

## Secrets, Trauma, and the Memory Market (or the return of the repressed in recent Argentine post-dictatorship cultural production)

Silvia R TANDECIARZ, College of William and Mary, [srtand@wm.edu](mailto:srtand@wm.edu)

Volume 1.2 (2012) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2012.43 | <http://cinej.pitt.edu>

### Abstract

*Since the end of the last Argentine Dictatorship (1976-1983), a number of feature-length films have engaged in the public debate over the legacies of state terrorism. El secreto de sus ojos (2009), Argentina's most recent Oscar winner, is the latest to do so, exploring the effects of more than a decade of impunity on those who lost their loved ones. Suggesting that restoration of a justice system that works can lead to the restoration of full civic engagement in a healthy body politic, the film raises important questions about citizenship and belonging in a post-national era. This essay explores the film's phenomenal success in the global memory market to illuminate what remains at stake in contemporary narratives of reconciliation.*

**Keywords:** Memory Studies, Argentina, Melodrama, Justice, Neoliberalism



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#) and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

## Secrets, Trauma, and the Memory Market (or the return of the repressed in recent Argentine post-dictatorship cultural production)

Must forgiveness saturate the abyss? Must it suture the wound in a process of reconciliation? Or rather give place to another peace, without forgetting, without amnesty, fusion, or confusion? (Jacques Derrida, 50).

We go to the movies not to think but to be moved. In a postsacred world, melodrama represents one of the most significant, and deeply symptomatic, ways we negotiate moral feeling. (Linda Williams, 61)

If the production of memory narratives--of a particular memory--responds both to the historical context being represented and the contemporary moment into which it is inserted (Jelin 2001, Huyssen 2003), how might we interpret the extraordinary marketing success of Juan José Campanella's, *El secreto de sus ojos* (2009)? The latest in a series of feature-length Argentine films to engage in the public debate over the legacies of state terrorism, the film has drawn huge audiences both in Argentina and abroad. With over two and a half million viewers as of November 2009, *El Secreto* holds the national record as the second most popular film in the history of Argentine cinema and has received numerous awards on the festival circuit, including an Oscar for best foreign film. Like *La historia oficial* (1985), Argentina's other Oscar winner, the film offers a narrative of reconciliation that promises to heal the damaged body politic, positing a future built on terrain shared equally by those who were directly victimized by the nation's most recent dictatorship (1976-1983) and those who benefitted from its crimes. It suggests, moreover, that after a decade of impunity, restoration of a justice system that works can provide sufficient closure for most and lead to full civic engagement in a healthy democracy. In what follows I examine the film's articulation of citizenship and belonging in this post-conflict setting to show how the problems of voice, representation, and identity the film poses speak not only to the national scene in Argentina, but also to the transnational marketing of memory in a new global imaginary.

The fraught issues of reconciliation and justice in post-dictatorship Argentina have been the subjects of international attention since the country's return to democracy in 1983. The commission appointed by President Raúl Alfonsín to investigate crimes committed as part of the Military Junta's "Process of National Reorganization" documented thousands of cases of illegal detention, torture, extrajudicial executions, baby stealing and disappearance, abuses committed often in collaboration with a larger transnational counter insurgency network. The Commission's report led to the prosecution of those responsible, and several top military officials received life sentences. This process, however, came to an abrupt halt in 1986 with the laws of *Punto Final* (1986) and then *Obediencia Debida* (1987). Two years later, even those prosecuted and sentenced, including the Junta commanders, were amnestied by Alfonsín's successor, President Carlos Menem. For the next fifteen years throughout the Southern Cone, those responsible for crimes against humanity were free to walk the same streets as their victims. In this interim, national and international human rights advocates and organizations stepped into the breach; Spanish Judge Baltasar Garzón's pursuit of justice for Spanish citizens who were victims of Southern Cone repression represents the most public of transnational efforts in pursuit of a justice that, for political and economic reasons, in Latin America had come to a stand still. The turning point in Argentina coincided with its institutional and financial collapse in 2001 and subsequent election of Néstor Kirchner in 2003. With the end of impunity, the last decade once again has meant a reversal of fortune for those implicated; the official nullification of Argentina's amnesty laws in 2003 enabled the resumption of trials and new criminal cases once again are being brought before the courts every day.

It is impossible to understand post-dictatorship cultural production in Argentina outside this local/global history in which for nearly two decades victims' demands for justice went unheeded. Denied a voice by the judicial process in their own country, those who suffered under state terrorism became exiles of sorts, their

citizenship bracketed by democratic governments that found they could not offer redress. At the same time, many sought interlocutors beyond the limited imaginings of their nation, in the mediascapes of the global human rights community. It is this limbo, I submit, that haunts *El secreto de sus ojos*, as palimpsests of secrets and the absence of justice prevent its protagonists at century's end from leading full and rewarding lives. Equally important, however, is the context of the film's release in a present marked in Argentina by an official, institutionalized politics of memory. Oscillating between an awareness of past impunity and the recognition that Argentina today may be well on its way to settling its accounts with torturers, the film suggests the time has come to close the book on this problematic. But even as it calls for an end to memory, it engages practices of memorialization integral to the work of mourning, capitalizes on what has become part of a transnational imaginary, and interpellates viewers from all over the world captivated by the story of a nation stretched to the breaking point by the exigencies of the neoliberal marketplace, the signal melodrama of late capitalism.

Set in 1999, the film traces Benjamín Espósito's efforts to reconstruct a crime committed in 1974 during the volatile government of Isabel Perón that anticipated Argentina's last military coup. Twenty-five years after the fact, Benjamín has returned to Buenos Aires from a self-imposed *insilio*, or internal exile in Jujuy, and is attempting to write a novel based on his recollections of the case that determined his last quarter century. While the crime Benjamín returns to is, itself, not politically or ideologically driven--it involves the rape and murder of Liliana Coloto by Isidoro Gómez, a childhood acquaintance from her home town--the web of impunity that prevents the victimizer from being judged and sentenced by Argentina's legal system very much is, as is the persecution to which Benjamín is subjected following his efforts to bring the perpetrator to justice. The initial violation serves, then, to engage viewers without regard to their political investment (it's a love story, one might argue, not a political treatise) and as the necessary pretext to reference other, systemic crimes committed by agents of the state as part of its counter-insurgency operation. The liberation of Coloto's confessed murderer and his subsequent employment in José López Rega's Ministry of Social Welfare not only references the criminality of, as Campanella puts it, a "grupo que se nutría de este tipo de gente" [a group that fed on this type of people] but, for those familiar with this dark period, functions as a cipher for understanding the bureaucratic infrastructure that lay the groundwork for state terrorism. After all, following the logic of the film, without the Ministry's intervention Gómez would not have been freed or drafted into the paramilitary *Alianza Anticomunista Argentina* (Triple A); Benjamín's friend and colleague, Pablo Sandoval, would not have been murdered in his stead; Benjamín would not have had to leave Buenos Aires in fear for his life; and his life and that of everyone involved might have taken dramatically different paths. Benjamín's research into the period thus exposes the structures of power that were in place even before the actual collapse of democracy, the operation of state terrorism before its official implementation; and it exposes a core contradiction of the mid-seventies, re-signifying what many still see as a period of political aperture in a continent slowly being engulfed by authoritarian regimes to present it instead as that which, through institutional corruption, set the scene for the dark history that followed.

The crime narrative Benjamín's research uncovers and that on one level drives the plot, however, remains secondary to the unresolved love story between Benjamín and his colleague, the young and attractive Irene Menéndez Hastings, who has only recently been hired when Coloto is murdered. As with the national romances of the nineteenth century in which erotic tensions and desire fuel foundational imaginings (Sommer), their ability to come together at the film's conclusion promises to join representatives of two distinct groups marked by dictatorship: those who, like Irene, succeeded in spite or because of the political climate and now see no need to look back (in Irene's own words: "atrás no es mi jurisdicción. Me declaro incompetente" [the past is not my jurisdiction. I declare myself incompetent]), and those for whom the past remains very much present having radically circumscribed what they were able to achieve (Benjamín: "No fue otra vida. Fue ésta. Es ésta" [It wasn't another life. It was this one. It is this one.]). The differences between them loom large as they approach the chasm

that separated them in 1974, and that still threatens to keep them apart, magnifying the choices each made when confronted with the criminality of the state and the consequences their different social location had for the paths their lives took. Benjamín's choice of words when he tells Irene he is writing a novel about the Coloto case serves to underscore the issue they will need to resolve if they are ever to come together: "en realidad nunca más hablamos de eso... ¿por qué nunca más hablamos de eso?" [in fact, never again did we speak about that.... why did we never again speak about that?]. Benjamín's deliberate repetition of the phrase "nunca más" [never again] cannot be accidental here, echoing as it does the "never again" of the Sábado Commission's proclamation in 1983; and the stress he places on it as he speaks it suggests that processing this story, coming to terms with it, engaging in an open dialogue about it is necessary not only for them, but through them, for the nation to be healed, for a real participatory democracy to succeed. This scene suggests that the film not only can help further the conversation, but through romance figure a resolution, suturing the divisions between winners and losers, between those who would rather not revisit the past and those still held captive by it.

As a foundational romance, however, the film does more than simply endorse open dialogue and invite its audience to share in the release of its romantic climax. A close look at the gender dynamics embedded in it, particularly its conceptualization of masculinity, can help illuminate what else is at stake in its memory work. In fact, it's interesting to juxtapose the love story between Liliana Coloto, the brutally slain victim, and her young husband, Ricardo Morales--filtered through Benjamín's gaze--and that between Benjamín and Irene as they respectively unfold in the seventies. From Benjamín's perspective, the love Coloto and Morales share is unparalleled by anything he's ever witnessed or felt. Following Isidoro Gómez's crime, Morales' refusal to accept the corruption and failure of the justice system conveys upon him, from Benjamín's perspective, a distinct moral authority (he obeys a higher law) and even heroic stature: here we have a real man, courageous in love, and equally courageous in the face of the state's failures. Indeed, in his version of the past both Gómez and Morales retain a phallic authority over Benjamín, as the interrogation scene leading to Gómez's confession underscores; in Gómez we have an example of a misogynous machismo unleashed, in Morales a quiet, steadfast, resolve to avenge the death of the beloved. In Benjamín, in contrast, we have a protagonist who can't bring himself to confess his love for Irene, never mind fight for it against all odds. His failure to provide Morales with some sort of justice mirrors his inability, in the past, to take charge of his life; he is defeated instead by the very forces that separate him from Irene and simultaneously transform Argentina's political scene into a show of horror.

Benjamín's return from Jujuy twenty-five years later and his decision to revisit this past and novelize it, help him not only come to terms with what happened, but serve the therapeutic function of transforming a fearful, emasculated hero into one capable of, in the language of the film, fully embracing his passion. The redemption of a damaged masculinity, healed and reinvigorated through the work of memory and acceptance of the shared vulnerability that makes us human thus proves one of the film's most powerful subtexts. In the end, those masculinities deployed in the seventies with bravado and impunity reveal themselves in the present as deeply flawed. Benjamín's encounter with Morales twenty-five years later leads to his discovery of the clandestine, private prison in which, unbeknownst to anyone, Morales has held his wife's murderer, thus meting out the very form of justice the state failed to apply: "usted dijo prisión perpetua" [you said a life sentence]. In seeing the prison that Morales has built for Gómez and by extension, for himself as captor, Benjamín realizes he can choose a different path, that temperance and the functional, if imperfect, justice at the close of the twentieth century are preferable to the peculiar form of madness intemperate passions like Morales' (and Gómez's) can unleash. The past that has haunted him loses its hold as writing the crime narrative's ending restores his *autoría*, conferring upon him a mastery that enables him to put it away. In contrast to the broken widower who, having captured Gómez and held him in captivity for twenty-five years, remains trapped in a prison of mourning and revenge, Benjamín's ability to close that book and step into a future with Irene signals the path all Argentines might follow, a path far from those unable or unwilling to forget and far, too, from those whose investment in the memory market makes

them equally captive to a "show of horror" that with the passage of time has become just another twisted, degraded and degrading enterprise.

Read through this lens, the period of dictatorship that physically and emotionally keeps Benjamín and Irene apart proves a detour, a long interruption in a love story that can simply pick up where it left off once the social order disrupted by the turmoil of the seventies has been restored, its protagonists disciplined by loss. The seventies appear in this memory work, then, as both the site of youth and possibility, and the site of intemperate passions and failure, a time when gender and class hierarchies were in flux, shaken from their moorings by a context of social and political unrest, but also the moment when the revolutionary struggle for a new Argentina was defeated. From this vantage point, moving on, looking forward emerges as a sign of maturity, offering relief from the growing pains the decade signified. The consummation of Benjamín's and Irene's love suggested at film's end thus carries a double charge: it highlights Benjamín's reclaimed masculinity and empowerment even as it redirects his passion for truth and justice toward more "temperate" pursuits in a New World Order. From his new vantage point--and hindsight here is 20/20--struggles against or outside the state's institutions in the end prove futile. That outside, frozen in time as figured by Morales' scene of retribution, repulses Benjamín, making him avert his gaze, wrap up his novel, and retreat to the safe harbor of his beloved, who conveniently welcomes him with open arms from within the walls of the very same judicial structure that expelled him years earlier. And while his restoration to the site of justice could be interpreted as symbolic of its restoration--making Benjamín's ethical stance no longer at odds with neoliberal democracy's dominant order--the film's trajectory suggests that it is Benjamín who has changed, lost his fear and come into his own. In the end, whether or not the state's institutions in 1999 have been rid of the corruption and criminality that once tore apart the nation proves secondary. The film's symbolic economy indicates, instead, that healing the body politic means working within the limits established by the state, as constitutionally defined under democratic rule, and decisively turning away from the ethos of resistance that remains one of the strongest legacies of the seventies.

A close look at the impact of class on the romantic narrative brings this ideological subtext into even starker relief. In Benjamín's recollection of the past, his emasculation and inability to act on what he recognizes as a shared attraction is due in large part to the class differences between him and the object of his affection. They mark his and Irene's first meeting as Irene corrects her superior to comment on the Scottish pedigree of her last name (Hastings), its proper pronunciation, and her American Ivy League educational credentials. The Argentine pedigree signaled by her other name, Menéndez, is not highlighted in the dialogue, but proves equally significant, linking Irene to at least two prominent military figures whose protagonism under state terrorism was decisive: Luciano Benjamín Menéndez, the ex-general who led an unsuccessful coup against Junta President Viola and was later convicted of crimes against humanity for his role as director of the clandestine detention center in Córdoba, La Perla; and Mario Benjamín Menéndez, the ex-General appointed military governor of the Falklands during the war that ended the dictatorship. Although the film does not specify whether Irene is related to either, her name clearly identifies her as part of a genealogy of power within the armed forces elite, marking her character if only by association.

While the film flirts with the possibility that class might be deemed irrelevant, trumped by passion, as it turns out, love cannot conquer all even in the revolutionary seventies; cross-class allegiances, like the struggle for social justice, are thwarted by a corrupt regime that plays those differences to its own advantage. Gómez, whose name, education level, and employment choices early in the film clearly designate him as working class, is granted enormous power when he is drafted into Argentina's paramilitary forces as a result of the crime he commits; Benjamín may have the law on his side and work in the courts, but he clearly does not come from the wealth or privilege that could insulate his every move. When his colleague Pablo is murdered by a posse looking for

Benjamín in retaliation for his pursuit of Gómez, Benjamín's life is momentarily spared; but his middle class status does not confer upon him the family connections available to Irene, the connections that ensure her safety and lead to his flight. Their love story in the past is thus over-determined by class--at least as Benjamín reconstructs it--something that seems irrelevant twenty-five years later to our older, wiser, and more enlightened hero. Loosening the historical association between the seventies and leftist struggles for social justice, the film codifies the period instead as a time marked by turmoil, unrest, social immobility, class hierarchies, and corruption. The present, in contrast, appears in a much better light: as Argentina enters the 21st century, order has been restored, the ever-growing chasm between rich and poor is nowhere to be seen, and functioning state institutions make cross-class allegiances possible. Given the current state of affairs, any nostalgia for the past appears misplaced, as does the residual reflex to look back.

All of these elements--class, gender, and ideology--come together in the film's penultimate scene to map, instead, a way forward. As Hugo Hortiguera argues:

El Benjamín de Campanella descubre la cárcel clandestina en una visita casual a Morales, ve al violador detrás de las rejas y elije callar, al igual que lo ha venido haciendo el carcelero todos estos años. Toda la escena transcurre en ese cruce de miradas en silencio de los tres personajes: la consternación en los ojos de Benjamín, la mirada cómplice de Morales y el aturdimiento de Gómez que sólo acierta a pedir: "Dígale que al menos me hable". Entremetido en esa relación siniestra, Benjamín, convertido ahora en encubridor del horror permanente, tampoco pronuncia palabra. Pero ya no es un inocente "virtuoso" entre dos demonios, entre dos espectros del pasado, sino un partícipe más de ese pequeño cosmos alegórico del país en que se ha transmutado la cárcel.... Lo nefasto que descubre es algo que va mucho más allá del castigo ilegal al que ha quedado sujeto Gómez. Es el descubrimiento de una fascinación perversa por lo atroz que atraviesa la sociedad argentina y de la que él no escapa. Eso que ve en ese pequeño espacio de la prisión levantada por Morales es su propia perversión secreta.

The looks the men exchange in this climactic scene expose their shared condition as prisoners--Gómez of Morales, Morales of his grief, and Benjamín of a past from which he has yet to break free. The scene, moreover, implicates the audience in that spectacle of looking, underscoring our complicity and revealing the film, itself, as also caught in a double bind: a vehicle for that very "perverse fascination" it would indict, it profits by revisiting this dark period while ostensibly releasing its audience from it and redirecting our affective investment elsewhere. Captivated by horror, caught in the act of looking, the audience along with Benjamín is delivered from the social responsibility this witnessing entails through the cathartic recognition at film's end that accommodation, complicity, and silence represent the only reasonable response to the revelation of this hidden, festering wound.

The key role of this scene in the melodramatic imaginary the film deploys cannot be overstated. As Linda Williams reminds us, drawing on the work of Peter Brooks,

The theatrical function of melodrama's big sensation scenes was to be able to put forth a moral truth in gesture and to picture what could not be fully spoken in words. [...]Usually, the unspeakable truth revealed in the sensation scene is the revelation of who is the true villain, who the innocent victim. The revelation occurs as a spectacular, moving sensation--that is, it is felt as sensation and not simply registered as ratiocination in the cause-effect logic of narrative--because it shifts to a different register of significance, often bypassing language altogether. (52)

In this case, the scene puts into doubt "who is the true villain, who the innocent victim," and momentarily "shifts to a different register of significance," underscoring "the unspeakable truth" at its core: our collective failure, to cite Derrida, to "suture the wound in a process of reconciliation." As such, it registers "as a spectacular, moving sensation... bypassing language altogether" the impossibility of confronting the enormity of the crimes committed or of addressing the questions of justice and reconciliation within our national and international criminal justice

systems. While the illegality of the punishment Benjamín discovers does not make it unjust given the moral imperative to which it responds, the scene effectively highlights its monstrosity and displaces the problem of retribution to the liminal terrain of the uncanny. The cognitive dissonance generated by the discovery of this new crime--yet another secret in this palimpsest--derives from its inassimilable nature and the challenge it poses: what to do when a nation's moral and legal codes are at odds (as they were for over a decade under Argentina's official policy of institutionalized forgetting)? In narrative terms, it is literally the impossibility of suture that drives Benjamín, and us, back to the imperfect halls of justice he fled years earlier. But his flight from this new crime scene also constitutes a choice: turning away from the pain of Morales and his clandestine, extra-legal punishment of Gómez, Benjamín implicitly sanctions this act of vigilante justice and withholds judgment, thereby indicating that the search for truth and reconciliation, given the disparate needs of those involved, must ultimately be resolved at the level of the individual. It is a conclusion that proves conveniently functional for the neoliberal social contract ushered in by dictatorship, reinvigorated in the nineties, and dominant still in the twenty-first century, a contract that would channel desire into the domestic private sphere and leave it, as the final scene indicates, safely ensconced behind closed doors.

In other words, it is the melodramatic mode that enables Benjamin to consummate his passion by joining with his beloved--thereby solving the problem of his damaged masculinity--while successfully evading the question of justice that propels the narrative forward. Narrative tension is diffused through the consummation of romantic longing in the private sphere, and the problem of social and political justice is displaced and indefinitely postponed. Again, as Williams reminds us, "Melodrama offers the hope that it may not be too late, that there may still be an archaic sort of virtue, and that virtue and truth can be achieved in private individuals and individual heroic acts rather than, as Eisenstein wanted, in revolution and change" (74). Ideally functional for neoliberal democracy and the global marketplace, the film deploys the melodramatic mode masterfully, demobilizing audiences by redirecting our investment away from collective, politicized demands for accountability.

The final scene sums up the narrative's loose ends by bringing Benjamín full circle, back to Irene, his abilities (read: virility) fully restored as he figures out how to move on, to stop looking. In so doing the film suggests, that we, the audience, Argentine society would be better off if we, too, were able to do the same. Benjamín's attempts to bring closure to the case that has haunted him for the last twenty five years restore order to a world gone awry, freeing him from a past that emasculated him and deprived him of historical agency. Closure will mean not only putting in perspective that time, but repairing his damaged manhood and transforming his fear into a newfound ability to love (symbolically figured by the manual correction of the typewriter's dropped "A," so that "temo" [I fear] becomes "te amo" [I love]). There is a certain triumphalism the film's ending underscores as it restores Benjamín's manhood and invites us to follow him like the pied piper away from the terrain of pain and retribution Morales represents. And there is, too, a certain relief it provides, serving as a bookend to a narrative that consumed a generation as it grants its viewers permission once and for all to turn away from it.

The historical lesson here is clear: the struggles of the past tore the nation apart, and in the twenty-first century wallowing in them, like empowering their protagonists, represents a sort of stagnation. In the logic of the film, the construction of an "other," grotesquely deformed, almost unrecognizable, against which a new Argentine identity might be molded schools its audience and redirects its affective investment away from the damaged, violated victim who takes matters into his own hands to mete out the justice the state has denied him. Narrative closure offers relief, a reprieve from the painful reality Morales inhabits, and shifts our attention away from the unpleasant, unsightly issue of our fractured moral foundation. Projecting a future without Morales, without his pain, without a trauma from which no recovery seems possible, the film's ending asks that we, its audience, take a side: choose a future scripted by Benjamín--representing an institutionally sanctioned, if deeply flawed justice--or

one scripted by those so scarred by the past that they not only remain its prisoners, but risk reproducing through their obsession the very criminality they would condemn.

Dropping the final curtain on the spectacle of justice and retribution that consumed a generation, the film gestures toward a future defined by a pact of silence among its witnesses for the sake of political stability. Asking us to close our eyes as the door closes on Benjamín and Irene, the film projects its audience into the imagined community they represent, marginalizing those who, marked by years of suffering in isolation, would refuse to engage in the transaction altogether. Unsurprisingly, as Alice Nelson reminds us, this may be, in fact, what the memory market requires: "any critique of neoliberalism, any gesture toward historical memory, is at once substantially framed by the "grammar" it seeks to contest. That is, offerings on the memory market are both produced by, and consumed within, neoliberalism's terms, even as they struggle (to a greater or lesser degree, with varying strategies and tactics) to disrupt that very paradigm" (6-7). *El Secreto de sus ojos* does not escape this trap as it leads viewers to accept, as modeled by Benjamín's silence and collusion, the imperfect and tainted justice the market demands. In a present defined by neoliberalism, with its myths of meritocracy, individualism, and opportunity, narrative closure minimizes class differences as privatized forms of love and vengeance take center stage. The utopian movements of the seventies that haunt this story lead, in the logic of the film, to heartbreak, even madness. What emerges in their stead reflects "an increasing social recognition that one of the deepest legacies of authoritarianism, forged within deep North-South inequities, may be neoliberalism itself" (Nelson, 6). Trafficking in the very voyeurism it denounces, the film takes on the issue of historical memory, acknowledges the fissures in Argentine democracy's judicial foundation, and then, unable "to suture the wound" (Derrida), asks us to look away and invest elsewhere, in the private sphere, in love.

It's a curious message given the film's release in a context where crimes committed under state terrorism are being prosecuted every day and where, in turn, not a single act of vigilante justice related to this period has been recorded. And yet, it is less curious when read as a critique of the populist memorial rhetoric that has defined the public sphere since Néstor Kirchner's election in 2003. As a cypher of the here and now in Argentina, *El Secreto* signals the end of an era: the exhaustion of a human rights discourse and agenda doggedly focused on coming to terms with this past. Read as a bookend, the counterpart to *The Official Story*, it marks a definitive shift in the articulation of a new Argentine imaginary, one constructed collectively through the coming of age of a generation that has no personal recollection of state terrorism. Underlining what most relatives of the missing have come to accept--that crimes against humanity, by their very nature, exceed all institutional mechanisms of redress--the film gives voice to what may prove a generational shift regarding post-dictatorship memory work. Indeed, it may be in its ability to recognize the lasting scars of state terrorism while simultaneously articulating the desire for a new social consensus that the film's extraordinary success lies. As the victims have moved on to rebuild their lives, as the children of the disappeared (H.I.J.O.S.) find new causes to focus on and new ways to identify themselves, and as new social actors and collectives emerge to address the struggles of the day, the dictatorship and its atrocities lose their all-consuming grasp. "Terror fatigue" begins to set in as one too many a politician masters the art of trafficking in horror; when individuals trade on personal suffering for political or economic gain, memory work risks becoming a marketing ruse that distracts from rather than contributes to the construction of a better world. This seems to be the political unconscious that Campanella's film taps into as it effectively takes the pulse of Argentine society, urging us to focus on the construction of a better world by breaking free from the stranglehold of a past that threatens to make us all its victims.

Viewed from the transnational arena, the film's ideological imperative unfolds in multiple layers, asking of its viewers to accept an imperfect institutionalism as the practical choice in lieu of collective mobilization and tacitly endorsing the current, economic global consensus. It suggests that were we, collectively, to follow Benjamín's lead in choosing Irene's way--the way of security and collaboration with flawed governance structures

whose jurisdiction is exclusively forward-looking--stability, security, and happiness are sure to follow. What is more, the message to an external audience seems unmistakable: we have settled accounts with the torturers, we have dealt with our issues, and Argentina is open for business. It is a message crafted from the heart of the neoliberal enterprise, and one that has proven unsurprisingly profitable for its creator. While calling an end to the show of horror, it ably turns a last trick, trafficking in the misery that ravaged a nation to assert itself in a global marketplace whose appetite for such images has not subsided. And it works because it facilitates cross-border empathy while asserting the exceptionalism of the outsider, capitalizing on a global solidarity movement that condemns the blatant disregard for human rights South of the border but that can't stop, in the words of Susan Sontag, watching the pain of others.

## References

ErlI, A. (2010). "Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory." In A. ErlI and A. Nünning (Eds.), *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*. Berlin and New York: De Gruyter. 389-398.

Campanella, J. J. (2009). *El secreto de sus ojos*. Argentina: Sony Pictures Classics. 2010. DVD.

Derrida, J. (2001) "On Forgiveness." *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. New York: Routledge. 27-60.

Feitlowitz, M. (1998, 2011). *Lexicon of Terror*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Gledhill, C. (2000) "Rethinking Genre." *Reinventing Film Studies*. Ed. C. Gledhill and L. Williams. London: Arnold. 222-243.

Hortiguera, H. (2010). "Políticas del recuerdo y memorias de la política en *El secreto de sus ojos* de Juan José Campanella." *Ciberletras* 24. Retrieved 7 March 2011 from <http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/ciberletras/v24/hortiguera.html>.

Huyssen, A. (2003). *Present Pasts. Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Jelin, E. (2001). *Los trabajos de la memoria*. Madrid: Siglo veintiuno.

Masiello, F. (2001). *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Nelson, A. A. (2011). "Conclusion. Marketing Discontent: The Political Economy of Memory in Latin America." In K. Bilbija and L.A. Payne (Eds.), *Accounting for Violence. Marketing Memory in Latin America*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Sacheri, E. *La pregunta de sus ojos*. (2005). Buenos Aires: Galerna.

Sommer, D. (1991). *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Sontag, S. (2003). *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Williams, L. (1998). "Melodrama Revised." In N. Browne (Ed.), *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press. 42-88.