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Everything but the Smell: The Ethics of the “Connective Turn” in Argentinian Memory Activism

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THE MEMORIAL MUSEUM IN THE DIGITAL AGE



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Everything but the Smell:

*The Ethics of the "Connective Turn"
in Argentinian Memory Activism*

Megan Corbin

Introduction: New Technologies and the Connective Turn

In 2013, the collective Huella Digital launched an interactive documentary website, centrosclandestinos.com.ar, which features three-dimensional video-game-style recreations of some of the most well-known former detention and torture centres now converted into sites of memory in post-dictatorship Argentina. This website is an exceptional example of how technological advances are changing the way visitors interact with spaces of memory across the globe, creating new forms of connection with memorial museums and

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modifying, or even replacing, past paradigms. As Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian Ott argue, “memory places cultivate the being and participation together of strangers, but strangers who appear to have enough in common to be co-traversing the place” (2010, p. 27). Similarly, Amy Sodaro links the moral education function of the memorial museum in part to the public element of the experience:

Not only are the museums’ visitors aware of and so internalize how they behave while experiencing the exhibition, but the memorial museum also seeks for them to internalize, with the discipline of being watched, the moral lesson of the past that they have learned in the museum, leading to a new moral discipline in everyday life.

(Sodaro 2018, p. 175)

However, the purely online existence of this new project removes the need to physically visit the place altogether, thus eliminating the way in which memory places cultivate the being and participation together of strangers. Instead, it facilitates solitary and individual explorations of the virtual memory place. This article asks, what are the ethical issues involved in introducing such a paradigm-altering technology to the concept of a memory museum? What type of connection (or disconnection) does such technology facilitate? Do such technologies introduce positive or negative additions to the encounter?

In an article published in 2011, digital memory scholar Andrew Hoskins examines the influence new technologies – especially digital media – have had on the metaphors used to discuss memory. Describing the incorporation of these advances into memory studies as “the connective turn”, Hoskins argues that we are experiencing “a paradigmatic shift in the treatment and comprehension of memory and its functions and dysfunctions” (2011, p. 20). Rather than examining specific case studies, Hoskins focuses on the implications of this connective turn for where individual and collective memory are to be

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found, interrogating the continuity of memory in an always-connected digital world that is complicating the traditional temporal dimensions and physical limitations of the archive.

This chapter interrogates what is lost and what is gained in this turn toward cyberspace as a new venue for interacting with a traumatic past. It will first examine the discussions and debates that took place in Argentina as former detention centres were converted into sites of memory, using the debate about the recovery of Escuela Mecánica de la Armada [ESMA] (the Navy School of Mechanics) as an illustrative example. Then, it will compare the features of some of actual memory sites in Buenos Aires with the interactive documentary features on the website, specifically focusing on the narrative logic and guided visits of the physical sites, taking the *Casino de Oficiales* [Officers' Quarters] of the former ESMA as its central case study. Lastly, it will discuss these similarities and differences in dialogue with the issues raised in the ESMA debate over the conversion of such historical places into memory sites in order to highlight and analyse the ethical questions posed by this new horizon of technologically enhanced memory activism in Argentina.

Argentina: The Last Military Dictatorship and Its Legacy

To understand the ethics surrounding the incorporation of new technologies into memory activism in Argentina, it is essential to first understand the violence of the country's recent history. From 1976 to 1983, the brutal military-led dictatorship in Argentina imprisoned, tortured, murdered, and secretly disappeared thousands. In 1976, the three branches of the military took over the government, installing a junta of representatives from the army, the navy, and the air force. These unelected leaders, in a series of three consecutive military juntas that governed the nation from 1976 to 1983, are collectively referred to in Argentina as the last civic-military dictatorship. The juntas billed their governmental project as *El Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* [The Process of National Reorganisation], meant to restore order to the country after

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a period of political chaos. In reality, their project employed state terrorism to target all political opposition and eliminate calls from the progressive sectors for revolution in the name of those who had been historically marginalised – primarily the poor, workers, and the student population. The period of the first junta, comprised of Jorge Rafael Videla, Emilio Massera, and Orlando Agosti (1976-1978), was the most brutal of the years of repression, with the highest incidence of murders, disappearances, and the systemic use of torture to instill fear and compliance among the citizenry. It is estimated that from 1976 to 1983, more than 30,000 people were disappeared throughout the nation (for further details, see the full truth commission report *Nunca Más* [CONADEP 1986]).

Much is still unknown about the details of the violence that the military dictatorship exercised upon its citizens, including the whereabouts of thousands of disappeared victims. However, through testimony given during the initial trials of the military juntas that took place shortly after the restoration of democracy in 1983, information included in the 1984 truth commission's report, *Nunca Más*, and the published testimonies of survivors and a few former military officers, pieces of the truth regarding what happened have emerged. Additionally, forensic information gained from the recovery and study of former clandestine detention, torture and extermination sites (ex CCDTyEs, to use the Spanish-language acronym¹), and recovered remains from mass graves further solidify the information contained in the testimonies with material evidence. This proof has also clarified other previous unknowns, especially regarding methods of torture and the military's operation of the detention centres.

¹ CCDTyE stands for Centro Clandestino de Detención, Tortura y Exterminio [Clandestine Centre of Detention, Torture, and Extermination] – for readability's sake, I will simply use the term detention centre throughout the chapter, adding former to delineate when I am referring to the period post-violence and omitting it when I am referring to the period of the dictatorship.

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Since the early 2000s, the efforts to recover information about the dictatorship through the recovery of former detention centres have grown in Argentina, and, with these efforts, the work of converting such sites into spaces of memory and operating them as places that educate about the past to prevent future atrocities has become a main focus for memory activists. For example, in 2002, excavations began at the site of the former detention centre Club Atlético, a centre the dictatorship buried under earth and cement when a highway was constructed over it after it was abandoned. The former ESMA was seized from the military by the government and officially deemed a 'Space for Memory' in March 2004. In October 2004, the Olimpo site was also reclaimed. Virrey Cevallos was recovered in April 2007, and Automotores Orletti in March 2009.² All of these spaces now function as sites of memory in Buenos Aires that anyone can visit to learn about the recent past. Many sites also host community events and participate in outreach activism meant to raise awareness about the ongoing absences of the disappeared while they continue to advocate for justice for those victims who survived. All of these sites host guided visits for the public, especially for school groups, during which visitors learn about the context of the repression and the history of each site. Much of this work was initially facilitated by the *Instituto Espacios para la Memoria* (IEM) [Institute of Spaces for Memory], which was created in 2002 and in operation until its dissolution in 2014 (Red Latina Sin Fronteras 2014). The work of the virtual project this chapter analyses was begun in conjunction with the Institute, and continued after its dissolution.

Arguably the most well-known of these cases is the recovery and conversion of the ex ESMA. Thus, the debate that emerged regarding how to convert this particular site into a space of memory can be used to illustrate the more general discussions of how to create sites of memory at former detention

² This list focuses on the efforts concentrated in Buenos Aires, the capital city of Argentina. It is by no means exhaustive – for more on the process of recovering these sites in Argentina, see Guglielmucci (2013).

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centres in Argentina. Reflecting debates regarding memorial museums and their design more generally, the process of creating these sites, located at the places where real people (including some living survivors) suffered, tends to be highly controversial.³ With multiple interest groups involved, often with differing stances on what constitutes acceptable use of the site, the conversation can get contentious. A brief history of the case of the ESMA will help illustrate why the debate that emerged around it is helpful to understanding the dynamics of memory site creation in Argentina.

However, before moving on to an exploration of the case of the ESMA, a clarification of terminology may be necessary. While such sites tend to be referenced in Argentinian Spanish as *sitios de memoria* (sites of memory) or even *espacios de memoria* (spaces of memory), I contend that their design and function parallel the goals of memorial museums, and thus they ought to be considered within the framework of such scholarship. Paul Williams defines a memorial museum as “a specific kind of museum dedicated to a historic event commemorating mass suffering of some kind” (2007, p. 8). He works from the definition of a museum as “an institution devoted to the acquisition, conservation, study, exhibition, and educational interpretation of objects with scientific, historical, or artistic value” (2007, p. 8). While the sites of memory in Argentina I consider in this article do not necessarily devote themselves to acquisition of objects, they do focus on conserving, studying, exhibiting, and educating the public about how to interpret the material elements that make

³ The critiques of the design of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (the USHMM) by Michael Rothberg come to mind, where Rothberg questions the design of the narrative for the space via a lens of “Americanization” of the Holocaust (2000). Also, Jennifer Hansen-Glucklich’s examination of the design of how the permanent exhibitions of Yad Vashem, the Jewish Museum Berlin, and the USHMM have the potential to fall into the trap of displaying authentic objects (in this case, the historical artefact is the object, not the space itself). Thus, they re-enact the perpetrators’ anonymising gaze or effectively “draw on creative visual and acoustic techniques to encourage a critical and nuanced interaction between viewers and the object of their gaze” (2014, p. 118). Such critiques reveal the consequences of the debates over how best to configure or utilise spaces of memory in the creation of memorial museums.

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up each individual site, material elements that carry highly important historical value related to the years of the dictatorship. The information contained in the exhibits, or, in some cases the guided visits, is based on the investigation carried out by each site and, most often, on survivor testimony. In some cases, the sites do acquire new objects as survivors donate them to be displayed, even when they are not actively seeking to expand their acquisitions.⁴

Both Williams (2007, p. 8) and Amy Sodaro (2018, p. 23) recognise in their definitions of the concept that memorial museums are most often not located on the sites of atrocity. However, Sodaro clarifies that there are exceptions to this – specifically, she cites the House of Terror Museum in Budapest and the 9/11 Museum in New York City (2018, p. 23) and Williams also includes in his analysis a number of memorial museums that are, indeed, located at sites of mass atrocity. For example, museums at the former Perm-36 labour camp site and the Choeung Ek killing field, as well as the National Chernobyl Museum, located in a former fire station (2007, p. 10-14). Sodaro stipulates that if they are located at the site of atrocity, memorial museums:

go beyond mere preservation of the site as evidence of what happened . . . [and] attempt to be more universal spaces in which the broader implications and reverberations of the past can be explored.

(2018, p. 23)

In their designs, the sites of memory in Argentina indeed do go beyond mere preservation, encouraging visitors to make connections between the injustices of the past and broader human rights issues in the present. For instance, the Automotores Orletti site's visit design focuses on Operation Condor's history

⁴ For example, the Orletti site now exhibits a blanket that was donated by a survivor who had it with her during her detention there. This was a new addition to the site when I visited in July of 2017 that did not exist during my prior visit in July of 2013.

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and the broader implications of foreign governments' (particularly the United States') intervention in Latin America. The guided visit also shows visitors a video that contextualises and links the Argentinian military dictatorship to other authoritarian regimes throughout Latin America, encouraging visitors to think about the broader implications of state terrorism beyond the nation's borders.

Sodaro also emphasises that memorial museums provide "a new kind of interactive engagement with the past" (2018, p. 24) by focusing on the experiential component of the museum. The most recent configuration of the ex ESMA's *Casino de Oficiales* [Officers' Quarters] especially engages this component, introducing into the museum space a number of examples of video testimony from the trials of the military junta, as well as infusing sounds into the *Casa del almirante* [Admiral's home] area of the visit, such that one feels as if they are eavesdropping on the Admiral's family living quarters. Additionally, in the *Pecera* area, where prisoners were forced to work producing propaganda for the dictatorship, one hears the sound of a typewriter in the background. In the *Pañol* area, where the stolen goods obtained by the dictatorship in various raids of 'subversive' homes were kept, the current exhibit projects images of the goods on the walls, giving the impression of observing firsthand the accumulation of the illegally obtained merchandise. In addition to projecting the images of these goods, the area incorporates video testimony where survivors describe the illegal activities of the dictatorial forces, denouncing the war booty [*botín de guerra*] stolen by the military. These testimonies encourage visitors to reflect on the morality of such actions, hopefully facilitating further reflection on similar actions within the contemporary world.

While all these elements facilitate an experiential understanding of the site, they are also presented via a controlled path, thus guiding the visitor's encounter with the space within a pre-determined narrative. When the visitor arrives, they are presented with a map of the space. While there are a few instances where wrong turns could alter the order in which the viewer encounters

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the exhibits, the path follows an orderly sequence and large display panels help lead visitors down the pre-determined route. This is another defining feature of the memorial museum according to Sodaro (2018, p. 24). These sites, like memorial museums, are also victim-oriented, basing their design on the information gleaned from victim testimony. Their work to document such testimony also shows how they function as an archive, further relating to Sodaro's defining features of the memorial museum (2018, p. 26). Due to all of these similarities between the sites of memory in Argentina and the scholarly definitions of memorial museums, I find analysing these sites using the scholarship on memorial museums appropriate, even if they tend to be referred to as sites of memory instead of memorial museums within scholarship focused on post-dictatorship Argentina.

How to Create a Site of Memory? The Case of the Ex ESMA

The ex ESMA is a property of 17 hectares of land occupying a city block in the Nuñez neighborhood of Buenos Aires. Established as a training school for the Navy in 1924, during the military dictatorship it held a double function. While continuing to operate as a school, a portion of the property was converted into a clandestine concentration camp, where so-called 'subversive' political activists were taken after being detained illegally and without official documentation. In addition to the use of the *Casino de Oficiales* [Officers' Quarters] for this task, other areas of the school also served the double function of both teaching students and participating in the mechanisms of the dictatorship. For example, the mechanic shop repaired the Ford Falcon police cars that were used to pursue and detain 'subversives', the infirmary helped with the secret births and disappearances of the children of detained pregnant women, and the printing press helped disseminate propaganda and create false identity documentation to aid the repression. The sizeable property holds numerous buildings, but not all of them were directly used in the violence, making it a particularly illustrative example of the dynamics of recovering former sites of violence in the wake of political repression. Its size, breadth, and complexity helped underscore the

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debates that emerged more generally about how to convert these spaces into sites of memory.⁵

The recovery of the ex ESMA took place in 2004, when then-president Néstor Kirchner removed it from the control of the armed forces that had continued to operate there in the years posterior to the dictatorship and deemed it a space of memory – a conversion process that was neither simple nor easy.

The book *Memoria en construcción: El debate sobre la ESMA* [Memory in Construction: The Debate over the ESMA] (2005) by Marcelo Brodsky – an Argentinean artist whose brother disappeared from the ESMA – documents the variety of perspectives that emerged in the debate about what to do with the space. Various groups advocated both for and against renovating/reconstructing the space, or leaving it as it was found upon recuperation, as well as for and against creating a museum or a cultural centre in the space. In arguing for the design of the space, Alejandro Kaufman, a professor at both the University of Buenos Aires and the National University of Quilmes in Argentina, summarised the common goal of recovering the site, stating:

Lo que hay que mostrar en forma irrefutable de una vez y para siempre, para nuestro país y para todo el mundo, es qué fue la ESMA, cómo fue la ESMA, y qué sucedió en la ESMA. No se requiere ningún énfasis especial. Sólo una sujeción estricta a los testimonios y las pruebas.

(in Brodsky 2005, p. 80)

⁵ Much of this historical information about the site came from the exhibits in the ex ESMA's Sitio Memoria building [the former Casino de Oficiales], when I visited in July of 2019.

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[What has to be shown in an irrefutable way for once and for all, for our country and for the whole world, is what was the ESMA, how was the ESMA, and what happened in the ESMA. It does not require any special emphasis. Just a strict adherence to the testimonies and the evidence.]

However, the question remained of how, exactly, to accomplish this goal, and whether, indeed, a strict adherence to what happened was all that needed to be included to transmit an understanding to the public. Horacio González, an Argentine intellectual, President of the National Library, and member of the Argentine Intellectuals Group *Carta Abierta* (Open Letter) argued that the building itself (referencing the *Casino de Oficiales*, the primary building used as a concentration camp) had to be the starting point of the history to be recounted in the place and that “*hay que contarla a partir del mismo edificio*” (in Brodsky 2005, p. 75) [It must be told starting from the building itself]. González also proposed that accomplishing this task be done by emphasising the performative, through the use of:

el arte, pero a condición de que el arte sea tomado por reflexiones como éstas [las que forman parte del libro], parecidas a éstas, o que partan de un raíz similar aunque con conclusiones diferentes.

(in Brodsky 2005, p. 76)

[art, but with the condition that the art be taken with reflections like these (the ones that form the debate over the site), similar to these, or that start from a similar point although with different conclusions.]

González, thus, adds to the debate the significance of the creative role of art, advocating for the incorporation of a type of selective and self-reflexive project that could provoke discussion as a way of transmitting the (up until this point) excluded history of what happened in the ESMA to the present and future.

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Some groups, such as SERPAJ (Service, Peace, and Justice – a well-respected NGO in Latin America) advocated for the use of the space as a museum as well as a centre for further study of and advocacy for human rights in the region (Brodsky 2005, p. 224). Others, such as the *Asociación de Ex Detenidos Desaparecidos* [Association of Former Detained/Disappeared], advocated for the absolute maintenance of the site for uses directly tied to the preservation and study of the space's former use as a detention centre, stressing that no irreversible modifications be made to the site and that it must operate independently of any governmental involvement (Brodsky 2005, p. 224). Still others, such as the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* [Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo] – an activist group comprised of mothers whose children were disappeared by the military dictatorship – advocated for both the historical preservation of the buildings of the site that had been used for the work of the repression, and a transformation of the rest of the space into a cultural centre, filling what was formerly a place of death with lively activities that would promote education about human rights in the future, especially amongst the youth population (Brodsky 2005, p. 225).

In the end, the territory that makes up the ex ESMA was divided amongst various interest groups. The *Casino de Oficiales* was set aside as an unmodified *sitio de memoria* [memory site]. The other buildings functioned as the place of operation for different groups, including the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* [Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo], *HIJOS* (the activist group formed by the children of the disappeared), the Secretary of Human Rights of the Nation, the Families of the Detained/Disappeared for Political Reasons, the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, and the NGO *Memoria Abierta* [Open Memory]. A building was also devoted to the National Archive of Memory and the Haroldo Conti Cultural Centre of Memory. In 2014, an additional museum devoted to recovering the collective memory of the contentious history of the Malvinas (Falkland Islands) was added to the property.

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Today, the various recovered sites of memory in Buenos Aires share a focus on historical preservation of places where victims were directly brutalised, thus valuing the maintenance of the sites as material proof of the past. However, like the new modifications to the *Casino de oficiales* building (now referred to as the *Sitio memoria* building), the sites of memory in Buenos Aires have also been outfitted with new museum-like exhibit features that help contextualise and convey the site's history to the visitor. Many of them also host the type of cultural activities held in the other buildings of the ex ESMA site.⁶ While sharing a common perspective regarding the balance between preservation and use of the sites, each space functions somewhat independently of the others, with each focusing their narrative design and guided visits on different aspects of the repression particularly characteristic of each site. However, all begin with a group discussion in which visitors share their connections to the site and their interests in visiting. While this could be dismissed as a common way of commencing any type of guided 'tour', in the context of the memory site it serves an additional function: to help foster connection among the visitors who will be co-traversing a very emotional space and history.

While the ex ESMA initially only allowed visits to the historical *Sitio Memoria* with the accompaniment of a guide, the re-design of the site in 2015 during the presidency of Kirchner modified this approach. The re-design installed a

⁶ The groups that operate the sites are extremely dedicated to this balance between preservation and use of the sites – at Automotores Oretti there is a specific room that was identified by former female prisoners as the place where they were sexually abused and tortured which has been sealed off from the guided visit so that further material proof can be obtained. Additionally, the staircase in the garage area is not used to preserve it for any survivors who need to physically walk that staircase to trigger memories to identify where they were held captive – many of the victims were kept blindfolded during the entirety of their captivity and thus, to this day, do not know where they were held. Such experiential memory techniques are therefore extremely important, and the sites all work to keep such options available to survivors.

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more traditional museographic approach, which allowed visitors to explore the site on their own, without a guide. This included the installation of multimedia video projections at various places in the building, as well as traditional text and visual exhibits. The design, the result of a two-year project worked on by more than forty professionals, was careful to not modify any existing structures in the building and to take precautions to avoid long-term damage from frequent visitors walking through the space – for example ‘floating’ pathways were incorporated for visitors to walk on that would prevent heavy traffic from damaging the original flooring. However, the most sensitive areas, for example *Capuchita*, where inscriptions on the walls made by prisoners during their captivity have been recovered, continue to be accessible only through guided visits. While the site now offers this more individual option, the layout of the exhibits continues to present a carefully curated narrative, starting with the historical context, the history of the ESMA prior to its use during the dictatorship, during its use, and the attempts to hide its history of repression. It also contextualises each of the spaces with prompts that explain their use during the repression, including multiple examples of video testimony in which survivors narrate the uses of each space. This testimony consists of historical footage from the initial trial of the military junta in 1985 and the first ESMA trial in 2010. The visit concludes in the *El Dorado* salon, where a video installation identifies the repressors who have been put on trial, and the verdicts and sentences they received.

As Sylvia Tandeciarz claims in her 2017 study *Citizens of Memory*, this shift to self-guided visits to the site and the installation of the museographic materials was not without controversy. Tandeciarz notes her own unease with the tone of the changes, remarking that the concluding video installation’s dramatic employment of light and sound “seemed to make a spectacle of justice” (2017, p. 33). She cites the unease felt by survivor groups as well, especially the group *HIJOS: La Plata’s* (the chapter of the Children of the Disappeared’s activist group *HIJOS* from the city of La

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Plata, Argentina)⁷, who critique that it constitutes a type of “Disneylandia” (Tandeciarz, 2017, p. 34). Overall, Tandeciarz concludes:

I object to what has been done because I find the compulsive accumulation of evidence not only distracting, consuming all of my attention, but ultimately inassimilable in its current format. I find that this information overload – academically rigorous, carefully compiled – rather than complement the visitors’ experience of the space, competes with it, ultimately limiting, through prescriptive didacticism, the likelihood of ‘that flow of curiosity and interpretations’ (Pastoriza 2005, p. 90) I believe is vital to postmemorial transmission.

(Tandeciarz 2017, p. 34)

Such qualms with the modifications presented in the new individual museum visits as an alternative to the guided ones highlight the need for similar scrutiny of the changes presented by the introduction of the digital into this type of memory work. To what extent might the interactive documentary also limit the flow of curiosity and interpretations that Pastoriza (a survivor of the ESMA) and Tandeciarz highlight as key to the successful design of the space as postmemorial?

The “Virtual” Memory Museum: Centrosclandestinos.com.ar

Centrosclandestinos.com.ar began as a project referred to as “The Ex ESMA in 3D” (“*La ex ESMA*”). Spearheaded by Martin Malamud and the group Huella Digital, the project was initially a tool to be used during

⁷ HIJOS is the organisation created by the children of disappeared parents. Their group is both a support group where they can find common understanding with each other and an activist group that works toward the three foci of memory activism in Argentina: Truth, Memory, and Justice. Since the creation of the initial group, regional chapters have also been created, such as the one from La Plata referenced here.

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the 2010 trial related to the violations that took place in the ESMA. Ana María Careaga, the then executive director of the Institute of Spaces of Memory, presented the project as material support for her testimony during the trial. In terms of the efficacy of the reconstruction for this purpose, the director of the project, Malamud, expressed the following in an interview:

Escuché muchos comentarios de que fue valioso en el juicio. El hecho de ver el lugar creo que aclara muchas cosas, muchos testimonios, ideas vagas que puedan llegar a tener jueces y testigos, porque estas imágenes te dan una sensación de la realidad que es muy impactante.

(2010, p. 12)

[I heard many comments that it was valuable in the trials. The act of viewing the place, I think, clarifies many things, many testimonies, vague ideas that judges and witnesses can come to have, because these images give a sensation of reality that is very impactful.]



Figure 1.
Landing page of
centrosclandestinos.com.ar
Screenshot
by the author.

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Figure 2. Secondary landing page of the [ESMA site](#). Screenshot by the author.

After this initial impact in the trials, the project expanded from a static three-dimensional reconstruction of the Officer's Quarters building of the ESMA to an explorable interactive documentary website (copyrighted in 2013 by the original design group Huella Digital) with additional materials such as survivor video testimony, and historical content about the years of the dictatorship. The reconstruction was also moved online, allowing the public to access and learn from it. Over the years, it expanded to offer visitors the chance to explore not just the ESMA, but other former torture centres, which are now sites of memory, in Buenos Aires: El Club Atlético (2010), Automotores Orletti (2015), El Campito / Campo de Mayo (2018), and La Cacha (2021) (see Figure 1).

Upon entering the website, the visitor finds a list of the sites that are included, and a presentation description states *"Se presentan aquí una serie de documentales interactivos sobre los centros clandestinos de detención, tortura y exterminio que funcionaron en Argentina durante la última dictadura cívico-militar"* [Here are presented a series of interactive

documentaries about the former detention centres that functioned in Argentina during the last civic-military dictatorship.] Upon clicking on the desired site, the visitor is taken to a secondary page that shows a sequence of stills from the 3D reconstruction, with options along the top of the screen to choose from, including the options to see historical images of the actual site, to watch interview-style videos in which survivors give more information about the site, or to directly access the “*recorrido virtual*” [virtual visit] of the site (Figure 2).

Once the visitor chooses the “virtual visit” option, a three-dimensional, virtual reconstruction of the site as it existed during the repression appears, with a quasi-videogame-like quality to it, and the visitor can then choose their point of access to the site from the series of buttons active on the building/floor plan of the site in question (Figure 3). A 360-degree view moves to continually keep the vantage-point of the viewer.

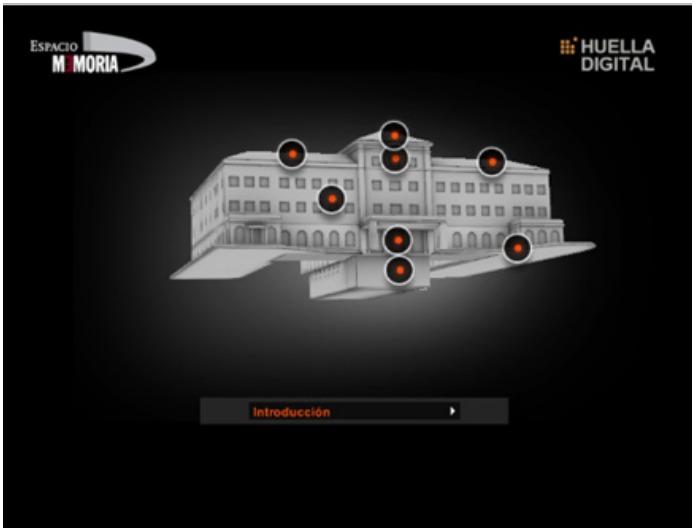


Figure 3. The virtual rendering of the [Casino de Oficiales space of the ex ESMA](#). Unlike the other sites, the ex ESMA has a suggested “Introduction” option (pictured here), where viewers get a short introductory video that contextualises the site. Screenshot by the author.



Figure 4. An example of the space of Capuchita in the ESMA reconstruction. Here, visitors learn about the mattresses upon which the prisoners slept in their individually partitioned spaces of the room. Screenshot by the author.

Once ‘inside’ the virtual reconstruction, visitors navigate through the space using their computer mouse and the arrow keys, exploring the various pre-programmed routes and clicking on different points to learn more about their uses during the dictatorship (Figure 4).

Upon entering the specific sites, recorded video testimonies from survivors who narrate various aspects of their detention automatically begin to play. However, this feature can be de-activated if the visitor desires though they must make the conscious decision to do this. The route that one can take through each building is limited by the programming and the extent of the visitor’s exploration of the site is highly dependent on their interest; without due diligence, it is somewhat easy to bypass or even accidentally miss certain clickable content within the reconstruction.

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The video testimonies and clickable content in the various areas serve to create a narrative, explaining the use of each place and adding additional information as available.

As previously mentioned in the discussion of the options included on each site's secondary landing page, in addition to the *recorrido virtual* [virtual visit], the visitor can explore other educational materials, including in the example of the *Casino de Oficiales* reconstruction, a short documentary film explaining the history of the site (*¿Qué fue la ESMA?* [What was the ESMA?]), short videos explaining the changes that were made to the site during its years of operation (*Cambios Históricos* [Historical Changes]), additional recorded interviews with survivors (*Entrevistas* [Interviews]) and a gallery of historical photos related to the operation and physical features of the former detention centre. All of this valuable historical content created and archived by Huella Digital evidences how the online site, like its counterpart physical site of memory, values knowledge-creation and the maintenance of an archive related to the history of each place. The website's page also includes a detailed description of the uses it foresees for the 3D reconstructions, highlighting that it is for open, universal use and access and uses multimedia, constructed narrative and explicit representation to achieve a mission of establishing truth [*verdad*], that it has been used in various judicial proceedings in its mission to seek justice [*justicia*], and that it has sought to be a collective reconstruction of the past, in fulfilling a mission to create memory [*memoria*] about the violence ("Usos" huelladigital.com.ar).

The Ethical Questions

The first ethical question that emerges when considering Centrosclandestinos.com.ar, is the way the features of the cyber visits to the sites allow the visitor the option to choose to largely avoid the broader historical context of the space – one of the key concerns expressed by the Association of Former

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Detained/Disappeared when the ESMA was recovered. By giving visitors the option to de-activate the video testimonies that contextualise the space, the site enables visitors to bypass this valuable explanatory context completely and simply interact with the video-game-style recreations of the structures. While the testimonies themselves were highly valued by the design team for their ability to humanise the exploration of the site (see Ohanian and Malamud, 2013), the ability to choose to not play this content during the visit appears to run counter to the website's pedagogical mission. As noted by Virginia Vecchioli in her analysis of the project:

A través de recursos de realidad aumentada, animación, modelos en escala, el uso de fotografías y objeto de época, y, fundamentalmente, el testimonio audiovisual de las víctimas inserto en distintos puntos del recorrido se busca que el interactor participe, ficcionalmente, de una de las dimensiones más traumáticas de la historia reciente.

(2018, p. 84)

[Through augmented reality resources, animation, to-scale models, the use of photographs and objects of the time period, and, fundamentally, the audiovisual testimony of the victims inserted at different points along the path, they seek for the interactor to participate, fictionally, in one of the most traumatic dimensions of the recent past.]

However, does this option to bypass the built-in content significantly alter the paradigm already present in the physical sites in Buenos Aires? In terms of the guided visits, yes, as this would never be an option, save if the visitor chose to abandon the visit completely and leave the site early. However, the 2015 modifications to the *Sitio Memoria* at the ex ESMA appear to present many of these same options to the visitor as are available in the interactive documentary; they can actively thwart the logic of the layout of the space should they so choose. One can simply move quickly from room

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to room in the museum installations, not reading the texts that have been carefully composed and arranged, and not listening to the full testimony recordings that are given throughout the building, or intentionally take a 'wrong turn' and encounter things out of order. As Tandeciarz notes in her critique of the modifications, the sheer magnitude of the information presented, and the bombardment posed by the audiovisual content tends to preclude a synthesis of the content by the visitor due to the overwhelming sense that it presents. Therefore, perhaps the result is the same in both cases – it remains the visitor's prerogative to decide whether to take advantage of all that the space has to offer. In terms of what the technology adds in this regard, we must consider that at the physical site, one must sit in the moment and decide to stay still to watch the entire testimony video (some of which are rather lengthy) and once one leaves one cannot view it a second time. Whereas the online venue offers the option of pausing and continuing should the desire or need arise, and even returning later to re-watch the testimony. Such advantages cannot be ignored.

On a related note, the guided visits to the physical sites begin with a discussion in which each visitor articulates their interest in the site, leading to spontaneous conversation about specific features of the space tailored to the interests of the viewer. This multiplicity of narratives is impossible with the online version, as the programming is, of necessity, predetermined and fixed. In another sense, in the physical visit, one is immersed in the space and confined without distractions – as Sodaro notes in her definition of the memorial museum, the space is public and the visitor often self-polices themselves accordingly (2018, p. 175). Thus, for example, the distraction of a phone call or text message would likely not be indulged. However, within the comfortable space of the virtual visit, where one's behaviour is not observed in a public manner, such distractions can interrupt the immersive nature of the memory site, thus inhibiting concentrated focus and reflection.

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A second concern related to this non-public nature regards the ability to view the online memory site from the protected space of wherever one's computer is located. This means there is no need for the physical or emotional discomfort of being in the same space where others experienced severe physical and psychological torture. Just the awareness of this separation changes the dynamic and places the visitor in a more voyeuristic position, consuming from afar. John Ellis posits that even the most mundane, everyday media witnessing (he is looking at consuming television news coverage of salient, sometimes even traumatic, events) brings an awareness to the viewer and constructs a type of "acquaintanceship that feels personal and yet is not" (2009, p. 83). However, I am inclined to argue that while this may be possible with the cyber visit, the physical visit remains much more effective at placing the visitor in the conditions under which the memorial museum can achieve its goal of giving:

the visitor an intense, affective, and emotional experience that will help her identify and empathize with the victims in a way that will morally educate her to work to prevent future violence, repression, and hatred.

(Sodaro 2018, p. 25)

Real-time, instantaneous online access permits psychological distancing and also enables visitors to navigate the site without investing the same time or physical effort required to move through the space on a visit to the tangible site of memory. Both forms of distancing may create a barrier for the memorial museum's creation of "experiences for visitors that engage all the senses: seeing, hearing, and even bodily sensation . . . [that] helps transform visitors into active participants instead of passive spectators" (Hansen-Glucklich 2014, p. 103). Similarly, Laurie Beth Clark observes that:

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memorial spaces frequently rely on structures, rather than – or in addition to – narratives, to facilitate participation and identification. Passageways are ideal for the performance of embodied knowledge because they can provide a spatial chronology of the slaves’ or prisoners’ journeys from points of first arrival, through the sites of transportation or extermination.

(2013, p. 46)

In the *Sitio Memoria*, the visitor experiences the spatiality of the place where the prisoners were held – the size, the darkness, the hardness, the isolation, the sounds that filter in from the exterior, the temperature; the structure itself is an essential piece of the visit. By experiencing these sites in a virtual realm, the visitor loses this contact with these performative elements of the place. Even the most faithful replica of the space cannot simultaneously recreate all of these elements in the same way in a three-dimensional virtual realm. Malamud himself reported that one survivor, upon viewing the project, commented, “*está bien, pero lo más característico y terrible de los centros era el olor*” (“*La ex ESMA*” 11) [it’s good, but the most characteristic and terrible thing of the centres was the smell.] While the smell cannot be replicated in either the virtual or the physical space, this reaction is revealing. The closer one can get to the physical experience of the site, the more that empathic understanding through identification with the victims seems possible. However, on the other extreme, the distancing maintained by the online visit can maintain a foreignness that impedes the development of the erroneous (and naïve) view that the survivor’s story is “knowable” – precisely the fear identified by Michael Rothberg (2000) in his consideration of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (the USHMM). While Rothberg acknowledges that “sense-based methods may be most effective”, he argues that they may also be “potentially misleading in the ease with which they allow contemporary visitors to touch an event that in both its extremity and everydayness continues to elude us” (2000, p. 262). While Rothberg’s comments are in connection to the Holocaust, they can also easily apply to the case of the experiences of the

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victims of the detention centres of the Argentinean military dictatorship. In this sense, the distancing imposed by the online visits may avoid such a pitfall of over-identification.

A third concern about these cyber visits is that, unless done collectively by one group via a single computer, they are individual experiences, not shared ones. There is no co-traversing a space in these instances, thus eliminating a factor that appears to be emphasised in the guided visits to memory sites in Buenos Aires. Even in the case of the redesign of the ex ESMA, where individual visits are also now a possibility, it is quite unlikely that one will be the only individual in the place, whereas this is almost exclusively the norm for 'visits' to the online space. As briefly touched on above, the online visit also creates a 'safer' space in which the viewer does not experience the physical discomfort of the site. In the winter, the *Sitio Memoria* does not have heating, therefore the visitor must experience the cold felt by the prisoners, thus underscoring their suffering. Conversely, in the summer it does not have air conditioning, resulting in a similar form of experiential empathic understanding of the stifling heat. The guided visits are also quite long, requiring substantial physical exertion on the part of the visitor, an exertion that can also help facilitate empathy for the victims of the violence. Even the individual visits, when undertaken with the rigour to want to experience all the site has to offer, command a substantial time and physical investment in maneuvering through the whole building. On the other hand, the virtual visits, in removing the need for such physical exertion, open the ex ESMA to populations that perhaps would be physically unable to undertake the guided or individual visit, or who are unable to travel to these sites in Buenos Aires. Such an opening allows more individuals to learn about and from the site, thus further democratising access to this history.

The fourth concern related to the interactive documentary reconstruction of the sites is that they rest on an intent to fully reconstruct the past at its most violent moment, when the site was operational as a detention centre. The focus is on the historical reconstruction of the space as it existed during the

moment of the repression, complete with furniture, realistic lighting (or lack thereof), and a sense of the environment in which it existed, historicising the space based on the content of survivor testimony. This desire to have the user fictionally participate in one of the most traumatic moments of the recent past falls dangerously in line with the qualms expressed in the original debates over what to do with the ex ESMA in terms of not wanting to create a show of horror implying a recreation of the victims' traumas. As mentioned above, giving this false sense of 'knowing' by seeking to have the interactor

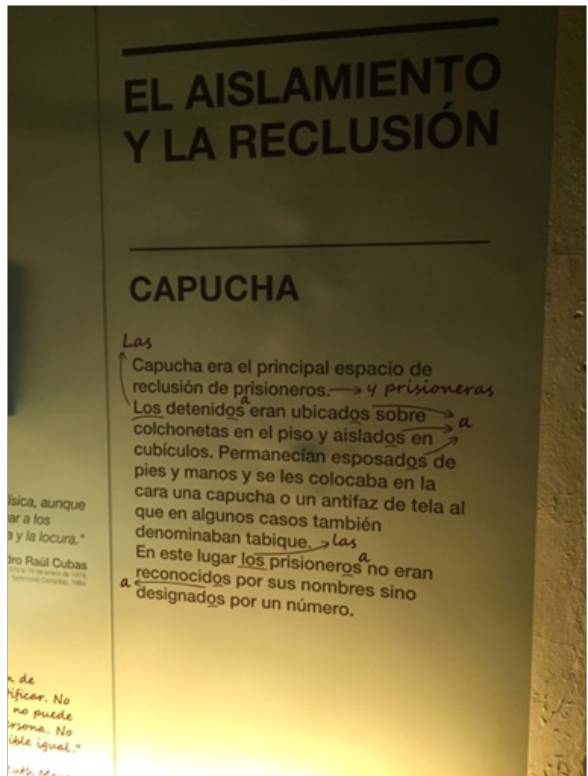


Figure 5. Installation signaling the Capucha area of the Sitio Memoria, displaying language revisions that recognise and highlight the female victims of the site. Photograph by the author, 2019.

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fictionally participate in the past could be an impediment to the didactic function of the space and the reflection on what remains unreachable in terms of the other's experience.

On the other hand, the recreation of the quotidian use of the site perhaps yields more understanding of the institutionalisation of the violence of state terrorism, or the "banality of evil," to use Hannah Arendt's (2006) term. While the videogame-like quality risks a possible fetishisation of the place of violence by glossing over the gritty details of the repression, the larger issue is that it does not incorporate the desire of many groups to fill former spaces of violence with a range of examples of culture, life, and art capable of generating meaningful reflection on the past. Absent of such art, the ability of the space to function as a memorial museum that helps encourage the visitor to make wider connections to the ongoing impact of the military dictatorships on Argentinian society can be limited. The focus of the content of the virtual site remains on the past, unlike many physical sites of memory that, along with relating the past of the site to the visitor, intentionally call attention to present issues that encourage future activism advocating for human rights. This focus fulfills an aspect of the definition of the memorial museum promoted by Sodaro, that they strive "to be more universal spaces in which the broader implications and reverberations of the past can be explored" (2018, p. 23). However, the virtual reconstruction itself could arguably be viewed as the type of creative art that produces contemplation, the type of project that Horacio González called for in his contributions to the debate over what to do with the ex ESMA.

Lastly, the creation of these virtual sites freezes the archive in a very specific place. While the online venue theoretically opens access to more people, technology evolves rapidly and is not easily or inexpensively updated. Whereas the ex ESMA today operates in a process of constant revision. For example, during my visit in July of 2019, as an extension of a special exhibit devoted to the female prisoners' experiences at the site

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(*Ser mujeres en la ESMA* [To Be Women in the ESMA]), the language of many of the permanent installations had been revised to recognise those experiences more fully by specifically changing the terminology on the exhibit signs to the feminine form of the nouns and adjectives. These changes, left as visual and noticeable revisions in the signage of the displays, call attention to the ongoing work of recovering the past (see Figure 5).

Conversely, the sites in centrosclandestinos.com.ar once completed appear to remain largely unchanged. Likely, this is a byproduct of the difficulties associated with obtaining ongoing funding, since the initial design of the sites and video materials included in it have been completed and ongoing redesign must be quite costly. At the same time, unlike the physical ex ESMA, the online site does not require the same level of consistent presence by workers to enable its ability to serve the public, thus it could be a more economical platform to maintain in the long-term.

Lest all these discussions seem negatively skewed, there are also numerous positive factors offered by the virtual reconstructions. First, above all, the interactive documentary site is a new pedagogical tool that offers valuable materials that can be used to teach about the last military dictatorship, the years of state terrorism, and the ongoing legacy of disappearance. The video testimonies included on the sites alone are an invaluable contribution to collective memory in Argentina. In terms of the cyber visits themselves, while the videogame aesthetic of the site (and this is purely an aesthetic, as the visit is not a game, but rather a defined space that the visitor can explore, but not alter) may contribute to a white-washing effect where the gory details are removed from the picture (even as the group expresses that they desire to show an explicit representation in keeping with the truth, graphic renderings of the byproducts of torture are not visible in the reconstructions even if they are referenced implicitly by the interviews), it is also a familiar way of

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connecting with new generations accustomed to consuming this type of digital imagery, thus offering a way to draw in the younger generations that such sites seek to educate about this past.

Additionally, the cyber reconstruction adheres to the desires of survivors' groups that no irreversible modifications be made to the physical sites. By offering an online venue, the actual historical building does not suffer the wear and tear of numerous visitors per year and any uncovered proofs of the past remain protected. Gonzalez's suggestions that (1) the focal point of the site be the building itself and (2) that it be the centre from which to relate the history of what happened are foregrounded via the encounter with the online reconstruction. Everything emanates from the study of the site itself, even if the encounter is with a three-dimensional version of it with a videogame aesthetic. Additionally, it must be noted that the newest site added, El campito / Campo de Mayo, was awarded an honorary mention in the category of Immaterial Cultural Patrimony for the 2019 Patrimony Contest of the National Arts Fund in Argentina, thus the project has garnered official recognition as a valuable contribution to the cultural patrimony of the nation.

Conclusion: Autonomy and the Creation of Citizens of Memory

In her study of cultural representation in post-dictatorship Argentina, Tandeciarz (2017) draws on Diana Taylor's (2003) differentiation between the archive – a fixed repository of historical information – and the repertoire – an experiential, performative approach to the past – to argue for the value of the experiential in human rights pedagogy. She offers a new reading of Sara Ahmed's (2004) work on how emotions tie people together to argue that affective experiences “work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective” (2017, p. 256) to build political communities. At the end of her study, which examines

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various examples of memory projects in Argentina, including the ex ESMA memory space, Tandeciarz concludes that

So long as spaces for affective transmissions remain, new generations of citizens of memory will continue to find ways to advocate on behalf of a more perfect union, one forged in the active and ongoing defense of human rights.

(2017, p. 256)

While Tandeciarz, here, is referring to an educational program that facilitates youth projects devoted to examining the legacy of the military dictatorship in Argentina, I argue that her analysis applies more broadly to the types of experiences facilitated by visits to spaces of memory like those explored in this chapter. Removing the physical visit, with its emphasis on connection, and displacing the performative dimension (the repertoire) in favour of the fixed archive of the virtual site, the interactive documentary reframes the visit as an individual experience and potentially diminishes the effectiveness of affective transmission.

While centrosclandestinos.com.ar offers valuable archival material, the main ethical dilemma stems from the uncertainty over how the project will be encountered. A rushed visit to the site, with video testimony deactivated, nearly completely bypasses the affective value of the materials. However, a careful visit to the site, contextualised with additional exploration of the materials offered, might achieve similar results to the physical visit to a space of memory. The ethical quandary lies in that gray area of uncertainty. With the exception of the redesign of the *Sitio Memoria* of the ex ESMA, the physical visits to sites of memory in Buenos Aires arguably guarantee the framing of the visit as an experience within a narrative designed to effectively tie the visitor to the affective dimension of the space. The online visit sacrifices such control, putting the onus on the visitor to create such an experience for themselves. Yet, such freedom is what characterises all

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reactions to the past, and perhaps the only truly ethical way of approaching the teaching of this history is to offer the material and allow the visitor to make their own path through it. If we desire to create “citizens of memory” (2017, p. 256) as Tandeciarz terms them, we must recognise that those citizens are autonomous beings who must take the initiative for themselves. The virtual visits, in that sense, constitute yet another tool that offers valuable access to an archive that can help these beings along that path. As a final comment, it must be noted that this chapter was initially written and finished prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic, a global event that severely impacted the work of sites of memory everywhere. In Argentina, most sites were forced to cease guided visits for a prolonged period of time during the pandemic. The alternative virtual format of the interactive documentaries offered by centrosclandestinos.com.ar therefore must be recognized as one of even more import, allowing continuity of access to this information despite the physical barriers to cultivating the being and participation together of strangers imposed by the pandemic.

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