

How do Perpetrators Become Visible?

Photographs and Visibility *Dispositifs* in the Identification of a Perpetrator During the Argentine Dictatorship

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Abstract: This article examines the connections between forced disappearances in Argentina, the public visibility of perpetrators, and the role of photographic images. It focuses on Alfredo Astiz, who was identified during the dictatorship for his involvement in two internationally renowned abduction cases: the disappearance of the Swedish teenager Dagmar Hagelin and the abduction of the French nuns Alice Domon and Léonie Duquet, who were taken to the Navy Mechanics School or ESMA (Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada). By analysing two series of photographs of Astiz that were published during the dictatorship, along with the accompanying texts and paratexts circulating at the time, and within the contexts, settings, and media that facilitated the identification and visibility of this perpetrator, this article sheds light on the dynamics, limitations, tensions, and opportunities presented by images of the figure of the perpetrator. The article proposes to understand visibility *dispositifs* as specific tools for investigating the visual representation of perpetrators and the complex processes involved in constructing meanings around perpetration over time. In the more specific field of forced disappearance studies, this text aims to discuss the role of images in making perpetrators visible, thus shifting the research focus away from the photographs of victims, which have been extensively examined in previous work. Its uniqueness also lies in considering this issue within a dictatorial rather than a transitional or post-conflict context.

Keywords: photography, visibility *dispositif*, perpetrators, dictatorship, ESMA, Argentina, Astiz

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Introduction

Frigate Lieutenant Alfredo Astiz was one of the perpetrators at the clandestine detention centre (*centro clandestino de detención*, CCD) located in the Navy School of Mechanics (*Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada*, ESMA) in Argentina.¹ His infiltration into the human rights movement of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo to facilitate the kidnapping of a group of them and two French nuns in December 1977, as well as his involvement in the abduction of the Swedish teenager Dagmar Hagelin, brought him early attention in the public eye and through international denunciations. During the dictatorship (1976–83), when information about the CCDs was still scarce, Astiz was one of the few perpetrators, despite not holding a high-ranking position, who was denounced as being responsible for heinous crimes. Over time, he became one of the emblematic figures of the Argentine dictatorship.

Why was Astiz identified so early and how did he become known internationally? How was his visibility achieved, and what role did the publicly circulating photographs of Astiz play in this process? This article examines the social construction of the figure of the perpetrator, focusing on the links between forced disappearances, the public visibility of perpetrators, and the role of photographic images.

As a means of repression, forced disappearances sought to conceal the violence exerted, the victims, and the perpetrators from public view. Hundreds of CCDs spread throughout the country, allowing abductions, torture, and mass killings to occur clandestinely. The lack of information for the relatives of the disappeared, the denial of facts, systematic dictatorial propaganda, secrecy, and terror in addition to the perpetrators' use of aliases and *noms de guerre* during operations all contributed to the concealment of the perpetrators. In this context, the relatives of the victims and the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo attempted to 'make visible' the disappeared in order to break the silence. Their public actions were extensive, early, and ongoing. Over time, a significant portion of commemorative activity in Argentina focused on the identification and visibility of the victims; initiatives that have been exten-

1 This CCD operated in the city of Buenos Aires between 1976 and 1983, under the command of the Argentine Navy. It is estimated that approximately 5000 detainees passed through there, and less than 300 survived. For a history of this CCD and its operation, see *ESMA: Represión y poder en el centro clandestino de detención más emblemático de la última dictadura argentina*, ed. by Marina Franco and Claudia Feld (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2022).

sively studied.² However, little research has been conducted on how the perpetrators were identified and made publicly visible through images, especially during the military regime.³ This article seeks to broaden the perspective on the use of images in the construction of narratives about forced disappearances and proposes to focus on the public visibility of the perpetrators, assuming that the few images of perpetrators that could be seen during the dictatorship complemented the denunciations and increased the public awareness of these crimes.

To accomplish this, I will analyse the visibility *dispositifs* that allowed the social construction of Astiz as a perpetrator during the dictatorship. I will examine two series of photographs that circulated in 1982, paying attention to the context of their production and circulation, the accompanying discourses, and media spaces. The notion of the ‘visibility *dispositif*’, which I borrow from Jacques Rancière,⁴ captures the interrelation of these heterogeneous elements and enables an understanding of their specific combination at particular times to ‘make visible’ and give meaning to the construction of the perpetrator as a social category. According to Gilles Deleuze,⁵ this combination, with its own ‘regime of light’ and ‘regime of enunciation’, is not a construction made deliberately by someone (an individual or a social actor) with a specific purpose. It is an array of components that allow

- 2 Among the many works that analyse political and aesthetic strategies to achieve visibility of the disappeared in public space, especially through photographic images, see Ludmila Da Silva Catela, ‘Lo invisible revelado: El uso de fotografías como (re) presentación de la desaparición de personas en la Argentina’, in *Independencia*, ed. by Claudia Feld and Jessica Stites Mor (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2009), pp. 337–361; Ana Longoni, ‘Fotos y siluetas: dos estrategias contrastantes en la representación de los desaparecidos’, in *Los desaparecidos en Argentina: Memorias, representaciones e ideas (1983–2008)*, ed. by Emilio Crenzel (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2010), pp. 43–63; Gabriel Gatti, *El detenido-desaparecido: Narrativas posibles para una catástrofe de la identidad* (Montevideo: Trilce, 2008); and Vikki Bell, *The Art of Post-dictatorship: Ethics and Aesthetics in Transitional Argentina* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
- 3 Some significant works study the image of perpetrators in transitional or post-conflict stages, but not in contexts of mass violence or dictatorship. See Susanne C. Knittel, *The Historical Uncanny: Disability, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Holocaust Memory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015); and Michelle E. Anderson, ‘Perpetrator Trauma, Empathic Unsettlement, and the Uncanny: Conceptualizations of Perpetrators in South Africa’s Truth Commission Special Report’, *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 2.1 (2018), 95–118 <<https://jpr.winchesteruniversitypress.org/articles/10.21039/jpr.2.1.17>> [accessed 12 July 2023].
- 4 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), p. 102. The term *dispositif* is often translated as ‘apparatus’ in English-language publications. I prefer to keep the word *dispositif* in French, as I believe it captures better the relationships between the different elements it is composed of and the dynamic and changing quality of these relationships.
- 5 Gilles Deleuze, ‘What Is a *dispositif*?’, in *Michel Foucault: Philosopher*, ed. by François Ewald, trans. by Timothy J. Armstrong (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 160.

for the visibility of that object, endowing it with characteristics of legibility and intelligibility. In Deleuze's conception:

These apparatuses [*dispositifs*], then, are composed of the following elements: lines of visibility and enunciation, lines of force, lines of subjectification, lines of splitting, breakage, fracture, all of which criss-cross and mingle together, some lines reproducing or giving rise to others, by means of variations or even changes in the way they are grouped.⁶

It is not my intention to discuss here the category of the *dispositif*, introduced and developed in the 1970s by Michel Foucault⁷ and then adopted in various studies and reflections, to the point that, as Óscar Moro Abadía writes, it has become a 'container concept'⁸ that can be applied to multiple perspectives and research objects. Rather, I am interested in understanding its potential to investigate and interrogate different modalities of visibility. In this sense, the notion of 'visibility *dispositif*' (*dispositif de visibilité*), allows us to emphasize what Deleuze calls 'lines of visibility', without neglecting the relations of the visible with the utterable, the multiple temporalities that a *dispositif* combines, and the lines of force between the different elements (images, texts, and arrangement of bodies, etc.). Faced with the vast controversies that have confronted the value of the testimonial word with the value of documentary images to account for the Nazi extermination,⁹ Rancière responds by saying that it would be a mistake to separate the image from the word, that both 'mediums' are part of the same visibility *dispositif* that 'creates a certain sense of reality, a certain common sense.'¹⁰

In this respect, the *dispositif*, as has already been pointed out in various works,¹¹ does not refer to individual elements (in our case, the photos of Astiz, the discourses that accompanied them, the information that circulated, and the accumulated knowledge about the disappearances up to that moment, etc.) but to the mesh or network that unites

6 Ibid., p. 162.

7 Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

8 Óscar Moro Abadía, '¿Qué es un dispositivo?', *Empiría: Revista de Metodología de Ciencias Sociales*, 6 (2003), 29-46 (p. 31) <<https://revistas.uned.es/index.php/empiria/article/view/933>> [accessed 16 October 2023].

9 This controversy is developed by, among others, Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2003).

10 Rancière, p. 102.

11 See, among others, Deleuze, 'What is a dispositif?'; and Giorgio Agamben, '¿Qué es un dispositivo?', *Sociológica*, 26.73 (2011), 249-264.

them: the system of relationships that allows them to be understood together. These relations do not obey a prior hierarchy and do not condense a definitive meaning. According to Rancière, the processes of figuration are at once processes of condensation and displacement.¹² Thus, the condensations of meaning are provisional, and the trajectories are more significant than the points of departure or arrival. This quality of constant movement does not prevent moments of collision or coincidence, in which images — within the framework of the visibility *dispositif* — produce strong figures or more socially accepted readings (even though the readings and circuits of reception are also part of the *dispositif*). As Laura Basu reminds us, the *dispositif* allows us to observe ‘tendencies’ rather than finished processes.¹³

In this way, what matters to me is to point out that the visibility *dispositif* is always open and in transformation. The temporal dimension is, therefore, a fundamental element that will be included in this analysis. On the other hand, it is necessary to clarify that in this analysis I will not emphasize the power-knowledge relations present in any *dispositif*;¹⁴ although I am interested in addressing two issues. First, to recall that — as Rancière has pointed out — every visibility *dispositif* allows for a certain distribution of the sensible that is intrinsically political.¹⁵ Second, that the *dispositif* is traversed by ‘lines of force’, as already indicated by Deleuze, which I understand here as tensions — which are not necessarily resolved — in the space of the visible. In short, my analysis will address three issues: the conjunction of diverse elements, the temporalities and transformations, and the tensions that run through the *dispositifs*.

By pointing out that perpetrators can be seen through visibility *dispositifs*, I aim to avoid a naïve consideration of images in the study of the construction of the figure of the perpetrator, which would lead to the belief that, once identified, photographed, and exhibited, perpetrators are socially visible.¹⁶ In this article, the *dispositif* will be considered as a methodological tool to relate and juxtapose what is shown and what is said in specific circumstances. As Rancière has noted regarding Holo-

¹² Rancière, p. 94.

¹³ Laura Basu, ‘Memory *Dispositifs* and National Identities: The Case of Ned Kelly’, *Memory Studies*, 4.1 (2011), 33–41 (p. 34).

¹⁴ Agamben, p. 250.

¹⁵ Rancière, p. 56.

¹⁶ This approach to images and the need for their social legibility is based on the perspective developed by Georges Didi-Huberman in *Images malgré tout*.

caust images, visibility *dispositifs* allow us to understand the system of relationships and tensions 'between the visible and the invisible, the visible and speech, the said and the unsaid'.¹⁷

To do so, I will first provide a brief overview of the case of Astiz and how he was individualized and identified between 1977 and 1979 through testimonies and denunciations. Then, I will focus on two series of photographs taken in October 1981 and April 1982, respectively, in two different places: South Africa and the South Georgia Islands. Based on this case, I will make more general observations about the capabilities, limitations, and demands of images in facilitating (or hindering) the public visibility of perpetrators involved in forced disappearances.¹⁸

'The blond angel': Early Testimonies about Astiz

The complaints and testimonies that circulated through humanitarian networks during the Argentine dictatorship served as initial visibility *dispositifs* to explain and give a name to the crime of forced disappearance. They were also fundamental in denouncing the perpetrators that survivors had seen in clandestine detention centres. In that context, both the lists of victims and the lists of perpetrators constituted a substantial part of the denunciations, even when the witnesses did not always know their full names: often, aliases and incomplete or misspelled names were intermingled with the real ones.

The case of the ESMA is unique because during the dictatorship there were some very detailed testimonies that gained international circulation, especially between 1978 and 1980.¹⁹ In those early accounts, detailed information about two internationally denounced kidnapping

17 Rancière, p. 93.

18 It is necessary to clarify that this article will not focus on examining the subsequent uses of the photographs studied here, or the memory discourse around the perpetrator Astiz once the dictatorship ended. Although my perspective as a researcher is 'in-formed' by such memory discourse, it will not be the specific object of inquiry in this case. Additionally, the scope of this article does not allow for an extensive discussion of the theoretical and conceptual foundations in the field of image and photography. Nevertheless, my objective is to intervene in this field with a very specific focus, which is the debate on the social visibility of forced disappearances, as mentioned in footnote 2.

19 Rodrigo González Tizón, "Los desaparecidos empiezan a hablar": una aproximación histórica a la producción testimonial de los sobrevivientes de la dictadura desde el exilio (1976-1983), *Páginas*, 13.31 (2021), 1-34 <<https://revistapaginas.unr.edu.ar/index.php/RevPaginas/article/view/475>> [accessed 12 July 2023].

operations had a particular impact. The first one took place in January 1977 and concerned a seventeen-year-old Swedish-Argentine teenager named Dagmar Hagelin as the victim. The other case involved two French nuns, Alice Domon and Léonie Duquet, who were abducted in December 1977 along with a group of relatives of the disappeared who used to gather at the Santa Cruz Church in Buenos Aires. Much later, it was discovered that Alfredo Astiz of the ESMA's Task Force (Fuerza de Tareas)²⁰ played a crucial role in both kidnappings.

In January 1977, Astiz and several comrades from his Task Force were lying in wait at the residence of Norma Burgos, who had been detained the previous evening. At that moment, Dagmar Hagelin arrived at the scene looking for her friend Norma, not suspecting that an armed group of men were guarding the house. They mistook her for someone else, and Astiz shot her from behind when she fled into the street. She was captured and taken wounded to the ESMA. From there, according to several witnesses, she was *trasladada* (transferred) without anyone knowing anything more about her. In the lexicon of the clandestine detention centres, the term *traslado* (transfer) was a euphemism for assassination.

In a second operation that began in July 1977, Astiz infiltrated the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo that gathered at the Santa Cruz Church, presented himself under the pseudonym of Gustavo Niño, and falsely claimed that he was searching for his disappeared brother. A few months later, he acted as an informer in the abduction of twelve people from that group, including the two French nuns Alice Domon and Léonie Duquet.²¹

These operations quickly turned into international complaints. Dagmar's father, Ragnar Hagelin, took the protest to the Swedish embassy.²² Several months later, the French embassy in Buenos Aires lodged a complaint with the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs re-

20 The disappearances in Argentina were carried out by military Task Forces (Fuerzas de Tareas, or FTs) that organized the logistic, operational, and intelligence actions. Astiz was a member of FT 3.3 that was comprised mostly of navy officers and was located at ESMA's secret detention centre.

21 In 1977, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo held meetings in churches, such as Santa Cruz, to avoid the persecution of their members. Other people who collaborated with the Mothers went to these meetings, such as the French nun Alice Domon, who was kidnapped on 8 December 1977 in the operation carried out in the Santa Cruz church following Astiz's infiltration. The other nun, Léonie Duquet, who shared Domon's home, was abducted from her house on 10 December.

22 Ragnar Hagelin's testimony in the trial of the former commanders was published in the eighteenth volume of *El Diario del Juicio* magazine; see 'Testimonio del señor Ragnar Hagelin', *Diario del Juicio*, 24 September 1985, pp. 403-408 (p. 406).

questing information about the two disappeared nuns.²³ Early testimonies from ESMA survivors in 1978 specifically mention these two cases, but without yet associating them with the perpetrator Alfredo Astiz.²⁴

In March 1978, Astiz was sent to France on a mission to infiltrate a group of Argentine exiles organized in the Argentine Committee of Information and Solidarity (CAIS), where he presented himself under the pseudonym of Alberto Escudero. There, he was recognized by one of the exiles who had previously attended the meetings at Santa Cruz Church.²⁵ This is how the relatives of the disappeared confirmed that the person who had betrayed them was the man who had joined them for months as Gustavo Niño. However, this undercover agent of the Argentine Navy had not yet been identified by his real name Alfredo Astiz.

Shortly after, new testimonies from ESMA survivors put the pieces together and the name of Astiz became associated with these two internationally prominent cases: particularly, the October 1979 testimonies of three women before the French National Assembly, and the December 1979 testimony of survivor Norma Burgos in Stockholm. The testimony of the three women described the kidnapping operation at the Santa Cruz Church, stating that Frigate Lieutenant Astiz had 'a leading role in the infiltration, pretending to be a relative of a disappeared person.'²⁶ Burgos's testimony placed Astiz at the scene of Hagelin's abduction, identifying him as the perpetrator who shot the teenager in the head from behind.²⁷

23 Maria Soledad Catoggio and Claudia Feld, 'Narrativas memoriales y reclamos diplomáticos a la dictadura militar: Francia y Estados Unidos frente al caso de las monjas francesas desaparecidas en la Argentina (diciembre 1977 - noviembre 1978)', *Pasado y Memoria: Revista de Historia Contemporánea*, 20 (2020), 141-170 <<https://pasadoymemoria.ua.es/article/view/2020-n20-narrativas-memoriales-y-reclamos-diplomaticos-a-la-dict>> [accessed 12 July 2023].

24 Testimony before the Argentine Commission of Human Rights (*Comisión Argentina de Derechos Humanos*, or CADHU) by Horacio Domingo Maggio. Maggio had escaped from the ESMA and gave his testimony in March 1978, before being recaptured and assassinated. Maggio's complaint consisted of handwritten letters sent to different human rights organizations, including CADHU. Those allegations were not published in a report. The document is preserved in the National Memory Archive and can be accessed online via the following link: <<https://catalogo.jus.gob.ar/index.php/testimonio-ofrecido-por-horacio-domingo-maggio-fugado-en-un-traslado-desde-la-escuela-de-mec-nica-de-la-armada>>. Astiz's name is mentioned on page 5.

25 'Policier argentin à Paris pour espionner les réfugiés', *Le Matin*, 15/16 April 1978, p. 9.

26 See Ana María Martí, Alicia Milia de Pirlés, and Sara Solarz de Osatinsky, *Testimonios de los sobrevivientes del genocidio en la Argentina* (Madrid: CADHU, 1980).

27 See: Testimony of Norma Susana Burgos before the Swedish government, 13 December 1979. Available at: <<http://www.desaparecidos.org/arg/victimas/h/hagelin/Testimonio.htm>>.

It is important to emphasize that at that time, Astiz began to gain public attention, not so much for the scale of his crimes or his particular personality as a perpetrator, but because of the status of his victims. The vulnerability of an adolescent and two nuns, combined with their foreign status, made these kidnappings scandalous acts, and placed their perpetrator in a position of public condemnation and particular visibility. Proof of this is that the same testimony of the three survivors described in detail the atrocious torture sessions carried out by another ESMA perpetrator, Antonio Pernías, which did not have any significant repercussions until much later.²⁸

In the descriptions of Astiz acting in these circumstances that started to become known, another element magnified the ominous nature of his situation: the stark contrast between his appearance and his criminal actions. Testimonies from several mothers of the infiltrated group recalled him as a young man with a good presence: physically strong, tall, blonde, and with light-coloured eyes.²⁹ According to one testimony, Astiz ‘incited others to protect him because of his childlike expression and gentle gaze, and that was the feeling he inspired [...] in the mothers at that time’.³⁰ This sinister contrast between his supposedly angelic face (and the nickname ‘the blond angel’ by which he became known) and his crimes is evident in many of the early testimonies about Astiz.³¹

Unlike the hundreds of perpetrators in the CCDs, Astiz had been seen in public. But the public vision of Astiz as the ‘blond angel’ was a delusion, a trap, used to ensnare his prey. Astiz’s face appears, from these early accounts, as the surface where falsehood is inscribed, like a veil that conceals the atrocious scene that his victims could not know. In this context, ‘making the perpetrator visible’ was not so much about knowing exactly what Astiz had done, as his actions in the ESMA were little known, but about deciphering that delusion and the interplay of tensions between him and his personas, Astiz and Gustavo Niño, and

28 The name of Pernías did not gain public visibility until 1994 when his promotion in the navy was halted in the national senate due to the accusations made by human rights organizations. See Horacio Verbitsky, *El vuelo* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1995).

29 See Uki Goñi, *Judas: La Verdadera Historia de Alfredo Astiz, El Infiltrado* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1996), pp. 44-45; and Leigh A. Payne, *Unsettling Accounts: Neither Truth nor Reconciliation in Confessions of State Violence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 75-77.

30 Haydée Segura de Maratea, Testimony quoted in the Habeas Corpus petition filed by relatives of the disappeared in August 1983 (Case CONSUFA, Body 06, Page 1741).

31 Martí, Pirlés, and Osatinsky.

between the infiltrator and the young man claiming to search for his brother. Thus, this initial visibility *dispositif* constituted by these denunciations and early testimonies (before any photo of Astiz circulated publicly) highlights the betrayal and abuse suffered by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. During the dictatorship, the notion of ‘the blond angel’, that angelic figure concealing the worst demon, became — for the families of the disappeared and humanitarian networks — an emblem in itself, condensing the hidden atrocities endured by the abducted and symbolizing the threat looming over those who were searching for them.

‘Envoys of horror’: A Repressor Discovered in South Africa

In 1979, as part of the announced visit to Argentina by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) of the Organization of American States (OAS), the ESMA Task Force restructured its personnel, sending several perpetrators as naval attachés abroad. In June 1979, Astiz travelled to Pretoria, South Africa, where former ESMA Director Rubén Chamorro and Task Force (FT) Intelligence Chief Jorge Acosta had also been assigned.³² It was there where the complaints and inquiries regarding the abduction of Dagmar Hagelin followed Astiz.

In March 1980, after a diplomatic exchange between Sweden and Argentina that ended with Argentine President Videla feigning a lack of knowledge about Hagelin’s whereabouts, the Swedish government released information that Astiz was in the naval attaché’s office in Pretoria, accompanied by his passport photo.³³ The case became a scandal in South Africa, where journalist William Saunderson-Meyer published an extensive article about the situation of the perpetrator in October 1981 (Figure 1). Shortly after, he managed to take two photos of Astiz, which were published in the Sunday Tribune between late 1981 and early 1982 (Figures 2 and 3).

32 Fernández Barrio links some missions of ESMA perpetrators in foreign naval attachés, especially that of Astiz, with the need to hide from human rights accusations, as well as reasons related to the restructuring of the CCD. Facundo Fernández Barrio, ‘Circulación transnacional de represores durante la dictadura argentina: las misiones en el exterior de los ex miembros del Grupo de Tareas 3.3 de la ESMA (1979-1981)’ (Unpublished manuscript, 2020). Regarding the ESMA perpetrators and the central role played by Acosta, see Valentina Salvi, ‘El poder en las sombras: el GT de la ESMA’, in *ESMA: Represión y poder en el centro clandestino más emblemático de la última dictadura argentina*, ed. by Marina Franco and Claudia Feld (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2022), pp. 55-78.

33 ‘Testimonio del señor Ragnar Hagelin’, p. 406.



FIGURE 1. *Sunday Tribune*, October 10, 1981 (Public Domain)

The October 1981 article specifically exposed Astiz's connection to the Hagelin case but also held him responsible for the other crimes committed in the ESMA: the disappearance of pregnant women, the appropriation of children, torture, and death flights.³⁴ In other articles, Chamorro and Acosta were mentioned as Astiz's superiors, but they were not identified as the main individuals responsible for the crimes at the ESMA.³⁵

Astiz described as the torturer and 'officer in charge of all kidnapping operations at the School'³⁶ contrasted, in some way, with the photographic images circulating publicly. In one of them, Astiz poses facing forward, with a serious expression, in casual clothing, and with his shirt partially open (Figure 2). In the others, he is seen smiling (Figures

34 I have been unable to determine the origin of the photo of Astiz reproduced in this article. It was probably the ID photo released by the Swedish government. The photographs taken by the South African journalist were published in December 1981 and May 1982.

35 Chamorro, Acosta, and Perrén are characterized as torturers from the ESMA. William Saunderson-Meyer, 'More Torturers at Pretoria Embassy', *Sunday Tribune*, 25 October 1981.

36 William Saunderson-Meyer, 'Envoys of Horror', *Sunday Tribune*, 10 October 1981, p. 29.

3 and 4).³⁷ The journalist described in the article how he took the photo and mentioned that Astiz tried to snatch the camera away from him, but eventually agreed to pose for the newspaper.³⁸

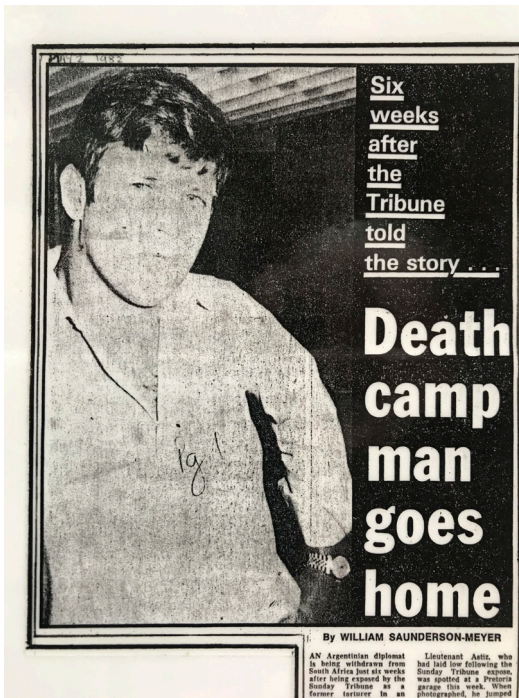


FIGURE 2. *Sunday Tribune*, December 6, 1981 (Public Domain)

- 37 The first photo was published in December 1981 and appeared on the cover of the newspaper. The second one was published in May 1982, illustrating an article about a medal awarded by the South African government to Astiz and other perpetrators from the naval attaché in Pretoria (Figures 2 and 3). Figure 3 shows how the *Sunday Tribune* cropped the original photo, which can be seen in Figure 4. The cropped version focuses on the face, excluding some significant details such as clothing, body position, and the surroundings where Astiz was located. The civilian attire worn by Astiz during infiltration operations, which was common among perpetrators operating within the ESMA, seems to have been the customary attire during his mission in Pretoria.
- 38 William Saunderson-Meyer, 'Death Camp Man Goes Home', *Sunday Tribune*, 6 December 1981, p. 1. In a personal interview, the journalist recounted that the frontal photo with Astiz posing seriously was taken first, and the photo of Astiz smiling was taken later when the naval officer was no longer posing for him. Online interview conducted with William Saunderson-Meyer by Claudia Feld and Dolores San Julián on 20 April 2022.



FIGURE 3. Sunday Tribune, May 2, 1982 (Public Domain)



FIGURE 4. Original photograph taken of Astiz in Pretoria by journalist William Saunderson-Meyer (Image courtesy of William Saunderson-Meyer)

This visibility *dispositif* brings together, for the first time, the information and the images. What tensions result from this combination? Perhaps the most evident tension exists between secrecy and publicity, which runs through this entire journalistic production. In it, Astiz is 'discovered' and exposed abroad. It is uncertain how these reports resonated in Argentina and in other countries where he was being denounced.³⁹ Yet it is clear that it had effects in the South African political arena. The reports about the 'envoys of horror' in Pretoria sparked a series of demands from the political opposition in the South African parliament, calling for Astiz's expulsion. According to journalist Uki Goñi, the information 'shook the South African Minister of Foreign Affairs for not having noticed the presence of the Argentine perpetrators.'⁴⁰ The episode resulted in the Argentine government's decision to withdraw Astiz from South Africa in January 1982.⁴¹

On the other hand, the tension between the horrifying and the everyday, the secure and the threatening (that is, a tension that defines the uncanny)⁴² also permeated the series of photos taken of Astiz in Pretoria. By analysing it, it is possible to hypothesize why the *Sunday Tribune* might use Astiz's image to make a denunciation that was both domestic and diplomatic. That man in civilian clothes, with a broad smile, fair skin, and light eyes, concealed the most terrible horrors reported in the news article.⁴³ Without explicitly stating it, Astiz's photo proved useful in pointing out to the readers of the *Sunday Tribune* (an opposition newspaper) that these Argentine 'torturers' had a similar appearance to those belonging to the White South African middle class

39 Regarding the circulation and impact of these news outside of South Africa, we have limited information and sources. Saunderson-Meyer, in the interview, states, 'I have no specific knowledge of where and when the articles were reproduced. As a matter of courtesy, I sent them to all the organizations and individuals I engaged with in France, Sweden, and the UK'. During those years, foreign newspapers circulated very restrictively in Argentina. Copies of some European and North American newspapers could be bought in specific locations in Buenos Aires (such as Calle Florida), but newspapers from other continents did not circulate, so it is likely that the news about Astiz in the *Sunday Tribune* reached the Argentine public much later, after its impact in other countries.

40 Goñi, p. 205.

41 Marisa Pineau, 'Vinculaciones de Argentina con la Sudáfrica del apartheid', in *La represión como política de Estado: Estudios sobre la violencia estatal en el siglo XX*, ed. by Gabriela Águila, Santiago Garaño, and Pablo Scatizza (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2020), p. 240.

42 Anderson, pp. 106-107.

43 The *Sunday Tribune* characterizes him as the officer in charge of 'all kidnapping and infiltration operations towards groups believed to be subversive'. See William Saunderson-Meyer, 'Horror Camp Men Now Envoys in S.A.', *Sunday Tribune*, 10 October 1981, p. 3.

aligned with the apartheid government.⁴⁴ In line with this, we also find a tension between the hidden and the visible, between what was shown and what remained in the shadows, because the most important figures of the ESMA, like Chamorro and Acosta — also hiding in South Africa — were not photographed or pursued in that same context.⁴⁵

The 'sadistic torturer': Astiz on the South Georgia Islands

After leaving Pretoria, Astiz embarked for the South Georgia Islands where, on 3 April 1982, once the Falklands/Malvinas War had begun, he took possession of the islands that had been under British control. This time participating in a conventional war (rather than a clandestine repressive campaign), Astiz surrendered to the British a few days later without having fought.⁴⁶

On 26 April 1982, he is photographed signing the surrender of his troops before two British officers (Figure 5).⁴⁷ It is common to find in later documents the account that this photo allowed witnesses to 'recognize' Astiz and expose that the surrendered officer was also a perpetrator from the ESMA. It is often said that, thanks to that photo, the governments of Sweden and France demanded that this prisoner of war should not be returned by Great Britain to Argentina but tried in those countries.⁴⁸

44 I thank Marisa Pineau for suggesting this interpretation in a personal conversation. According to Pineau, Astiz's physical appearance allowed the *Sunday Tribune* to denounce the White South African sectors that supported the regime; in contrast, neither Acosta nor Chamorro, with a very different physical appearance from Astiz's, could be associated, in the image, with the South African perpetrators.

45 This discrepancy is also confirmed when reviewing the different dates on which Astiz and Chamorro had to leave South Africa. The visibility of Astiz in late 1981 led to his expulsion from South Africa in January 1982, while Chamorro managed to stay in the country until February 1984 when he was expelled and had to appear before military courts in Argentina for allegations related to the ESMA, within the framework of the first trials carried out in Argentina during its return to democracy. See Pineau, p. 240.

46 Goñi, p. 206.

47 The moment is captured by a photographer from the British armed forces. In addition to this well-known photo, another one of the same event has circulated, in which the Englishmen are seen signing while Astiz observes them. Cora Gamarnik has investigated these photos and reports that, at one point, the British government had plans to print the photo of Astiz surrendering and make flyers to drop on the Falkland/Malvinas Islands, thereby demoralizing the Argentine troops in the midst of the war (personal conversation with Cora Gamarnik in March 2022).

48 Among many other sources, this account can be found in the Habeas Corpus petition signed by relatives of the disappeared individuals in ESMA on 9 August 1983. Case CONSUFA, Body 06, page 1744. See also Goñi, pp. 206-207.



FIGURE 5. Astiz signing the surrender of his troops in the South Georgia Islands on April 26, 1982 (Public Domain)

However, this account about the image faces a paradox in the sense that the alleged identification based on the photo of Astiz is an image where his face, shown in profile, with a grown beard and looking down, is difficult to recognize. This apparent contradiction led me to investigate how this visibility *dispositif* developed over time in the short period between Astiz's surrender (on 26 April 1982) and the publication of the photo in the international media (on 16 May 1982). My reconstruction of that period, comparing diplomatic documents with press coverage from France and Spain, allowed me to conclude that it was the Swedish and French diplomatic claims that triggered the publication of this photo, and not the other way around.⁴⁹

My interpretation of the episode is that the British government made that image available in the specific context of agreeing — apparently questioned by international agreements concerning the treatment of prisoners of war — to keep Astiz in London while returning the rest of the prisoners of war to Argentina. Regarding this visibility

⁴⁹ The claims from Sweden and France to Great Britain were made on 7 May and 11 May 1982, respectively. On 13 May 1982, the British government sent all prisoners of war back to Argentina but agreed to retain Astiz in response to the Swedish and French requests. On 16 May 1982, Astiz's photo was published in several European newspapers, stating that he was sought out by both countries and that the photo was released by the British on 15 May 1982. See declassified diplomatic documents from the French government available at the Centre des Archives Diplomatiques, Série Amérique-Argentine, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Folder: 8000/305, Newspapers *El País* and *Diario 16* (Spain), *Le Monde* and *Libération* (France), between 26 April and 16 May 1982. Astiz's detention in London lasted until 10 June 1982, when invoking the Geneva Convention, the British government returned him to Argentina.

dispositif, it is important to underline that when the photo was published, it no longer revealed an anonymous perpetrator or a military officer surrendering in war, but rather a criminal sought after by two European countries.

The idea I would like to propose, reflecting on this image and its impact, is that although Astiz had already been sought out, identified, and denounced before the photo was published, the image still functioned as a tool to unmask him. Not necessarily because it publicly revealed the hidden perpetrator or showed the 'other side' of the surrendered military officer, but because the image contrasted with that of the persona of the 'blond angel'. As both a uniformed combatant and a surrendering soldier, Astiz no longer displayed the sinister innocence conveyed by the testimonies of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. This is reinforced by the characterizations published in some European newspapers, stating that Astiz was 'accused of multiple murders, rapes, and tortures';⁵⁰ that he was 'one of the most sadistic torturers of the Argentine Navy';⁵¹ and that 'according to multiple testimonies, he raped a young Swedish woman and then threw her from a helicopter'.⁵² The Spanish newspaper *El País* published the photo, stating in its caption that Astiz was accused of 'having tortured a Swedish citizen and two French nuns before they were killed'.⁵³ As if marking the extreme vulnerability of his victims was not enough, the articles emphasized Astiz's extreme cruelty with them. This characterization of Astiz and his role within the ESMA differs from many later testimonies.⁵⁴ However, it is useful to magnify, in that specific context, the visibility of this perpetrator and, at the same time, expose the terrible crimes committed by the Argentine dictatorship.

Within this visibility *dispositif*, one can also observe the tension between the persona of Astiz and the collective of Argentine military personnel (whether troops fighting in the Falklands/Malvinas or perpetrators of the

50 P. Sabatier, 'Les Anglais gardent au frais "Le bourreau de Cordoba"', *Libération*, 14 May 1982, p. 26.

51 'Intervention française contre la libération du "bourreau de Cordoba"', *Libération*, 13 May 1982, p. 17.

52 Pierre Hasky, "Le Boucher de Córdoba" aux fers dans une soule', *Libération*, 11 May 1982, p. 4.

53 'El capitán Alfredo Astiz en el momento de firmar la rendición', *El País*, 16 May 1982, p. 1.

54 Astiz's role as a member of the Task Force dedicated to kidnapping individuals has been corroborated by numerous testimonies, as well as his involvement in infiltration missions. In the judicial sentence of Case 1270, his role in kidnapping operations is described, and he is accused of committing torture and participating in the so-called recovery process of prisoners from the ESMA. He has also been convicted for his direct responsibility in the murder of the twelve individuals from the Santa Cruz group. TOF 5, Sentence Case 1270, 28 December 2011, p. 138.

dictatorship). The prominence of Astiz is constructed through his own name and that of his victims, the international scale of the accusations, extradition requests, and the hyperbole surrounding his crimes.

It is interesting to compare this case with Susanne Knittel's study that examines two photographs of Nazi commander Christian Wirth. Knittel proposes to consider how the uniform accentuates the 'symbolic function' of the perpetrator in contrast to the personal photo without a uniform.⁵⁵ In the case of Astiz, we can think of divergent interpretations depending on who, at that time, could look at the photo and make sense of it: for the British military, Astiz was an enemy surrendering, and there was no need to distinguish him from the rest of the Argentine armed forces. In contrast, for the French newspapers that denounced him, he was an executioner wanted for heinous crimes, and it was necessary to identify him to reveal the 'sadistic torturer' who should be extradited.

However, those 'war attributes' fail to portray Astiz in a position of power. With his head down and dishevelled, facing the upright British officers, the photo of his rendition exposes a sinister ambivalence, different from the previous *dispositifs*: no longer between the 'blond angel' and the traitor, no longer between the privileged white youth and the 'man from the death camp', but between the imprisoned soldier and the unpunished perpetrator. While the photo, the name, and the reported cases supported the claims and allowed for wide circulation, they ultimately led to Astiz's impunity that would last for decades.

Before the end of the dictatorship, Astiz was tried by a military tribunal for his role in the Falklands/Malvinas War,⁵⁶ and a case was opened regarding the disappearance of Dagmar Hagelin, but he was not convicted. A few years later, the so-called Due Obedience Law (1987) granted him impunity in Argentina for the forced disappearances he was responsible for. In 1990, he was tried in absentia by a French court for the case of the disappeared nuns and was included in the list of persons sought by Interpol, which prevented him from leaving Argentina. Although justice could not pursue him at home, he continued to be at the centre of accusations and commemorative actions. In 2006, trials against the perpetrators of the dictatorship were reopened after amnesties and pardons had been revoked in court, and Astiz was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2011 and 2017.

⁵⁵ Knittel, pp. 140–41.

⁵⁶ Astiz was accused of 'surrendering his troops to the enemy without offering resistance', according to the Rattenbach Report conducted by the Argentine military and published in 1983. *Informe Rattenbach* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Fin de Siglo, 2000), 246.

Long before justice caught up with him, Astiz became one of the most emblematic perpetrators of the dictatorship. In the mid-1990s, when he enjoyed his long-standing impunity, a survivor from another clandestine detention centre recognized him on a street in the city of Bariloche and punched him in the face.⁵⁷ It was a symbolic blow to that ‘angelic face’ that no longer merely revealed a perpetrator of the dictatorship but also exposed, behind that impassive face, the impunity of all other perpetrators.

Conclusions: How to Think about the Visibility of Perpetrators?

This brief journey through the different scenes, contexts, and media that allowed the identification and visibility of the perpetrator Alfredo Astiz during the Argentine dictatorship raises some questions for the debate on the social construction of the perpetrator as a social category and the approaches we can use to investigate this social process. The ‘visibility’ of perpetrators is significant because it counters the secrecy and invisibility that characterized the system of forced disappearances and other repressive and genocidal modalities. Moreover, studying perpetrators contributes new elements to the analysis of forced disappearances, which has traditionally focused on the visibility and figure of the victims.

In this regard, investigating the visibility *dispositifs* helps us understand that the discovery and unmasking of perpetrators can be slow and more complex than is often considered in hindsight. Although the recognition of Astiz came early, the gradual assembly of the various pieces, like a puzzle, did not create certainty until long after his name was circulated. Even when the pieces of the puzzle seem to come together, their meanings can be ambiguous, hyperbolic, or paradoxical in relation to the information that will be known later. In this respect, I would like to pose some questions to encourage further investigation into other cases.

To begin with, who took these photos? The two series of photos studied here were taken, one by a journalist attempting to denounce Astiz, and the other by a photographer from the opposing armed forces. I will not delve into the implications of these two different ‘perspectives’ on Astiz, but I do want to emphasize the need for a more thorough ex-

⁵⁷ Omar Lavieri, ‘Cuando le pegué a Astiz sólo veía pañuelos blancos’, *Clarín*, 3 September 1995, p. 12.

amination of the camera's 'eye' that seeks to uncover and expose those responsible for violence. These photos differ from the images of perpetrators produced by propaganda operations common in authoritarian regimes, which aim to conceal violence.⁵⁸ They are also quite distinct from what Sánchez-Biosca refers to as 'perpetrator images'.⁵⁹ If, in the latter, victims are photographed by the perpetrators or their accomplices, thus prolonging and perpetrating the violence, in this case, the images seek visibility and a condemnation (even if symbolic) of the violence through the photographic image of the perpetrator.

It is important to ask, consequently, how these images of perpetrators are linked to the violence exerted: to what extent do they allow for its visibility? From the analysis conducted here, it can be deduced that different social mediations are needed for violence to be seen in the image of a perpetrator photographed afterwards and far from the places where their crimes were committed. Methodologically, it may therefore be useful to pay attention to the different components of the visibility *dispositif*, especially to those paratexts that accompany the images: newspaper headlines and typography, captions, journalistic notes, and so on. But the *dispositif* is more than the image and the text, as they interact and compose meaning. It is also the location and opportunity of its circulation, the tensions, the layers of 'sedimentation', and the lines of 'creativity', as Deleuze calls them.⁶⁰ In that aspect, it is interesting to pay attention not only to the connection and coincidence of the different components but also to the dislocations, ruptures, and collisions between opposing meanings that each visibility *dispositif* establishes. That is, meanings are not univocal, so a study of the social construction of perpetrators should take into account these fractures as part of the visibility process. For example, the vision of Astiz's 'angelic face' coexists simultaneously with his visualization as a 'sadistic torturer'. These meanings coexist and cause the image to reverberate with a sinister halo in these existing and in new visualizations.

For all these reasons, it is interesting to pay attention to the spaces and times of image circulation and their 'afterlife'. In this regard, these two series of photographs are quite different from each other. While the Pretoria photos were little known and hardly circulated outside

58 Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 3-7.

59 Vicente Sánchez-Biosca, *La muerte en los ojos: Qué perpetraron las imágenes de perpetrador* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2021).

60 Deleuze, p. 161.

South Africa, the one from the South Georgia Islands was published in newspapers from different countries at the time and in the post-dictatorship period. It became an iconic photo associated with the episode in which Astiz surrendered to the British without having fought. It illustrated his 'cowardice' as a soldier and therefore amplified his negative characteristics as a perpetrator. Here, we have analysed how the South African photo was taken with the intention to unmask Astiz, while the one produced by the British had other purposes in the context of the war.⁶¹ Paradoxically, the South Georgia photo had a 'subsequent life' in which it became associated with the moment Astiz was identified as a perpetrator, although, as we have shown, it did not happen that way: Astiz was identified before the photo was published; the photo was published because he was a wanted perpetrator. This allows us to raise other questions about the dissociations between the intentions of the photographer and the subsequent circulation of the images, between the narrative about the image and its functionality at the time it was taken. In the case of perpetrators, it leads us to consider that the image and its visibility are two different matters. Analysing the visibility *dispositifs* and not just the images allows us to investigate the complex processes of meaning construction over time, their displacements and fractures, in addition to the consolidated and crystallized meanings.

A final set of questions relates not to what is seen but to what remains in the shadows. There is something that the images themselves obscure, hide, and prevent from being seen. In our case, we have paid attention to the contrast between the hyperbolized image of Astiz and his crimes, versus the invisibility — in the same visual space — of other higher-ranking and more responsible perpetrators from ESMA (Chamorro, Acosta, and Pernías). What conjunctions between discourse, context, and image are conducive to making a perpetrator (or a group of them) visible, and what is it that the same *dispositif* is preventing from being seen? What is it, to use the words of Sánchez Biosca and Zylberman,⁶² that the visual medium reveals and masks? This case also serves to draw attention to those hidden and invisible aspects that are, likewise, a constitutive part of the visibility *dispositifs*.

61 See footnote 42.

62 Vicente Sánchez-Biosca and Lior Zylberman, 'Perpetradores de crímenes de masas a la luz de la imagen: A modo de introducción', *Papeles del CEIC*, 2 (2021), 1-12 <<https://ojs.ehu.es/index.php/papelesCEIC/article/view/23018>> [accessed 12 July 2023].

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