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## IMAGE AND DISAPPEARANCE IN ARGENTINA. REFLECTIONS ON A PHOTO TAKEN IN THE BASEMENT OF ESMA

*El secuestro de las monjas francesas, Alice Domon y Léonie Duquet, en diciembre de 1977 en Buenos Aires generó protestas internacionales y una fuerte visibilidad pública del caso, a través de la prensa francesa. Para tratar de evitar problemas diplomáticos con el gobierno francés, la dictadura argentina intentó endilgar la responsabilidad del secuestro a la organización guerrillera Montoneros. Para ello, fraguó un comunicado de la organización y lo difundió acompañándolo con una foto tomada a las religiosas en el sótano de la ESMA. Esta foto singular, sacada dentro de un centro clandestino de detención a dos personas ya desaparecidas, para ser mostrada públicamente, plantea una serie de cuestiones –que son tratadas en este artículo– en torno a la relación entre fotografía y memoria de la desaparición. Se analizan las noticias en torno al tema publicadas por la prensa argentina y francesa después de los secuestros, y se examinan algunos programas emitidos por la televisión francesa en las décadas de los '80 y '90. En primer lugar, este caso permite cuestionar el estatuto de huella y de “prueba” de la fotografía (Barthes, Dubois): ¿puede ser interpretada esta foto como “prueba de la desaparición”? En segundo lugar, el artículo problematiza el vínculo entre fotografía y representación del horror preguntándose, con Didi-Huberman, si más que el referente, lo que “da a ver” el horror en este caso son las marcas de las condiciones de enunciación de la imagen, es decir, aquello que permite inferir cómo y dónde fue tomada. Finalmente, el artículo analiza, a partir de esta foto y de sus sucesivas reutilizaciones, las tensiones entre visibilidad y secreto, entre imagen y memoria, y entre el “interior” y el “exterior” del centro clandestino de detención de la ESMA. La repetición constante de la imagen en distintos contextos, a lo largo de más de treinta años, permite preguntarse en qué medida esta “iconización” (Hirsch) termina borrando o amortiguando su carácter perturbador, su posibilidad de seguir comunicando algo del orden de lo intolerable. Estas cuestiones se encuentran en el centro del complejo trabajo de la memoria erigido, en torno a los desaparecidos, en los últimos treinta años.*

Between the 8th and the 10th of December 1977, in several operations carried out by the Argentine Navy in Buenos Aires, twelve people, belonging to a larger group who met regularly in Santa Cruz Church to denounce the disappearance of their loved ones and organise the search for them, were kidnapped. Among those kidnapped were mothers of disappeared people, human rights activists and two French nuns from the Paris Foreign Missions Society in Argentina: Alice Domon and Léonie Duquet.

Both Domon and Duquet had lived in Argentina for many years, supporting various humanitarian missions.<sup>1</sup> Alice Domon was also an active participant in social

action. She had collaborated with rural people supporting the Agrarian League in Corrientes province, and in the months before she was kidnapped she had worked actively with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in searching for information about the fate of the disappeared and publicly denouncing these cases.

The kidnappings happened in broad daylight in several locations, but the most noticeable of these operations was the capture of seven people at the same time, as they left mass at Santa Cruz Church, on the 8th of December.

It came to be known much later that Task Force 3.3.2, belonging to the Argentine Navy, had planned and carried out these kidnappings, using information provided by Lieutenant Commander Alfredo Astiz, who had infiltrated the group of Mothers posing as the brother of a disappeared person.

According to witness accounts given subsequently, the twelve people who were kidnapped were taken to ESMA,<sup>2</sup> where they were tortured and held clandestinely for some days, until they were finally murdered. Since then, their names have featured in the long list of people who were disappeared in Argentina.<sup>3</sup> Faced with protest from the French government, the members of the ESMA Task Force circulated false information to blame the guerrilla organisation Montoneros for kidnapping the nuns. This information was accompanied by a photo taken in the basement of ESMA: it is the last photo that shows the nuns alive and one of the few photographic images of disappeared people taken inside a clandestine detention centre.

In this study, I would like to propose some reflections on the way in which this photograph has been presented in the public arena, particularly in the press and on television, both during the dictatorship and after it. I shall refer in particular to Argentine and French newspapers published immediately after the kidnappings, and to some programmes shown on French television during the '80s and '90s. More precisely, I would like to investigate, through this photo and its subsequent re-uses, three issues that link the photo to the memory of disappearance in Argentina.

Firstly, it is possible to question the status of the photo as proof, and specifically as "proof of disappearance". As is known, forced disappearance, the principal means of repression employed by the last Argentine military dictatorship (1976–1983), depended on the lack of public visibility of its bloodiest actions: although the kidnappings were "visible" because they often took place in public spaces and in the presence of witnesses, what happened to the victims subsequently was concealed. The dictatorship tortured and murdered its opponents in clandestine detention centres which were not seen publicly, and it denied their existence and covered any trace that could link such places with repressive activity. What happened "inside" the clandestine centres could rarely be seen "outside", although – as I shall indicate later – these boundaries were more porous and permeable than one might suspect.

Since the end of the dictatorship, no images have been found in Argentina like those taken in Nazi concentration camps by Allied troops, nor propaganda films like those made by the Nazis while those camps were operating, nor "private" photos like those taken by Nazi soldiers of the execution of prisoners (Baer 2006). One ESMA survivor, Víctor Bastera, managed to smuggle out, hidden in his clothing, a series of photos of disappeared people taken inside ESMA, although in large part those faces were in unrecognisable locations.<sup>4</sup> With time, and through specific work of memory that has coincided with the several occasions on which Bastera shared his testimonial, these images have begun to be recognised as "visual documents" of disappearance.

And even so, they constitute an exception that does no more than emphasise the lack of visual documentation of this particular crime. As a result of all this, the notion of disappearance poses extraordinary challenges to photography, if we bear in mind the inherent contradiction that would seem to exist between the photo as trace and image, and disappearance as the systematic erasure and concealment of traces and images.

According to its indexical nature, photography brings traces of past events into the present. As Roland Barthes affirmed, the referent captured by the camera must have existed for the image to be produced: “in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of past” (Barthes 2000: 76). Although Philippe Dubois maintains that “the principle of the trace, however essential, only represents one moment of the photographic process” (Dubois 1986: 49), this photographic record allows the construction of a pool of images that can be read as “proof” of the past. So the first issue with which our analysis must engage concerns the way in which this exceptional photo, taken in the ESMA basement of two nuns who *were already disappeared*, to be published as “proof of life” even after their death, may question photography’s status as trace and proof. If this photo is proof of something, what is it proof of? In sum, the first issue that this article explores is the problematic nature of the link between photography and disappearance.

The second matter to be addressed has to do with the equally problematic link between photography and the representation of horror. To what extent can this photo be seen as a document of the atrocities committed within the clandestine detention centre? The issue, which many authors have discussed at length, surrounding the way in which atrocities are shown in the public arena, which Rancière (2010) calls “the intolerable image”, presents itself here in a remarkable manner. Can this photo be read as an “image of horror”? Which characteristics of this photograph would allow such a reading?

Among the most notable discussions of the representation of horror through photographs – in this case related to the Holocaust – we might mention the debate involving Georges Didi-Hubermann, Claude Lanzmann, Gérard Wajcman and other French intellectuals. The debate centred on four photographs taken by members of the *Sonderkommando*<sup>5</sup> in the crematoriums of Auschwitz-Birkenau and later “wrested from hell” (Didi-Hubermann 2003) and shown in other contexts and historical moments. The polemic turns on various axes: whether these photos “document” the horror; whether they should be shown in the public domain, where and in what way; whether they can, in some way, give an account of the atrocities committed there, among other issues (Didi-Hubermann 2003). I do not wish to enter into this extensive polemic here, rather I wish simply to signal one aspect of it that may be useful in our analysis of the photograph that particularly concerns this article. The question is in what way this photo reveals something more than what it (apparently) shows; whether its “frame” (Butler 2009) and its “moment of enunciation” (Didi-Hubermann 2003) give as much or more of account of the horror than the referent (the French nuns) does. On this point, the comparison of this photo with the four photographs of the Auschwitz crematoriums reaches its limit, given that, as Didi-Hubermann signals, those four photos were taken by members of the *Sonderkommando* as an act of resistance, and as such, when their “moment of enunciation” becomes visible, both the photographed subject (the extermination of millions of Jews in the gas chambers) and the – fragmentary,

heroic, improbable – act of wanting to tell the world what was happening there can be saved from oblivion. On the other hand, the photo that concerns us here was taken by the perpetrators, in the ESMA basement, of two disappeared people with the aim of creating false proof of what had become of them, and with the aim of making that lie public. As such, this frame and this situation of enunciation can only appear, in the image, as an open question about *who took the photo, and when and where it was taken*. These are the key questions that define the situation of disappearance (where are the disappeared people, what happened to them, who took them away?). We ask ourselves if this frame and this situation of enunciation can be considered as the “document of horror” here. That is to say, we ask whether that same open question, which is made *visible* in the image, documents the horror precisely as a result of our incapacity – we, the viewers of this image – to answer it.

Finally, the third matter to consider relates to the subsequent representation of the event and the uses of this photograph in the configuration of memories of disappearance. In its successive re-uses, over more than thirty years, this photo has been repeated, reframed, and shown in various montages, in different media. One of the effects of the progressive aestheticisation of the image (Didi-Hubermann 2003) has been the erasure of the particular situation of enunciation that we have just mentioned: that is to say, the omission of the frames which allow us to infer that the photo was taken by the perpetrators, in the ESMA basement, of two people who were soon to be murdered.

The first problem, therefore, with respect to the way in which this extraordinary photo orientates itself with a memory of the disappearance of the French nuns is to ask what new meanings are constructed when the photo is reframed and reedited. The second problem has to do with the fact that this photo is constantly repeated. It is known that discourses of memory which are presented in the public arena tend to configure or form strong figures that, with time, can become emblems and, at certain moments, condense and stabilise meanings about the past. These strong figures function as counterweights to the diffusion of sense brought about by memory, both on an individual and a collective level.

With specific reference to the use of photographs in this process, Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci (1995) speaks of “emblematic icons” and Marianne Hirsch (2001) of a process of “iconisation”. As such, following Hirsch, I ask to what extent the repetition of this image ends up erasing or softening its disturbing character, its ability to keep communicating something intolerable.<sup>6</sup> I am interested in that inherent tension in mediated memories: the tension between the unique and disruptive character of the event in question (the disappearance of people as a systematic method of annihilation under State terrorism in Argentina) and the increasingly stabilised and repetitive representations spread by the media – and which, in turn, allow the issue to become accessible to the general public.

Although they are not dealt with strictly in this order, the discussion that follows deals with these three main considerations.

## The news

Under the censorship and strict control of the media imposed by the dictatorship, Argentine newspapers<sup>7</sup> reported the kidnapping of the nuns several days later, on the 14th of December 1977, when the case was made public by the diplomatic dispute

surrounding the detention of two French nationals without the French authorities having been informed.<sup>8</sup> The headlines of Argentine newspapers on the 14th and 15th of December referred to the “French protest” at the kidnapping of the two nuns, and to the request for information regarding their fate.

In a strategy followed by almost all the Argentine newspapers during the dictatorship, given that censorship prohibited the publication of information that was not confirmed by an official source (Blaustein and Zubieta 1998), newspapers from the 14th and 15th December describe the denunciations and reproduce the communiqués from the Argentine Foreign Office, without giving a clear account of the events or seeking alternative sources or witnesses who could give first-hand accounts of those events. The information varies, even within individual newspapers, from one day to another, and imprecision abounds: there is no consistency in the names of the people who were kidnapped (the names and their spelling vary from one edition to another), or the number of people kidnapped (7, 15, 20?), or the operations carried out (at times it is claimed that the nuns were both kidnapped on the 8th of December, when in fact Domon was taken on the 8th and Duquet on the 10th, as many articles have also stated).

Beyond giving news of the kidnappings, the newspapers report the denunciation made by France and, for this reason, the information given focuses on the nuns and not on the kidnapping of a group of people. If indeed it was the first time that the repression had so clearly targeted a group of disappeared people’s relatives and particularly affected the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo organisation – whose president, Azucena Villaflor de Devicenti, was kidnapped on the 10th of December – very few newspapers reported that among those kidnapped were mothers and other relatives of disappeared people. However, the lack of information in these newspapers mainly concerns to the perpetrators of this act. There is mention of “armed groups” to which the newspapers do not attribute any identity, and which, of course, are not linked in any way to the military Junta in power.

The important exception, in terms of the information that circulated in the Argentine press during those few days, was the English-language newspaper *Buenos Aires Herald*,<sup>9</sup> which, on the cover of its 13th December 1977 edition, reported the kidnapping of the group: it gives a detailed description of the events and the people who were kidnapped, with details about the human rights organisations affected (the Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo). This article mentions one nun within the group of people who were kidnapped, “sister Alicia”, but it does not say that she was French.<sup>10</sup> The tone of the article is denunciatory and we can infer that it was based on a first-hand testimonial, although no source is mentioned. The article also points out that the police gave no information about the case and it speaks of the lack of response to the *habeas corpus* that were presented. An editorial note from the same day, signed by the editor Robert Cox and published in English and Spanish, expresses the suspicion that the kidnappers acted under some form of agreement with the military Junta:

If the occupants of the unidentified cars were not members of the secret services, how is it possible that they had been able to operate so unabashedly inside one of the most ferociously policed metropolises of the world?

Si los ocupantes de los coches sin identificación no eran integrantes de los cuerpos de seguridad, ¿cómo es posible que hayan podido operar tan desembozadamente en una de las metrópolis más férreamente vigiladas del mundo?” (“¿Qué es lo que está pasando?”, *Buenos Aires Herald*, 13/12/1977, p. 8)

Meanwhile, during these first days after the kidnapping, French newspapers<sup>11</sup> denounced the disappearance of “a group of 15 to 20 people” and emphasised the fact that they were mothers and relatives of disappeared people. *Libération* reported the kidnapping on the 12th and *Le Monde* on the 13th, before the actions of the French government with regard to these events had been made public. In these articles, the two nuns are not mentioned. On the 14th of December there appeared headlines mentioning the kidnapping of the nuns,<sup>12</sup> at the same time as reports of the complaints made by the French government to the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Between the 14th and the 16th of December, articles in the French press (especially *Le Monde*) reported the different actions taken by the French government, in Paris and Buenos Aires, in protest against the kidnapping of the nuns. In these articles the operations are meticulously described, clear details are given about the nuns’ identities and the fact that others in the group were members of human rights organisations (especially the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights). All the same, each newspaper writes according to its own format, style and focus. If we compare, for example, *Le Monde* and *Libération*, we can see that the first focuses on the different demands made by the French government of its Argentine counterpart; the second, however, emphasises the very fact that people are being disappeared in Argentina. *Libération* uses the kidnapping of the nuns as starting point to denounce the Argentine dictatorship and its repressive methods based on kidnapping, torture and disappearances.<sup>13</sup>

As for the perpetrators, the French newspapers state their suspicion that the “armed groups” which carried out the kidnappings could be linked to the dictatorship. The link is made tentatively, however: in the news they are characterised as plain-clothes police officers,<sup>14</sup> as “groups working in parallel with the armed forces”<sup>15</sup> or as “groups out of control”.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, international criticism of the Argentine government had notably intensified. James Carter’s government in the United States had begun to press the military Junta on the subject of human rights in the country,<sup>17</sup> and various countries attacked the plans for the Football World Cup to be held in Argentina in June 1978.<sup>18</sup> While denunciations of disappearances had been made in the international press since the beginning of the dictatorship and, by then, thousands of people had been kidnapped, some of whom were very well-known for their roles in Argentine culture and journalism,<sup>19</sup> the kidnapping of two nuns followed by a forceful protest from the French government catapulted the issue of human rights in Argentina to the centre of the international stage. This was a particularly inconvenient moment for the Argentine dictatorial government to have to counter a poor image, and it was very difficult to show the case as the usual consequence of the so-called “fight against subversion”, because the nuns could not simply be presented to international opinion as “subversives” and the situation lent itself rather to showing the opposite: that the regime targeted innocent people.<sup>20</sup>

For these reasons, the Argentine government, which, in general, gave no explanation for the disappeared – and, much less, specific cases of disappearances – sent

out a communiqué which was published in almost all the Buenos Aires newspapers on the 17th of December 1977. Somewhat ambiguously, the communiqué seemed to assign responsibility for the kidnappings to what it calls “subversion”. The text began by mentioning “the disappearance of a group of people, two of them nuns”, but went on to speak of the need “to eradicate protests which disrupt the national community” and repudiated “any attempt to upset the peace and calm of Argentines”, condemning “subversion caught up in its nihilism”. However, it gave no concrete information as to the fate of the kidnapped people or those responsible for this action. The Argentine newspapers scarcely added any comment of their own when they published this text.<sup>21</sup> But it was clear, due to the scale that international protests had reached, that this information proved insufficient. What is more, it created the paradoxical effect of being bad propaganda for the regime: if the “fight against subversion” was victorious, as the Junta claimed, how had the “subversives” kidnapped so many people in such visible locations? This also signals the Junta’s ambiguity in the reports they gave on the “fight against subversion”: sometimes blaming “terrorists” for the violence that they couldn’t keep secret, sometimes announcing that “subversion” had been defeated.

### The photo

At the time, as well as bringing on international pressure and the diplomatic dispute with France, the kidnapping of the Santa Cruz group unleashed innumerable tensions within the governing military Junta, reactivated an old conflict between the armed forces (especially between the Navy and the Army), and crystallised many of the tensions that existed within the Navy, fundamentally between the officials of ESMA Task Force 3.3.2 themselves. These issues evidently go beyond the scope of this article but they do help to explain why ESMA officials decided at that time to kidnap, and then kill some days later, that particular group of people (Goñi 1996).

Suffice it to say that, even within this repressive system based on secrecy, with clandestine detention centres run by all three branches of the armed forces across the country, the operation of kidnapping and murdering the two French nuns was treated with particular secrecy that extended even within Junta and the Navy (Goñi 1996). The main component of one attempt to maintain this silence was a photograph of the nuns taken inside ESMA and intended – paradoxically – to be made public immediately.

The photograph was taken in the basement of the ESMA Officers’ Casino:<sup>22</sup> “las dos monjas fueron sentadas frente a una gran bandera de Montoneros, sosteniendo una copia de *La Nación* del 14 de diciembre en primer plano” (Goñi 1996: 109).<sup>23</sup> The Navy used this photo to falsify a communiqué from Montoneros in which the guerrilla organisation claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of the two nuns and made a series of demands in return for their release.

According to survivors’ testimonials, by the time the photo was taken, the decision to kill all the members of the group had already been made. In fact, one witness states that the marines planned to change the date on the newspaper and keep publishing the photo as proof that they were alive:

Acosta’s idea was to publish it with a newspaper in it, and then to change the newspaper so that, even long after having eliminated them, people would think they were still alive; a childish idea which was never carried out.



La idea de Acosta<sup>24</sup> era sacarla con un diario y después ir trucando el diario, para que se pensara mucho más tiempo después de haberlas eliminado que seguían vivas, una idea infantil que no se hizo nunca. (Testimonial of Miguel Angel Lauletta, quoted in Goñi 1996: 109)

This is the first characteristic of this photo that I would like to point out: it is a *photograph taken on the edge of death*. Not only because it was taken in a clandestine detention centre, or because the women in the photo show signs of the torture they suffered, but because it is a photo taken in order to “give proof of life” when they had already been murdered. It is a photo that, in some way, seals the nuns’ fate: once the image was in circulation outside ESMA it was improbable that they would come out alive. This characteristic makes the photo of the nuns qualitatively different to aforementioned images smuggled out of ESMA by the survivor Víctor Bastera and then used as evidence in the trial of ex-commanders. The photo of the nuns was taken with the express intention of being publicly shown and circulated even while ESMA was still functioning as a clandestine detention centre.

The Marines sent the communiqué, the photo and a handwritten letter from Alice Domon to the France Presse Agency in Buenos Aires on the 17th of December 1977. The letter was presumably dictated in Spanish by an ESMA official, but written in French by Alice Domon and addressed to the Bishop of Toulouse, P. Guyot. According to Yvonne Pierron (2009: 100), as well as the France Presse Agency, the French embassy received a copy of the documents.

Domon’s and Duquet’s photograph from the ESMA basement arrived inside a certified letter to the France Press offices on Saturday 17 December. The envelope also contained the letter the marines had forced Alice to write, as well as a long communiqué with the stamp of Montoneros demanding the liberation of twenty political prisoners. The proposal was to exchange the nuns for a list including former president Héctor J. Cámpora and the trade union leader Lorenzo Miguel (. . .) The letter arrived shortly after noon and was handed over to the police at 3 pm for further analysis. By 6 pm, the First Corps of the Army had already cited the letter as proof that the kidnappings had been carried out by the subversion.

La foto de Domon y Duquet en el sótano de la ESMA llegó en una carta certificada a las oficinas de la agencia France-Press el sábado 17 de diciembre. El sobre contenía asimismo la carta que los marinos habían forzado a Alicia a escribir y un largo comunicado con el sello de Montoneros reclamando la liberación de 20 prisioneros del Proceso<sup>25</sup>. Se proponía el intercambio de las monjas por una lista que incluía al ex presidente Héctor J. Cámpora y al dirigente sindical Lorenzo Miguel. (. . .) La carta llegó poco después del mediodía y fue entregada a la policía a las tres de la tarde para su análisis. Para las seis, el Primer Cuerpo del Ejército ya había citado a la misma como prueba de que los secuestros habían sido perpetrados por la subversión. (Goñi 1998: 115)

While the photos did arrive at France Presse, the Argentine press published only a communiqué from the First Corps of the Army which assured that Montoneros had

kidnapped the nuns. This communiqué was reproduced by Argentine newspapers, almost verbatim in many cases, on the 18th of December.<sup>26</sup> The articles cite the demands made by Montoneros, but do not mention the letter from Alice Domon or the photo. None of the newspapers published in Buenos Aires reproduced that photo. Some days later, on the 21st of December – when the French newspapers were already discussing the photo – the *Herald* mentioned the photo without printing it.<sup>27</sup>

For their part, the French newspapers reported the fabricated message from Montoneros one or two days after the Argentine press,<sup>28</sup> when Montoneros had already refuted the news. The information given was precisely that refutation. They mention the communiqué from the Army so as to criticise the falsity of the information given by the Argentine government. The existence of Domon's handwritten letter and the photograph is also highlighted by these newspapers.

Two French newspapers reproduced the image: *France Soir*, on the 20th of December, and *Libération*, on the 21st of December 1977 (figures 1 and 2). The first writes that it is “the first photo of the two nuns kidnapped in Argentina” (*France Soir*, 20/12/1977, p. 3), and broadly reproduces the France Presse report that mentions the “communiqué” from Montoneros, the letter and the photo, explaining what happened and referring to the doubts expressed by “diplomatic means” regarding the authenticity of the “communiqué” and clarifying that a spokesperson for Montoneros in Paris formally denied “all participation of his organisation in the kidnapping of the two nuns” (*France Soir*, 20/12/1977, p. 3).

For its part, *Libération*, which on the 19th of December had already expressed its doubts as to the truth of the message from Montoneros,<sup>29</sup> insists, in its commentary on the photo, on the elements which invite the conclusion that it is a falsification:

This document suggests, moreover, trick photography: contrary to what this document shows, the Montoneros emblem is not round but is slightly oval.



FIGURE 1 *Libération*, 21st of December 1977.



**FIGURE 2** *Libération*, 21st of December 1977 (detail).

Finally, the relationship between the size of the letters on the pseudo Montoneros emblem and the size of the two nuns shows that this photo was taken (if it is not a montage) in a huge room. It is therefore difficult to imagine, bearing in mind the conditions of secrecy in which the Montoneros or the ERP live in Argentina, that they could have held sisters Alicia and Léonie captive in a huge shed.

Este documento sugiere, además, el trucaje: contrariamente a lo que deja ver este documento, la sigla de Montoneros no es redonda sino ligeramente ovalada. Finalmente, la relación entre el tamaño de las letras de la pseudo sigla Montoneros y el de las dos religiosas muestra que esta foto fue tomada (si no se trata de un montaje) en una habitación inmensa. Pues nos es difícil imaginar, teniendo en cuenta las condiciones de clandestinidad en las que viven los Montoneros o el ERP en la Argentina, que hayan podido tener cautivas a las hermanas Alicia y Léonie en un galpón enorme.<sup>30</sup>

The *Libération* article demonstrates a second characteristic of this photo that I would like to discuss; that is, its *incongruence*. Even within a very specific aesthetics (that of photos taken of people kidnapped for political reasons, highly visible in the early '70s in Argentina), this photograph brings together elements that do not seem to sit well alongside one another within the image, through a composition that exposes the artificial nature of the image: the newspaper *La Nación* appears in close up, covering part of Domon's body; the space is too big and the nuns are lost in the bottom left

corner; the letters of the word “Montoneros” do not fit inside the chosen frame and the shield takes up too much space.<sup>31</sup> There is an obvious tension between the different elements that are juxtaposed, between the information that is being shown (the word “Montoneros” and the date of the newspaper *La Nación*) and the information that is being hidden (where was the photo taken? who took it?). For these reasons, *Libération* speaks clearly of “trick photography”, showing a tension between the truth that is meant to establish a “proof of life” and the lies disseminated by the Argentine military. In *Libération*’s analysis, the photo’s value seems to be inverted: instead of being documentary proof of an unquestionable truth – a value that, as we have already mentioned, tends to be attributed to photography, in general, for its indexical and highly referential character – it shows itself to be *irrefutable proof of a lie*.

Beyond the interpretation given by *Libération*, the photo and the whole episode of the false communiqué can be seen as part of a complex system of signs through which the dictatorship disseminated terror, combining concealment and visibility. The visibility of people who had been kidnapped was combined with the invisibility of what happened to the victims, and the appearance of unidentified bodies showing signs of having been brutally tortured allowed the inference that, once kidnapped, people were submitted to something horrific. As Pilar Calveiro (1998) points out, the clandestine detention centre managed to disseminate terror towards the outside through this conjunction of exhibition and secrecy: people knew and did not know at the same time, because they received information that offered as many doubts as certainties regarding the fate of those who were disappeared. It is due to this mixture of concealment and visibility that some have characterised disappearance as a “discreet” system of social discipline (García Castro 2002), in which the combination of information and secrecy is effective in reproducing fear.

Within this framework, the photo of the French nuns taken inside ESMA can be seen as a document which condenses this issue and displays the full perversion of “discretion” in the repressive strategy of the disappearances: the visibility and exhibition of the “live” nuns, although the photo was circulated after they had been murdered; the intention that the photo should hide what really happened to them, in that traces of the torture they suffered after their kidnapping were made visible. It is in this sense that this photo calls into question its own indexical and evidentiary nature: it is indexical, yes, but thanks to what it keeps hidden as well as what it shows. It is indexical of the secret (or the combination of visibility and secrecy) and, as such, the “truth” that it produces is a different truth. Not so much the truth originating in its subject material, but that which originates in its (invisible?) situation of enunciation. I shall return to this point later.

## Television

Despite these incongruities, tensions and contradictions, this photograph has continued to circulate publicly for over thirty years. Among the many uses and republications of the photo I would like to concentrate only on those linked to the use of this image in television programmes on French television during the ’80s and ’90s. I shall centre my analysis solely on the use of the photo, which means leaving aside rich possibilities for analysis of the programmes as a whole and, more generally, the ways in which French television recalls and represents the disappearance of these two nuns.<sup>32</sup> This is equally not a historical analysis of these programmes or a periodisation, since I shall not discuss

the production context or the general transformations in the field of representation and memory. What matters is to examine the multiple relationships between memory and image that can be woven from a photograph that shows these extraordinary characteristics and which has become, over time, an “emblematic icon” (Matard-Bonucci 1995) of the disappearance of the two French nuns.

The first programme to mention is a *docudrama* entitled “La passion de sœur Alice” (The Passion of Sister Alice), broadcast as part of TF1’s programme “Mercredis de l’information”, on the 14th of April 1982. This programme was broadcast at a time when news about Argentina was prominent in many French newspapers because the Malvinas/Falklands war had started two weeks earlier. Through this kind of *docudrama*, which mixes “fictional” reconstruction with some interviews with the “witnesses” of events, the journalist Michel Thoulouze, the programme’s director, believed it was possible to speak of events which “classic reporting” was unable to tackle.<sup>33</sup>

The programme recreates Alice Domon’s life, beginning with from her arrival in Argentina, and uses filmed reconstructions of events and the places in which they took place. In doing this, the programme allows itself certain dramatic licence, for example displacing events to Nicaraguan coffee plantations instead of filming in the tobacco plantations of the Argentine province of Corrientes. According to the producers, this was because it was impossible to film inside Argentina given that the dictatorship was still in power.

The *docudrama* reconstructs the kidnapping of the nuns and their imprisonment in the clandestine detention centre – although the name of ESMA is not mentioned – and includes crude torture scenes featuring the actress who plays the part of Alice Domon. The specific scene in which the nuns’ photo is taken comes at minute 46 of the hour-long programme. With the banner that reads “Montoneros” in red letters hanging behind them, Alice and Léonie are together for the first time since their arrival at the clandestine detention centre. There they have a conversation in which Alice apologises to Léonie for having involved her: “Forgive me, they found your address in my address book. I shouldn’t have gone to your house”, she says. This dialogue, although improbable, is coherent with the dramatic centrality placed on Alice and with the need of the script to explain that Duquet was not as politically engaged as Domon.<sup>34</sup> In the analysis of this scene, the programme’s reconstruction of the photo as such (figure 3) is



**FIGURE 3** “La passion de sœur Alice”, TF 1, 14th of April 1982.



**FIGURE 4** “La passion de sœur Alice”, TF 1, 14th of April 1982.

not as interesting as the recreation of the precise moment at which the photo was taken (figure 4).

What the *docudrama* reconstructs here is precisely the information that was suppressed in the original photo, the *off-frame*; that is, the primary questions that arise from the photograph published in 1977: who took the photo? Where was it taken? Michel Thoulouze’s programme shows this information in images. The information is unclear, since we see only a bare wall, some elements that could signal torture (a bathtub, a bucket),<sup>35</sup> and a soldier with a uniform which bears no similarity to those worn in ESMA (figure 4).

It must be pointed out, however, that the original image, like any photo, already bore traces of that off-frame that the marines tried so hard to conceal. Among the many indicators of the off-frame, Philippe Dubois refers to the gaze of the people photographed. According to Dubois, the gaze of a person who has been photographed sets up:

an off-frame which acts in the depths of the image, or rather in its *foreground*, which does not spill over the sides but instead spills out in front, which is the reason that makes it the origin of the cut. An off-frame which explicitly positions the photographer, which integrates him/her more-or-less as an invisible interlocutor, which designates his/her place and is the place of the gaze that builds the scene and the frame themselves.

“un fuera-de-campo que actúa en la profundidad de la imagen, o más bien es su *avanzada*, que no desborda por los costados sino por delante, razón que lo convierte en el origen del corte. Un fuera-de-campo que posiciona explícitamente al operador, que lo integra más o menos como interlocutor invisible, que designa su lugar y que es el lugar de la mirada constituyente de la escena y del campo mismo. (Dubois 1986: 164).

In the play of gazes, in what Alice and Léonie saw when they were being photographed, is inscribed, therefore, the photo’s *off-frame*: the secret that the marines wished to keep hidden.<sup>36</sup> But those gazes, in the original photo, do not appear to see

anything in particular: Léonie's gaze is lost, Alice is concentrating; her gaze is "dark, full of anger", according to the witness of someone who met them.

I dwell on the terrifying photo of the two women. What an atrocity . . . . My poor Léonie is unrecognisable. She isn't wearing her glasses and her gaze seems lost. Her mouth is closed, her expression is hard, her hair is messed up. On her left is my Caty, her gaze is dark, full of rage, her jaw is tense. She looks tired and very thin.

Me detengo en la aterradora foto de las dos mujeres. Qué atrocidad. . . . Mi pobre Léonie está irreconocible. No tiene puesto los anteojos y su mirada parece perdida. Su boca está cerrada, su expresión es dura, sus cabellos revueltos. A su izquierda, yace mi Caty, su mirada es oscura, plena de rabia, su mandíbula está contraída. Tiene aspecto fatigado y parece muy delgada. (Pierron 2009: 100–1)

It is as if they too are unable to see what is hidden from us as viewers of the photo. As if the blindfold which covered the eyes of people when they were kidnapped was still present.<sup>37</sup> It is in this sense that the photo "reveals" the clandestine detention centre because the nuns' gazes cannot penetrate the space that surrounds them, and because they equally cannot look at the photographer (a member of the Task Force? Another prisoner who was carrying out forced labour? The torturer himself, as the *docudrama's* interpretation suggests?). The off-frame also indicates that the photograph is the result of the repressors' gaze on their victims and positions those looking at the photo in the same place as the executioners. In reconstructing the off-frame in images, Thoulouze's programme inverts this play of gazes and gives its viewers in a perspective closer to that of the victims.

This off-frame also allows us to problematise the photo's conditions of enunciation and invites us to question which of those conditions – that the marines so carefully hide – are visible despite (or precisely due to) that concealment. It is thanks to the nuns' gazes and facial expressions, but also their problematic positioning in the space and the elements that disguise the unrecognisable background of the scene, that the photo shows not only the nuns themselves but also their condition as people who have been kidnapped. It is a stolen photo, torn from them, taken despite them. The photo does not "show" the violence in the strict sense that it replicates it; it is part of the violence to which the nuns were subjected in the clandestine detention centre<sup>38</sup>.

The second television programme that I want to discuss is "Résistances", broadcast on the 5th of September 1985: a journalistic programme dedicated especially to issues of human rights, shown on Antenne 2 and presented by Bernard Langlois. When this programme was broadcast, the dictatorship in Argentina had already come to an end and the trials of ex-commanders were taking place. In the Argentine press the testimonials of survivors of clandestine detention centres, such as ESMA,<sup>39</sup> were commonplace.

Against this background, the programme "Résistances" opts to include an unusual witness who is presented as an "ESMA torturer" with the name Claudio Vallejos. The programme, which follows the production format of a traditional documentary, reconstructs the story of the nuns' kidnapping and murder, using as visual material a filmed journey through the various places where, according to the witness, the nuns were taken after having been kidnapped.<sup>40</sup> Vallejos's testimonial does not coincide

with what ESMA survivors said, at that time and later, about what happened to the nuns and thus we can suspect that the testimonial is in part false, since – as opposed to the multiple witnesses who saw the kidnapped women in ESMA and gave information about the case – Vallejos asserts that their captivity lasted for several months and that they weren't held solely in ESMA but also in different locations.<sup>41</sup> In the television programme, this testimonial, which describes horrific torture in detail, is used to make the nuns' experience seem more hellish.<sup>42</sup>

The photo of the nuns appears as part of the programme's set design. In front of a bare wall, the presenter stands next to a panel with the photo (figure 5) and then the camera zooms in to end on a close-up of the image of the nuns (figures 6 and 7). In this reuse of the photo, the most striking thing is the new framing of the image: in this edited version the space around the nuns and the banner with the word "Montoneros" are cut out. Although the rest of the programme mentions ESMA and says that the nuns were taken there, at no point does it mention that the photograph was taken inside the clandestine detention centre.

This reframing of the photo puts the women's faces in the centre of the image and emphasises the shadows that surround them. In this way, this framing helps to reinforce the argument that the programme seeks to construct against the dictatorship's crimes. The women's faces are remarkably pale, and Alice's face is very thin. We can infer that they have suffered abuse and torture. What is more, the placement of the photo on a bare wall creates the impression that they were in a particularly sordid situation (this effect is supported by the music which accompanies the camera zooming in on the photo). This new framing therefore emphasises *the traces of the conditions of imprisonment*.

In this new use, another characteristic of the photo is also highlighted: that it is the document that shows who the disappeared nuns were. Its "truth" value has been displaced, and it is impossible to see the signs of the document's origin. For this reason, in this context the photo no longer illustrates the lies of the military or the off-frame constituted by ESMA, but the mere existence of those people that the military have disappeared.

In other programmes broadcast later, principally television news programmes, this "illustrative" quality of the photo was maintained and reinforced. In relation to this we can mention a significant tension between this photo in particular and others that



**FIGURE 5** "Résistances", Antenne 2, 5th of September 1985.





**FIGURE 6** “Résistances”, Antenne 2, 5th of September 1985.



**FIGURE 7** “Résistances”, Antenne 2, 5th of September 1985.

appear in television programmes, in which the nuns appear smiling, in full-body shots, dressed in normal clothes or habits, in action. Television programmes use a series of strategies to bring the two nuns together in images, but only in this photo do they appear next to one another. For this reason, the photo can be seen to constitute an illustration of what journalism calls “the case of the two disappeared nuns” and it is used in programmes to “introduce the issue”. In many French news programmes in the '90s, the photo and the “case” become equivalent on television. This is a common practice in the reproduction of photographs on television: the photographs are shown without mentioning who took them or in what context they were taken. However, what is notable here is that to show the “truth” of the “case”, television programmes do not hesitate to use new “tricks” and photomontages that take the photo even further from its origin. I shall give just two examples.

In the TF1 news programme from the 26th of February 1996, which discusses the objection France made about Alfredo Astiz not being extradited when the then president of Argentina Carlos Menem visited Paris,<sup>43</sup> the photograph of the nuns appears as a background to the news presentation, but without any spatial frame: we do not see the newspaper *La Nación*, nor the banner, and of course no mention is made of



**FIGURE 8** News bulletin, TF1, 26th of February 1996.

the fact that the photo was taken inside ESMA. The shadows surrounding the women's faces have been removed and their faces seem to be especially clean, as if they are a logo, against a backdrop of television screens (figure 8). As such, the erasure here is double: the indicators of the situation of enunciation (the banner, the newspaper, and the elements that made this photo a failed "proof of life" constructed by the Junta) are erased, but so too are the indicators of the conditions of imprisonment which were emphasised in the use that we examined above.

One other similar example is that of the France 2 news programme from the 25th of February 1996, which reported the same event. Here the photo of the nuns is shown behind the presenter, but this time it has been spatially reordered. The women do not appear next to one another, but instead Alice is above and Léonie below (figure 9). Then there is only the image of the photo and they are shown next to one another but it is as if a magnifying glass has been placed over Alice's face, and in the next image she is alone, while Léonie's face fades (figures 10 and 11). Alice's centrality in the story told by many of these programmes is illustrated here by the photomontage that once more removes the photo which was taken in ESMA from its context and fragments it.



**FIGURE 9** News bulletin, TF 3, 25th of February 1996.



**FIGURE 10** News bulletin, TF 3, 25th of February 1996.



**FIGURE 11** News bulletin, TF 3, 25th of February 1996.

## Memory

The last programme that I would like to analyse relates to the construction of the image of the nuns as an icon of memory and with the symbolic space that they occupy in the French imaginary relating to other cases of disappeared people. The different memorial events that have taken place, in France as well as in Argentina, over the last thirty years show a tension (which I will not analyse here) between the thousands of disappeared people as a whole and certain cases in particular that entered the public domain and are considered special. In Argentina's social memory, certain names have become more recognisable than others, some of which belong to people who were kidnapped and murdered in ESMA, for example, the writer Rodolfo Walsh, the Montoneros leader Norma Arrostito, the founder of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo Azucena Villaflor.

In France, that status of "symbolic disappeared people" belongs exclusively to the two French nuns, despite the fact that in total 18 French citizens were disappeared in Argentina, for whom truth and justice has since been sought. The other highly emblematic name in the French memorial initiatives, regarding this time the

perpetrators, is that of Alfredo Astiz, the lieutenant commander who infiltrated the group of Mothers and who perpetrated the disappearance of those twelve people.

In a very short programme of only six minutes broadcast by France 2 on the 27th of December 1992, entitled “Raconte”,<sup>44</sup> a presenter speaks in front of the camera and describes the events related to the disappearance of the nuns in Argentina. The programme’s visual work is very poor and the front-on image of the female presenter predominates. However, the photo of the nuns is included in a new photomontage through a fade of images that goes from the nuns’ faces (figure 12), passing through the photos of other French disappeared people (figures 13 and 14), to a panel with the portraits of many disappeared people (figure 15), as if the nuns’ faces were included in those panels or banners with thousands of photos of disappeared people that the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and other human rights organisations constructed to take on marches and public demonstrations. The nuns are included here in one of the most significant medium of memory relating to those who were disappeared. In fact, the black and white photos of thousands of faces, stuck onto placards or banners, and present in marches and demonstrations for human rights form one of the most recognisable images of disappearance in Argentina, since the time of the dictatorship.

In this programme, the photo that the ESMA Task Force once wanted to present as “proof of life” is used as an “image of disappearance”. But, in the montage, this exceptional photograph has been included in a group to which it does not truly belong. There has been much analysis of the use of these portraits of disappeared people, taken into the public domain by the human rights movement as a denunciation and an attempt to rescue each disappeared person from anonymity and give them back their identity (Richard 2000, Da Silva Catela 2009, Longoni 2010). All these studies underline the *prior quality* of the photos, that is prior to the disappearance of the people portrayed:

The photographs of young people who were murdered and disappeared during the Argentine dictatorship constitute one of the most common ways of remembering them, representing them, reviving them. (...) These small black and white passport photos were not intended to “make history”. Generally they belonged to identity



**FIGURE 12** “Raconte”, France 2, 27th of December 1992.



FIGURE 13 "Raconte", France 2, 27th of December 1992.



FIGURE 14 "Raconte", France 2, 27th of December 1992.



FIGURE 15 "Raconte", France 2, 27th of December 1992.

documents or membership cards to clubs, libraries, trade unions, political parties or universities. When images of disappeared people were first used in public, there were a small number of photos that showed “moments of life” of the disappeared people. *In this way, the origin of those photographs had nothing to do with their prior use.* Taken because their use was required on documents or to show happy moments of family life, *a posteriori*, with disappearance, they acquired a particular objective: to be instruments of denunciation about missing people in Argentina. They thus brought into being a very different form of protest against intranational violence.

Las fotografías de los rostros de jóvenes asesinados y desaparecidos durante la dictadura argentina constituyen una de las formas más usadas para recordarlos, representarlos, vivificarlos. (. . .) Estas pequeñas fotos carnet en blanco y negro no fueron pensadas para “hacer historia”. Generalmente pertenecían a los documentos de identidad o carnet de filiación a clubes, bibliotecas, sindicatos, partidos políticos o universidades. De manera minoritaria, en el inicio del uso de las imágenes de los desaparecidos en el espacio público, hubo fotos que retrataban “momentos de la vida” de estos desaparecidos. *De esta forma, el origen de esas fotografías no tenía nada que ver con su uso posterior.* Realizadas ante la necesidad de ser usadas en los documentos o para retratar momentos felices de la vida en familia, *a posteriori*, con la desaparición, adquirieron un objetivo particular: ser un instrumento de denuncia sobre la ausencia de personas en Argentina. Inauguraron, así, una forma diferente de protesta contra la violencia intranacional. (Da Silva Catela 2009: 342. My emphasis)

The photograph of the nuns, on the other hand, is the image of two people who *have already been disappeared*, who find themselves in that liminal space between life and death which is the clandestine detention centre. When this origin is erased and the photo is incorporated in the panel of portraits of disappeared people, the television programme undertakes a process which firstly suppresses the image of the “live” nuns (before being kidnapped) and, then, omits the fact that the marines took the photo to facilitate and hide their murder.

## Final considerations

In this brief discussion of this photograph of the nuns, and its republication and resignification in certain French television programmes, we can see some of the operations which often take place in the media, especially on television, when they take up the theme of disappeared people: reconstructing and recreating “documentary” images which never existed, emphasising certain characteristics of the existing images so that they show the sordid conditions and the signs of torture, omitting the origin of the images so that they can be confused with others or included in a series to which they do not belong.<sup>45</sup> All of these are operations of memory the value and signification of which in the complex social process called “memory work” (Jelin 2002) are yet to be investigated.

We must, however, underline the fact that the link between images and disappearance is made significantly more complex when we analyse the few photos that were taken within the clandestine detention centres and which have circulated in the public domain.

In the case of ESMA, this particular photo serves to question the complex system of borders between “inside” and “outside” that existed in the ESMA clandestine

detention centre. How far did the clandestine centre extend? We can speak of the “porosity” of these borders through the circulation of different elements: people, news and objects that entered and exited there, usually as part of the so-called process of “recuperation of prisoners” put in place by the ESMA Task Force.<sup>46</sup> One specific aspect of this porosity relates to the journalistic campaigns operated by ESMA to deny the disappearance of people who were held captive there.<sup>47</sup> The photo of the nuns, in this sense, presents the extraordinary case of a photo from “inside” which was taken to be shown “outside” and constructed as a lie about the situation of two disappeared people. However, as we have seen, the quality of what was not said and not shown by that photo is so clear that it impregnates the image itself with signs, transforming it into a “document” and a “proof” of the secret, despite the intentions of those who took the photo and, we might almost say, despite the image itself.

In this way, as we have pointed out, this photo can be read as an *image of disappearance*, even when it does not show the conditions of imprisonment, or the murders, or the locations of clandestine detention in their totality or recognisable representations of them. This photo, as with the photographs that Basterra smuggled out of ESMA, allow us to obtain material traces that confer visibility and certain presence on the category “disappeared”. They are photos that, as Luis García notes, were taken “between-two-deaths”<sup>48</sup> and which, to a certain point, give the photograph a new status, testing our vision, our understanding, and our capacity to “imagine” disappearance.

Finally, in terms of the subsequent representation of the event and the successive reuses of this photo in different contexts, a large number of processes of aestheticisation have been undertaken in the mass media with the goal of making these images “presentable”. Many of these processes erase the features that would allow us to guess at the situation of enunciation and the (intolerable) conditions in which this photo was taken. As Didi-Hubermann (2003) says with respect to the four photos taken in the Auschwitz crematorium, these kinds of photo which are “wrested from hell” show the horror, not necessarily through its referent, through what has effectively been photographed, but through the traces of its enunciation: those elements which allow us to infer how that referent was photographed and which give the photo “its status as visual event” (Didi-Huberman 2003: 53). What new meanings are constructed when the photo is reused in this way? As we have said, the great paradox that creates a tension in this photograph and distinguishes it considerably from those analysed by Didi-Hubermann is that this photo was taken by the perpetrators *to try to hide their crimes*. When it is transformed into what Didi-Hubermann calls “icons” or “documents” of terror, through successive aestheticisations and reframings, we ask ourselves if these photos are placed once more at the service of the erasure that the repressors tried to enact or if their meanings change and they become images that can tell us about disappearance and make it visible; whether, as Marianne Hirsch (2001) wonders, these reuses increase or decrease the power of the photo to disturb. Or if, perhaps – since the meanings are always plural, complex and shifting – they can generate both effects at the same time.

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## Notes

- 1 Alice Domon had arrived in Argentina in 1967 and Léonie Duquet in 1949. For a portrait of the two nuns and their activities in Argentina, see Cabrejas, 1998 and Pierron, 2009.
- 2 The Navy Mechanics School (Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada, ESMA) was an important clandestine detention centre during the last Argentine dictatorship, through which passed an estimated 4000 prisoners—disappeared people, and of whom around 200 survived. Various testimonials exist from survivors of ESMA who saw Alice Domon and Léonie Duquet in captivity there. For a testimonial produced while the dictatorship was still in power, see C.A.D.H.U. 1979: 55–7.
- 3 The body of Léonie Duquet, along with those belonging to two mothers of disappeared people, was found in 2005 in a tomb marked NN in the General Lavalle cemetery, after having been recovered on the coast of the Argentine Sea. Duquet was identified on the 29th of August 2005 and her remains now lie in the Santa Cruz Church.
- 4 These are, in large part, photos of oppressors and some people who had been kidnapped, the negatives and copies of which Basterra was able to save from destruction and smuggle out. Some of these photos have been published in Brodsky, 2005. For reflections on the role of these photos in the memory of disappearance and in the debate surrounding the construction of a museum in the ESMA premises, see Bell, 2010 and Andermann, 2012.
- 5 A special commando made up of prisoners of the concentration and exterminations camps, whose job was to incinerate the bodies of the people who were killed in the gas chambers.
- 6 I shall not use the concept of Postmemory which is central to M. Hirsch's work, because I do not believe that it can be applied mechanically and unproblematically to this particular case, but I am conscious that the notion "iconisation" recalls this process studied by Hirsch.
- 7 For this article the newspapers *La Nación*, *Clarín*, *La Opinión*, *La Prensa*, *Crónica*, *La Razón*, *El Cronista Comercial* and *Buenos Aires Herald* from the month of December 1977 were consulted. Given our focus here, we shall not include in this analysis the information relating to each one of the newspapers (their format and discursive style, their ideology, their economic structure, their target audiences) and we shall instead concentrate on the constant aspects, signalling only the differences that are significant in terms of this particular issue.
- 8 As the French newspapers of the time pointed out: "Argentina signed a Vienna convention on diplomatic and consular relations which obliges signatory countries to inform an embassy when one of its citizens is arrested" (*Le Monde*, 16/12/1977, p. 10).
- 9 Since 1976, the *Herald* had published numerous denunciations of disappearances. For a more accurate description of this newspaper's activity during the dictatorship see Schindel, 2004.
- 10 "Disappearances worry petitioners", *Buenos Aires Herald*, 13th of December 1977, p. 1. As well as the *Herald*, the news appeared very early on in the newspaper *La Prensa* of 12th December 1977.



- 11 *Libération, Le Monde, Le Figaro, L'Humanité, La Croix* and *France Soir* from December 1977 and January 1978 were consulted.
- 12 For example, although the 13th December edition of *Le Monde* had reported the kidnapping of the group, on the 14th of December the kidnapping of the nuns was reported as a new story, without establishing a link with the previous one. "Deux religieuses françaises ont été enlevées par des inconnus", p. 48.
- 13 See "Enlèvement de deux religieuses françaises / Argentine: deux disparues en un jour, 15000 en deux ans" (Kidnapping of two French nuns / Argentina: two disappeared in one day, 15000 in two years) (*Libération*, 14/12/1977, p. 11).
- 14 *Le Monde*, 16/12/1977, p. 10; *La Croix*, 16/12/1977, p. 7; *France Soir*, 16/12/1977, p. 5.
- 15 *Libération*, 14/12/1977.
- 16 The idea that there were "out of control groups" that acted repressively outside the orders of the Armed Forces high command is expressed in the newspaper *Libération* from the 14th December as a criticism of Videla. However, the Junta itself fed the rumour that these groups existed to hide the fact that the repression was, in fact, planned and systematically carried out by the State.
- 17 In September 1977, in a meeting with James Carter and in view of the concerns of the US envoy for human rights, Videla had promised a "Christmas in Peace" for Argentina (*La Nación*, 7/9/1977, p. 1). Throughout 1977, Patricia Derian from the US State Department made three visits to Argentina to ask the members of the Junta about disappeared people. In November, Cyrus Vance, US Secretary of State, also visited the country and held audiences with members of the Junta to the same end. At the same time, the US was threatening to embargo the sale of arms to Argentina if they did not improve the human rights situation. See Uriarte, 1991: 166–74.
- 18 This action was particularly important in France. The aim was to stop the Football World Cup taking place in a country where the State systematically violated human rights. According to Marina Franco, the first call for a boycott of the World Cup appeared in *Le Monde* in October 1977 and the el "Comité de Boycott du Mondial de Football en Argentine" (COBA) was formed at the end of that same year (Franco, 2008: 182).
- 19 For example, the kidnapping of the journalist Jacobo Timermann in April 1977 had had a big impact on the international press and external pressure brought about his release several months later. In July 1977 this same pressure was felt when the Argentine ambassador in Venezuela, Héctor Hidalgo Solá, disappeared.
- 20 This characteristic was important both inside and outside Argentina. As regards the image of the Junta within Argentina, in relation to this case, Estela Schindel states that: "For the Argentine oligarchy, allied with the military in the dictatorial project, all things 'French' represented an emblem of culture and elegance (. . .). In this class imaginary, French citizens must have had an additional symbolic credit. If to this we add the fact that women, destined for a domestic and private role according to traditional values, and the status of nuns, which immediately demands respect in those ultra-Catholic circles, the French nuns who were disappeared presented a difficult equation to solve for some sectors of the civil-military alliance in power" (Schindel 2004).
- 21 *Clarín*, 17/12/1977, "Government repudiated the disappearance of two French nuns"; *La Opinión*, 17/12/1977, "The disappearance of the two nuns"; *La Prensa*, 17/12/1977, "Government rejects the kidnapping of two people"; *Buenos Aires Herald*, 17/12/1977, "Nihilistic subversión blamed / Govt. Repudiates nuns' abduction"; *Crónica*, 17/12/1977, "The government expressed its condemnation of the disappearance of a group of people, two of them nuns".

- 22 The epicentre of the repressive activity at the clandestine detention centre which functioned on the ESMA premises was in the building called the Officers Casino. In its basement torture took place but there were also – at different points during the dictatorship – offices, an infirmary and a photographic laboratory.
- 23 The testimonial of Ricardo Coquet, ESMA survivor, in the oral archive of Memoria Abierta includes a section on the way in which, forced by the Task Force, he had to make the Montoneros banner for this photograph. See <http://www.memoriaabierta.org.ar/materiales/fch.php>.
- 24 Lieutenant commander Jorge Eduardo Acosta was head of the Task Force and the clandestine detention centre that functioned at ESMA.
- 25 The dictatorial regime in power in Argentina from 1976 to 1983 called itself “Proceso de Reorganización Nacional”, which many simply shortened to “Proceso”.
- 26 *Buenos Aires Herald* is the only newspaper that allowed itself to question the truth of the letter from Montoneros quoted by the Army communiqué. Its doubts, which were not made explicit, took the form of insistently questioning why the (supposed) communiqué from Montoneros fails to mention the other people kidnapped in the group. What the *Herald* implies is that if Montoneros really had the nuns and they had wanted to negotiate for those hostages they would not have omitted the fact that, as well as the nuns, 10 other people were in their power. See: “New call for information on missing”, *Buenos Aires Herald*, 20/12/1977, p. 1. For a detailed examination of the signs allowing the deduction that the Montoneros communiqué was false, see Bousquet, 1983: 84–7.
- 27 It is possible to infer that the photo did not reach the editors of the Argentine newspapers. Jean-Pierre Bousquet, the France Presse correspondent who received the envelope with the fake communiqué, recalls having sent all the documentation to the police, because it was an issue that went beyond his capacity, and says that he kept a copy of the document and the photo which he sent to France, to the AFP head office. According to him, the other copy of the documentation that arrived at the French embassy was not sent to the newspapers either (interview carried out on the 21st November 2010 in Narbonne, France).
- 28 *Libération* and *Le Figaro* 19/12/1977; *Le Monde* and *La Croix* 20/12/1977.
- 29 *Libération*, 19/12/1977, p. 9: “Argentine / La junte intoxique / Elle attribue aux ‘Montoneros’ l’enlèvement de deux religieuses françaises” (“Argentina/ La junta intoxica / Atribuye a los ‘Montoneros’ el secuestro de dos religiosas francesas”). We must bear in mind the fact that several French newspapers such as *Le Monde* did not publish photos at that time.
- 30 *Libération*, 21/12/1977, p. 11: “Argentine / Un document (mal) truqué du général Videla”. The emphasis is mine.
- 31 As Cora Gamarnik pointed out in a personal conversation, the person who took the photo apparently faced the problem, making all the necessary elements come together in that rectangular space. The photo remains “uncomfortable” even in this sense.
- 32 Given the lack of television archive material and systematic information about the programmes shown on Argentine television during the ’80s and ’90s, I have not been able to access Argentine programmes that deal with this issue specifically, produced and broadcast around the same dates as those studied here.
- 33 The genre of docudrama was at that time fairly new to French television. Thoulouze explains the characteristics of the genre in an interview for the magazine *Telerama* in relation to a docudrama about the disappeared nuns (Sorg 1982).

- 34 The scene of the conversation between them is unbelievable if we take into account the conditions of imprisonment in ESMA. What is more, it is known that Duquet's kidnapping was due to more complex reasons than a simple address found in a diary.
- 35 The method of torture known as "submarine" consisted in submerging a prisoner's head in a container of dirty water.
- 36 I must reiterate that this was a photo taken to be circulated outside ESMA at that time, as opposed to those smuggled out of ESMA by Basterra. In this sense, as I have already pointed out, there is something that the photo wishes to show to the outside, but in doing that it reveals that secret. In other words, the photo exhibits the secret in its role as secret.
- 37 The kidnapped people held at ESMA were "boarded up" with "little glasses" or "a kind of dark mask without holes for the eyes, which was used to impede vision, bandage over the eyes" over which a hood was often placed (Actis *et al.*, 2001). Valeria Manzano refers to a "blindfold position" for the "subjective breakdown that entry into the clandestine centre produces" and which was used as mediation in the contact between kidnapped people and their captors. Cf. Manzano, 2009: 162–3. The incapacity of the prisoners to "see" in Nazi concentration camps has been signalled in many analyses, among others Levi, 1987 and Felman, 1990.
- 38 Sontag (1977) and Berger (1980) speak of the proximity between the act of killing and that of taking a photo: to shoot with a weapon, to shoot with a camera. Here I shall not analyse this issue, but it is evident that this photo calls into question this relationship between taking photographs and killing in this specific space of the clandestine detention centre. See Bell, 2010.
- 39 On the role of the Argentine media during the trial of ex-commanders, see Feld, 2002.
- 40 The images are almost all taken from a moving car, in which Vallejos is speaking. This is due to the fact that, according to the presenter, Vallejos was "pursued in Argentina" and taken, for filming, "secretly" to Buenos Aires from his home in Rio de Janeiro. The presenter says that: "The reconstruction of the two nuns' itinerary would take place, as such, under probation and all areas would be filmed with a hidden camera."
- 41 Vallejos's testimonial about ESMA Task Force 3.3.2, which concentrates almost exclusively on the kidnapping of ambassador Hidalgo Solá, appeared in the magazine *La Semana*, numbers 399 and 400 (July and August 1984). This magazine does not present Vallejos as a witness to the kidnapping of the French nuns.
- 42 In the programmes analysed there are many references made to Alice Domon with a religious slant. References to "martyrology" are central to many of them.
- 43 Due to the law of "Forced Obedience", Astiz was not pursued at that time by the Argentine judicial system. However, he was tried in absentia in France in 1990 and condemned to life imprisonment for his involvement in the kidnapping and disappearance of the nuns. Since then, the French government has called for his extradition. President Menem denied the extradition several times. Since 2005, with the reopening of cases in Argentina, trials against ESMA oppressors have continued and Astiz was condemned to life imprisonment in 2011.
- 44 Programme made by the priest Bernard Marliangeas, coordinated by Marie-Bernardette Noël. This is a religious programme. The "pedagogical" tone cannot be ignored, and at times it seems as if the presenter is telling a children's story.
- 45 For an analysis of the images used on Argentine television to represent the disappearance of people see Feld, 2009.
- 46 Elsewhere (Feld, 2010) I have described this system and analysed these "borders".

- 47 Without having researched this campaign exhaustively, as well as the case of the nuns, we can mention the case of Thelma Jara de Cabezas, detained and disappeared at ESMA, who was forced to give an interview for *Para Ti* saying that she hadn't been kidnapped (*Para Ti*, 10/9/1979); and the case cited by the testimonial of three ESMA survivors to C.A.D.H.U. in 1979: "After a few days, I saw in the paper an article saying that José María Salgado had died in a clash with the police. We said – because we had shared with him the cries of torture and the hooded silence – that this news was false. That José María Salgado was alive in ESMA and that he should be turned over to the federal Coordination" (C.A.D.H.U. 1979: 64).
- 48 "These photos bear witness to the impossibility of witness: the between-two-deaths, that spectral state between a first human death and a second biological death" (García, 2011: 66).

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