is banished. Memory interrupts this darkness, but it alone cannot illuminate the past. It is in the determination of those who fall outside of “official” history to tell their stories of missing bodies that another history is heard; it is in their persistence to use all the avenues available to them to identify the disappeared — to transform the dark side of genetics as cloning into a strategy for shedding light on the murder of their loved ones — that another history is revealed.

In conjoining memory and science to give presence to absent bodies, the families of the disappeared open a space for a vindication of the political struggle that engulfed Argentina during the 1970s and 1980s. Through the establishment of archives and DNA banks, in their testimonies and their remembering, they call into question the theory of the “*dos demonios*”— of darkness clashing with darkness; they demand of society a recognition of the ideological and class dimensions of the confrontation between two different political projects during the “Dirty War”; they illuminate the aspirations and idealism for a different future that the Argentinean military sought to vanquish when they decided that a generation of Argentineans had to disappear.

Translated by Dot Tuer

## Notes

1. Carlos del Frade, *Desaparecidos Desocupados* (Rosario, Argentina: Ediciones Fantacia Industrial II, 1996), 291-292.
2. Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of the Evil* (London & New York: Verso, 1993), 118.
3. William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 958.
4. *ibid.*, 959.
5. Frank Graziano, *Divine Violence: Spectacle, Psychosexuality and Radical Christianity in the Argentine “Dirty War”* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1992), 196.
6. *ibid.*, 196.
7. Andrea Rodriguez, *Nacidos en la Sombra* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1996), 108.
8. *ibid.*, 108.
9. Carlos del Frade, *Desaparecidos Desocupados* (Rosario, Argentina: Ediciones Fantacia Industrial II, 1996), 147.
10. Andrea Rodriguez, *Nacidos en la Sombra* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1996), 138-39.
11. Laura Bonaparte, *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, Linea Fundadora. In conversation with the author, 1995.
12. In conversation with the author, 1995.