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On Fernando's Photograph

The Biopolitics of *Aparición* in Contemporary Argentina

Vikki Bell

Abstract

This article concerns the striking photograph of a young man, Fernando Brodsky, taken shortly after he was kidnapped in Argentina in 1979. Brodsky was detained in the notorious Escuela de la Armada (ESMA) in Buenos Aires, and remains disappeared. The negative of the photograph was smuggled out of ESMA and the image became part of a bundle of photographic evidence submitted by families of the disappeared during the trials of the military after the return to democracy in 1983. This article seeks to understand the vitality of the photograph, the different courses it takes, the archives it joins and leaves, asking: 'What sort of life can the photograph have? What sort of desire? What sort of politics?' The article proposes that we might consider the role of such images 'biopolitically', which is to say in the context of the relations established through the attempts to govern populations in times of military rule and in times of transitional democracy. The re-appearance of Fernando in the photograph is part of post-dictatorship politics in which the demand '*aparición*' resounds. Fernando, an absolute witness who does not, who cannot, speak nevertheless re-appears in the law courts and in art exhibitions. The article considers the difference between the photograph's appearance as evidence and its reappearance in the art galleries, arguing that its 'desires' can be imagined differently in each. The article argues that while the photograph does not escape archives *tout court*, in raising the question of how it should be filed, it prompts reflection on the biopolitical present, with its inequitable distribution of life and security among populations. This is a politics of the present, more than it is a politics of memory.

Key words

Argentina ■ art ■ biopolitics ■ detention camps ■ the disappeared ■ Foucault ■ images ■ memory ■ photography ■ shanty-towns

Perhaps too much value is assigned to memory, not enough to thinking. (Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 2003: 103)

Aparición con vida!¹

IN HER study of performance, both theatrical and political, in relation to Argentina's 1976–83 military dictatorship, Diana Taylor makes the remark that the use of silhouettes as a part of the protests of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo meant that the military were placed 'in the ludicrous position of having to police ghosts' (1997: 199). The life-sized painted outlines were first used in the third Marcha de la Resistencia called by the Madres and other human rights groups on 21 September 1983. They appeared in their thousands on walls, trees and pillars around Buenos Aires, representing those disappeared by the state. Perhaps the best-known example of the use of images in confronting state violence in Argentina, the silhouettes were developed as an intervention in collaboration with three visual artists, among them Julio Flores,² who explains that the idea was to employ the outlines of bodies as a graphic indication of the scale of the disappearances, the full extent of which was, at that time, unknown. Flores had come across a poster produced in Poland on which small silhouettes represented the numbers of people who had died at Auschwitz on a single day;³ from this idea, developed that of using silhouettes as part of the protest. As well as bringing silhouettes to the demonstration, more were made in Plaza de Mayo, as people lay down and allowed others to draw

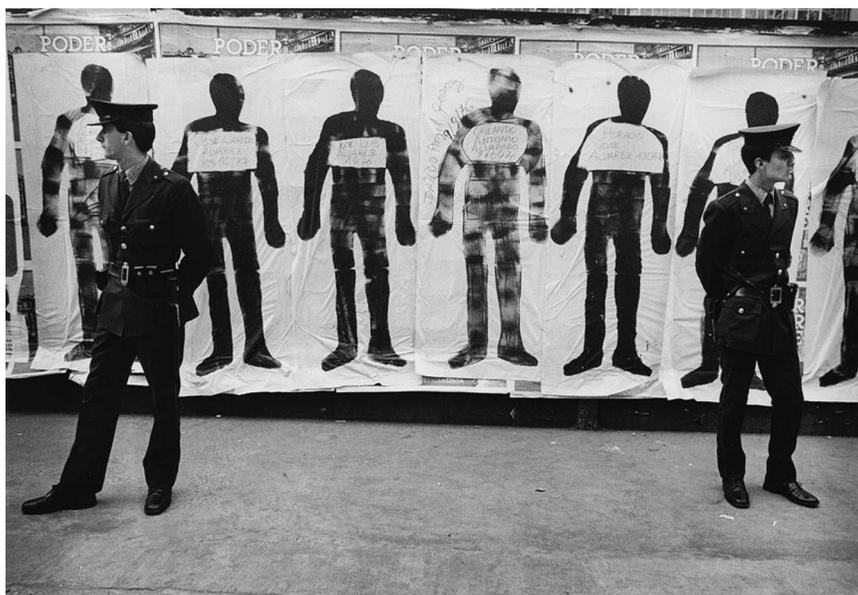


Figure 1 Guarding the silhouettes, 23 September 1983
Source: © Eduardo Gil.

around them. At a time when the military state was routinely kidnapping people from their places of work, from their homes, from the street, making no place safe,⁴ when meetings of more than two on public streets, or having the wrong hairstyle or running in the street became sufficient causes for suspicion, arrest and death (Giunta, 1999: 153), this action of lying down in the city's central public square in front of the Casa de Rosada, the heart of city and national government, and rising up to leave silhouettes – to reproduce, in other words, the impossible shadow of another no longer able to cast it – was a bold performance.

For the Madres, it was important that the figures were displayed vertically, since that was how their loved ones were taken, and how they demanded they were to be returned. On the morning of 22 September 1983, therefore, passers-by were confronted by the crowds of 'voiceless screams' that were pasted all over the centre of the city (Longoni, 2007: 2; see also Longoni and Bruzzone, 2008). These graphic portrayals of the concept of absence constituted the cityscape as a stage on which to make those absences demand explanation; the silhouettes were a call to account, and a call for accounts, as well as a call for world attention. They countered the denials and half-statements made by the junta – such as Viola's statement that if there were a few people who had disappeared, they should be considered 'absent forever', someone whose 'destiny' it was 'to vanish' (speech 29 May 1979, quoted in Feitlowitz, 1998: 13, 49).

To such cruel absurdities, the Madres repeated their simple demand: '*Con vida los llevaron, con vida los queremos!*' (They were taken alive, we want them back alive!). And despite the confessions and survivors' testimonies that have filled in horrific details of stories only half-imagined in 1983, details that make the fulfilment of the demand almost certainly impossible, the Madres (at least one faction of the original group) continue to this day to make their demand: bring them back '*con vida*'. To be sure, 're-appearances' of those lost, especially babies born to mothers held in clandestine detention centres and given away to be raised by other, often military, families, continue to surface, meaning that this demand is only *almost* impossible. Indeed, exhibitions such as 'Identidad' (Identity) (1998), organized by the Abuelas⁵ with the participation of 13 Argentine artists, and which saw photographs of the disappeared interspersed with mirrors, inviting viewers to acknowledge or reject the inclusion of their own image in that history, reportedly prompted just such a realization for at least three visitors to the exhibition. Nevertheless, the request continues to be made, with an awareness that it is highly improbable – in fact impossible – that it could be met, and is most certainly beyond the power of the present administration. So how should we understand the demand, its continued repetition? As a certain kind of madness afflicting those whose lives have been so devastated by these past events, who are so traumatized that they cannot leave the past behind? No, instead, let us hear that call for *aparición* as a certain kind of biopolitics, in which the fact that it has been unheeded over the years does not mean it falls silent. On the contrary, since it is a demand

whose repetition marks the silence that falls between each call, it is obliged to repeat itself.

If Taylor wasn't quite right to say there was a policing of ghosts that morning in September 1983, therefore – since to call for one taken to be returned isn't quite the same as him or her returning – her point nevertheless stands; the state apparatus had to contend with its own actions reflected back in the form of an image, a vain battle akin to the impossibility of controlling the *revenant* of which Derrida (1994) wrote. Throughout the past 15 years of Argentina's return to democracy, each successive administration's attempts to draw a line under the past has met with the problem of fighting those who simply will not stop recalling it.

Official ways of 'dealing with the past' have blundered back and forth, with different administrations understanding the demands of the past and present differently. After the determination signalled by the initial transitional justice mechanisms – the dramatic and extraordinary trials of the military leaders in 1985, and the commissioning of CONADEP (National Commission on the Disappeared) and its report – there followed Alfonsín's series of pardons and legislation to limit the prosecution of military personnel.⁶ Menem's discourse of 'reconciliation' continued in this vein, extending pardons even to the military leaders. These measures were ultimately understood as a conservative attempt to silence those whose sufferings had not been heard or addressed and to appease the military. Before Nestor Kirchner's government took charge in 2003, the pardons and laws on these matters had been declared unconstitutional and, once in position, Kirchner set about preventing military personnel escaping prosecution. At the same time he revoked a decree impeding the extradition of Argentines to face charges abroad. Under Kirchner, and continuing under Christina Kirchner's presidency, prosecutions have begun once again.

Even though the dictatorship ended more than 25 years ago, therefore, the stuttering character of transition has meant that the social body could not afford to stop crying '*Aparición con vida*'. Challenging the attempts to put the past to rest by fiat, many groups – the Madres, Abuelas, HIJOS, CELS, human rights and art-activist groups, to name a few of the most prominent – have fought for '*juicio y castiga*' (the demand for trials and justice), rising up each time it seemed these were to be taken from them in the name of reconciliation or 'turning a new leaf'.

The aftermath of the dictatorship has not been able to become about memory and memorials. If only. In contemporary Argentina the cry '*Aparición*' resounds not only in relation to those disappeared during the military dictatorship of 1976–83, but also to those disappeared in very recent times. The shocking recent disappearance of Julio López, who was the main witness and complainant in the 2006 trial of Miguel Etchecolatz – the former Director of Investigations of the Buenos Aires Province Police, who was sentenced to life imprisonment in September of that year, for his role during the dictatorship including murder and kidnapping – saw mass demonstrations in several cities, where banners and tabards bore the slogan:

Aparición con vida: Julio López. His face, with his signature beret, has been painted and stencilled on many a wall across Argentina, his image iconic. By now, his face signals that the struggle to allow the practices of state violence to become past continues: ‘*Sin López, no hay nunca más*’ as one scrawl of graffiti puts it. This year ‘*Aparición con vida*’ has also accompanied photographs of Luciano Arruga, a teenager who disappeared after being taken away by the police in Lomas del Mirador, Buenos Aires, on 30 January 2009 – not the first case of its kind. Luciano Arruga’s face is also posted and stencilled in public spaces and on noticeboards; students have organized concerts and held meetings, and painted murals and banners showing his face and the words ‘*Aparición con vida de Luciano Arruga ya!*’ or ‘*Buscamos Luciano*’. With their images increasingly presented together, Arruga and López have become connected, their campaigns borrowing each other’s style, as well as personnel and modes of operation. Moreover, these different stories connect what some might – optimistically – figure as a ‘residue’ transitional terror, of punishments and cover-ups as warnings as the crimes of the dictatorship are investigated and prosecuted, on the one hand, with the everyday fearfulness, the terror ‘as usual’ (Taussig, 1992), that is crystallized in the fear of the police, on the other.

Evidently, this is a politics of the *present*, of present (in)securities, not a politics of memory. The differential between the populations granted security and those not is keenly felt, and insecurity in contemporary Argentina is understood in this context. A poster in the campaign to call for Luciano Arruga’s return declares: ‘*Su seguridad no es la nuestra!*’ (Your security isn’t ours!). To emphasize the point, the ‘*su*’ is elsewhere in disdainful inverted commas. This ‘counter-discourse’, now, alas, well established, reminds and cautions actors within the state, past and present, that the social body will bear witness, will mark the violence that prevents too quick a celebration of Argentina’s ‘lively’ democracy.

Integral to this biopolitics, then, are the images, photographs, graffiti, stencils-becoming-icons of the disappeared that accompany the slogans demanding their (re)appearance. What can we say these images do? What sort of survival do they grant the persons they portray? What sort of life – what sort of death – do they ‘choose’? I want to contemplate these questions through the consideration of one particular image, but before I do so, let me consider the concept of the biopolitical in a little more detail.

Biopolitics and the Junta

The notorious military dictatorship in Argentina began the same year that Michel Foucault was delivering the lecture series translated as ‘*Society Must be Defended*’ in Paris at the Collège de France. In the now much-discussed lecture delivered on 17 March 1976, Foucault explored his thesis that sovereign power had re-positioned itself in the 18th and 19th centuries such that its appearance, so long associated with its power to take life, now became associated with the power to foster the life of subjects. The argument was centrally about the displacement of power’s *display* as increasingly



Figure 2 A poster at the University of Buenos Aires
Source: Reproduced by permission of www.enclaveroja.org.ar

routinized 'disciplinary' arrangements meant individuals were enfolded into matrices of power/knowledge that had no call for such pomp and ceremony. Foucault told the history of a sovereign power that became more distant from its subjects, less overtly visible, while biopolitical mechanisms of the state gathered and intensified around the living body; the disciplinary techniques that focused on the anatomo-politics of individual bodies enabled the production of data about populations who could then be administered and predicted, which is to say, calculated and governed, statistically. This biopolitical development, Foucault suggested, meant increasing attention to general biological processes, with the coordination of systems of housing provision, sanitation, fertility and reproduction as societies experienced accelerated industrialization and associated urban development. Thus, and by contrast with sovereign power, biopolitical power does not display itself in its ability to kill, but takes the more discreet form that intervenes in order to maintain a healthy population, in order to make live.

This much is well known. But it is the next development in Foucault's lecture that I want to discuss in relation to the junta that was to seize power in Argentina exactly one week after Foucault delivered his lecture. Because, having explained the focus on life and the living body, Foucault turned to consider precisely the 'paradox' of state violence within such a biopolitical regime. Given that biopower's objective 'is essentially to make live', he asks, how 'is it possible for a political power to kill, to call for deaths, to demand deaths, to give the order to kill, and to expose not only its enemies but its own citizens to the risk of death?' (2003: 254). The answer, Foucault contends, is that the killing of the other is cast in biological terms such that the death of the other could be figured as the guarantee not merely of my safety but of the health of the living in general. ¹⁴According to this logic, then:

... the more inferior species die out, the more abnormal individuals are eliminated, the fewer degenerates there will be in the species as a whole and ¹⁵the more I – as a species rather than an individual – can live, the stronger I will ¹⁶become, the more vigorous I will be. I will be able to proliferate. (2003: 255)

There is a racism at work here, Foucault argues. Indeed, the biopolitical mode of power inscribed racism within the mechanisms of the state such that the modern state risks becoming racist at every turn – it can 'barely function without becoming involved in racism at some point' (2003: 254). Whenever the biological field that power controls is divided, wherever a caesura is introduced, one can speak of a racism that functions to fragment, that shadows its task of creating populations to be governed.

It is not usual to think ¹⁷the so-called 'Process of National Re-organization' that the junta embarked upon in 1976 in these terms, but to a large extent the biopolitical lens lends those events a certain clarity. In the wake of the economic crisis of 1975, the leadership problems since Peron's death, the factional struggles and the horrors of daily murders, the guerrillas' actions and the terrors of the Triple A,⁷ Argentina was primed to accept the junta's simply stated aims – to re-establish order and the state's monopoly on violence – which were supported by a range of the legal measures they immediately put in place. The language was one of restoring order and allowing for proper democratic government to be re-established. But the military programme went further and consisted 'in eliminating the root of the problem, which according to its diagnosis was found in society itself and in the unresolved nature of society's conflicts' (Romero, 2002: 215). This new military government spoke of Argentine society in biological metaphors of illness and health, using terms such as 'sickness, tumour, surgical removal, major surgery' (Romero, 2002: 216), and it was in the name of 'healing' that their prescriptions for the new Argentine subject, and their operations of terror – including the tactics of kidnapping, torture and killing – proceeded. Casting their violence explicitly as temporary antibodies produced by an illness afflicting the social body, and with particular intensity in the years 1976–8, the dictatorship engaged in its strategy of

disappearances. CONADEP estimated the number at 9000, while human rights groups have always held that the number reached 30,000 people – all the while speaking in the language of democracy and life. ‘A government is an essentially moral entity,’ declared Admiral Massera, ‘[and] must never abdicate the metaphysical principles from which the grandeur of its power derives . . . every citizen is unique and irreplaceable before God’ (quoted in Feitlowitz, 1998: 24).

The contrast between a language of freedom and democracy and the actuality of the regime has led some commentators to suggest that the junta operated like a ‘dual state’ during this period, declaring democracy and the rule of law as their eventual goal, and pointing to the constitution under whose remnants they operated, while operating lawlessly, in clandestine and extrajudicial activities (Corradi, 1985: 121), and denying the existence of detention centres while over 600 of them were set up around the country. Read through the lens of biopolitics, however, one is prompted to see the contradiction as an intensification of a caesura on which the very possibility of nation-states and modern politics arises. As Marguerite Feitlowitz has shown, the definition of who was a citizen was at stake in the speeches of the junta, who repeatedly figured the citizen of Argentina on one side of a caesura beyond which ‘the enemy’ threatened. ‘The repression is directed against a minority we do not consider Argentine’, General Videla stated, an enemy without ‘flag or uniform . . . not even a face’ (quoted in Feitlowitz, 1998: 23–4).

In a famous speech from 2 November 1976, Massera stated:

We who believe in a pluralistic democracy are fighting a war against the idolators of totalitarianism . . . a war for freedom and against tyranny . . . here and now, a war against those who favour death and by those of us who favour life. (quoted in Feitlowitz, 1998: 25)

He went on, arguing, *inter alia*, that:

Just as centuries before the world was attacked by plagues, we today are seeing a new and hallucinatory epidemic: the desire to kill. . . . We are not going to fight unto death, we are going to fight beyond death, unto victory. For love of life, for respect of those who have fallen and will fall . . . death will not triumph here. Because all of our dead . . . each and every one died for the triumph of life. (quoted in Feitlowitz, 1998: 25)

Leaving aside the peculiar notion of fighting ‘beyond death’, the language of war is employed through notions of life, for love of which the military dictatorship set about eradicating those it considered subversive, figured as in the sway of totalitarianism and as non-Argentine (as, in other words, located across a caesura).

This speech is all the more remarkable for the fact that it was delivered to his inferior officers in the ESMA, one of the most notorious detention and extermination camps of the dictatorship. ESMA was (and remains

in part) a training school for the Navy; but during the dictatorship it was used as a torture and detention centre, and an estimated 5000 people were imprisoned there, of whom only an estimated 400 survived. Here, as Agamben argues in his development of Foucault's thesis, the logic of the caesura became entwined with the camp, the *nomos* of modernity, where systematic killing makes necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003) the better description of this underbelly of biopolitics. Located on the Avenida de Libertador in the city of Buenos Aires, it symbolizes the systematic nature of the kidnapping by the military, the proximity of the *desaparecidos* to the everyday life of the city, as well as the complexity of living with continued revelations about that past offered up in/to the present.

If it has now become *de rigueur* to criticize Agamben's *Homo Sacer* thesis for the ambition of a thesis applicable across time and space, for its ahistorical and therefore un-Foucauldian rendering of the political structures in question, here it remains nevertheless all too resonant. The practices of systematic kidnapping, torture and murder described in the shocking 1995 confessions of retired Navy Captain Adolfo Scilingo removed those who were deemed to be in the system but not of it, those who became vulnerable because they could be ambiguously placed. Scilingo, and those who followed his lead in confessing, described the processes of interrogation and torture at ESMA, as well as the drugging of the kidnapped and the dumping of their bodies from aircraft into the Rio de Plata, the so-called 'death flights'. Because of the victims' alleged participation in campaigns of violence figured as against the democratic nation, the junta's logic depicted them as precisely a remainder, an impure in relation to the purity of a figure who was to be protected, the Argentine political subject. The military leaders cast themselves as engaged in a battle for Argentina, for democracy and, even to the very end, likened their struggle and ultimately the 'sacrifice' signalled by the guilty verdict at their trial, to the martyrdom of Christ, the 'most notable victim of human justice', as Galtieri's defence put it, pointing to the cross above the judges' heads (Graziano, 1992: 226).

Now, after a long battle to halt its proposed demolition (proposed as part of Alfonsín and Menem's project of 'reconciliation'), ESMA has been designated a dedicated 'Space for Memory', with those buildings that were used in the detention of civilians having been given back by the Navy to the City of Buenos Aires. During that campaign, cardboard and metal silhouettes – some shaped like pregnant women, some covered in smaller passport-style photographs of the disappeared – were tied to its railings, and remain there still (Figures 3 and 4).

Again, the image of the disappeared is less a memorial than an accompaniment to present efforts to serve an ethical injunction on both the passer-by and the state. The silhouettes do not suggest that the present is haunted by those from the past – a formulation that is attractive and poetic, but that underemphasizes the actions of those in the present – so much as they confront the present with the past as a question, making its significance and its lessons a matter of present political configurations and debate. If



Figure 3 ESMA
Source: © Vikki Bell.



Figure 4 ESMA
Source: © Vikki Bell.

this much is allowed, I want to go on to suggest that the stronger, more expansive argument found in Agamben’s thesis might begin to illuminate the present biopolitical demarcations and distributions of liveable lives in Argentina. Before I do so, I would like to follow one particular story awhile, and one particular image, that of someone who is, in Primo Levi’s (1989 [1986]) sense, an ‘absolute witness’.

Following Fernando

 Ultimately, Photography is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is *pensive*, when it thinks. (Barthes, 2000 [1980]: 38)

Fernando Brodsky was kidnapped on 14 August 1979 and taken to a detention camp – to ESMA, in fact. He remains disappeared. His name, along with his age and the year he was taken, is now inscribed in the recently finished wall of memory in El Parque de la Memoria, which is being built on a plot of land alongside the banks of the Rio de Plata (Figure 5). In this space, Fernando becomes one in a multitude, one name carved into one of the four discontinuous walls, one among many on a memorial designed to look like a jagged cut from the air, to symbolize the open wound that still gapes. The memorial contains individual names but its main message is scale; like the poster of Auschwitz that Julio Flores described, the mounting

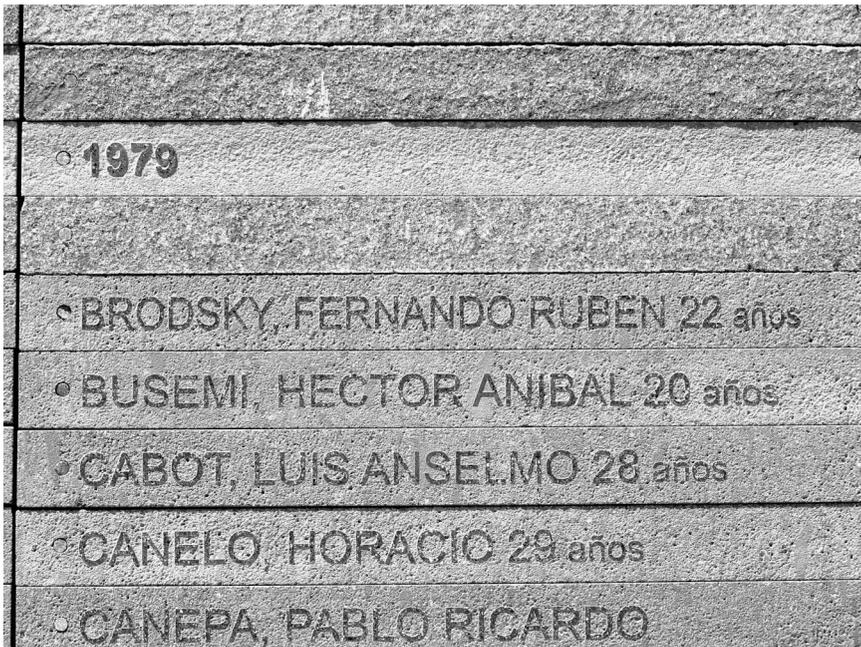


Figure 5 El Parque de la Memoria
Source: © Vikki Bell.

up of names, year after year, gives the visitor a sense of the sheer number of these crimes.

The site at which I first encountered Fernando, however, was an art exhibition. There, Fernando's photograph hung, 're-framed', as it were, as part of an exhibition assembled by a US curator, entitled *The Disappeared*, that – not uncontroversially – brought together work on its theme from across Latin America. Fernando's brother Marcelo had included this image of his younger brother in his contribution to the exhibition, and it appeared there, together with some grainy video footage and family photograph-album images of Fernando.

It is a very special portrait, whose provenance is particularly shocking; this photograph was actually taken inside the ESMA. The kidnapped would often be so photographed, and these images were used to create and falsify their documents. The negative of Fernando's photograph was smuggled out of ESMA by a photographer – Victor Bastera⁸ – who was also kidnapped and made to work as a photographer in ESMA, and with whom Fernando's brother, Marcelo, was later in touch. Marcelo quotes Bastera explaining how he did not actually 'take' this photograph of Fernando, although he smuggled the negative out along with several others:⁹

One day working in the lab I saw they had a pile of photographs that were going to be burnt – that was around 1983, you see, and changes were on the way. And I saw my own picture among them, my own photograph from when they had just hauled me in. . . . So I went through the pile and grabbed the negatives I could find, hiding them under my pants next to my stomach down there by my balls. (Brodsky, 2005: 235)

When democracy was re-established, and the trials of the military were announced in 1985, Bastera handed these images to the authorities. Later, Marcelo collected Fernando's photograph with Bastera from the law courts archive, taking it from the files where otherwise it would have remained, piled high with other files documenting the disappeared, including the writs of *Habeas Corpus* that the families filed in vain, testimony to their belief in the pursuit of justice through legal process even at that bleak time. The thumb that you see in the image is Bastera's, holding the photograph as Marcelo took the second image, the photograph of the photograph

This pulling of the image from the law archives dramatizes the tension that has been associated with portraits. For, arguably, portraits always contain a tension related to the history of capturing the face, as such practices have pulled both ways – being honorific in the tradition of ceremonial presentations of the self and repressive in the documentation of the criminal, the mentally ill, the insane (Sekula, 1987) – so that there is always a tension between the face captured on account of a celebration of individuality and that captured on account of its encounter with power. Arguably, Marcelo Brodsky and Bastera effect the movement of Fernando's image from the latter (back) to the former, pulling Fernando out of 'documentation' and back



Figure 6 Fernando Brodsky

to a ceremonial or at least celebratory presentation of one intimately known and loved.

But things may not be quite so straightforward, since the related tension between the singularity of the person and the becoming-archive, or perhaps simply History (Barthes), to which s/he is always potentially ascribed, is not overcome simply by presenting Fernando's image in the art-space. 'History is hysterical,' wrote Barthes:

... it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it – and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it. As a living soul, I am the very contrary of History, I am what belies it, destroys it for the sake of my own history. (2000 [1980]: 65)

If history is about the constitution or the consigning of objects and documents to the archive, a movement from the now to the past that is thereby constituted as such, it is also, by the same token, the habitat of the (absolute) witness, one who cannot speak to 'now'. Barthes immediately recognizes the relationship between History and the witness, adding parenthetically, 'impossible for me to believe in "witnesses"; impossible, at least, to be one' (2000 [1980]: 65). Fernando's photograph still risks the possibility of becoming-archival, becoming preserved *as past*, even in the art-space.

But what if we approach this from the point of the image? W.J.T. Mitchell coaxes us in this direction, posing the question ‘what does the picture “want”?’ (2005: 28). There is something rather peculiar about this way of approaching the question, as Mitchell himself notes, since it entails ‘a dubious personification of inanimate things’ and might be seen to ‘flirt with a regressive superstitious attitude toward images’. But he poses it, nevertheless, as a ‘thought-experiment’ (2005: 30) and in order to take a distance from art-historical approaches that, although infused with the sense of the ‘liveliness’ of the image, tend to refer ever backwards, privileging anterior stories over those that arise from present conjunctions.

In the case of Fernando’s photograph, there are different possible answers to the question, not least because of the different sites of its appearance. In one strong sense, and on the one hand, this picture of a young man in 1979 ‘wants’ to be filed, since this is the way that prosecutions proceed and succeed (Vismann, 2008); it has no qualms about losing Fernando’s singularity in the process. It wishes to become documented precisely as one among others, adding to the weight of the prosecution case in a legal trial. As evidence, the image *wants* its viewer to feel s/he is gazing at an absolute witness, looking into the eyes of someone who looked with those same eyes at his torturers, his murderers. The silence of the absolute witness – Fernando looks out from beyond death, but we couldn’t really say it is *he* who ‘speaks’ – does not deny to his image the possibility of testimony. ‘Fernando was there,’ the image declares. ‘They took me.’ The photograph asserts itself as evidence, as an exposure not of the one captured in the camera but of the regime that captured *him* in the camp.¹⁰ Thus, as an example of what has been termed a ‘reverse mug-shot’ (Hughes, 2005: 463), it asks to be counted; it ‘calls’ for justice. In this ambition, as a part of those files, one might justifiably say, the photograph was successful, in the limited and provisional sense that the military leaders were called to account, they were found guilty, if only to be pardoned and freed once again.

As an image in an art-exhibition, however, what the photograph wants is not framed by formal legal procedures. Here, it cannot and does not seek the justice that belongs to courts and prosecutions. Arguably, the image’s desire is elsewhere, with a different *modus operandi*. But can the photograph, in this different assemblage, assert itself against the force of becoming-History or becoming-archive, which, while preserving, can also threaten the potential vitality of its collected elements? Can the art context shield that vitality?

Fernando’s photograph is astonishing. Like Gardner’s photograph of the imprisoned Lewis Payne that Barthes discusses in *Camera Lucida*, one observes with horror ‘an anterior future of which death is the stake’ (2000 [1980]: 96). And just as Barthes does when he considers the photograph of his mother, we ‘shudder . . . over a catastrophe which has already occurred’ (2000 [1980]: 96). At this complex fold of temporality that the photograph delivers, however, we are not given to wonder about the essence of photography, with Barthes. It is not an image that asks to be read according to the

techniques or conventions of photography. Instead, this image is affecting insofar as, in ways I will explain further, it wants to *debate* its own conditions of possibility (as Bal, 2001, has argued in a different context). The question this image poses is not confined to a technological or aesthetic level: 'how – by which chemical, technological or compositional effort – did I come to be?', but a political and ethical question 'how did I come to be t/here?' And although this question 'solicits' a narrative approach,¹¹ such that one can tell the amazing story, relayed above, of how, in grabbing the negatives, Bastera grabbed Fernando's image and so it came to be here, how it disappeared and reappeared to take part in a legal battle, in the human rights discourse (that continues to surround the future of the building ESMA) and in an art exhibition, no simple narrative approach satisfactorily answers such a question ('how did I come to be t/here?').

A riposte to Videla's remarkable statement that the enemy has 'no face', a 'resurrection' (Barthes) that mimics and challenges the junta's likening their plight during their trial to Christ's sacrifice,¹² the critique that Fernando's image wants does not ask us to reflect on his particular story but rather about the story of the dictatorship. If this photograph reappears in order to 'call out' like Althusser's policeman, if, as W.J.T. Mitchell seems to suggest, it seeks recognition, it is not for a individual story but for the story of the configurations of power and the machinations that put Fernando in the frame. As Foucault wrote in another context, in a little essay called 'On the Lives of Infamous Men':

... in order for some part of them to reach us, a beam of light had to illuminate them, for a moment at least. A light coming from elsewhere. What snatched them from the darkness in which they could, perhaps should, have remained was the encounter with power. (2000: 61)



Fernando's image is such a trace of an encounter with power, the flash, here, the literal flash of the camera.

It is our task – this was Foucault's whole purpose – to receive these traces from the past and to construct a critique, a genealogy or history of the present that rescues them from being merely cultural memory, or from becoming-archival, that seeks to understand and place them in relation to the political rationalities that produced their possibility, and those that currently produce the present conditions of possibility. The camera's adoption by the military regime has left us an image that has the potential to speak back to power. But how might we pursue that critique without fallaciously proposing that our attentions magically allow the image to speak?

Bal's argument that an image or artwork can 'beckon' certain specific delimited references is perhaps helpful here. As she has argued, the 'beckoning' belongs to the artwork, but it is necessarily a present composition, in which the viewer partakes. The detail of the artwork draws one in, constituting a gathering full of potential propositions that enable the attentive viewer to make connections. Thus, for example, Bal reads the folds of Louise Bourgeois' sculpture as beckoning the folds of Bernini's

sculptures. Bal suggests a replacement – even a reversal – of art history’s tendency to see a ‘referencing’ (2001: 99) of works or traditions or biography, with an attention to the past that is ‘located in front of not behind the present’ (2001: 100). Moreover, suggests Bal, the *ethics* of looking arises in how the viewer responds anew to such anterior narratives via the present composition suggested in the viewer’s exploration of the piece in question. To give consideration to an artwork – to ‘inhabit it’ as one does with Bourgeois’ *Cells* – is to allow that inhabitation to suggest a place for the ‘old’ stories ‘in the *now*’ (2001: 34, 102).

In the art gallery, Fernando’s photograph beckons certain references and connections that respond to, but also extend beyond, its remarkable narrative. With the flash that caught him and delivered his image to us, as if we were, came other details. Fernando’s slim torso cast a long dark shadow on the wall behind him. Might we adopt Bal’s approach here and read the shadow that Fernando casts in this image as a detail beckoning other shadows, and other walls?

In accounts of the clandestine camps in Argentina one reads over and over about the proximity of the camps to the everyday life of the ‘beautiful’ cities on the other side of the wall; the *desaparecidos* lived in the literal shadow cast by city life. One woman, Ana Maria Careaga,¹³ held in a police station in La Boca, Buenos Aires, recalls:

There were small air holes between the ceiling and the walls, from which I could hear people walking by, cars and buses passing, life going on as usual, with us disappeared in a concentration camp. In the afternoon, when the sun was at a certain angle, I could see on the floor the shadows of the people passing by, getting in and out of their cars. . . . To be so close to them, for them to be so close to us, and yet to be so far away. . . . We were in the world but not a part of it, alive in the realm of death. (in Feitlowitz, 1998: 165–6)

Such stories never lose their ability to shock; but considering the question of what Fernando’s image might *want*, and following Bal’s ‘past located in front’ of us, the work of critique cannot be reserved for the history of the *desaparecidos*. And those within Argentina and across South America who are building new stories ‘in the now’ are making precisely the link between the category ‘the disappeared’ and present state rationalities and its various violences, not only in relation to those who are the newly disappeared, but also those who suffer police aggression while the police remain seemingly impervious to laws of the land. Thus the interventions of groups such as Grupe del Arte de la Calle (GAC) have re-orientated their activities – previously centred around the noisy, collective ‘outing’ of former *repressors* living in the cities, often unbeknownst to their neighbours – to focus instead on the routinely ignored violence of the police; using similar methods of graphic painting of walls and pavements, and gathering in solidarity, they mark out and protest at police stations.

Moreover, and by the same token, Fernando’s photograph invites critique of present shadows that fall in the cityscape, the present caesuras.

The *cartoneros* who live in the shanty-towns in and around Buenos Aires, and other cities, and who populate the city’s streets every night searching for cardboard and plastic to take to recycling plants; these are the ones who survive literally in the shadows, at the social and economic margin. They are not unadministered or untouched by state power – indeed, the infrastructure accommodates their modes of survival, providing specially adapted train carriages for example, to accommodate the trolleys – and although they are in the shadows and in ‘camps’, they are also visible to all, as in so many cities around the world (as Mike Davis, 2006, has recently argued), not least in the demonstrations of the *piqueteros*, the groups of urban poor who block routes in the city to demand precisely to be administered biopolitically.

It is true that it was Foucault’s point that as soon as one constructs a ‘vulnerable population’, the figure of a potential *homo sacer* if you like, one is caught in the biopolitical game, making populations and their lives the focus of administrative attentions while necessarily also drawing distinctions. Understood biopolitically, the moral injunction becomes all the more problematic, especially as articulated in human rights discourse, not least because its moral economies retain the biopolitical distinction between *bios* and *zoë*, as well as a certain intimacy with the concept of the nation-state figured as the defender and guarantee of those rights (Asad, 2003), an assumption clearly untenable in Argentina’s historical record. Critics have argued that even humanitarianism has the potential to engage, in practice, in the constitution of distinctions that arrange human lives in hierarchical fashion (Fassin, 2007). The idea that a basic shared quality of ‘the human’ that provokes unconditional and unquestionable support is an absolute that is articulated differentially. When and for whom is humanitarian intervention demanded (and when is it not)? Clearly, one is amidst a complex politics of naming (Mamdani, 2007). Yet what Fernando’s photograph might ‘want’ is precisely that these connections are countenanced; ‘biopolitics’ might frame that thought, linking past atrocities with the present, in a country where hundreds exist only because of the modes by which the city produces and disposes of its waste.

A group of sociologists of education at the Universidad de San Martín in Buenos Aires recently facilitated the making of a video by a group of children from one of the city’s shanty-towns.¹⁴ The children chose to focus on the issue of trash, that plagues their lives, but that also sustains their families. In a memorable sequence, a city worker whom the children had asked to interview, takes the children to ‘their’ landfill site¹⁵ in a coach. As they approach the entrance to the site, he is explaining the city’s regulated process of waste disposal to the children in all its biopolitical fullness; meanwhile, a young girl stares out of the window as he re-describes a landscape she knows only too well, to which she usually walks – unregulated, illegally, unprotected – and where she and her family search for scraps of food, and where she plays every day of her life.

Of course Fernando’s image does not contain references to this present political situation in any direct way. Yet it is possible to argue that, insofar as

it might be thought to want something, it would want to promote a reflection on how his disappearance was possible that extended beyond a narration of historical events. And, in pursuing that genealogical work, one is also pursuing an ethical reflection on the present, one that attends to the production of political life and its caesuras ‘in the now’. And, flawed as its ambition may make it, Agamben’s thesis serves as a powerful reminder that one has to keep within this exploration an awareness of the senses in which the ‘secured’ biopolitical life of the People, constituted through their relationship with the sovereign, implies exclusions and vulnerabilities. The *homo sacer* is the figure who is not taken into the sovereign bond, who is excepted from it. And if that bare life reveals the ‘original activity of sovereignty’ (1998: 83), if the figure of *homo sacer* retains a relation to that bond, it is not only because he is produced by it, but also because he mirrors it and serves as a ‘reminder’ of it; without this included exclusion of the sovereign decision (1998: 85), the sovereign bond does not make sense, does not constitute anything.

Another photograph of Fernando Brodsky exhibited by his brother shows Fernando as a younger boy, of about 11, sitting in an empty theatre. He is amidst rows and rows of empty seats, smiling softly directly at the camera, at his mother,¹⁶ at us. He is waiting as if for the other spectators to join him, to take up their places. The image poses the question I have been pursuing in these pages. How might we imagine those empty seats to be filled? Into which group, into which archive should we place Fernando’s image? Once there, what potential vitality can we preserve for it?

Notes

1. The Spanish term *aparición* is a noun meaning both appearance (that something appears) and the appearance (the thing seen). Shouted or painted on posters, it is not an injunction ‘appear now alive!’ addressed to the one disappeared, but, more interestingly, it is like the answer to the British protest marches’ call-and-response question: ‘What do we want?’ That is, ‘[for them to] appear alive’. Its ambiguity, such that sometimes it is translated as ‘apparition’ (as if it meant a vision or ghost) rather than ‘appearance’, means it is not clear, however, what or who the call is for and before, especially as the likelihood of such an appearance diminishes with time. I discuss this in a little more detail in Bell and Di Paolantonio (2009).

2. The others were Rodolfo Aguerreberry and Guillermo Kexel (author’s interview with Flores, 6 December 2006, conducted with Mario Di Paolantonio). I would like to express my gratitude to Mario Di Paolantonio, all interviewees and the AHRC for funding of the wider research project on which this article draws. For interviews and for the key image used here I would like to thank Marcelo Brodsky.

3. The poster was one in a series, one for each day. Flores also explained that he had used this technique with children in art classes, and also in collaboration with medical researchers who had discovered that people marked troubled regions on their own silhouettes at the site of the location of their future cancer tumours (author’s interview with Flores, 6 December 2006, conducted with Mario Di Paolantonio).

4. CONADEP's report, *Nunca más* (1984), stated that most kidnappings were from homes, then places of work, then public spaces.
5. The Abuelas are an NGO formed in 1977 by the grandmothers of the children and unborn children of the disappeared, and who continue their fight to recover the identities of those who were born while their mothers were detained. Often the babies were given away (frequently to military families) to be brought up unaware of their true genealogies. Over 400 were declared missing; 87 have been located. The Abuelas fought to have clauses protecting the 'right to identity' included in the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, which became known as the Argentine clauses and were later incorporated into Argentina's Constitution (via law 23,849).
6. Alfonsín's government responded to unrest among junior military officers by passing the Full Stop and Due Obedience laws in 1986 and 1987 respectively (the Due Obedience law was law 23.521 sanctioned 6 August 1987), which brought an end to most prosecutions for human rights abuses under the period of the dictatorship. His successor Carlos Menem then pardoned more than 400 military officers being prosecuted in 1989, and the following year he pardoned those who had already been convicted, including the regime's leaders. However, in 1998 the Argentine Congress repealed the Full Stop and Due Obedience laws, allowing prosecutions once again; and in 2001 Judge Gabriel Cavallo declared them unconstitutional (Jelin, 2003). In 2003 Kirchner was elected; he fired 52 senior military officers and revoked a decree impeding the extradition of Argentines to face charges abroad. In the first year of his presidency 97 military personnel were charged with human rights violations and detained by the justice system.
7. The AAA (Alianza Argentina Anticomunista) was a ruthless anti-communist organization first set up under Isabel Perón's government, who directed their state-supported terror against 'subversives' – not only communists but all who could be cast as communist sympathizers, or critics of state policies – in the name of the nation.
8. Bastera was kidnapped and taken to the ESMA himself, and he was made to work as a photographer there, taking photographs for the military that they used in the falsification of personal documents.
9. If photography is more about 'pursuing realities' than about pushing a button, comments Marcelo Brodsky (2005: 31), Bastera certainly did 'take' the photograph. As this quotation suggests, some of the kidnapped were allowed to go out of the detention camps, but were expected to return or suffer the consequences.
10. As such, the photograph shares something of the relationship between particularity and generality of the genre of *testimonio*, about which much has been written (Beverley, 2004 [1992]).
11. Here I am following Bal's (2001) discussion of Louise Bourgeois' sculpture *Spider*, which she also argues solicits but resists a narrative approach.
12. The Christ reference also occurs to Marcelo Brodsky, who writes about Fernando's vest in the image: 'it recalls the loincloth of someone else who had been tortured, on the cross. And the scarves. Pieces of white cloth, scraps, worn on different places on the body' (2005: 235).
13. Ana Maria Careaga was kidnapped at the age of 16 in 1977. Her mother was later disappeared.

14. I am grateful to Dr Silvia Grinberg, Universidad de San Martín, Buenos Aires, for passing me a copy of this film which she and her team produced with the children, and for discussing its production with me. The film is entitled *Re-copada*, and it was filmed by the children of Cárcova, a shanty-town named after the famous Argentine painter Ernesto de la Cárcova (1866–1927) whose *Sin pan y sin trabajo* (1894) depicted the desperation of poverty.

15. Coordinación Ecológica Área Metropolitana Sociedad del Estado is the leading company in waste transport and disposal. The children refer to the landfill site, where much of the trash produced in the city of Buenos Aires is deposited, by its acronym CEAMSE. Many families go to these sites daily in search of food.

16. Marcelo Brodsky (2001: 48) explains that this image was taken by his mother who was pursuing her own short-lived photographic career. She won a local prize for the image, to which she appended a swimming medal won by Fernando.

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