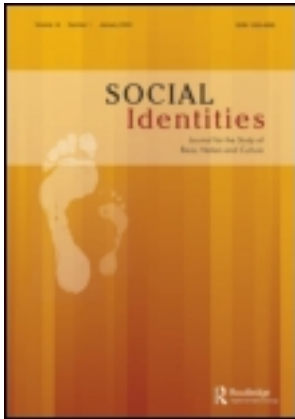


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Documentaries and politics in post-dictatorship Argentina: *Cuarentena: Exilio y regreso* and *Juan, como si nada hubiera sucedido* by Carlos Echeverría

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While much has been written about Argentine political documentary during the 1960s and 1970s, less has been said about post-dictatorship political documentaries. This article will consider the films *Cuarentena: Exilio y regreso* (1983) and *Juan, como si nada hubiera sucedido* (1987) by Carlos Echeverría, an independent filmmaker who focuses on the return to democracy and reflections on the recent past. *Cuarentena: Exilio y regreso* is about Osvaldo Bayer's experiences and fervent desire to return to his homeland. Osvaldo Bayer is an Argentine writer who was exiled in Germany during the dictatorship. *Juan, como si nada hubiera sucedido* is one of the most important Argentine films of the last thirty years, as it is among the first documentaries to address the subject of the forced disappearance of people during the last military dictatorship. The film contains interviews with military officers who held high positions during the period, asking them about the roles they played in political disappearances.

Keywords: Argentina; documentary; cinema; dictatorship; democracy

Introduction

As a space for reflection on political and social topics, Argentine documentary cinema of the 1980s and 1990s constitutes in a large part a response to the traumatic conditions that arose out of the latest military dictatorship. Even though military governments repeatedly affected the history of Argentina in the twentieth century, the 1976–1983 period coincides with the most violent dictatorship the country has ever endured. Under the government of a military *junta* composed of General Jorge R. Videla (army), Admiral Emilio E. Massera (navy) and Brigadier Orlando R. Agosti (air force), the dictatorial regime systematically violated human rights through a repressive operation carefully planned by the heads of the three armed forces. This resulted in the kidnapping, torture, confinement in clandestine detention centers, disappearance and death of approximately 30,000 people. Torture, censorship, and violence became the standard currency, with the full complicity of the media and a significant portion of civil society (CONADEP, 2009, p. 8).

Historically, Argentine cinema has had great political visibility within student and activist organizations. By the end of the 1960s, numerous political filmmaking groups had been formed. The concept of 'cinema as a political act' (*cine acto*) encapsulated the expectations of the *Cine Liberación* film collective. The intention of

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the group was to incite spectators to become active players in the Peronist fight against imperialism, and they did this by clandestinely projecting films. From a different viewpoint, the *Cine de la Base* group, which was the cinematographic arm of the Workers' Revolutionary Party/People's Revolutionary Army, was also determined to further its agenda by surreptitiously screening films.

The end of the military dictatorship created different types of bonds between cinema and politics. While Argentine fictional films soon started to address the traumatic conflicts resulting from the country's recent history – in some cases by resorting to metaphors and allegories (Kriger, 1994, p. 55) – documentary filmmakers in Argentina took more than a decade to address these topics from a critical perspective. This delay notwithstanding, and irrespective of the differentiation between documentary and fiction, these first films about the transition to democracy are defined by their testimonial nature (Manetti, 1994, p. 257). David William Foster states that documentalism is one of the typical characteristics of Argentine films that consider the transition to democracy (1992, p. 12). While films made soon after 1983 are historical in every sense of the term, the so-called 'memory cinema,' as regards the latest military dictatorship, did not start before the mid-1990s, which coincided with a renewal taking place deep inside documentary language in Argentina.

By the early 1980s, more than a decade before the advent of memory cinema, certain topics closely related to Argentina's recent traumatic past, such as the military dictatorship, violence, the disappearance of people, and exile, began to be addressed and denounced by Argentine documentary filmmakers who either had been exiled or lived abroad. By 1983, even before the return of democracy, Carlos Echeverría made *Cuarentena: Exilio y regreso* (1983, Germany [*Cuarentena: Exil und Rückkehr*]), a documentary about Argentine writer and historian Osvaldo Bayer's experiences during his exile in Germany and his fervent wish to return to his homeland before the end of the last military dictatorship.¹ *Cuarentena: Exilio y regreso* was among the first documentary films to address topics related to the latest military dictatorship in Argentina, the forced disappearance of people, exile, death and the return of democratic elections.² Four years later, Echeverría filmed *Juan, como si nada hubiera sucedido* (1987, Germany [*Juan, als wäre nichts geschehen*]).³ *Juan* was one of the first documentaries, and possibly the only one, in which Argentine military officials who held high positions of authority were interviewed to find out their responsibility in the forced disappearances during the last military dictatorship.⁴ The possibility of conducting such interviews would end after the enactment of the Laws of Due Obedience and Full Stop in Argentina.⁵

This essay focuses on the films of Echeverría in order to address the relationship between documentary cinema and politics in the context of the expectations generated by the transition to democracy following the military dictatorship in Argentina.⁶ The essay reviews the particular methods of production and circulation of Echeverría's films and analyzes their various narrative resources as well as the way in which they make it possible to reflect upon specific problems regarding the democratic transition process in the context of the substantial socio-political changes that occurred in Argentina between 1983 and 1987. This work argues as a thesis that these two documentaries by Carlos Echeverría use distinct elements to analyze the transitional process to democracy. *Cuarentena* depicts the appearance of a set of expectations linked to this transitional process to democracy; while *Juan* portrays the end of said expectations, as a result of the approval of the Full Stop and the Due

Obedience Laws. These two films made in the 1980s explore aspects central to the reconstruction of the Argentine public sphere, well before the development of memory cinema in the 1990s.

Circulation

Despite having represented a response to deep concerns about the Argentine political reality, both *Cuarentena* and *Juan* faced formidable difficulties in terms of circulation in the country. For one, space for documentary production in Argentina during the 1980s was negligible. Production, distribution and exhibition were hindered by obstacles inherent to a developing market in which, with rare exception, there was no support structure for documentaries.

Having been trained as a documentary filmmaker in Germany, where the field was already professionally developed, Carlos Echeverría's creation of his first films was facilitated by his access to significant production funding. For example, *Cuarentena* was given financial support and aired in Germany through the national public television channel ZDF. In Argentina, however, the restrictions posed by a non-existent documentary market, at a time when democratic values were not consolidated, prevented the film from being aired on Channel 7, the public television station (Ormaechea, 2005, 14 April). Even today, it remains practically unknown by both the public and the critics.

Similarly, *Juan* aired on the German television channel WDR and was shown at the fifth Munich Film Festival, but did not receive government support and was not commercially premiered in Argentina. In 1988, the film was broadcast by a regional TV station, Channel 10 of Tucumán, although not without repercussions. As Echeverría himself states:

Sometime later, when *Juan*... was aired at a Tucumán TV station, the house of the program host (a certain Mr. Parolo) was bombed. The Universidad de Tucumán, which is closely related to Channel 10, invited me to present the film. As a result of the criminal act mentioned, a debate began at the university and a decision was made to air the film again. (Ormaechea, 2005, 14 April)

In 2005, the seventh annual BAFICI (Buenos Aires Festival Internacional de Cine Independiente) included a retrospective of Carlos Echeverría, thereby allowing many moviegoers and critics to appreciate the director's work for the first time. In 2006, Argentina's public television channel finally gave the entire country the chance to see the film nearly twenty years after it was produced. This broadcast marked the first time that the film was aired nationwide.

Owing to this complex series of factors, *Juan* had essentially laid dormant for almost two decades. It was thus a documentary that, even allowing for its enduring political significance, reached its audience an entire generation later. The many years that had lapsed between the production of *Juan* and its gradual distribution and exhibition also witnessed a series of changes that would affect the way in which the film was to be received by the public. As Argentina began its transition towards democracy and state censorship began to abate, the issue of human rights started to become of paramount importance for an emerging generation. Moreover, the way in which documentary films were viewed had also changed over the intervening years.

However, in spite of these factors, Echeverría's film had not dated when finally seen by a broader public. On the contrary, both its subject and the aesthetic resources it employs to address it would be relevant to a new generation of Argentine filmmakers whose works began to appear halfway into the next decade. The difficulties that these documentaries encountered in circulating throughout the country over such a long span of time resulted in the significant delay in their incorporation into film studies. Recently, these and other documentaries of limited circulation during the 1980s have begun to be studied academically (Molfetta, 2011; Zylberman, 2011).

Stories told in the first person

Both *Cuarentena* and *Juan* are narrated in the first person, articulating a 'biographic space' that combines experiences of the person as an individual and a member of society (Arfuch, 2002). In addition, the military dictatorship is a central theme in both documentaries. In *Cuarentena* this theme is presented through the historian, writer and journalist Osvaldo Bayer, who is motivated by the desire to travel back to Argentina to witness the democratic elections, after being exiled in Berlin from 1976 to 1983. In the film, Bayer's voice directs the events shown on screen and his body is followed by the camera. He explains that the reasons for his exile arose from the publication of Osvaldo Bayer's book *Los vengadores de la Patagonia trágica* (1974), which tells the story of a rural strike in the early twentieth century that ended tragically with the execution of 1,500 workers by the Argentine army (there is no available English translation; the Spanish title translates as Avengers of Tragic Patagonia). The writer also participated as a scriptwriter in the production of the film *Rebellion in Patagonia* ([*La Patagonia rebelde*] Ayala & Olivera, 1974, Argentina). When the military took over the government in 1976, both the book and the film were removed from circulation.

Bayer's desire to return to Argentina before the end of the dictatorship motivated the *Cuarentena* film project, thus generating certain conditions concerning the pre-production of the documentary. The short timeframe imposed by the imminent elections in Argentina forced the German television channel ZDF to speed up the assessment of Echeverría's project proposal, making it possible for the filmmaker to film in Argentina before the event (Echeverría, interview, 18 March 2009). At the same time, Bayer's intention to return to Argentina before the end of the military dictatorship also entailed other types of challenges. Firstly, there was a potential risk for the writer, as he was to return to a country that did not offer guarantees for political exiles. The film depicts this risk early on, in a discussion between Bayer and fellow exiles in Germany, who warn him that political repression in Argentina was indiscriminate and unreasonable. Bayer answers with a sense of humor:

I think that they [the military officers] would be satisfied, at the very most, just by punching me, beating me or by honoring such funny promises made by those two officers who said that the only thing they wanted to do with me was make me swallow the four volumes, one page at a time. I have always regretted having written that much.

These highly dramatic conversations explain and anticipate the tension expressed in the film's next scene, in which Bayer arrives at Buenos Aires' Ezeiza International Airport and submits his identity documents to the authorities. To anticipate Bayer's

concern about this process, the film suggests a historical parallel by inserting pictures that show the burning of 'anti-German' books in Berlin in 1933. The black list of intellectuals in Nazi Germany is promptly associated with a similar list prepared by the Argentine military dictatorship. The camera pans down the list of names and stops on 'Osvaldo Bayer.'⁷ As the film highlights it, both the risk that threatens Bayer and the need for him to return to the country ahead of the elections are related to his role as an intellectual; it is precisely his function as a social critic that renders him a threat before the eyes of the military forces. At the same time, his position as a witness of his time motivates him to experience first hand the pre-elections atmosphere, to ask questions, and to listen to his people.

As an intellectual, Bayer regains a critical ability to act in a public space that had been claimed by the intellectual elite in the late nineteenth century (Altamirano, 2006, p. 20). Accordingly, the intellectual figure cannot be separated from the process of creation pertaining to the public sphere, defined as an area of social life in which people gather to freely discuss societal problems, thereby influencing political actions (Habermas, 1994). Understood in this way, the public sphere is the domain of social life where public opinion is formed (Bell, Loader, Pleace, & Sohuler, 2004, p. 157). However, the eight-year military dictatorship in Argentina barred intellectuals' intervention in public life. As Beatriz Sarlo (1987, p. 32) suggests, there was 'a virtual disappearance of the public sphere throughout the years of the military dictatorship; at least, until its hard reconstruction process started to be carried out from 1982 onwards'. As Francine Masiello purports (1987, p. 12), it was a moment in which 'the public sphere had been deprived of the polyphony of voices.' Exclusion from Argentine public life displaced Bayer's political struggle towards exile. In such conditions, Bayer's return to Argentina functions in the film as a sign of the regeneration of Argentina's public life. The lack of public debate about the horrors of the military dictatorship was at the time an indicator of the damage sustained by the public sphere during the military dictatorship.

In the case of *Juan*, the use of the first person as a narrative strategy is more complex than in *Cuarentena*. *Juan* addresses the changes in the public sphere through Esteban Buch's personal perspective (the character in the film who shares his name with his true self beyond the screen). The film takes some ingredients of a category that Bill Nichols (1994, p. 94) calls 'performative documentary,' which emphasizes the subjective aspects of a typically objective discourse, and obscures 'yet more dramatically the already imperfect boundary between documentary and fiction'. The documentary focuses on Esteban Buch's search for clues about what occurred when a law student was kidnapped and disappeared while visiting his parents in the city of San Carlos de Bariloche in the late 1970s. Starting with the question: 'What happened to student Juan Herman on the night of 16 July 1977?' the film employs an investigative narrative approach typical of the police genre, developed through Buch's journalistic work with Juan's relatives and friends. At the same time, the film contains a parallel personal exploration by the young journalist, which will lead him to acknowledge certain aspects of his city and people. He ends up questioning the role of Argentine society as a whole in the last military dictatorship. It is precisely the journalist's disappointment and painful insight revealed by the search for those responsible for Juan Marcos Herman's kidnapping and disappearance that unveil the network of complicities and silences necessary to support a system of forced disappearance of people.

Approaching Argentina's public space

Carlos Echeverría's films approach Argentina's present political circumstances gradually. In *Cuarentena* there is a return to the national arena, while in *Juan*, an investigation regarding the case of a missing person is restricted to the city of San Carlos de Bariloche. In both documentaries the actions provide a specific type of spatial anchoring: situations are developed in venues that under no circumstances could be transferrable. Indeed, it is the public nature of the locations that renders them unique and non-replaceable. In this manner, space becomes as important as the events taking place therein. The first film shows us the political volatility of a country that not long before had been deprived of the right of assembly on the street – due to the military government's curfew – as well as every other civil right. In contrast, in *Juan* we bear witness to a tour across several spaces pertaining to public institutions – the armed forces, the police, the judicial branch – whereby the difficulties faced by a democratic system trying to eradicate remnants of the dictatorial mindset become apparent.

Cuarentena more specifically explores the reconstruction of the Argentine public sphere after the military dictatorship. The film depicts this space through the detached perspective of a returned exile who feels the distance of time gone by and suffers ideological isolation, yet simultaneously continues to share local cultural codes and knows how to function. Bayer's initial approach to Argentina consists of an exploration of public space: he tours the city's streets, chats at traditional Buenos Aires coffee shops, and holds conversations with waiters and taxi drivers. In this initial introduction to the city, Bayer would seem to be moving at random; the intellectual does not go to a pre-set destination, but instead tours the streets to soak up the effervescence of the pre-electoral climate. As if immersed in a thinking dominated by the free association of ideas, Bayer follows different events that are spontaneously triggered as he moves forward. The film shares this fascination for the immediate present, for the accelerated dynamics of the facts, and is easily captivated by the events and enthusiasm on the city streets. The film's interest in public space and political activism becomes particularly evident when the camera leaves the historian in the background – looking at some books in a bookstore of *Avenida de Mayo* – to let itself be seduced by the proclamations of an activist supporting the Intransigent Party (*Partido Intransigente*). The scene's background shows walls papered with banners of the Peronist Party (*Partido Peronista*) and street stands where flags and hair-bands of the Radical Civic Union (*Unión Cívica Radical*) are offered. Once settled in the crowd, the lens becomes unstable when capturing the detail of individuals who passionately argue about the different possibilities of each candidate, while Bayer asks questions about the potential results of the election. The background sound of the Peronist March (*marcha peronista*) intermingles with the proclamation of a man promoting the Luder–Bittel formula. Bayer's tour amid the crowd leads to the impassioned oratory of a man who, in a broken voice, promotes the Worker's Party (*Partido de los Trabajadores*) list. The camera follows Bayer's back through Florida Street – a pedestrian zone at the city's business center – while he forces his way through until he hones in on an intense argument between men in suits who could be middle-class office employees. Such scenes capture a unique and bygone moment in Argentine history, one that saw the reorganization of public life and political parties in the era of the military dictatorship.

As the documentary proceeds, the strong initial enthusiasm increasingly fades and Bayer's journey through Buenos Aires becomes more systematic. Resembling the logic of an electoral campaign, his tour through the city also includes visits to friends, relatives, and other institutions such as the Libertarian Federation (*Federación Libertaria*) and the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo Association (*Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo*), to finish – on election day – at the *Clarín* newspaper's editorial office.⁸ The camera, which had coupled with Bayer's initial movements, spontaneously led by the unforeseen, now becomes more rigorous and stable as it adapts itself to a slightly more structured journey. At this point, the foreign place of Bayer's exiled condition translates into a larger sense of distance from the camera. Wide shots prevail when capturing the meeting of Bayer and Tomaso, 'the good friend, [and] humble worker,' who provided shelter to the investigator in times of repression. The camera respectfully scrutinizes the embrace, joining bodies that had not touched each other in years, and is in no hurry to follow them. The viewer sees the backs of both men departing, before being reunited with them and two other friends at a table inside the house. The organization of these shots is sensitively distant, respectful of the intimacy between these men, which the camera does not abuse by zooming in. Rather than interposing itself in their discussion, it goes for the composition of ample and harmonic frames in the quiet atmosphere of the meeting. In the event's context, this distance effectively suggests intimacy.

As regards the general structure of the film, Bayer is presented as a witness of his time rather than a main character in the historical events taking place in Argentine public space. This may be a consequence of the lack of communication between intellectuals and the popular sectors throughout the military dictatorship (Sarlo, 1987, p. 32); but it is of course also caused by the difficulties Bayer has in reintegrating himself into public life upon his return from exile. Bayer is not involved in the mass movement; rather, he sees the people pass by from the peripheral distance of a balcony.⁹ The privileged observer's place assumed by the intellectual becomes particularly evident at the elections' climax. The historian chooses to receive the partial results of the vote counting at the quintessential location for molding public opinion, namely, the editorial office of *Clarín*, the newspaper for which Bayer had previously worked for fifteen years. There he receives first hand information through news cables. Echeverría's camera shows the historical context through the unquiet dynamics of the mass media, where everyone moves hurriedly, immersed in the coverage of this exceptional event. Such a scenario emphasizes Bayer's double exclusion, whereby his thoughtful gestures, immersed in memories and pondering, are at odds with the maelstrom surrounding him. Additionally, as his voiceover makes clear, the exiled were not even allowed to vote in these elections.

A necessarily distant look

In *Cuarentena*, Echeverría shows a return to national space through the detached look of an exile. The distance, in this context, is suggested through the difficulties that Bayer finds in reinserting himself into the society from which he was forced to exile himself a few years before. *Juan*, in turn, entails the penetration into the deepest horror of the last dictatorship from a different, inter-generational distance (when making the film, Esteban Buch was the same age as Juan Marcos Herman was when he was kidnapped). But beyond the time gap between Juan Marcos Herman's

disappearance and Buch's investigation – which generates only a small amount of distancing, given the evident empathy between Esteban Buch's and Juan Marcos Herman's story – the greatest separation in the film refers to a difference of power and knowledge regarding a common collective antagonist: namely, those in positions of responsibility during the last military dictatorship. In the case of *Cuarentena*, the *other* has an omnipresent power, evident in Bayer's discourse, for example, in his reflection about the horror experienced during the dictatorial government, which also pertains to the risks that returning to the national territory could represent for him. In *Juan*, on the other hand, the *other* assumes a corporeal and visible shape and confines itself to limited public spaces (such as offices, police stations, and military buildings), leaving marks and sequels in the whole social fabric. In this context, penetrating into these spaces – as Emilio Crenzel (2011, p. 52) indicates in referring to the inspections undertaken by the CONADEP – would imply 'encroaching on a specific territory and a jurisdiction normally not exposed to the public'.

In spite of the intervening years between the return of democracy and *Juan*'s actual production process, in these public spaces we see a direct reference to the authoritarianism characteristic of a military dictatorship. The characters in these arenas are used to holding powerful positions, authorizing and determining what can be said and shown. Echeverría opts out of subordinating his film to such reasoning by making use of a camera that is 'not authorized' (by the military officers), that is, one that does not ask for permission to start and continue filming a given scene. Not only does such action constitute a political stance but it is also important in terms of aesthetics. In *Juan*, Echeverría implements an inverse strategy in relation to that used in *Cuarentena*. Previously, the camera was highly respectful of the distances. In *Juan*, however, the camera makes every attempt to reduce distance and show the *other* as close as possible.

Moreover, the distance separating Buch from that *other* has less to do with a physical distance than an ideological one. According to Jean-Luis Comolli, whether friends or foes, the characters in a film share the scene and even the frame: from the moment they are filmed together, the distance separating friend from foe is more imaginary than real. This decision to show the enemy, Comolli says (2002, pp. 159–165), is supported by the need to show him in his full power, as a threat demanding to be taken seriously. Echeverría's film would seem to follow this premise, by displaying the military men, letting them speak, revealing through their gestures and discourse the impunity they still retain, which enables them to disregard their responsibility in the disappearances of political opponents during the last military dictatorship.

In this way, the ideological distance, as a narrative operation, increases as the film develops. The documentary's first focus is on Juan Marcos Herman's closest private circle, namely, his family, and later penetrates the collective perspective of public institutions. It starts with the testimony of Juan's father, who remembers in close up the look of his son when he was being taken away. Then, the film begins its exploration of the public sphere, following a path of interviews that will finally lead Buch to the city of Buenos Aires in search of those responsible for the crime.

One of the main discursive strategies employed in *Juan* to create longer or shorter distances between the subjects consists in marking a difference between the use of interviews and testimonies. As Gustavo Aprea explains, the greatest variance between these two techniques consists of the different role attributable to the interviewee and the witness. The interviewee is questioned on the basis of his knowledge of the matter

under scrutiny. In contrast, the witness justifies his presence pursuant to the transmission of an experience in which he took part as a protagonist or as a privileged observer: he is the owner of a will that could never be forced (Aprea, 2008). This difference notwithstanding, debates within memory studies have demonstrated the ‘expressive, ethical, and activist potential of audiovisual testimony to further human rights and transitional justice initiatives’ (Sarkar & Walker, 2010, p. 2). In the specific context of Argentina’s recent history, we can verify that testimonies have played a key role in condemning state terrorism. As Beatriz Sarlo holds (2007, p. 24), ‘no conviction would have been possible if it hadn’t been for those memory acts – evidenced in the testimonies of victims and witnesses’.

Bayer’s own story, works in *Cuarentena* as a first person testimony of exile. His experiences and reflections are narrated in the present and operate as indicators of the general changes that were occurring in the public sphere. The conversations that the historian has with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, as well as with their friends and family, further form part of a collective testimonial perspective in the film. In Echeverría’s second documentary, the place of testimony is, to a large extent, represented by Juan’s private circle, his friends, and relatives, with whom the film creates strong bonds.¹⁰ Juan’s friends and relatives do not need any formal introduction; they are treated rather as though we have always known them. In turn, far from providing support to the testimonies by adding information about their key subjects, interviews turn out to function as a space in which conflicts are developed and through which action further progresses. In contrast to testimonies, most interviews are conducted with public figures with whom the film establishes a distance; they are addressed as *others* with whom it is impossible to have an affinity. This ideological distance is continually emphasized in the film. In one key exchange, for example, the retired General Castelli illustrates this gap as he addresses Esteban Buch:

I don’t know how I see you at this very moment, if you are an inquisitor or what. . . . I don’t know who you are. Had I had a fluid contact with you before, had I known you over there [Bariloche], had I known something about you, but I don’t know who you are. Who says that you do not form part of Bariloche’s Human Rights Commission? Or that you are not a subversive?

In the case of interviews with military officials, the structure of the exchanges tends to be repeated: initially they are asked to introduce themselves formally, while still pictures are displayed on screen showing them as they perform their duties. This technique connects the present time of the interview with the present time of the event referred to in the interview: in this case, the disappearance of Juan Marcos Herman. Then, they are directly questioned about their awareness and responsibility in the Herman case; or, alternatively, ellipses are used to lead the narration directly to such a specific topic. In principle, the film shows neither an interest in shortening its distance from the interviewed persons nor in focusing on details about their careers (likely what motivated these characters to consent to the interview in the first place). As a result, the montage of the documentary is extremely strict: any discourse not directly related to the investigation of Juan Marcos Herman’s disappearance, or to the actions carried out by military officers during the military dictatorship is, in principle, set aside. The film’s unambiguous purpose motivates the interviewer to

resort to a diversity of strategies which he uses in order to shift the direction of the interview towards the Herman case. In certain instances this softens the edges of interviews: the inside content – that is, everything contained under the formal structure of the interview – is often left out. In contrast, much of the material outside of the interview – such as the preliminary actions, or the less formal conversations held while the interview was being prepared, or while the set was dismantled (generally not even filmed by the camera, or filmed and then discarded) – becomes the main component of the film. This resource deprives the interviewee of authority, because they can no longer decide when the interview starts and when it ends. In addition, it is precisely through these gaps and cracks that the structured formality of the interview escapes; that the interviewee's mind slips and leaks out.

The above may be observed in the interview with retired General Castelli, which is split into two parts. Both parts of the interview take place inside the General's private residence and explore his public responsibilities. The first shows his formal statements, where one hears his most structured discourse, a conversation that finds repetition and continuity in the various uniform statements made by the other questioned military officers (namely, the expressed total ignorance regarding Juan Marcos Herman's disappearance and repeated evasive actions taken to avoid discussing it). By contrast, the second part of the interview escapes the formal conventions governing it to reveal more information about Castelli's responsibility and behavior.¹¹ In this complex section, which lasts over ten minutes, the film's spectators witness a dialogue that goes beyond the scope of the formal interview. It starts with Castelli controlling the materials videotaped during a previous interview (the military officer is crouched down facing the video camera, watching the images and wearing headphones, while Esteban Buch stands looking at him, a few steps away). The film introduces pictures showing the officer along with some of his recent comments about the role played by 'subversion'. At this point, Castelli no longer looks at the camera but redirects his look at Esteban Buch, with whom he starts a more informal conversation, seemingly ignoring a camera that continues shooting. It is precisely in this poorly organized space where the officer's most imprudent statements are heard. This informal conversation – which extends far beyond expectations – becomes increasingly more anxious, until the tense atmosphere is stifling. Deprived of the technical nature that characterizes a formal interview, the last segment of this on-screen conversation shows Castelli and Buch standing outside the space initially prepared for the interview. The lighting is dim; shadows surround the figure of the retired General, accompanying him in his careless movements (reinforcing the shadowy atmosphere in the air). Castelli, who was nervous about the relentless repetition of the question related to the Herman case, paces around, abruptly stepping out of frame many times. The unexpected question triggers spontaneous reactions, generating unplanned actions that create a dramatic reality effect.

Closing a question

Just four years separate the filming of these two documentaries. Nevertheless, this short period makes it possible to perceive a series of political and social changes that had gradually occurred in Argentina; changes that define the transition to democracy not as a single act but as a complex, continuous process, over and above the advent of democratic elections. Pursuant to the theory outlined by Juan Carlos

Portantiero, the democratic transition process consisted of three instances: first, the ‘crisis of authoritarianism,’ followed by a second moment of ‘installation of democracy,’ and eventually the ‘consolidation’ of democracy. According to Portantiero (1987, pp. 262–263), the success of the third stage could not be reached until stable democratic regulations and definitions of state interests had actually been attained. Irrespective of such theoretical interventions, there was also a social imaginary that by then sustained the promise of justice in relation to crimes against humanity and state terrorism (Canelo, 2006, p. 86). Such a promise, which was ever present in the election campaign speeches of Raúl Alfonsín (the candidate eventually elected as Argentina’s President in 1983), determined the success or failure of the democratic system in the eyes of public opinion.

This expectation is present in Echeverría’s documentaries and is also evident in the treatment accorded by both films to the time axis, in particular to the future. Since *Cuarentena* is about one of the few moments in history in which the different social agents are aware of the fact that they are building the future, the distance between the present and the future tends to be shorter: the present already is the future. *Cuarentena* appears to account for the aforementioned temporal fusion and is thus chromatically organized from that standpoint. While the images of Bayer in Berlin are filmed in sepia, a shade typically used to express nostalgia, his experience in Argentina is introduced in full color. *Cuarentena*’s color code is a response to the social expectations set by the return to democracy. The film ends in the precinct of the National Congress, the democratic institution par excellence, channeling Bayer’s wishes: ‘I hope the people are no longer betrayed. I hope that an Argentinean never again has to depart to exile.’

Thus, if *Cuarentena* looks ahead, opening a series of unanswered questions about the near future, in *Juan* we find the closing of such a set of expectations. Shot fully in black and white, *Juan* neither deploys a coded chromatic change nor does it express hopes for the time to come. It is as if the expectations of finding and sentencing the people responsible for the murder of Juan Marcos Herman have been left behind in the past. Therefore, public concern about convicting those guilty of crimes against humanity ends up as a private, albeit painful, learning experience. The sense of impotence, made manifest by Esteban Buch’s voiceover, makes it possible to question a premature closure to this story. In Buch’s words:

The Judiciary did not manage to find any of the military officers that operated in my city during 1977. I have found them all. What is left for me to say? Should I feel the anger of impotence? Should I no longer believe in Justice? I think: isn’t all of this a bad predictor of future acts of violence? My city goes on living its usual life; it has abandoned its disappeared son. It doesn’t care if justice has been served or not. It doesn’t care that Juan’s murderers cohabit with us. My city has erased its memory. It holds no fear that the same may happen to its next sons. Why does it do so? Is it because of fear? Is it because of superficiality? Is it because of indifference? What will the new generations think when they become aware of this? Will they see us as accessories of the crime? Won’t Juan’s blood stain my city’s idyllic landscape forever?

Toward the end of the documentary, the immediate present bursts into the film, before eventually giving way to a series of documents. These include fragments of newscasts, President Raúl Alfonsín’s speeches, photographs of debates over the Full Stop Law, and of a military uprising in opposition to the legal proceedings against perpetrators of human rights violations. At this point, Echeverría’s documentary’s

central conflict overlaps with issues inherent to the democratic transition process. Among these is the problem of how an emerging democratic system can ensure that justice be done while its embryonic institutions are consolidating.¹²

Conclusion

In 1986 the Full Stop Law froze all judicial processes against those criminally charged with the crime of forced disappearance during the military dictatorship. At the end of *Juan*, the screen fades to black and the following legend is projected: 'On 22 February 1987, as a result of the enactment of the Full Stop Law, the last chance to submit Juan's murderers to trial was lost.' The film's ending is not only conclusive in its narrative development but it also expresses the purported impossibility of a project of political justice. As the analysis throughout this essay has shown, the study of Echeverría's documentary films makes it possible to reflect upon such tensions from within the Argentine process of transition to democracy. Insofar as *Cuarentena* demonstrates the restructuring of public and political life in post-dictatorship Argentina, it also offers a hopeful view of the future while not avoiding a consideration of the difficulties the new democratic system will find to articulate issues that were excluded by the latest military dictatorship. In the film, such exclusion is exemplified by its central character, the returning exiled intellectual, particularly in terms of the difficulties he will find upon trying to participate meaningfully in the Argentine public sphere. In turn, *Juan* represents a journey that begins from the private experience of a disappeared person and his family (a story that could be extrapolated to 30,000 other cases in Argentina) and turns into a quest for the public resolution of this political crime. This film's story reveals the manner in which, behind the great rupture implied by the return to democracy in 1983, a political continuity with the dictatorial regime has prevailed in Argentina. This continuity becomes evident in the authoritarianism still being reproduced within public institutions as well as in the pressure that sectors of the army are able to exercise to halt legal processes against those guilty of committing crimes against humanity during the military regime.

These first two feature-length documentary films by Echeverría depict key phases in post-dictatorial Argentine history: first, the moment inaugurating the period of transition to democracy, and, secondly, the moment that shatters the heightened expectations ushered in by this transition. While both films conclude in the same physical place, the National Congress, they differ in the symbolic value attributed to this institution. While for the former the Congress encompasses the promise of a democratic future, the latter simply concludes the revision of the recent past: the traumas of Argentine society have been denied as if they had never happened.

As we have seen, these two films by Echeverría are extremely engaged with the period in which they were made, and create a clear link to the transitional process to democracy in Argentina. In this sense, they are valuable as historical records of their time which mark distinct moments in the debate of the transition to democracy. Different studies concerning memory (Jelin, 2002; Longoni & Bruzzone, 2008; Masiello, 2001; Ros, 2012) have shown that the last dictatorship has left an indelible mark in subsequent cultural production. The recently cited works describe part of the coming process of struggles and interventions in the public space, where human rights groups, such as the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and

later the H.I.J.O.S. (sons and daughters of the disappeared), would play a leading role. These groups would work to maintain human rights as a lead topic within the public sphere and to continue demanding justice for crimes against humanity committed during the dictatorship.

The state of the search for justice and punishment in which Argentina found itself in 1987 – the year in which Echeverría finished his second feature – would find a new definition around fifteen years later. In 2003, then president Néstor Kirchner annulled the ‘Impunity Laws’ (the Full Stop and Due Obedience Laws promulgated during the Alfonsín government and the pardons decreed during Carlos Menem’s administration), finally allowing those guilty of crimes against humanity during the 1970s to be tried.¹³ Through these actions, Argentine society would ultimately confront its recent past, publicly condemning these crimes that impunity had kept silent.

Notes

1. There is no international English title; the Spanish title translates as ‘Quarantined: Exile and Return.’
2. I will refer to this film as *Cuarentena* throughout the remainder of the essay.
3. There is no international English title; the Spanish title translates as ‘Juan, as if Nothing Had Happened.’ The title references statements concerning the disappeared, made by then president Raúl Alfonsín, where he promised “that the government would not act ‘as though nothing had happened’” (Crenzel, 2011, p. 36).
4. I will refer to this film as *Juan* throughout the remainder of the essay.
5. The Full Stop Law (*Ley de Punto Final*), enacted in Argentina in 1986, put an end to all trials against those responsible for the crimes of illegal detention, torture and assassination that were committed during the latest dictatorship. The Due Obedience Law, enacted the following year, dictated that it must be assumed, without admitting proof to the contrary, that the acts committed by members of the armed forces were not punishable due to the fact that they had acted out of due obedience. For more on the Due Obedience Law and the Full Stop Law, see Gargarella, Murillo, and Pecheny (2010).
6. Other films, such as *Only Emptiness Remains* ([*Todo es ausencia*] Rodolfo Kuhn, 1984, Spain/Argentina) and *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo* ([*Las madres de Plaza de Mayo*] Susana Blaustein & Portillo, 1985, USA) make reference to the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo’s fight to trace the whereabouts of their missing children during the dictatorship.
7. The comparison between Nazi Germany and the Argentine dictatorship probably functioned as an echo of the public debate in Germany that was simultaneously occurring around *Historiker Streit*. This debate introduced the idea that in principle the Holocaust could be compared with other genocides. For more details on this topic, see Jarausch (1988) and Nolan (1988).
8. The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo is a social movement that emerged during the latest military dictatorship for the purpose of finding alive missing political detainees, and in order to find those responsible for the crimes against humanity and bringing them to justice.
9. The exception to this appreciation appears when Bayer accompanies the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo’s fight in one of their resistance marches. There, the intellectual is actively involved in the efforts of the people united under the motto ‘to find alive all missing detainees’.
10. Another strong testimony included in the film is that of Miguel Ángel D’Agostino, who would presumably have shared a prison cell with Juan at the concentration camp known as *El Atlético* in Buenos Aires.
11. The change in the clothes of the interviewed reflects a time ellipsis between one part of the interview and the other.
12. For further information on Echeverría’s films, see the online catalogue produced by the Argentinean ONG Memoria abierta, which lists films that deal with the latest military dictatorship: <http://www.memoriaabierta.org.ar/ladictaduraenelcine/>

13. These trials have resulted in the sentencing of at least 250 people (CELS, 2012) and some recent sentences demonstrate that civilians and church officials involved with the dictatorship are beginning to be held accountable as well ('Derechos humanos', 2012).

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