

LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Pitfalls of Trauma: Revisiting Postdictatorship Cinema from a Semiotic Standpoint

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This article examines two approaches to postdictatorship cinema: trauma theory, which has been especially popular in reading this corpus, and semiotics, which has regained popularity in film analysis in general but is not often employed when analyzing postdictatorship films. The article claims that, though highly productive in the 1990s, trauma theory has become less fruitful after decades of continuous scholarship and after the emergence of administrations that have made the representation of the dictatorship the center of their public policies, such as *kirchnerismo* in Argentina (2003–2015). While trauma theory yields ahistorical analyses, a semiotic approach that takes into account how indexical, iconic, and symbolic signs merge in the cinematic field allows for historical interpretations that are more adequate for reading postdictatorship films, especially after 2003. The article first outlines the main tenets of the two approaches (trauma theory and semiotics), then assesses their suitability for historical interpretation via a brief analysis of *Andrés no quiere dormir la siesta*, a 2009 Argentine film on the country's last dictatorship.

Este artículo se propone examinar dos aproximaciones al cine postdictatorial: la teoría del trauma, que ha sido especialmente popular para leer este corpus, y la semiótica, un acercamiento que ha vuelto a ganar popularidad en el análisis fílmico en general pero que no es frecuentemente utilizado en la interpretación de este tipo de películas. El artículo argumenta que la teoría del trauma, aunque productiva en los años noventa, se ha vuelto menos fructífera después de varias décadas de producción académica constante y de la emergencia de gobiernos que, como el kirchnerismo en Argentina (2003–2015), han puesto la representación de la dictadura en el centro de sus políticas públicas. Mientras que la teoría del trauma resulta insuficiente para leer históricamente el cine postdictatorial, una lectura semiótica de cómo los componentes indiciales, icónicos y simbólicos se combinan en la imagen cinematográfica resulta más apropiada para llevar a cabo una interpretación histórica, especialmente después del 2003. Luego de delinear estas dos aproximaciones, el artículo las reevalúa mediante un breve análisis de una película argentina reciente sobre la dictadura militar, *Andrés no quiere dormir la siesta*.

In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992, xiii) pose questions that are often raised by scholars working on Latin American culture: "What is the relation between the act of witnessing and testifying, and the acts of writing and of reading? What is . . . the relation between narrative and history, between art and memory, between speech and survival?" Felman and Laub's answer is well known and is a landmark in global academic discourse. There is a close relationship between trauma and history, between clinical work and the act of reading, between analyst and cultural scholar. In an era that has survived unthinkable historical catastrophes, texts—much like patients undergoing treatment—bear witness to this crisis. Like clinical testimony, literature, cinema, and graphic art are precocious modes of accessing history. Their discourse testifies to trauma, inscribing past historical truths that we might not yet know. The role of the cultural scholar thus resembles that of the analyst. Both scholar and analyst help to break silence and to enact the liberation of the testimony from the bondage of the secret. They bring evidence materialized by unconscious testimony into the realm of cognition and are able to decipher historical truths that are unspoken yet embedded in texts. As Felman and Laub learned while collaborating in their interdisciplinary book, clinical discourse can be a useful framework for cultural

interpretation. Via trauma theory, the text comes to be “at once historical and clinical . . . a medium of historical transmission and the unsuspected medium of a healing” (Felman and Laub 1992, 9).¹

Felman and Laub’s findings have resonated in postdictatorship studies, where psychoanalysis was already a privileged discourse, especially in the Southern Cone. In the 1990s—marked by Walter Benjamin’s writings, impacted by recent shifts in cultural criticism, and attuned to the discipline’s historical influence in the region—foundational scholars like Nelly Richard, Alberto Moreiras, and Idelber Avelar unveiled the complex relationship between narrative and history appealing to psychoanalysis. Trauma, symptom, memory, and mourning proved useful concepts for understanding how cultural production reacted to what Richard (2004, 33) famously called the neoliberal “techniques of forgetting”: the strategies of oblivion encouraged by the neoliberal regimes of the 1990s.²

It is probably because of this popularity of psychoanalysis that trauma theory has been prominent in postdictatorship studies, mainly since the early 2000s. Recent books such as Nora Strejilevich’s *El arte de no olvidar* (2006) and Edurne Portela’s *Displaced Memories* (2009) base their analyses on the premise that clinical discourse is suitable for reading the representation of history in catastrophic narratives. Several of the articles included in a 2013 volume edited by Erna Pfeiffer also follow this path. Moreover, and of particular interest for the argument I am developing, trauma theory has become an important paradigm for reading postdictatorship cinema. Scholars appeal to the discipline’s findings for understanding cinematic strategies. Film critics and journalists intersperse clinical vocabulary in their reviews. Graduate students ground their dissertations in the hypotheses put forward by Felman and Laub.³

Although it was highly productive in the 1990s, trauma theory has become less fruitful after decades of continuous scholarship and after the emergence of administrations that have made the dictatorship the center of their public policies—by, among other things, reopening trials, funding films on the topic, and organizing commemorative events. Trauma theory’s current constraint is not only practical (how can we say something new about trauma, memory, and mourning?) but also conceptual, historical, and ideological. As opposed to what Felman and Laub were hoping, this approach often yields interpretations that block access to history, especially—as I show later—when analyzing post-2003 Argentine films. To avoid this loss of historicity, I suggest, in line with a contemporary tendency in film scholarship, that it is more fruitful to revitalize a semiotic approach.⁴ An account of how indexical, iconic, and symbolic signs merge in the cinematic image is more suitable to engage in a historical reading of postdictatorship films.

Symptomatic Readings: Postdictatorship, Trauma, and History

“Today,” says Andreas Huyssen in a preface to *Present Pasts* that has been quoted innumerable times since its appearance in 2003, “we seem to suffer from a hypertrophy of memory. . . . After more than a decade of intense public and academic discussions of the uses and abuses of memory, many feel that the topic has been exhausted. Memory fatigue has set in” (3). His assertion points to a global fatigue that certainly applies to the proliferation of postdictatorship films and their centrality in Latin American studies. After decades of teaching and interpreting these films, many seem to feel that they are exhausted. Kali Tal reads this exhaustion chronologically. Trauma narratives, she claims, have passed through three consecutive stages: sacralization, assimilation, and appropriation (Tal 1996, 59). They first were regarded as quasi-religious artifacts, then analyzed as historical documents, and finally have been treated as self-help texts. Kimberly Nance (2006, 137–178) follows Tal’s periodization to state that Latin American trauma narratives have

¹ In this article I follow Susannah Radstone’s definition of trauma theory as a theory that conceptualizes “trauma” combining deconstruction, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, and clinical work. As Radstone (2007, 10) explains, this trend has been the “new theoretical orthodoxy” in memory studies since the 1990s and is best represented by the works of Felman, Laub, and Cathy Caruth (for further details, see Radstone 2001, 2007; Elsaesser 2001, 2013; Traverso and Broderick 2010; for a genealogy of the notion of trauma, see Leys 2000).

² For canonical works in postdictatorship studies influenced by psychoanalysis, see Avelar (1999); Richard (2004); Richard and Moreiras (2001). See Casullo (1993) on the impact of Benjamin’s work. See Bosteels (2012) and Plotkin (2003) on the importance of psychoanalysis in the region. See Avelar (1999, 39–85) for an explanation of how the critical paradigm changed after the dictatorships.

³ See Jelin (2002) for the influence of trauma studies in postdictatorship scholarship. See Nisenson (2002) for an example of journalism and the articles in Paulinelli (2006) for film scholarship. A 2015 search in ProQuest’s Dissertations and Theses database indicates that since the year 2000 there have been seventy graduate theses on Latin American film and trauma. The majority quote Caruth, Felman, and Laub. Most were written after 2009.

⁴ I am thinking especially in the works of Philip Rosen, Mary Ann Doane (2007), Lev Manovich, and Michael Chanan, whose readings are grounded in a revitalization of key concepts in semiotics, such as indexicality. A number of contemporary interpretations of Argentine film manifest a similar tendency, even when not explicitly stated (see Aguilar 2010; Andermann 2012; Page 2009). I return to this tendency in a later section.

ceded to less politically charged memoirs and that critical reception has gone all the way from celebration to pessimism. Tzvetan Todorov (2000, 12–13) warns about an overabundance of historical representations that can paradoxically lead to oblivion. Yet Huyssen (2003) goes on to say, the call to move on reproduces the industry's fast-paced mechanisms of declaring obsolescence. Moreover, moving on precludes an explanation for the current obsession with memory and trauma as a symptom of the present. In other words, analyzing this obsession is more fruitful than letting it go. Rather than discarding texts for their repetitive excess, it is necessary to acknowledge them (and their exhaustion) as discourses of the present.

Taking this acknowledgment as a starting point, I claim that the existing fatigue is less related to the texts themselves than to the way these texts are often read. Trauma theory has become insufficient for historical analysis. Its pitfalls are especially apparent when analyzing contemporary postdictatorship cinema. Shifting away from this approach and engaging these films in a different fashion might help us to break with the current fatigue and might open the path for new understandings. But what is the problem with trauma theory? Why is this combination of clinical discourse and cultural analysis less suitable for historical interpretation?

Before answering these questions, I would like to introduce a caveat. I do not want to argue that the entire psychoanalytic framework is misleading when approaching postdictatorship films. Given that these are narratives resulting from catastrophic events, this framework can illuminate, among other things, how people cope with catastrophes and how discourse embodies unconscious aspects. Analyses of documentaries featuring second-generation survivors, for example, have shed light on how children experience traumatic events. Moreover, recent theorizations on affect, sometimes anchored in psychoanalysis, conceive of feeling as integral to cognition. There are thus compelling analyses of how postdictatorship films can unsettle emotions, shape sensibility, and bring about new knowledge. And there is also a well-known, productive tradition in film theory that, following Lacan, sees cinema as a useful medium for exploring concepts such as identification, the gaze, and pleasure.⁵ Some problems arise, however, when relying on psychoanalytic clinical discourse for interpreting history—a move that, via trauma theory, has become quite common when reading films that deal with the dictatorships.

A first hint of this incompatibility between clinical discourse and history can be found in the choice of theoretical concepts that do not quite translate from one to the other. One of these is trauma. Relying on Freud, most scholars (Felman, Laub, Caruth) define trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to these events occurs in the often delayed and uncontrolled appearance of intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 1996, 11). Trauma is caused by the lack of preparedness to process a quick stimulus in time. This experience, which was perceived yet not fully grasped, returns through a symptom. A wound that is not known until it haunts the individual, trauma emerges as an unwitting reenactment of an episode that one cannot leave behind. But this haunting repetition, these scholars state, is more than pathology: it is also the voice of a past truth that cries out and that is not otherwise available. Against suspicions regarding the access to history, trauma allows for a recuperation of the past.

This relationship between trauma and history lies in large part behind Felman and Laub's praise of the link between clinical experience and cultural interpretation. In a traumatic era, they say, texts are a medium of historical transmission, inscribing historical truths that the scholar can bring to cognition. Yet the connection is far from being as straightforward as they present it. An occurrence that is unwittingly reenacted, the notion of trauma needs to be rethought when analyzing narratives that most of the time have been carefully organized. Filmmakers and film characters are not patients who seek help after a haunting recurrence but people who have decided to speak publicly about a specific event that pertains to society—even in the case of real victims in a documentary. Filmic discourse is not an uncontrolled discourse from which to reconstruct hidden traumatic circumstances but is openly addressing those circumstances. Even if we agreed with the psychoanalytic premise that any type of discourse includes unconscious aspects, we could not establish a symmetrical parallel between a filmic narrative representing a past catastrophe and the clinical narrative resulting from a traumatized subject. The distinction between experience and event becomes at this point relevant. As Dominick La Capra (2004, 45) explains, while the traumatizing event (say, torture or kidnapping) is punctual and datable, the traumatic experience (the delayed effects of the catastrophic event) is not punctual and has an elusive aspect because it has not passed away. In trauma theory, there is a juxtaposition of event to experience, a juxtaposition that ascribes the qualities of the traumatic experience

⁵ For an overview of theories on affect, see Ahmed (2004); Cartwright (2008); Gregg and Seigworth (2010); Hardt (2007); Massumi (2002); Ticineto (2007). For a study of affect in Latin American cinema, see Podalsky (2011). See Copjec (1994); Metz (1995); Mulvey (1989); and Žižek (2000) for primary references in the Lacanian tradition.

to the representation of the traumatizing event. This happens to some extent because these readings rely on concepts that are related to the subjective sphere (e.g., trauma) to assess the representation of the collective realm, often obliterating a larger (political, historical) dimension—and relegating filmmakers and characters to the role of traumatized victims who passively suffer an unexpected occurrence.⁶

This juxtaposition paradoxically undermines the possibility that films turn into means of historical transmission. The idea that history is a hidden truth that has been unconsciously inscribed in the text converts postdictatorship films in thrillerlike narratives. Once the truth has been discovered, once the secret has been revealed, the search is over. Via trauma theory, history becomes a stable, given, and latent referent that needs only to be brought into the realm of cognition. Trauma theory ends up being, as Thomas Elsaesser (2001, 201) observes, an account of “recovered referentiality,” an account that concludes with the assertion that there is a hidden, static referent unveiled by the cultural scholar. Moreover, conceiving of films as pieces in a clinical dialogue entails another undesired backlash: they become redundant. Based on unchanging conceptions of mourning, trauma, and memory, trauma theory provides an interpretive formula that treats all films identically, extracting a common meaning. Independently of their content, all narratives end up yielding the same analysis. This omission of differences also entails an oversight of diachronic transformations in the representation of history, overlooking how postdictatorship cinema has changed over time. Talking about the regimes in the early democracy, as hidden aspects came to light for the first time, seems to be no different from addressing them after decades of continuous findings.

A snapshot of how diverse films belonging to different stages in the postdictatorship have been read makes these critiques more visible. Drawing on Freud’s distinction between melancholy and mourning, Ana Amado observes that *Botín de guerra*, David Blaustein’s 1999 documentary interviewing relatives of missing people, joins *Papá Iván* (María Inés Roqué, 2004) and *Los rubios* (Albertina Carri, 2003)—two films by second-generation survivors on their disappeared parents—in eluding melancholy and engaging in a task of mourning that enables a recuperation of the dictatorship’s traumatic past (2009, 139). In their respective articles, Silvana Bekerman (2012, 157) and Liliana Feierstein (2012, 126) mention Blaustein’s documentary as yet another case in which film serves as a means for processing psychological trauma, allowing for the transmission of a collective history that was deemed to vanish together with the dead bodies of the disappeared. While Bekerman claims that this is also what happens in Carlos Echeverría’s *Juan, como si nada hubiera sucedido*—a 1987 documentary on the kidnapping of a man in southern Argentina—Feierstein extends her reading to Benjamín Ávila’s *Infancia clandestina*, a 2012 semi-autobiographical fiction film on the director’s childhood as the son of radical activists (Bekerman 2012, 159–178; Feierstein 2012, 124–144). Furthermore, several scholars have traced a parallel between Gastón Biraben’s *Cautiva* (2005), a fiction film on a teenager who discovers that she is the daughter of disappeared parents, and the canonical *La historia oficial* (Luis Puenzo, 1985). According to these scholars, in both films the traumatic experiences of innocent characters permit the viewer to unveil a historical truth about the military dictatorship (Blaustein 2008, 153; Kaiser 2010, 106; Gorodischer 2005; Scholz 2005).

Although they are far from comprehensive, I find these interpretations indicative of several of the problems mentioned above. First, the evident existence of a script challenges the notion of trauma as unwitting reenactment. Second, the readings are based on a conflation of event and experience, and of the subjective and the collective spheres: a task of mourning allows for a recuperation of the dictatorship’s traumatic past, a processing of psychological trauma transmits a collective history that was deemed to be vanished, and traumatic experiences unveil a historical truth about the dictatorship. Third, history is conceived as a given, stable referent. The use of singular nouns is particularly telling of this stasis: these films enable a recuperation of *the* traumatic past, the transmission of *a* vanishing history, and the unveiling of *a* historical truth. Finally, this clinical framework yields a repetitive (almost identical) conclusion for every film. A more conventional documentary like *Botín de guerra*, which is grounded in the idea that film can preserve history, is read in line with performative, inconclusive documentaries that challenge this possibility, such as *Papá Iván* or *Los rubios*. The representation of the past in fiction films like *La historia oficial*, *Infancia clandestina*, or *Cautiva* is not distinguished from the one in documentaries like *Juan*. First-person narratives by children

⁶ As Leys (2000, 5–10) explains, there are two opposing views of trauma. While mimetic theories state that the subject hypnotically repeats the traumatic experience, antimimetic theories see trauma as a purely external event coming to a passive victim. I thus agree with Radstone when she claims that Felman, Laub, and Caruth’s theory mixes both conceptions: it emphasizes the lack of recall that is typical of the mimetic view yet relies on the idea of an external event befalling the subject. As Radstone contends, this mixture poses at least two problems: first, the notion of a passive subject is contradictory with this theory’s explicit affiliation with deconstruction; second, it opens the path for a number of Manichean binaries (inside and outside, trauma and normality, victims and perpetrators).

of missing people are subjected to the same clinical analysis as the narratives of fictional characters designed by filmmakers who have not been directly affected by the dictatorship, such as Luis Puenzo. Films like *La historia oficial*, which in the early democracy revealed atrocities for the first time, is ultimately read the same way as *Cautiva*, a film that refers to those same facts after twenty years of representation. Thus, although trauma theory relies on the premise that films are means of historical transmission, analyses embedded in invariable concepts rooted in the subjective experience end up blocking access to history.⁷

In noting this problem, I am not trying to dismiss trauma theory for forgetting certain facts. As Paul Ricoeur (2003, 542) has compellingly shown, forgetting is a necessary condition for remembrance. What I intend to point out is that this type of reading does not fully account for a historical dimension. History becomes a steady background, framing a repetitive analysis of the process of trauma and mourning. In this sense, I agree with Huyssen (2003, 8–9) when he warns that psychoanalysis has formed a thick discursive network that blocks the political and historical layers of memory discourse. Or, to put it in the discipline's own terms, it has sealed memory discourse into compulsive repetition. If one of the main features of the traumatic symptom is that it is an out-of-context experience, then we could say that these out-of-context analyses have become traumatic and symptomatic readings. Dictatorships remain what La Capra (2004, 56) calls a "founding trauma": a traumatic event that poses questions for identity yet paradoxically becomes its basis, an event that may be a way of reclaiming history but also a fixation that undermines the possibility of engaging situations in the present. Thus, existing critiques, he admits, pose "an important challenge that needs to be addressed: to develop a careful approach that does not become psychologizing, consumingly theoretical, oblivious to larger social and political problems, narrowly subservient to identity politics, or the object of a fixation whereby history is identified with trauma and one sees trauma everywhere" (La Capra 2004, 112).⁸

Semiotic Readings: Index, Icon, Symbol, and History

But how can we develop such an approach? Is there any way for readings of postdictatorship films to avoid becoming psychologizing, hypertheoretical, or fixated on trauma and mourning? How likely are we to delve into these moving stories without missing larger problems? I would like to suggest that, to develop such an approach, we need to restore what trauma theory overlooks: historicity. By *historicity* I mean not only the filmic representation of history but also the particular qualities that films, like other texts, adopt as a result of them being inscribed in history. This inscription manifests on two different, interrelated levels. Synchronically, films are marked by their present of enunciation: they are affected by the tensions and impulses of a certain historical moment. Films materialize existing social discourses and at the same time contribute to creating these discourses. They belong to (and contribute to the creation of) particular ideological and discursive formations. In other words, films have historicity because they emerge within a concrete, particular present—and because they are being read at that concrete, particular present.⁹ Yet, as La Capra (2004, 1) famously stated, "History is always in transit." Films, like other texts, are not only inscribed in the present but are also affected by temporality: they are marked by earlier historical moments—whose residual components, as Raymond Williams (1977, 53) would say, in large part constitute their present—and they are open to the future. Films might anticipate and shape historical moments yet to come. They might also be read at a forthcoming historical moment, thereby achieving new meanings. An analysis that attends to

⁷ Other problems in trauma theory have been noticed. Radstone (2007, 22–26) says that there are three aspects that should be reconsidered: first, the role of the reader-analyst and the notion of empathy; second, the fascination with trauma; third, the contradiction of analyzing texts that represent catastrophes relying on the idea of trauma as irrepresentability. Traverso and Broderick (2010, 3) claim that this master paradigm neglects local specificities and assumes that people in the third world experience trauma as theorized in the first. Maureen Turin (1989, 234) suggests that trauma scholars focus on the event without considering that trauma can be read formally, for example, in flashbacks and editing. Although these are important critiques, in this article I am more interested in exploring trauma theory's loss of historicity, which I think is the most salient drawback in the postdictatorship context.

⁸ We could in fact say that the latter problem especially applies to Felman and Laub. They basically consider every text after World War II, even those that do not deal with a catastrophe, to be a traumatic text. Although the claim that sustains this view (that narrative in general is in crisis) is quite compelling, seeing trauma everywhere runs the risk of rendering texts, history, and trauma irrelevant—a risk we encounter when reading postdictatorship films.

⁹ With this I do not want to say that any film made at the same time would bear witness to its moment of production *in the same way* but that all films bear witness to their moments of production, albeit in diverse and multiple ways. The filmmaker's and the viewer's particular history, class, gender, and ideology—to name but a few important parameters—certainly influence this relationship with the present. The choice of genre also affects, as I suggest in the next section, the connection with history in different ways. What I intend to point out is that, if we aim to interpret films historically, it is vital to examine the multiple manners in which they relate to their present of enunciation; an examination that is often overlooked when analyzing them from the standpoint of trauma.

postdictatorship cinema's historicity must then simultaneously take into account three interrelated levels of interpretation: the filmic representation of history, the dialectical relationships between this representation and the film's present of enunciation, and its temporal (diachronic) localization in history.¹⁰

An example from a well-known film might help to clarify this. Interpreting *La historia oficial* while attending to historicity means, first, analyzing how history is being represented within the narrative: how Gaby's story discloses hidden aspects of the military years, how this disclosure affects nationalist discourse, and so on. Second, paying attention to historicity entails dialectically linking this internal representation with the film's present of enunciation. How does the internal representation shape social discourses in the early democracy? And how do social discourses in the early democracy make possible the emergence of this particular representation? How does the plight of a fictional average family affect real average families in 1985? And how do existing notions of family enable fictional representation at that specific moment? Finally, acknowledging historicity means recognizing that Puenzo's film both engages past narratives and is read over time. How does *La historia oficial* build on or challenge pre-1980s Argentine cinema? What does the film say in the 1990s, in the wake of the Menemist decrees releasing the imprisoned members of the military junta? How does it speak to us in 2015, when the fate of the disappeared and their children is already known and was at the center of official discourse during *kirchnerismo*?

Relying on trauma theory is not the best option for engaging in this type of historical reading. Yet a semiotic approach can help. As Philip Rosen (2001) explains, although semiotics emerged in film scholarship mainly via Peter Wollen's rereading of Bazin in 1972, it was superseded by other discourses that emphasized the role of subjectivity, such as poststructuralism and feminist theory. Sharing an antirealist conception of representation, these approaches displaced discussions on referentiality in favor of problems like subject positioning, desire, sexual difference, and filmic enunciation (Rosen 2001, 1–8).¹¹ Since the early 2000s, however, some film scholars (Aguilar, Andermann, Chanan, Doane, Manovich, Rosen) have been returning to key concepts in Peircean semiotics, in particular "indexicality," on the basis of the idea that they are useful for rethinking the links between film and history. Indexicality doubly endows the filmic image with historical qualities. First, it points to the image's existence at a particular historical moment and thus brings traces of that moment into the film. Because the image is made of a referent that belongs to the present of enunciation, we are able to find that present within the film. Second, indexicality endows film with history because it points to the past. Given that the profilmic object was placed in front of the camera prior to the viewing of the image, filmic images become "indexical traces": "for their spatial field and the objects depicted were in the camera's "presence" at some point prior to the actual reading of the sign" (Rosen 2001, 20).

In line with this tendency, I would add that the symbolic and the iconic dimensions are also crucial for a historical reading. If we agree that social discourse is historically situated, then we can read verbal language and generic conventions historically. Because genres change over time, we can read films diachronically based on generic variations. Since words are historically specific, we can connect them to specific historical moments. Symbolic signs thus help to elucidate how films materialize and contribute to the creation of existing social discourses and how they are marked by the social discourses of earlier historical moments. Finally, iconicity contributes to an understanding of how images, like history itself, are always in transit. As Peirce (1982, 78) explained, iconicity is a result of the mixture of repetition and stability. Because a sign is repeatedly connected to a stable referent, an icon is formed. For a sign to be considered iconic, a particular image needs to be continually linked to an invariable referent. An everyday example helps us understand this: it is because a particular shape regularly refers to a women's restroom that people are able to visually associate the shape with the restroom. Since the image always evokes a space that remains the same, people

¹⁰ For an overview of paradigmatic scholarship that conceptualizes "historicity" at the intersection of these three levels, see Jameson (1992); La Capra (2004); Williams (1977).

¹¹ Relying mostly on Peirce, film semioticians see film as a sign system encompassing indexical, iconic, and symbolic signs. Cinematic images are indexical because a real referent is required for their configuration: the profilmic objects have to be in front of the camera while being shot so that an image can be formed. At the same time, filmic images are iconic because they visually resemble the referent: In *La historia oficial*, for example, the close-up of Gaby's face looks like that face. Finally, filmic images also include symbolic signs, i.e., signs that establish a conventional link with the referent, like verbal language, plot, and genre codes. See Wollen (1972); Silverman (1983); Prince (1999) for classical examples in this tradition. Needless to say, semiotics cannot be completely isolated from questions of subjectivity and is not necessarily at odds with psychoanalysis. As Silverman (1983, 3–43) explains, semiotics involves the study of signification that cannot be disengaged from the human subject. In this article I am trying not to separate these realms (an impossible task) but to suggest that an approach that emphasizes semiotics over a clinical psychoanalytic reading is more suitable for interpreting postdictatorship films historically.

are able to choose the appropriate space when seeing the image.¹² Although a return to semiotics can be noted in recent analyses of Argentine cinema—for example, Aguilar and Andermann rely on indexicality to connect film and history after the 2001 crisis and Page points to the importance of iconicity in contemporary citations of Italian neorealism—this tendency has not been as prevalent in readings of postdictatorship films. I argue, however, that it could also be beneficial for interpreting this corpus historically, especially—as I analyze in the next section—given the iconic status of several representations of the dictatorship after 2003.¹³

Vintage Representations of Argentine History during *Kirchnerismo*

I now clarify these rather abstract ideas via a brief reading of *Andrés no quiere dormir la siesta*, Daniel Bustamante's 2009 film. This fiction film tells the story of an eight-year-old boy who is forced to move in with his grandmother following his mother's death. Set in 1978, the family drama intersects with Argentine history in a way that is reminiscent of *La historia oficial*. Like in Puenzo's film, melodrama and coming of age codify a political thriller. Individual suspense and private revelation go parallel with collective disclosure. As Andrés adjusts to his new life, he gradually discovers hidden aspects of the society surrounding him. In the course of a transformational year, he learns that there is a clandestine detention center in the neighborhood, that people are being violently brought there, and that friends and relatives are aware but prefer not to interfere and even cover all possible traces. Unlike Gaby's adoptive mother in 1985, Andrés ultimately conforms to his complicit surroundings. Toward the end, he betrays his mother's left-leaning boyfriend, pointing him as the owner of "subversive" flyers to a military officer.

Although it might seem at first sight that *Andrés* is just another example of an invariable format, a semiotic approach brings us closer to the film's historicity and sheds light on its importance in contemporary Argentina. The combination of symbolic, indexical, and iconic signs exposes how temporality and history clash in the filmic world, making the film what I call a vintage (i.e., archaic, retro-style, collectible) representation of dictatorial Argentina during *kirchnerismo*.

The first indications of this clash are, as I have just implied, the anachronistic plot and genre. By means of a thrillerlike, coming-of-age narrative, Bustamante takes us back to the early democracy. Argentine films produced between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s focused above all on denouncing what had happened during the dictatorship. Usually combining two genres, allegory and melodrama, these fiction films led viewers through a labyrinth of clues and emotions until they reached a final revelation that uncovered previously hidden aspects of the recent past. As in the paradigmatic *La historia oficial*, allegorical melodrama and political thriller went hand in hand, often relying on coming-of-age plots featuring young protagonists who embodied the childlike vision of the early democracy. In this sense, *Andrés's* symbolic dimension takes us back in time, to the first decade after the dictatorship.¹⁴

Yet if we pay special attention to the dialogues, we notice that there is another conflicting temporality. On the one hand, like in the allegorical melodramas of the early democracy, adults speak as they would have spoken in 1978, using the typical vocabulary that—via films, testimonial documents, and scholarship—we immediately link to the military years. One of the officers, for example, emerges from the clandestine center saying, "Se me fue la mano con la máquina"—a familiar euphemism for having killed someone during a torture session. As relatives browse through the dead mother's belongings and find left-leaning propaganda, they leave the house while stating the well-known "Yo no tengo nada que ver. Yo no ando

¹² Peircean semiotics is more complex than what I have just outlined, and I attend to that complexity in the next section. First, for Peirce, we have direct experience but indirect knowledge of reality. We know that there is a world of things but we have no intellectual access unless we represent it. He thus distinguishes between two types of referent ("objects"): the "immediate object," the object as represented in the sign, and the "dynamic object," the object as it really is. Given that I am interested in elucidating how the dictatorship becomes a sign (i.e., how it is being represented), in this article the word *referent* corresponds to Peirce's immediate object, to the referent within the semiosis. Second, the symbolic, the indexical, and the iconic dimensions always overlap in a single sign. Although there is a triadic relationship, what defines a sign as an icon, index, or symbol is the prevalence of one of the three dimensions over the others. See Silverman (1983, 20–25) on overlapping functions in Peirce. Finally, what I have outlined are the basic tenets of a semiotic approach. I have left out interesting analyses on how this approach is being rethought in the digital era. See, for example, Buckland (2000); Hansen (2004); Manovich (2001); Rodowick (2007). Although I think that these analyses are necessary for a timely reading of postdictatorship films (e.g., when reading the use of *animé*-style cartoons in *Infancia clandestina*), in this article I outline the basic guidelines for rethinking this corpus historically with the hope that it could be further developed when analyzing particular films.

¹³ I do not want to suggest that a semiotic approach is the only option for reading postdictatorship films historically but that it could be particularly fruitful, especially in the contemporary, iconizing context. See Burucúa (2009) and Feld and Stites Mor (2009) for alternative examples of historical readings.

¹⁴ See Aguilar (2010); Amado (2009); Andermann (2012); and Falicov (2007) for a characterization of Argentine cinema in the 1980s and early 1990s.

metida en nada”—phrases by which civil society signaled a lack of involvement in left-leaning politics. On the other hand, children use words that point to a future time, to the film’s present of enunciation. “Dale, no seas bolacero,” a contemporary colloquial expression accusing the addressee of exaggeration, is the most recurrent example. Thus, symbolic signs point to two temporalities at odds: the early democracy and the 2000s. The interrelation of these two temporalities affects the representation of the military years. In sharp contrast with a historical moment yet to come, the military years seem archaic. Affected by the surprising irruption of the future, especially as materialized in the children’s vocabulary, the representation of the dictatorship acquires vintagelike qualities. The military years look like an antique; an old, collectible item; a retro-style, outdated object that has returned to fashion.

This vintage effect is emphasized by indexicality. Although all images in the film are indexical, there is a sign whose indexicality stands out: the grandmother. Norma Aleandro, one of Argentina’s most famous actors, plays the role of the grandmother. Her inclusion highlights the images’ indexical status. Her recognizable body points to the existence of an afilmic world—that same world in which Aleandro walks on the streets, receives awards, is interviewed, and the like. In other words, the shots of the grandmother interrupt the internal narrative to remind us that there is an outside universe and that cinematic images are made of this outside universe. If indexicality is always by definition linked to historicity, in this particular case the link is even more explicit. Norma Aleandro became famous precisely because she is the actor who portrayed Alicia, Gaby’s adoptive mother, in *La historia oficial*. Aleandro is thus the most visible index of historicity in the film. Her older features and more mature gestures are a constant reminder that time has gone by: though set in 1978, the film was clearly shot at least two decades later. An overtly indexical and historical sign, the grandmother produces an effect similar to that of the dialogues. The sudden irruption of the future—of the film’s present of enunciation—destabilizes the temporal narrative, turning the military years into a vintage, archaic image.

And Aleandro is an example not only of the vintage qualities of this representation of the dictatorship but also of its iconic status. We could say that she establishes with the dictatorship a connection analogous to the one between the shape of a woman and the women’s restroom. Like the shape and the restroom, Aleandro’s body instantaneously evokes the military years. Her image automatically refers to the past unveiled in *La historia oficial*. As with all icons, the link between sign and referent is a visual one. To put it simply, we visually associate Norma Aleandro to that (steady) referent that we call “military dictatorship.” In fact, the inclusion of this particular actress helps us to perceive that it is iconicity the dimension that, unlike what usually happens in the medium, dominates representation in this film. The dictatorial past is made of a series of iconic signs: Norma Aleandro, a garage-style door leading to a detention camp, a woman giving birth in chains, a black hood in the middle of the night, and, especially the canonical green Ford Falcon, which appears in almost all the suspenseful scenes.¹⁵ Interestingly enough, these iconic signs are accompanied by typical 1970s objects categorized as “vintage,” “antique,” and “retro” at retail websites like Mercado Libre: the reading book *Upa*, the textbook *Simulcop*, and the Pocketeer, a classic 1970s toy. These objects join the green Ford Falcon, Aleandro, and the rest of the above-mentioned signs, tightening the bond between iconicity and the vintage representation of the military years.

This iconic, vintage representation entails important ideological consequences. Since, for Peirce, iconic signs require both repetition of a particular image and stability of a steady referent, there is a tight connection between image and referent that invites a prompt association but precludes further examination. The shape of a woman instantly evokes the restroom and requires no additional consideration. Moreover, given that the referent exists only within the semiosis, it is available only when linked to a particular sign. In other words, the women’s restroom is a women’s restroom only because we are codifying it as such. The symbolic thus plays a key role in the constitution of the referent: habit, convention, and law make the referent possible. Thus, in iconic signs there is a tight connection between convention, image, and referent—between the symbolic, the iconic, and the object. An icon emerges as a result of a conventionalized association between an invariable sign and an invariable referent, an association that is repeated and sedimented over time. Hence the enhancement of iconicity has significant ideological implications: the iconic representation of the dictatorship in *Andrés* evokes (and solidifies) a given referent recognized by the audience. Norma Aleandro, the black hood, and the green Falcon trigger well-known sensations, enabling the viewer to identify and sediment an existing representation without demanding further interpretations. As Janis Breckenridge (2012, 105) observes, “The impact of now-iconic imagery . . . remain[s] entirely lost on the naïve protagonist.

¹⁵ See Reati (2009) for an interesting analysis of how the green Ford Falcon came to be the most canonical icon of the Argentine dictatorship.

Refusing to provide overt and didactic commentary within the narration, Bustamante instead relies on the viewer's knowledge of Argentina's recent history."

The flyers that are the medium of Andrés's betrayal are a telling example. Although these flyers advance the plot and link the narrative, we never fully see them. The audience is thus never able to assign a specific party affiliation to the mother's boyfriend, to understand the characters' confrontation as part of a broader ideological struggle in the 1970s, or to situate the drama within that concrete political moment. As is the case with the other iconic signs in the film, the flyers evoke politics but prevent the audience from immersing themselves into politics. They are another iconic sign, an additional example of a retro-style object, of an outdated item that has returned to fashion.

Although focusing on other films goes beyond the scope of this article, Bustamante's vintage representation is in line with many successful recent films on the dictatorship, especially by second-generation directors, such as Gastón Biraben's *Cautiva* (2005), Pablo Agüero's *Salamandra* (2008), or Benjamín Ávila's *Infancia clandestina* (2012). In these fictions, as it happened in Bustamante's, a clash of temporalities creates an anachronistic representation that allows for the cinematic images' iconic dimension to take over their indexical dimension. Released in 2005 and set in 1994, *Cautiva* mixes typical 1980s components (the melodramatic thriller, scenes of demonstrations at the Plaza de Mayo in the early democracy, and newspapers revealing the US involvement in Argentine politics) with real objects belonging to the late 1990s (an automatic ticket machine, a phone card, and graffiti signed by Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio, or HIJOS). Although the plot is never explicitly dated, *Salamandra* combines a suspenseful environment, allegorical phrases, and typical 1980s songs—a combination that transports the viewer back to a frozen past that seems to lie outside of time. In *Infancia clandestina*, children use contemporary language ("Te colgaste," "Está para darle"), while activists use 1970s vocabulary ("estaba podrida la cita," "Beto cantó"). The use of close-ups and slow-motion scenes interrupts the narrative's flow and puts images related to 1970s militancy—such as bullets, weapons, and activists—outside of time. These temporal dissonances build an anachronistic, outdated view of radical militancy. In other words, in all these films the past acquires vintagelike qualities. The representation of the dictatorial past is made of signs in which iconicity takes over the other dimensions.

I find this type of iconic representation to be deeply historical: it materializes and shapes social discourses at a specific moment, *kirchnerismo*. From 2003 to 2015, the imperative to remember what happened during the military years developed into public policy, marking a shift from 1990s Menemist discourse. The reopening of trials against members of the regime, the conversion of military facilities into museums, and the insistence on disclosing the junta's illegal actions brought once again the recent past to the fore. Human rights organizations like Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, Madres de Plaza de Mayo, and HIJOS gained more visibility as government supporters, taking victims' and relatives' voices to the center of social discourse. Public funds made possible the creation of films and TV programs that dealt with past military violence. Children of disappeared people grew into adults willing to tell their own stories, sparking a new wave of cultural production. In other words, in the past decade the dictatorship took center stage, becoming one of *kirchnerismo*'s most salient icons. Fiction films, especially by second-generation directors, were vital to the materialization and creation of this type of iconic representation. They registered and fueled the official way of referring to the dictatorship between 2003 and 2015. Indeed, President Kirchner's (2004) famous speech for the twenty-eighth anniversary of the military coup relied on a clash of temporalities and on iconic images of the 1970s that remind us of the films: "Cuando recién veía las manos, cuando cantaban el himno, veía los brazos de mis compañeros, de la generación que creyó y que sigue creyendo en los que quedamos que este país se puede cambiar . . . que ha dejado un sendero, su vida, sus madres, que ha dejado sus abuelas y que ha dejado sus hijos."¹⁶

This iconicity entails paradoxical ideological consequences. On the one hand, it was precisely this iconic representation that made possible actions as important as trials: because there was a sedimented convention against the atrocities of the regime, there was sufficient consensus to put ex-officers on trial. Given that, upon being confronted with certain signs (a black hood, a green Falcon, a disappeared activist, a mother of Plaza de Mayo) people evoked a given, shared referent (an atrocious dictatorship), there was enough support to take those who were responsible to court. On the other hand, as with all icons, this representation relies on a given referent that prompts agreement yet precludes further examination. Proof of this stasis is not

¹⁶ See Grimson and Kessler (2005) for general references on 1990s Argentina and Auyero (2007) for general references on *kirchnerismo*. See Vezzetti (2009) for a thorough account of memory discourse in Argentina and for the challenges this type of discourse faced as it became hegemonic during *kirchnerismo*.

only the success of the above-mentioned films but also the adverse reaction against discourses that shift away from this iconic narrative, as seen in the controversies sparked by *Los rubios* or by Beatriz Sarlo's *Tiempo pasado* (2005).¹⁷ Unlike what happened in the early democracy—when, as *La historia oficial* suggests, the dictatorship was a referent-in-progress—during *kirchnerismo* the military years became a sealed and already-given referent. Like a semiotic reading of *Andrés* helps us to perceive, the dictatorship became a retro-style object, a vintage item that came to be iconic—with both the positive and the negative ideological consequences that iconicity entails.

Moreover, a semiotic approach sheds light on a connection that has been implied in my analyses and that, although I do not have time to develop in this article, can further help to read postdictatorship films historically: the connection between genre, ideology, and history. As my examples have suggested, there are two important ideological differences in contemporary films: one between the uses of documentary and fiction and another (interrelated) one between two groups within the second generation. While second-generation documentaries tend to challenge hegemonic representations of the dictatorship, fiction tends to accompany this process. *Papá Iván* and *Los rubios* are two good examples of the former. Roqué and Carri manipulate indexicality (e.g., they include photos and letters and then erase their referential markers) to question canonical narratives about the 1970s—a manipulation especially enabled by documentary.¹⁸ On the contrary, as seen in the second-generation films mentioned earlier, the use of fiction allows for narratives legitimizing canonical and official representations. This dichotomy is far from being absolutely straightforward. Not only—as several scholars have observed (Nichols 1997, 50–60; Plantinga 1997, 20–35; Chanan 2007, 4–16)—is it difficult to establish clear-cut boundaries between documentary and fiction, but also, as Aguilar (2010, 64) has outlined, since the 1990s Argentine cinema has been dominated by hybridity. The vast majority of documentaries include fictional strategies, like in Carri's mixture of her own presence as a survivor with Playmobil toys and with an actor who duplicates her. Many fictional products incorporate documentary sections, as in *Cautiva*, where a completely fictional plot follows archival footage of the 1978 FIFA World Cup. Thus, setting a clear boundary between second-generation documentary and fiction is an impossible task. Analyzing the different uses of the two genres, however, illuminates the important ideological consequences that this difference entails, particularly for the enhancement or decrease of iconicity and indexicality. Furthermore, I contend that this clash between documentary and fiction is the formal counterpart of an ideological tension among the members of the second generation regarding recent history, especially regarding the political projects of the first generation. Whereas fiction tends to allow for an iconic representation of the revolutionary years attuned to *kirchnerismo*, the manipulation of indexicality in second-generation documentaries challenges such discourse.

After this brief semiotic analysis of *Andrés*, I return now to trauma theory. It is of course possible to read Bustamante's film from the latter standpoint, paying attention, for example, to how children cope with a catastrophic environment. We can also resort to psychoanalytic clinical concepts to see the film as a piece of mourning. If, however, we relied on trauma theory to access history, we would be producing an undesirable ahistorical reading. We would be engulfed in the political thriller, discovering truths that were already available: the existence of clandestine detention centers, of clandestine baby deliveries, and of a complicit society. Because of unchanging conceptions of trauma, memory, and mourning, we would probably see no differences between this historical narrative and the one in *La historia oficial*. History would be a steady background, framing an analysis of subjective psychological processes. It would be impossible to disengage the traumatizing event from the traumatic experience: the dictatorship would continue to be a founding trauma, preserved by our symptomatic, repetitive-compulsive reading. The military years would remain a stable and invariable referent: a vintage, outdated item. In other words, we would be engaging in

¹⁷ Both HIJOS, one of the leading voices of *kirchnerismo*, and INCAA, the National Institute of Cinematic and Audiovisual Arts, reacted negatively to *Los rubios* and accused the film of being disrespectful toward 1970s activism, particularly because of Carri's implied doubts on its viability. In *Tiempo pasado*, Beatriz Sarlo argued that the subjective turn in the representation of the dictatorship precluded historical examination. Her assertions were strongly criticized, especially by scholars advocating the validity of testimonial narrative from the standpoint of trauma theory. I find these controversies paradigmatic of the difficulties of shifting away from the naturalized, iconic representation of the 1970s during *kirchnerismo*. See Noriega (2009) for further details on the reactions against *Los rubios*.

¹⁸ I say "especially" because, as explained earlier, both documentary and fiction include symbolic, iconic, and indexical signs: all cinematic images (whether documentary or fictional) establish real, visual, and conventional associations with their referent. However, as Chanan (2007, 4) has compellingly argued, indexicality is more emphatic in documentary because the viewer is aware that images are "drawn from the social and physical world that exists independently of the camera," and iconicity is more emphatic in fiction because the viewer expects the fictional world to visually resemble the afilmic world.

an iconic reading, closing the gap between image and referent, precluding further examination, and missing the film's historicity.

A semiotic approach, on the contrary, provides the foundations for a historical reading. It helps to elucidate how the film materializes history and is inscribed in history. It contributes to an understanding of how it intersects with the present and is immersed in time. This approach has arguably other drawbacks. The burden on the reader is probably one of them. To read these films from this perspective, we need to delve into complex concepts such as icon, symbol, and index, coming close to that hypertheoretical view that La Capra rightly criticized. For us to restore historicity we need to be conversant with specific historical moments over time; that is, we would not be able to read *Andrés* without knowing Argentine postdictatorship culture and history. Yet I find these demands as onerous as being knowledgeable of the complexities of trauma theory. Reading the signs present in the cinematic field and their connection to history is not more complicated than appealing to intricate concepts such as experience, postmemory, trauma, melancholy, and mourning. Moreover, if we consider the ideological implications entailed in symptomatic, iconic interpretations, we can resignify these demands and rather than seeing them as a burden regard them as a moral imperative.

Let us finally reconsider Laub and Felman's questions: Is there a relation between narrative and history? Can the act of reading be instructed by clinical work and can clinical work be instructed by the act of reading? In large part, we have to agree with them. Postdictatorship films can be precocious modes of accessing history, inscribing truths that—even in the midst of memory fatigue and representation excess—we might not yet know. We can also say that the role of the cultural scholar resembles to some extent that of the analyst. Both scholar and analyst aim to decipher historical truths that are unspoken yet inscribed in texts. Trauma theory is not, however, the best approach for achieving this goal. Especially in the recent political context, it yields interpretations that preserve an invariable referent and runs the risk of transforming texts, via the reader, into a medium of ahistorical transmission.

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