

**HAUNTED HOMES AND DESERT LANDSCAPES: THE SITES OF MEMORY
IN LATIN AMERICAN POSTDICTATORSHIP FICTION**

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Resumo: Como se representam na arte e na literatura contemporânea a terrível memória das ditaduras militares? Como tratam a literatura e a arte a confluência entre a memória particular e a memória pública do autoritarismo, entre o trauma individual e o nacional? E finalmente, como reconciliam, ou reconhecem, a narrativa e as artes plásticas as diferentes versões do passado? Este ensaio primeiro examinará brevemente as representações da brutalidade dos regimes autoritários latino americanos nas artes plásticas. Vai-se abordar como artistas tais como Iván Navarro (Chile), Fernando Traverso (Argentina), Cildo Meirelles (Brasil) e Luis Camnitzer (Uruguai) trabalham com objetos do dia a dia para abordar questões ligadas à opressão e à memória. Esta análise será seguida pela leitura de dois romances recentes, um brasileiro, *Prova contrária* (2005), de Fernando Bonassi e outro chileno *El desierto* (2003), de Carlos Franz, que recuperam os fios que ligam a história (ou seja, a lembrança pública) com a memória (ou seja, a lembrança pessoal); o passado ao presente.

Palavras chave: Ditaduras militares, repressão, memória, literatura, artes plásticas.

Abstract: How do contemporary Latin American authors and artists represent the harrowing memory of the military dictatorships? How does art and literature account for the confluence of private and public memory of authoritarianism, between individual and national trauma? And finally, how do narrative and pictorial discourses reconcile – or at least acknowledge – the diverging accounts of the past? This essay first briefly examines representations of the brutality of Latin America’s authoritarian regimes in the plastic arts. It will consider how artists such as Iván Navarro (Chile), Fernando Traverso (Argentina), Cildo Meirelles (Brazil) and Luis Camnitzer (Uruguay) work with everyday objects to broach the issues of oppression and recollection. This discussion will then segue into an analysis of two recent novels, one from Brazil, Fernando Bonassi’s *Prova contrária* (2005) and another from Chile, Carlos Franz’s *El desierto* (2003), that recover the threads that associate history (i.e. public recollection) to memory (this is, private remembrance); the past to the present.

Keywords: Military dictatorship, repression, memory, literature, plastic arts.

In the fall of 2007, the art museum Site Santa Fe, in Santa Fe (New Mexico, United States) hosted an exhibition on the victims of the military dictatorships in Latin America. The exposition, “Los desaparecidos/The disappeared” was organized by the North Dakota Museum of Art and curated by Laurel Reuter (<http://www.ndmoa.com/pastex/disappeared/index.html>). As its title suggests, the show focused on those people who were vanished during Latin America’s repressive regimes in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. “Los

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desaparecidos” evidences the ongoing aesthetic and political preoccupation with the memory and the trauma of dictatorship and its multiple violent legacies in Latin America.² The artists featured in the show display a concern not only with the remembrance of various totalitarian regimes but also with the contemporary socio-political and cultural legacies of said governments. This same interest is also manifest in recent cinematic output³ and in the fictional creations of Latin American authors such as Carlos Franz (Chile) and Fernando Bonassi (Brazil). Many of these literary, filmic and pictorial artifacts work at countering the dictatorships’ accounts of history that are predominately constructed in terms of what historian Steve J. Stern calls “memory as salvation” (Stern, 2006), as well as the mnemonic silence of the neoliberal context prevalent in the postdictatorship/s. As a result, these writers, filmmakers and artists portray the past as a traumatic event, a page riddled with the forced muteness and the absent or tortured bodies of the military’s victims. In this framework, many artistic works dealing with the anguish of the totalitarian experience employ silence as metaphor of dictatorial violence. Speechlessness becomes a cipher for both censorship and for language’s inability to express the horrors imposed by authoritarian governments.

But how do authors and artists represent the harrowing memory of totalitarianism without trivializing or making a spectacle out of it? How does art and literature account for the confluence of private and public memories, how does it approach the linkage between individual and national wounds? And finally, how do narrative and pictorial discourses reconcile – or at least acknowledge – the diverging accounts of the past? These are the questions that continue to trouble artists, writers, filmmakers and critics alike when dealing with such seemingly unspeakable atrocities such as genocide and torture.

In this essay I will first briefly examine representations of the brutality of dictatorship in the plastic arts. I will focus on how artists such as Iván Navarro (Chile), Fernando Traverso (Argentina), Cildo Meirelles (Brazil) and Luis Camintzer (Uruguay) work with everyday objects to broach the issues of oppression and recollection. This analysis will then segue into a discussion of two recent novels, one from Brazil and another from Chile, that recover the threads that associate history (i.e. public anamnesis) to memory (this is, private remembrance); the past to the present, the private to the public. In both aesthetic modalities (i.e. the plastic arts and fiction), one observes how artists

² One only needs to think of the recent decision by Italian prosecutors to arrest 140 people implicated in the *Operación Condor* (BBC 12/24/2007).

³ For example in Cao Hamburger’s *O ano em que meus pais saíram de férias* (2006), in Lúcia Murat’s *Quase dois irmãos* (2004), and the Argentine features *Los rubios* by Albertina Carri (2003) and *Crónica de una fuga* (2006) by Israel Adrián Caetano.

and writers privilege metaphor and allegory. As suggested by Idelber Avelar, the use of the symbolic conveys the ambivalence of the post-dictatorial era and the non-redemptive quality of the narratives that ensued in the aftermath of authoritarian trauma while also posing resistance to the dominant episteme of the postdictatorship. Avelar maintains that literary allegory is a privileged expression of discourses dealing with mourning and loss because:

What cannot be replaced, what lingers on as a residue of memory, is precisely the allegorical charged ruin – hence the contention that mourning suspends exchange value to posit a third dimension, irreducible to use and exchange, and not contemplated by Marx’s opposition: that of *memory value*, a paradoxical kind of value, to be sure, because what is most proper to it is to resist any exchange. It is due to that insistence of memory, of the survival of the past as a ruin in the present, that mourning displays a necessarily allegorical structure. (Avelar, 1999, p. 5)

When I visited the “Los desaparecidos” exhibit, the pieces that predominantly caught my attention were the ones that allegorized (rather than explicitly portrayed) coercion and anguish, linking the brutality of oppression to the everyday, to routine objects such as lounge chairs (Navarro), bicycles (Traverso) or Coca-Cola bottles (Meireles). The artists’ use of domestic or personal items to approach national trauma, links individual retrospection, embodied by such articles, to the public arena and to collective remembrance. Similarly, in recent Latin American fictional context, one observes a focus on the personal dimension of historical trauma. Individual stories of sorrow serve as points of departure for a reflection of the violence impinged onto the individual and the national corpus.

Furthermore, expressing the violence of the totalitarian governments through daily objects evidences how repression saturated daily life during the military regimes, seeping into the crevices of society, permeating the individual subject and leading to a normalization of the “state of exemption” that permitted disappearances, torture and thousands of deaths. By calling attention to the insidious presence of such violence, artists as for example the Chilean Iván Navarro (born 1972), rescue the disappeared from the forced oblivion that the normalization of coercion entailed. His neon sculptures of seemingly innocuous objects such as *Maletín* (2004) literally and symbolically illuminate the rule of death practiced by the Chilean military after 1973. *Maletín*, a neon sculpture in the form of a briefcase that contains neon tubes engraved with the names of four of the Chilean dictatorships’ victims: the Chilean ex-Ambassador Orlando Letelier and his co-worked Ronni Moffit assassinated in Washington DC in 1976 by DINA agents, and the names of two American journalists, Charles Horman and Frank Teruggi, who were killed by the Chilean military in the days following

the 1973 coup. The glowing tubes insert, or rather, re-insert their presences via their absent bodies into the consciousness of the viewer as the briefcase utilized belonged to one of the four victims whose name appear in the piece. This personal object, a signifier of daily routine and hence of the private sphere and of individual remembrance, extrapolates the personal ambit and is transformed into a phantasmagoric memento, a token of collective memory by the anonymous tubes that glow inside it. Their assemblage of neon pieces evokes the haunting presence of the dead whose names are written on the tubes, but also of other victim's of Chile's authoritarian violence. In juxtaposing these names inside a valise, an accessory that also represents transit/travel, Navarro signals towards the broad reach of the military's repression, expending as it did beyond national frontiers.⁴

Likewise, Navarro's piece *Joy Divison* (2004) unveils beneath its apparent ordinariness, a socio-ideological structure that implicated Chilean political and military men with the doctrine of Nazism. *Joy Division*, is also composed of bright pink neon tubes, juxtaposed to form a swastika upon which a glass table top is placed, creating the shape of a coffee table. The piece's title is an ironic inversion of the suffering inflicted by the Pinochet administration. Irony is also at play in the disparity between the domesticity of the coffee table, its triviality and its intimations of sociability and the message that emanates from the neon lights. Routine and comfort implicit in such a furniture object are contradicted in light of the glowing neon structure that sustains it and transforms it into a menacing article. *Joy Division* also signals towards the invasion of the private sphere – an a priori protected/protective terrain – by not only the ideological menace of authoritarianism, but also by the physical threat of the dictatorship.

The banality of the everyday object also acquires new meaning in the work of the Argentine artist Fernando Traverso (born 1951). Traverso was part of the resistance movement in his native Rosario until he was forced into exile. After the re-democratization, Traverso returned to Rosario and began his “intervention” to reclaim the memory of disappeared fellow activists and of other people vanished by the military junta. He spray-painted three hundred and fifty life-sized bicycles on the city's walls and on silk banners, symbolizing the missing citizens of Rosario and his *compañeros* respectively. Similar to Navarro, Traverso works with metaphor to transmit the trauma of loss. The bicycle was the preferred transportation medium for members of the resistance and as people disappeared, their bicycles would appear abandoned on the

⁴ *Maletín* thus also alludes to the *Operación Cóndor* implemented in 1975 by the chief of the DINA, Manuel Contreras.

streets of Rosario. Traverso’s bikes represent both absence and presence: the absence of the material subject and the presence of her or his memory. As aesthetic artifacts, two-dimensional paintings, they cannot but point to the insufficiency of art in the face of lived horror. At the same time, the images – and, in this case, their ubiquity and parallel unobtrusiveness – also suggest art’s mnemonic value. In the series “Intervención urbana calles de la ciudad de Rosario” (2001), the lightness and deceitful playfulness of the everyday item masks the pain and the remembrance of violence that marks the history of the city and the nation. “Interventions” advances dynamic memory work by inducing the viewer to firstly see the painted items (as they are so to speak “camouflaged” within the urban landscape) and secondly by inviting her or him to decipher the meaning behind the illustrations by digging into the city’s traumatic past.

Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles (born 1948) also utilized aesthetic intervention as a subversive tactic, a mode of interrogating the dictatorship and its economic and ideological underpinnings. In the 1970s, he appropriated the symbols of capitalist power and North American socio-cultural dominance: bank notes and Coca-Cola bottles respectively, to elucidate the connection between material interests, political violence and cultural imperialism. In his venture: “Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Coca-Cola Project” (1970), Meireles re-signified the soft-drink by silk-screening empty Coca-Cola bottles with the inscription “Yankee Go Home.” On other containers, he printed guidelines on how to prepare a Molotov cocktail. He then sent the bottles back to the Coca-Cola plant to be refilled. Only when the bottles were full, did the embossed texts become entirely visible. Meireles works with a caustic form of parody, appropriating a popular symbol of North-American interventionism to, on the one hand, transform it into the means of its own subversion and, on the other hand, to hint at the connivance between Brazil’s dictatorship and the Nixon administration.⁵ At the same time, by rendering his undermining texts temporarily invisible, Meireles was able to circumvent censorship at the height of the AI-5. Another of Meireles’ interventions occurred in 1975, after the assassination of journalist Vladimir Herzog while he was in detention. Meireles stamped the question “Quem matou Herzog?” on money bills and introduced them into circulation thus contradicting the dictatorship’s official account of the

⁵ The connections between Brazil’s military dictatorship and the North American government are highlighted in a recent *New York Times* article that deals with the discussion between the Brazilian government and Richard Nixon’s administration in which the former was requested by the latter to aid in staging a coup to depose the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende and of Cuba’s leader, Fidel Castro (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/17/world/americas/17chile.html>).

journalist's death.⁶ The question confronts the reader, probably engaged in routine transactions and rituals of expenditure, to pause and reflect on what is obliterated from the public's purview, or what the public decides to ignore in order to maintain a semblance of normalcy in the face of brutal repression.

While the vehicles of Meireles' interventions are part of the domestic, everyday economy, his communiqués belie the subtlety of the means. In their directness, the messages signal the urgency of the historical moment. Between 1968 and 1975 the dictatorship heightened its persecution of oppositional figures or those perceived to be opposed to the regime. Political awareness was blunted by incarceration, torture, murder, and disappearance. In this framework, the straightforwardness of the statements counteracts the prevailing silence.⁷

Remembrance as an interpretative act is at the heart of the Uruguayan artist, Luis Camnitzer's (born 1937) montages. Centering in general on utilitarian objects such as beds, a piece of paper, or a glass bottle and accompanied by short, almost poetic sentences, the images do not reveal their full content until the observer assembles the puzzle of pictorial and textual narrative.⁸ Describing the suite “From the Uruguayan Torture Series” (1983), a sequence of thirty-five etchings, Camnitzer underlines the dialogic nature of his art, explaining that

most of the [prints] are not overtly about violence. Instead I try to produce a situation in which neither the image nor the text reveals too much. Only when they are seen together does something happen. ... The image and the text are relatively trivial and meaningless in themselves. Once they click together an insight occurs about violence. That configuration is not just about being tortured, in empathy with the victim, but also with the torturer and oneself as accomplice (Camnitzer, 2006, p. 82).

⁶ The official version was that he committed suicide. This account was implicitly contradicted by the chief rabbi of São Paulo's main synagogue, Henri Sorel. Sorel buried Herzog in the heart of the Jewish cemetery, rather than in a corner, as corresponds to suicides.

⁷ Meireles' recent productions are more nuanced, playing with the public's perception of reality. His installation, “Strictu” (1999) alludes to two diametrically opposed empirical and figurative contexts. On the one hand, the arrangement can be read as a scene of intimacy, a dinner table awaiting familial interaction or perhaps a cozy tête-a-tête. On the other hand, the setting connotes an interrogation desk, the disruption of privacy, indeed of individuality. If in the first instance the low light suggests closeness; then the second interpretative possibility alludes to the distance between victim and victimizer, as the latter is stripped of her/his humanity by the former. Low lightning in this context insinuates a threatening secrecy, intimating spaces of torture and of brutal removal. “Strictu” works with the ambivalence of interpretation, corresponding to the conceptualization of memory as a “box” (Stern, 2007) that might contain many meanings.

⁸ An approach used also by German artists Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock in their “An Art in Public Space Project” dealing with the remembrance of the Holocaust in Schöneberg, Berlin (1993).

Whereas separately image and written discourses might allow the observer to remain detached, the hermeneutic proceeding forecloses innocence. We are, so to speak, “tainted” by the photoengravings, becoming simultaneously witnesses – and hence accomplices – and targets of the aggression depicted in the imprints. Camnitzer seduces us into remembering the terror of torture by confronting us with both its banality (encompassed in the use of ordinary artifacts) and its pervasiveness during the military regime. Similar to Navarro, the daily objects portrayed by Camnitzer are emptied of their quotidian, familiar and often even comforting connotations by their positioning vis-à-vis the text that accompanies the photoengraving. Thus for example in “Temía la sed,” a glass of water is transformed from a symbol of comfort into a metaphor of torturous deprivation, connoting the thirst felt by political detainees after being tormented with electroshocks and the general denial of basic human rights to political prisoners.

What is common to all the artistic works I have discussed thus far is the use of ordinary items to generate metaphors about violence. These images uncover the disruption of regularity (democratic but also of the accepted norms of basic human rights), while instituting a coercive criterion, a perversion of normality. By eluding the obvious, artists such as Navarro, Traverso, Meirelles and Camnitzer reflect on the difficulty of dealing with trauma utilizing media that inevitably adulterate the experience of pain by establishing distance or aestheticizing suffering. In addition, metaphor (or, in some cases, allegory), in its obliqueness, also speaks of the, at times, forced amnesia that accompanied the transition to democracy in some Latin American countries. For the transitional administrations in Brazil and Chile, forgetting (or pretending to) was part of the deal struck between the new democracies and the outgoing military regimes.

Paradigmatic is Chile where the amnesty law of 1978 was largely respected by Patricio Aylwin’s coalition government. Similar to Chile, in 1979, the Brazilian government also passed an amnesty law pardoning both those accused of political crimes and the general military and security personnel that worked for the repression (Koonings, 1999, p. 210). This law was largely honored by the transitional government of José Sarney (himself a member of military’s political party, ARENA). Kees Koonings observes that the transitional process in Brazil (from the mid 1970s to the late 1980s) was marked by “political institutions [that] were adapted to democratic rules and procedures on a step-by-step basis. The main social and political actors who had been involved in the politics of authoritarianism remained in the centre of power after 1985...” (Koonings, 1999, p. 197). Restoration of civilian and political liberties

was accompanied by the ongoing (and threatening) military presence that preempted substantive memory work. Hence in Chile, Pinochet remained the Commander-in-Chief until 1998, and in Brazil the government of José Sarney had six ministers from military ranks.⁹

Oblivion, partial, complete, coerced or voluntary furthermore allowed the continuance of economic and social policies initiated by the totalitarian regimes (Breshanan, 2003). As a result, political change was not necessarily complemented by socio-economic transformation. The consequences of fiscal policies, specifically, the implementation of a market-oriented dictum during many of the Southern Cone’s military administrations continued (and in certain aspects, continues) to haunt the countries of the region well into the 1990s.

The prolongation between past and present forms of oppression/suppression; between previous and contemporary modes of socio-economic exclusion and the importance and simultaneous complexity of memory work in this framework are recurring themes in various recent Southern Cone novels that deal with the dictatorship and the transitions to democracy. Literary critic Idelber Avelar postulates that the “literature produced in the aftermath of the recent Latin American dictatorships... confronts not only the need to come to terms with the past but also to define its position in the new present ushered in by the military regimes: a global market in which every corner of social life has been commodified” (Avelar, 1999, p. 1). In the Chilean context, authors such as Alejandra Costamagna (2002), Ramón Díaz Eterovic (2005) and Carlos Franz trace the nation’s contemporary socio-economic and cultural landscape to the period between 1973 and 1989. Brazilian fiction has also dealt with the experience of the dictatorship by connecting present-day personal and public grief and inequality with past brutality as for example in the works of Cristovão Tezza (1987), Luis Fernando Veríssimo (2004), and Fernando Bonassi.

Fernando Bonassi’s novel *Prova contrária* (2003) takes as its point of departure Law number 9.140 (approved in 1995 by president Itamar Franco). This decree “reconhece como mortas as pessoas desaparecidas em razão de participação, ou acusação de participação em atividades políticas, no período

⁹ Kees Koonings observes that Brazil’s first democratic government since 1960 was, so to speak, under military surveillance. Koonings maintains that “Despite the restoration of civilian rule in 1985, powerful mechanisms for the political influence of the military wielded what has been commonly called ‘tutelary power.’ Throughout the Sarney administration, the armed forces exerted pressure on the civilian government, through their presence and policy-setting role within the government, and through public or private manifestations and threats. The military maintained at least six top-level officers as ministers within the government (army, navy air force, intelligence, joint chiefs of staff, military house), and they interfered with a number of political issues, among which were the land reform and labor issues” (Koonings, 199, p. 212).

de 2 de setembro de 1961 a 15 de agosto de 1979.” According to law 9.140, the relatives of the vanished are to be financially compensated for their loss. The disappeared body thus attains a symbolic materiality, being translated into an economic figure. Having been erased by a government that favored the free market, the dead ironically regained visibility through their “exchange” value, thus unwittingly entering the cycle of commodification. Nonetheless, while the violence of the past was “compensated” materially, the price to be paid is the obstruction of official memory work. Even though Law number 9.140 implicitly recognizes the state’s authoritarian abuses, it does not “prevê a investigação das circunstâncias em que ocorreram, nem a identificação dos autores dessas arbitrariedades.”

Prova contrária revolves around one of the reparation’s beneficiaries, “a mulher,” who is the partner of a disappeared political activist. The monetary compensation allows her to buy an apartment, a symbolic terrain of both recollection and necessary forgetting. On the day of the move, the woman receives a visit from her (presumably) vanished spouse. It is unclear if the man’s presence is material or imaginary, whether the couple’s dialogues occur in the present or whether they are the product of reminiscences that spill forth from the opened and unopened moving boxes, which, tellingly are labeled “fragile.” Indeed, in the midst of the pandemonium of the move, “Tudo parece frágil” (Bonassi, p. 13). Memory, in *Prova contrária* is attached to the daily objects of the home, to the lists of things that surround the woman and give shape to her existence. In contrast to the domestic objects, time is fluid, organized in layers (“em camadas” [Bonassi, p. 13]) that interact. Accordingly, the woman is accustomed to the fact that “o presente e o passado se misturam” (Bonassi, p. 18). What is more unusual however is that, “se perca o limite entre ambos” (Bonassi, p. 18). This fine line is ruptured when she sees her companion standing at the door. His (perhaps ghostly) presence confronts the woman with the unburied, unmourned remnants of past brutalities as well as her complicity with the obviation of this violent past.

Mourning, which implies “active forgetting,” this is, coming to terms with bereavement and, through this process, working through grief, is obstructed by the denial of loss, emblemized by the lacking body of the dead. For Martine Déotte, the funeral rites are an integral part of mourning and when these rituals are forestalled because of the absence of the object that intend to celebrate – the body of the deceased, mourning itself is impeded. Déotte asserts that “Los funerales prescindien difícilmente del cuerpo, que sirve de punto de apoyo a diferentes prácticas: maternación, aseo, velorio, cortejo y exequias. Su ausencia trae una duda interminable en cuanto a la realidad de la muerte y la

imposibilidad del rito funerario que debe canalizar el trabajo del duelo en el sentido de Freud” (Déotte, 2000, p. 94). Unable to mourn, to perform the last rites and attain a measure of closure, the woman’s domestic space and her quotidian existence are invaded by the traces of the disappeared. He is a lack that infuses the small details of her routine: “Quando eu me deitava, me lembrava de você...Quando eu suava, me lembrava de você...Quando congelava comida, eu lembrava de você. Quando passava roupas, quando matava o tempo, eu lembrava de você...Quando lembrava de você, alguma coisa tinha acontecido...” (Bonassi, p. 93). The absence of a body and, consequently, of material and psychological certainty regarding the man’s death, transforms her partner into a specter of sorts who returns at the moment of a new disappearance, as the woman is about to accept his non-existence, to forget “passively” (Avelar, 1999, p.1) instead of mourning actively. His vanishing, denied by the despotic system, only becomes real through its inscription on his death certificate and through the home that this document buys. The woman acknowledges her acceptance not only of her partner’s death, but also of the reigning socio-political episteme that dictates the commodification of bereavement and by extension, of memory conceding that “Se não fosse atestada tua morte, eu jamais compraria esta casa” (Bonassi, p. 61). If during the dictatorship his presence was obliterated due to political persecution and enforced silence; then in the contemporary moment, his memento becomes compromised by the economic logic that impedes punishment for those responsible for past atrocities.

To forget passively is, as Idelber Avelar suggests, an imperative of the late capitalist order. Avelar contends that, on the one hand, the neoliberal state necessitates such oblivion in order to erase the brutality of its inception. On the other hand, the market, in its hunger for sellable novelties, favors the perpetual present. Diachronic memory and historiography become obsolete in the face of “compulsive substitution” (Avelar, 1999, p. 21). Comparable to the dictatorship, when remembering the dead and disappeared was tantamount to defying the imposed silence/oblivion of the regime and its official historiography (one needs to think only of the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*), remembrance, in the postdictatorial period, is synonymous with resistance, this time to the dominion of consumerist amnesia.

By appearing on the woman’s doorstep, the man preempts forgetting. Indeed he endangers the prevalence of the material over the mnemonic and the disassociation between the current moment and the past. His (albeit uncertain) presence, similarly to the apartment, serves as a nexus that binds the violence of the military to the contemporary violence of official oblivion and to the socio-

economic legacy of the authoritarian regime: neoliberal policies that have exacerbated social imbalance. The man's absence, and his metaphorical presence (in the form of the domestic space) are vestiges of the ongoing violences that permeate not only the woman's daily existence, but that also mark the national panorama.

Elizabeth Jelin indicates that Latin America's dictatorial regimes posited their administrations in terms of a discourse of salvation: moral, political or economic. In Brazil, the military regime defined itself against the threat of communism and financial instability (one being connected to the other). Thus for example, “in 1974, the tenth anniversary of the coup de état in Brazil was used as an occasion to put into circulation one exclusive story in the public sphere and the school system: the account of the economic success of the military regime – the story of the Brazilian ‘economic miracle’” (Jelin, 2003, p. 28). At the same time, the military regimes in the Southern Cone paradoxically also utilized the rhetoric of (in particular, economic) “freedom” (Klein, 2007, p. 52) to justify not only the coup de états but also the continuation of authoritarian rule – and of its repressive tactics.

It is however well known that the various economic “miracles” performed by the military dictatorship in Latin America's Southern Cone rested on a deeply flawed configuration that favored foreign investment, privatization and cuts in social spending and lead to an increase in socio-economic rifts. However, dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the supposed national economic growth were ignored or obliterated from public discourse. In this framework, general political oppression and elimination of civil liberties such as the right to *habeas corpus* (abolished in Brazil with the implementation of the Ato Institucional Número 5 on December 13th, 1968), were used to quell dissent. Conversely, while the military regime actively sought to erase dissent through the erosion of civil rights and the government's repressive procedures, the elite and middle classes were only too eager to passively overlook the violent measures implemented by the government as these two segments of the populace initially benefitted from the so-called “economic miracles.”

Even though in Brazil the military's market-friendly policies lead to a financial crisis in the wake of the 1973 oil crises, the economic approach of the ruling sectors did not change. During and after the transition, neoliberalism increasingly became the economic philosophy of the Brazilian ruling sectors. Within this framework, social imbalances, instead of lessening either remained the same or, at times, grew. For sociologist Kees Koonings, Brazil's deep social imbalance applies not only to income distribution but refers furthermore to

“systematic exclusion from formal livelihood resources (land, work, wages), from public welfare schemes, from cultural constructs” or, what Koonings terms “social citizenship” (Koonings, 1999, p. 224). Social citizenship determines the degree of access one has to services such as health, education, and even security. It also affects the geographic make-up of the loci of public participation in the urban centers. In the metropolitan agglomerations, the privileged sectors and the marginalized populace inhabit parallel realities, where many of the former have never dealt with the contingencies of urban existence. The woman observes that the metropolis is inhabited by many people who: “pisou o solo... Jamais o crocante das calçadas, os buracos das avenidas. Essa gente em linha reta. Estão livres. Essa é a sua maior riqueza, entre todas as outras. Mais uma. Que não percebiam o espaço mudar. Que não se iludam com a passagem do tempo. Apenas a cidade alastrando enquanto afastam-se dela” (Bonassi, p. 19). Partly because of the socio-geographic split that runs through the urban body, the city, a microcosmos of the nation, is no longer equivalent to the polis, an arena of public participation and communitarian engagement, instead it becomes a non-space (Augé, 1995), in which civic interaction is increasingly conflictive. If during the totalitarian governments, the metropolis was a space of uncertainty, a terrain that swallowed its citizens and held secret spaces of death and brutality, now it inspires other types of fears. Danger looms not primarily in the state apparatus but rather in the lack of state involvement in social affairs, in the augmented economic hierarchies created by the neoliberal order.

Fear, instilled first by state coercion is now perpetuated by the violence of material inequalities and the parallel denial of citizenship. According to historian James Holston, “precisely as democracy has taken root, new kinds of violence, injustice, corruption, and impunity have increased dramatically. This coincidence is the perverse paradox of Brazil’s democratization. As a result, many Brazilians feel less secure under the political democracy they have achieved, their bodies more threatened by its everyday violence than by the repressions of dictatorship” (Holston, 2008, p. 271). Holston maintains that Brazil’s transition to democracy has continued the tradition of differentiated citizenship that exists in the country since its political emancipation from Portugal in 1888. In this context, citizenship, although theoretically equalizing differences, in practice, functions on the basis of a system of privileges and privations. Unequal citizenship foments conflict, including, at times, violent conflict.

It is thus not surprising that the culture of fear¹⁰ and de facto illegality generated by the discourse of the dictatorship becomes ubiquitous after the demise of the regime, as sociability wanes due to the continuation of violations of civil and economic rights, creating both material and hermeneutic violence. Indeed, as pointed out by Naomi Klein, fear lies at the heart of global latecapitalist expansion. The methods employed by the military regimes to take and maintain power engender a culture of fear and phobia that encumbers not only remembrance but also hinders agency in the aftermath of authoritarian rule. In their introduction to the collection of essays *Societies of Fear. The Legacy of Civil War, Violence and Terror in Latin America*, Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt point towards the omnipresent horror generated and perpetuated by the military administrations. For the two authors:

House searches and arrests, followed by lack of information about the prisoner's whereabouts and by apparently random accusations, torture and the widespread knowledge of indiscriminate torturing of captured victims, contribute to a generalized climate of individual weakness, of permanent alertness without the possibility of escape, of collective powerlessness, of lack of control over daily life and the near future, and of a distorted perception of reality. ... Horror becomes a routine social phenomenon. (Koonings and Kruijt, 1999, p. 19)

In Bonassi's text, the perception of “horror as a routine social phenomenon” resulting from repressive tactics and furthered by stark socio-economic differentiation becomes evident in the woman's anxieties, a continuum that encompasses the “Medo dos barulhos na minha orelha ... Medo de choque nu ... O medo é um silêncio que estica. Medo dos revólveres cochilando ... Medo de um caco de vidro por menor que seja ... Medo das coisas perdendo seu contorno. O medo é um ciclo. Um nervo pulando. Um dedo caloso e torto apontando” (Bonassi, p. 72). The woman's terror of the “raw” shock (a metaphor of torture) and of broken glass (signifying present-day criminality) connotes firstly her latent memories of past terrors, of the military's brutal persecution of dissent. Secondly, the juxtaposition of different modalities of terror indicate that, even though the political system has changed, the traumas

¹⁰ Beyond generating a culture of terror as a result of violent repression, fear lay at the basis of the military's ascension to power in countries such as Brazil, Chile and Argentina. According to investigative journalist Naomi Klein, the military was successful into “shocking” the population into obedience by obliterating democracy through violent means. Klein proposes the notion of the “shock doctrine” to explain the military takeovers of Southern Cone countries and the ensuing expansion of global capitalism. According to Klein: “That is how shock doctrine works: the original disaster – the coup, the terrorist attack, the market meltdown, the war, the tsunami, the hurricane – puts the entire population into a state of collective shock. The falling bombs, the bursts of terror, the pounding winds serve to soften up whole societies as much as the blaring music and blows in the torture cells often soften up prisoners. Like the terrorized prisoner who gives up the names of comrades and renounces his faith, shocked societies often give up things they would otherwise fiercely protect” (Klein, 2007, p. 17).

and exclusionary socio-economic practices that were either implemented or strengthened by the military administrations cannot be entirely obviated by the logic of expediency. Desire to partake in and simultaneous exclusion from the theater of consumption generates new forms of violence, including the violence of forgetting past abuses and their nightmarish resurgence.

Beyond being forgotten, the past becomes irrelevant as its ideals – or rather, the ideals of the woman’s and the man’s generation, are swallowed by the irrelevance of a consumerist ethos. As the couple reflects on the ideological and material transformations that occurred since the transition, disenchantment pervades their inventory of changes: “Quem diria que os militares se cansariam?” / “Quem diria que os civis os piorassem?” / “Quem diria que o conforto é mais forte que o incômodo?” (Bonassi, p. 59). The use of the conditional tense, alluding to both the past and the future, to the expectations held in the past and foiled in the present – and which result in a vacuum of futurity, the lack of utopian projects and retreat from the body politic, denounces the ultimate futility of the couple’s subversive struggle and, hence, of their suffering. Their dialogue ends with the women’s conclusion that her companion’s death bought her the comfort of homeownership but did not lead to any significant socio-political change. The apartment is therefore a memorial, but one that paradoxically encourages forgetting rather than remembering. In this respect, it is paradigmatic of Brazil’s transitional culture.

The liaison between past oppression and its contemporary sequel, the return of the repressed that is inserted in the intersection between collective history and individual experience is also the theme of Carlos Franz’s novel *El desierto* (2005). Alternating between the beginning months of Chile’s 1973 military coup and the initial epoch of the democratic transition, Franz’s book recuperates and attempts to exorcise the phantasms of collective guilt that fester beneath the shiny surface of neoliberal bonanza in the post-Pinochet era. The novel’s plot revolves around Laura Larco, the middle-aged protagonist of the text who, having suffered the physical and psychological abuses of the authoritarian regime on her body, goes into exile in Germany. After Chile’s redemocratization in 1990, she returns to the scene of her multiple traumas, Pampa Hundida, an imaginary oasis town located in the midst of the Atacama desert.

The novel oscillates between two narrative levels: on the one hand, the third person narrator relates Laura’s experiences as she returns to Pampa Hundida. On the other hand, Laura retells her own version of the past in a letter she writes to her twenty-year old daughter, Claudia, responding to the latter’s

insistent question about her location at the time of the coup and its ensuing repression (“¿Dónde estabas tú, mamá, cuando todas esas cosas horribles ocurrieron en tu ciudad?” [Franz, p. 12]). Claudia’s interrogation is both a personal and a collective inquiry about the nation’s private and public histories and its accompanying traumas. Beyond this, Claudia’s query is also an unwitting search for her origins, as she is the product of the violence incurred onto her mother’s body by the authoritarian government. As many other women persecuted by the totalitarian regimes, Laura’s torture involved rape. But her story is complicated by the conflicting forces of eros and thanatos that parallel her resistance to and compliance with her own abuse and furthermore, with the generalized violence of the dictatorship.

Franz intersperses public history with personal story, revealing how both are enmeshed and tainted by the past’s violence. In this frame of reference, the omniscient narrator speaks for the collective trauma of the dictatorship, giving voice to the multiple actors of the authoritarian drama, both the perpetrators and its victims. Most importantly however, the third person narrative exposes the tacit support of the population in the dictatorship’s intimidation of its citizens. This collaboration extends into the contemporary period, as the majority of the townspeople once again want to silence the presence/memories of the dictatorship’s victims in order to maintain the fragile construction of reconciliation – and thus ensure the town’s economic prosperity in the aftermath of its traumatic past.

Some figures, however, disrupt Pampa Hundida’s tenuous harmony, creating through their inquiries, and through their haunting presences a tear in the town’s mnemonic fabric. Beyond Laura and her daughter, the city’s history is also revisited by the ambitious young lawyer, Tomás Martínez Roth. Martínez Roth wants to uncover the human rights violations surrounding the death camp situated just outside of Pampa Hundida. But, given the transitional climate in Chile that emphasizes reconciliation, he must recur to a subterfuge in order to expose these crimes. Hinging his persecution of the military command that tortured and murdered dissidents on the camp in the outskirts of Pampa Hundida on an accusation of profaning the image of the town’s patron saint, the young lawyer hopes to break through the imposed silences that haunt Pampa Hundida and, concurrently, Chile. Martínez Roth’s struggle and ultimate compliance with the muteness regarding the city’s violent history, reveals the demise of political ideals that was ushered in by first the brutal coup de état, and subsequently, by both the violence of the dictatorship and the neoliberal transition. What remains for the generation post-coup, the ones who grew up under the authoritarian regime but who did not engage actively against it is a

“desatinada época de comedia y máscaras ligeras ... Habrían querido juzgar el pasado de sus mayores por los asesinatos, por los muertos, por los desaparecidos, y todo lo que tenían, al quinto intento, era una querrela por un delito religioso que el legislador había olvidado derogar” (Franz, p. 97). For Martínez Roth, the only recourse left for seeking justice in the amnesiac times of the postdictatorship centers on a banal transgression that, ironically, both masks and provides the possibility of uncovering the brutality of the military’s repressive tactics. Nonetheless, if banality is the loophole through which the ambitious young lawyer believes he will attain justice, triviality, or rather the facileness of ambition is also the means by which he himself becomes enmeshed in the collective rejection of a national collective guilt. Enticed by the prospects of a successful career, Martínez Roth drops his charges since, as he expounds to Laura: “¿Se da cuenta, magistrada, de que si reconociéramos la existencia de una culpa colectiva, esto implicaría aceptar que la dictadura no fue totalitaria?” (Franz, p. 307). By blaming solely the military government, Martínez Roth can absolve the general populace from the crime of accepting the dictatorships aggressive repression. His stance replicates that of Pampa Hundida’s general citizenry. And his cooptation by the post-dictatorship justice system is emblematic of its inability and unwillingness to persecute the human rights violators within the military personnel.

Beyond these three figures, that are part of the hegemonic domain of society, another denizen of Pampa Hundida evokes the city’s recent past: Iván. His character represents the margins of Chilean society in multiple ways. Firstly, he belongs to the indigenous population of Pampa Hundida. Secondly, due to developmental problems, Iván does not have a voice within neither his tribe nor outside it. He is what Nelly Richard calls the “residual” element (Richard, 1998). Nonetheless, it is precisely from his peripheral position that Iván is able to destabilize the entrenched order of the city, exhuming its past crimes by becoming a scapegoat of sorts. Iván is Pampa Hundida’s *homo sacer*. In this respect, he echoes the postionality retained by Laura and Chile’s political prisoners during the military dictatorship. His character embodies both past and present forms of exclusion and persecution and paradoxically, in this role, becomes a pivotal figure in the unmasking of the town’s guilt by association.

In Franz’s novel, the city of Pampa Hundida becomes a symbolic site of the nation, containing in its material and symbolic spaces the various wounds and scars that afflicted Chile during Pinochet’s totalitarian government and in the transitional period. This symbolism is exacerbated by Pampa Hundida’s mirror image, the concentration camp where the military regime imprisoned those subjects it deemed threatening to its socio-economic and political project.

Outside of Pampa Hundida lies one of the regime's death camps, on the site of a former saltpeter mine (the location thus indirectly alludes to the persecution of striking nitrate workers in the 1920s and links it to the generalized repression of the authoritarian regimes [Frazier, 2007]). The death-camp is Pampa Hundida's negative image, a sterile territory of death and destruction that, nevertheless, is the repository of the city's repressed memories: “El pueblo fantasma de la salitrera que después fue campamento de prisioneros y que luego volvió a ser ruina, replicando la ciudad como un espejismo seco o una advertencia. O, todavía, como una premonición...” (Franz, p. 18).

In the present, the town's citizen's want to obliterate this memorial locus erasing thus both the remembrance of historical violence and their own collaboration in this violence. Jean Franco maintains that “Collective or social memory has traditionally been activated by place, by specific sites. The relative permanence of certain places resists the rapid flow of time and permits sedimentation” (Franco, 2002, p. 240). If the dictatorship enforced oblivion through coercion, murder and the disappearance of those who resisted it, the neoliberal order creates forgetfulness as it generates a constant now, a prevailing desire for novelty that erodes the layers of memory. Privileging flux over stability, consumption over remembrance, in the neoliberal present, the sediments of memory are overlaid by a “ciudad nueva en el desierto, al norte de la actual, trazada sobre las ruinas sucesivas del campamento de prisioneros que una vez fue una salitrera: los hoteles blancos para los peregrinos, un supermercado, una basílica gigantesca, posmoderna, y a su lado la parabólica de una antena satelital” (Franz, p.158). This planned city proposes the obviation of the past's brutal legacy as a precondition to economic success in the present. It's existence is a link in the chain of capitalist domination: first the saltpeter extraction, then agribusiness and finally, the service economy. “A principios del siglo fue la economía de extracción, el salitre; a finales, la fertilidad intensiva, los frutos del país. Pero el oro del siglo XXI serán los servicios” (Franz, p. 181). The creation of the city in the midst of the arid landscape evidences the interconnections between different forms of capitalist exploitation: from the entrepreneurial model of saltpeter extraction to the late capitalist manifestations of export-oriented agriculture and finally to the enmeshing between capital and culture, between leisure and consumption, between mass-marketable spectacle and personal belief.

Similar to Brazil's transitional administration, Chile's *Concertación* government was obliged to the continuance of economic and social models imposed by the dictatorship. At the same time, the amnesty law of 1978

imposed a de facto official forgetting which both fostered and resulted from the prolongation of socio-economic policies. Michael Lazzara, in his study about narratives of memory in postdictatorship Chile, points to the conscious effort to put forth a discourse of conciliation during the first three post-coup Chilean democratic administrations. Lazzara also signals how this undertaking was inevitably foiled by the country's traumatic past that includes the “problem of human rights” and authoritarianism (Lazzara, 2006, p. 17). For Nelly Richard this discourse of conciliation goes hand in hand with a neoliberal ethos that stimulated consumption within an ideological framework that purported to guarantee citizens the rights denied to them by the military regime.¹¹

In *El desierto*, whose title alludes not only to the aridity that surrounds the oasis town but also to the sterility of impeded memory work, collective and individual forgetting is nonetheless precluded through Laura's return. It is significant that she, before going into exile was the judge of Pampa Hundida. Her forced absence from the town signifies the lack of legislative justice in Chile during the Pinochet era, as the judiciary system was hijacked by the authoritarian state. Upon the protagonist's return to the city, Laura assumes her judiciary duties again. In particular, she becomes involved with the recuperation of the mnemonic remains of the victims killed and disappeared in the bordering death-camp. By demanding the salvage and correction of past injustices, she is trying to reestablish legality. Nonetheless, her endeavor is hindered by the judiciary's complicity with Chile's transitional logic that favors the concept of reconciliation rather than persecution of the human rights abuses perpetuated by the military government. This logic of compromise reflects the intrinsic threat posed by the military to Chile's incipient democracy, but is also reveals an epistemological shift that precludes utopian socio-political projects. For Carlos Ruiz, during the transition, the notion of “truth” becomes subordinated to the concept of reconciliation, a shift that, according to Ruiz, is evident in the discursive composition of the *Informe de la Comisión Nacional sobre Verdad y Reconciliación* (1991). Ruiz asserts that the *Informe* reveals how “el ideal de la reconciliación, un ideal tal vez más religioso que político, se pone por encima de la verdad y la condiciona y limita, así como limita también al régimen democrático mismo” (Ruiz, 2000, p. 19). Franz's text harks back to the utilitarian

¹¹ Nelly Richard describes the transitional process as a “controlado proceso de regularización del cambio político y social que ordenó el camino de la redemocratización, según una recta optimista de avances y progresos que debió hacernos transitar, gradualmente, del *menos* al *más*: más libertad, más justicia, más bienestar y también, sobre todo, más consumo” (Richard, 2001, p. 9). This process was accompanied in the epistemological realm, as the fields of Chilean political science, economics and sociology also aided in the “instrumentalización del mercado y del consenso que perfeccionó el dispositivo transicional, confeccionando lógicas ejecutivas que hablaran el mismo idioma (funcionario y numerario) que forjó la pragmática del acuerdo entre redemocratización y neoliberalismo” (Richard, 2001, p. 9).

model of justice that predominated during Chile’s transition. Laura observes that:

La justicia había dejado de ser una autoridad intangible, la majestad de la ley había caído en desuso, como el muro de las convicciones absolutas – en Berlín – que también había caído. Ahora, para bien y para mal, en las familias así como en las sociedades, la justicia dejaba de ser un ideal y transaba con el mundo: con las necesidades de la fe, con los sobornos del presente y el olvido con la medida de lo posible. (Franz, p. 282)

Metaphorically speaking, Laura’s return and judicial powerlessness allude to the transformation of justice into a practice of economic compensation, as the social, political and civic sphere become increasingly commodified.¹² In this frame of reference, it also becomes progressively more difficult to make the disappeared truly visible again in the proliferation of consumption and its amnesiac culture and even in the commercialization of memory as yet another cultural artifact to be consumed. It is hence significant that although the people of Pampa Hundida want to forget their recent past, they celebrate the distant memory of the town’s founding and its accompanying violence. The planned religious sanctuary that is to be erected in the city’s outskirts would pay homage to the colonial past and its brutal religious as well as social indoctrination of the local indigenous populace. *El desierto* makes clear how the city – and by proxy – the nation are founded and consolidated on multiple layers of conflict and violence. While official memory and the sites erected by this discourse redeem some of these manifestations of violence through ritual and celebration as well as sacrifice, other modalities of aggression must be interred in the dust of oblivion (Frazier, 2007, p. 25).

Analogous to Bonassi’s *Prova contrária*, *El desierto* does not promise redemption through remembrance. The melancholy presence of the unmourned continues to haunt the national ruins in the aftermath of dictatorial violence. Laura’s quest does forestall the erection of a religious recreational complex in which the symbolic and the financial are joined in an unholy alliance, emblemizing late capitalist logic (Jameson, 1991). However, the obstruction of said compound – even though it allows for the exorcism of Laura’s private

¹² Carlos Ruiz observes that beyond favoring reconciliation over truth, the capitalist economic model is hailed by the *Concertación* as yet another mode of stimulating political (if not necessarily social) consensus. Ruiz states that: “Después del *Informe* en 1991, el paradigma del mercado es crecientemente acogido por el gobierno de la Transición en función de su eficacia para el crecimiento económico y es también integrado al modelo consensual. De esto resulta una nueva relativización de los crímenes contra la humanidad cometidos por el régimen militar, ya que éstos se perciben ahora como costos lamentables, pero cuyo impacto de nuevo tiene que ser contrabalanceado por la gran transformación económica modernizadora emprendida por los militares” (Ruiz, 2000, p. 19).

ghosts – ultimately does not lead to public recognition of Pampa Hundida’s collective guilt. While the city does metaphorically atone for its collaboration and slowly disappears into the surrounding desert, the voices of the disappeared continue to be lost in the wind that howls through the abandoned streets. Similarly, *Prova contrária* does not propose a resolution to the exhumation of the disappeared. The novel ends as the woman’s companion once again vanishes leaving her with an empty apartment contaminated by the unmourned memories of the man whose real or simulated death provided the material means for its purchase.

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