

**Cinema and Recent Past in Argentina:  
Representations of Illegal Detention Centers**

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**Introduction**

In Argentina, the last military dictatorship ruled between 1976 and 1983. Since the return of democracy in December of 1983, a variety of means have—to a large extent—made it possible to unravel and represent the horror endured during the years of the so-called “National Reorganization Process.” The aim of this presentation is to address the different discourse strategies used in motion pictures representing the kidnapping, torture, and forced disappearance of persons during the last military dictatorship. To this end, I have selected Argentine films that, having been produced in different decades, allow me to trace an historical evolution in the treatment of this topic. These films portray the adaptation to life in illegal detention centers in different ways.

From an analytical perspective, my starting point in each chapter is a “memory cycle”, a concept I shall often resort to, since it defines the different socio-historical periods in post-dictatorship Argentina.

### **Cycle of establishing the Truth and Starting Actions to Remember the *Desaparecidos***

One of the most emblematic films during the transition to democracy was *La historia oficial* (*The Official Story*) by Luis Puenzo. It was premiered on 3 April, 1985, while arrangements were being completed for the trial against the military *juntas*. The film soon became one of the most popular motion pictures in the history of Argentine cinema. *The Official Story* covers several key themes of Argentina's recent past: e.g., exile and return, the main characters' realization of what had happened during the "Dirty War," her encounter with the "Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo," and the acceptance that a systematic plan to abduct babies had actually existed. The movie features the period prior to the dictatorship's downfall, showcasing the participation of social and institutional players that supported the political, economic, and social system during the years of State Terror.

The theory of the "innocent victims"—implied in *The Official Story* through a guiltless society—becomes explicit in *La noche de los lápices* (*Night of the Pencils*, 1986.) Premiered ten years after the students' disappearance in 1976, the film presents abject situations that had never been shown before, remaining off screen. In *Night of the Pencils*, torture and the inside of an IDC appear on screen for the first time in Argentina.

The story line in *Night of the Pencils* is clear: seven high-school students from La Plata City take part in demonstrations demanding student bus tickets to travel with reduced fares. The conflict starts to develop on the night of September 16<sup>th</sup>, 1976, when a squad kidnaps and tortures six of the young students. From then on, they become *desaparecidos*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From the implementation of forced disappearances by the self-proclaimed National Reorganization Process onwards, the word *desaparecidos* defines the victims of State terrorism in Argentina of whom all traces have been lost.

Pablo Diaz (the only survivor) is kidnapped days later. Throughout the film, prisoner Pablo Diaz's point of view leads the narrative.

In the same fashion as *The Official Story*, *Night of the Pencils* opens with a shot of a secondary school, “topical in Argentine films portraying the last military dictatorship.” From the beginning, the director shows the teenagers playing games, making jokes at each other, and trying to win the hearts of the girls they like, showcasing the adolescents’ “innocence.” The film builds a crescendo through the protagonists’ daily life—the audience can thus increasingly identify with the character during its construction. Both *The Official Story* and *Night of the Pencils* contributed to and imposed the strategy promoted by the government—i.e., supporting the “theory of the two demons” and the “theory of the innocent victims”.

### **Cycle of Family and Victims’ Reparation and Fertilization of Memory (1995-2002)**

Politically speaking, the 1990’s were in consonance with Carlos Menem’s neoliberal tendencies since 1989—namely, *reconciliación* and pardon. It could be said that, where Alfonsín’s government had implemented a policy of memory, Menem’s promoted a policy of oblivion.

After several years during which fiction did not address the topic of the dictatorship, Marco Bechis’s *Garage Olimpo* (1999) was released. Bechis’s own experience as a prisoner disappeared from civil life poses an entirely new perspective as compared to the typical motion pictures of the transition to democracy. His film became a turning point from the typical productions of the time: avoiding “low blows,” it resorts to the story of an

individual to depict how an illegal detention centers works. Despite its considerable international impact, the film did not attract attention in Argentina, where “less than 30,000 people saw it”, going nearly unnoticed in theaters.

*Garage Olimpo* revolves around two stories: the first one is Ana’s, a militant in a guerrilla organization. We only learn about her present—she succeeds in her attempt to plant a bomb in a friend’s house in order to kill her father—and, towards the end, we discover that the target of that bomb had been “el Tigre”, a military repressor in charge of the illegal detention centers called “El Olimpo.”<sup>2</sup> The second narrative focus is the love-hate relationship between María and Félix—the victim and her torturer. María is an 18-year-old militant who teaches how to read and write to the inhabitants of the suburbs of Buenos Aires. She lives in an old big house with her mother, and the two women rent out some free rooms. Félix is one of their lodgers. María and Félix meet again at the illegal detention centers, with entirely different roles—she is a victim and he is her torturer. From then on, their contradictory and unequal relationship becomes the center of the film.

Bechis point, illustrated along several sequencies, is the routine within the IDC. He does not portray repressors as monsters or sadistic people but as normal, family men who, after torturing, play ping-pong, or listen to music. This can be related to Hannah Arendt’s interview with Adolf Eichmann, lieutenant colonel at the SS, published under the title *Eichmann in Jerusalem - A Report on the Banality of Evil*, where she focuses on the executioner’s role rather than the victim’s. Her critical work involved an attempt to

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<sup>2</sup> El *Olimpo* was a garage used as an IDC between 1978 and 1979. On the West of Buenos Aires province, it is believed that around six hundred prisoners spent time in there, and about fifty survived (Calveiro 2008:21). Ludicrous as it may seem, the *Olimpo* was thus named because, according to its top managers, it was “the gods’ place” (op. cit., 53).

understand the *modus operandum* of a repressor, a torturer who resorts to “due obedience” to justify his actions. *Garage Olimpo* clearly exemplifies the so-called banality of evil. From a cinematographic viewpoint, the film opens with a long take showing repressors clocking in and out of work, like civil servants do. Thus, man makes use of the ills of bureaucracy to enslave, dominate and subjugate others.

In Bechis’s film, violence is always off screen, but it can be perceived through sound by the yells of the tortured, the noise of the *picana* (a prod designed for torture) and the crying of children. From a metaphorical perspective, violence is revealed through the detail shot of lights going on and off during the use of *picanas*. *Garage Olimpo* takes nothing for granted, addressing issues that had been absent in the cinema of Argentina—namely the “death flights,” the victim-abuser relationship, the illegal appropriation of victims’ assets by the repressors, the presence of children inside IDCs, the quarrels among the death squads, the *patotas*<sup>3</sup> “work”, and the torturers as bureaucrats who clock their way in and out of the illegal detention centers.

### **Cycle of Memory Stabilization (2003-2010)**

Despite Argentina’s dramatic economic situation in 2001 and 2002—20 years after the return of democracy—, in 2003 the largest audiovisual production featuring the recent past, both documentary and fictional, is released. Since President Kirchner’s coming to power in 2003, several strategies were set into motion, recovering the government’s interest in the events of the “Dirty War.” In this context, and 30 years after the coup,

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<sup>3</sup> “*Patota*” was the popular name of the death squads in charge of following, kidnapping, and transferring the *desaparecidos*.

Adrian Caetano's *Cronica de una fuga* (*Chronicle of an Escape*, 2006) was premiered. It narrates Claudio Tamburrini's experience since his detention to the day he and three other prisoners manage to escape the IDC "Mansión Seré"<sup>4</sup>. *Chronicle of an Escape* begins with a squad's search for Tamburrini, followed by his abduction and subsequent torture. We are later shown his adaptation to daily life in the Illegal detention centers; the story closes with his escape. Using a handheld camera and constant high- and low-angle shots, Caetano maintains tension throughout the film, resorting to different genres' techniques—from horror's to suspense's to action film's. The *chronicle* begins when an intelligence group breaks into Claudio's mother's house to abduct him. When Claudio arrives home, the *patota* kidnaps and takes him to *Mansión Seré*. Once he is there, he meets the prisoners who will later escape with him. *Chronicle of an Escape*, like *Garage Olimpo* but unlike *Night of the Pencils*, does not show torture visually. In order to achieve this the off-screen technique, both visual and aural, has been chosen.

The film is narrated through the succession of days, from Claudio's arrival to day 121, when the escape actually takes place. The prisoner have only one day left to live. They have no plan, just a chance both extremely simple and complex: they must wait for the change of guard, pick up a bolt with which they will attempt to open the window, and descend using tied sheets. The bolt will then be their instrument for freedom. After the escape, Caetano uses the technique of the "film-based-on-a-true-story" to narrate the aftermath of the characters' life.

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<sup>4</sup> The former IDC known as *Mansión Seré* or *Atila* operated between 1977 and 1978 in Morón, in the province of Buenos Aires. On March 24, 1978—on the second anniversary of the military *coup*—four prisoners and former *desaparecidos* managed to escape the *Mansión Seré*. A few days later, the *Mansión* was blown up. Before this, the remaining prisoners were transferred to other IDCs.

## Conclusions

Each of the films we have dealt with distinctively addresses the representation of horror. In *Night of the pencils*, the youths' political activism is denied in consonance with the role attributed to the victims of State Terrorism during the transition to democracy, when the model of thought consisting of "the two demons" and "the innocent victims" is constructed.

Unlike *Night of the Pencils*, *Garage Olimpo* has no didactic purpose, building its narrative from the militants' actions. If Bechis' film has a purpose, it is to reveal how an IDC works, not to prove its victims' innocence.

*Chronicle of an Escape* differs from *Night of the Pencils* in that militant activism is not denied—actually, at least two of the prisoners who flee with Claudio are militants. In each of the films representing an IDC, the idea of constant surveillance and punishment is conveyed through the poetics of each director. Olivera puts forward the figure of a survivor, an innocent prisoner who is released; Bechis shows two escape attempts from an IDC, both failed; while Caetano tells the story of four youths who manage to escape and once out, see how nothing has changed and life still goes on.

We could say that the selected films, which look into Argentina's recent past, are somehow a "testimony of their time (since) each period in History constructs its own particular modes of representation", enunciating multiple discourse strategies that, generally speaking, do not escape the policies of their time.