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Remembering the other, repositioning oneself. The right to a biography and autocommunication in perpetrator and collaborator descendant documentaries

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(Article begins on next page)

## **Remembering the other, repositioning oneself**

### **The right to a biography and autocommunication in perpetrator and collaborator descendant documentaries**

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#### **Abstract**

Can the perpetrator or the collaborator “speak”? How, and for whom? Do they have a “right to biography” (Lotman [1984] 1985) and, if so, what are the terms of this right? Who can speak for them? In short, what does it mean to work through their lives and the crimes they committed for those who decide to tell their stories? The main goal of this paper is to answer these questions using a particular kind of documentary directed by those who, in a certain moment of their lives, have discovered that a member of their families was a perpetrator or a collaborator relating to a dictatorship. Using Lotman’s theory of culture and memory, we discuss the positionalities of those who “wrote” these documentaries, located constantly between the individual and the collective semiosphere. Taking into account two case studies – *El pacto de Adriana* directed by Lissette Orozco (Chile, 2017) and *L’occhio di vetro* directed by Duccio Charini (Italy, 2020) – we look at the mechanisms of investigation and recollection that they use and “show”, in order to elucidate family secrets within the broader contexts of the collective traumas of Chile’s and Italy’s post-conflict societies.

**Keywords:** the right to a biography; autocommunication; documentaries; perpetrators and collaborators; Juri M. Lotman.

#### **Introduction**

Within the vast and stratified debate on the collective representations of trauma and its subjects in post-conflict societies, the so-called “victim paradigm” (Giglioli 2014) – which foregrounds the victim as the only legitimised actor who can speak the “truth” of the past – is undergoing a profound transformation. During the last decade, scholars, artists, curators and activists have sought to investigate and promote new understanding not only of those who suffered acts of violence, but also of those who, directly or indirectly, committed them, thus inserting the actorial and thematic roles of the perpetrator and collaborator into the semiotics of trauma.

In the interdisciplinary literature concerned with the study of the past, the question of perpetration is becoming increasingly central to debates on the dynamics of representation and management of difficult<sup>1</sup> legacies (see, for example, Knittel and Goldberg 2020). Perpetrators have thus been studied from different perspectives: from questions of motivation and the dynamics of their actions (Williams and Buckley-Zistel 2018; Williams 2021) to their representation in different media (Bielby and Murer 2018; Demaria and Violi 2020; Morag 2020; McGlothlin 2021); from their affirmation (or denials) of guilt on trial (Arendt 1963; Osiel 1997; Krulisova 2020; Panico and Violi 2021) to how the

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, whenever we use the adjective “difficult” to characterise the pasts of post-conflict societies, we do so with reference to often competing national memories in that society, which are often not easily manageable, and which trigger a conflictual politics of memory and identity. As in our case, this politics regards not only the victims, but also the legacy of the perpetrators. See Vinitzky-Seroussi (2002) and Macdonald (2009) for the first scholarship to have interrogated the concept of “difficult” pasts and “difficult” heritage.

memories of their crimes have (or have not) been transmitted to second and third generations (Rosenthal 2010; Frosh 2019).

Much of this research focuses specifically on the idea that a coherent understanding of the dynamics of traumatic events and their textualizations must transcend the binary narrative dichotomy of “good and evil”, “victims and perpetrators”, by complicating the phenomenon of the agency of violence and the agency of the subjects involved. To adopt this position means to conceive the perpetrator not merely as the instigator or executor of violent actions, as the actant antagonist, but in a more complex role that can be shaped by contextual and textual variables, by situational or dispositional elements. In view of these premises, and for the sake of the argument that follows here, it is also necessary to introduce the figure of the collaborator (also conceivable as an “implicated subject” on a synchronic level, to echo Michael Rothberg’s fundamental work on the topic, 2019). S/he is a subject who did not perpetrate violent action directly but, through ideological and political complicity, helped to increase or maintain the power of those who did.

This allows us to distinguish between the degrees of responsibility of those who contribute to an act of violence, despite not having an active role as the “classical” perpetrator.

This clarification serves the narrative, historical and national specificities of the cases we take into consideration below: in the case of the Chilean documentary *El pacto de Adriana* (Lisette Orozco, 2017) the narration revolves around the life of a person who is directly involved in acts of violence. In the Italian documentary *L’occhio di vetro* (Duccio Chiarini, 2020), the person on at the centre of the film’s “investigation” was instead a collaborator, with indirect responsibility.

Working from within these theoretical perspectives, our aim in this article is to study how the perpetrator and the collaborator can be granted a (mediated) voice from within the family; how relatives can oblige or permit him/her to speak, and in what way. The case studies of our discussion are the two aforementioned documentary films directed by individuals with family links to these subjectivities: Lisette Orozco’s *El pacto de Adriana* (Adriana’s Pact) and Duccio Chiarini’s *L’occhio di vetro* (The Glass Eye). Through these examples, we ask: who writes the stories of these perpetrators and collaborators’ lives (Lotman 1985)? When such figures are revealed as family members, how do later generations textualise their kinship ties and (re-)write the family’s troubled past? How can we define the role of the descendant as that of the “biographer”, with a positionality that is always situated between the personal and the collective semiosphere?

We analyse how family members come to terms with – or indeed refute – this family bond by foregrounding how different subjectivities involved, and their specific roles, are redefined and recoded within the text itself as a form of autocommunication (Lotman 1990). Following Lotman’s theory, this is understood here as a specific communicative act that a subject (or a culture) enacts with him/her/itself, contributing to the modification and resemantisation of the overall information about the same subject. As Lotman writes: “In the ‘I-I’ system, the bearer of the information remains the same, but the message is reformulated and acquires new meaning during the communication process. This is the result of introducing a supplementary, second, code; the original message is recoded into elements of its structure and thereby acquires features of a *new* message” (Lotman 1990, 22). As we demonstrate, through an analysis of the documentaries, autocommunication also affects the features of the subjects who are speaking directly: “the addresser inwardly reconstructs his/her essence, since the essence of a personality may be thought of as an individual set of socially significant codes, and this set changes during the act of communication” (ibidem).

Our case studies belong to the little examined genre of the “post-perpetrator generation documentary film” (Moral et al. 2020), or, in our case, perpetrator/collaborator descendant documentaries: non-

fiction films about the responsibility and implication of people involved in crimes against humanity, genocides or dictatorships, made by their children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. Examining *El pacto de Adriana* and *L'occhio di vetro*, we analyse the dynamics of autocommunication and self-determination of those who “wrote” the documentaries and how they “use” their family stories, re-assembling private objects and dialogues within the films in order to build or re-build “family archives”. As we seek to illustrate, these narratives interestingly tread the line between intimate, personal stories and often contested, public histories.

In the first section, we reflect on the visual and cultural potential of the documentary in memory narration, before further contextualising the corpus. In the second, we turn to Lotman’s theory, connecting his notion of the right to a biography to the context of inter-generational memory transmission. By concentrating on the role of second, third, fourth generation subjects and their semiotic positionality and personality – stretching from the personal to the collective, and vice versa – we investigate how these generations could be intended as “writers” of troubling biographies, and how, from this perspective, they become translators with a complex positionality (cf. Sedda 2003, Rothberg 2019). In the third and fourth sections, examining first the Chilean case and then the Italian one, we reflect on how these texts can be understood as tools for familial and personal autocommunication and a reconstruction of the past that makes visible what we could call a process of “recollection”. This refers to a continuous abductive reasoning, balancing what is memorised – since it is clearly textualised and attested by all the collected “proof” – and what instead is narcotised, buried in family silences and reticence and which must, therefore, undergo interpretative redefinition.

### **Documentary and autocommunication**

Among all the media, film has a particularly interesting role in the creation of collective memories (Elsaesser 2014; Hirsh 2004) – and, at times, even in forging prosthetic ones (Landsberg 2004). As Wulf Kansteiner affirms, while films and television are too structurally unsuitable to reproduce academic history, they “offer superb platforms for the invention of social memory” (Kansteiner 2018, 133). Film scholars, critics and creators have thus devoted much attention and energy to the theories and practices of how the medium can record and (re-)write reality, and therein narratives of history and of memory<sup>2</sup> (Kaes 1989).

As Susannah Radstone has illustrated, tracing out the mutual influences of cinema and memory enables the possibility to “explore, map and radically critique” (2010, 326) the boundaries of the private and the public, the personal and the social. This reasoning can be applied to our understanding of the semiosphere’s role in memory narratives, and specifically the relationship dynamics between what lies inside or outside of it, or within its periphery (we elaborate this point more fully below). Radstone continues,

Always at stake in discussion of the cinema’s relation to memory is the question of memory’s transindividuality: the social and the cultural, as well as the individual and personal aspects of memory, for cinema – along with television and digital print media – has been central to the development of the concepts of cultural, social, and public memory (2010, 326).

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<sup>2</sup> Given the extensiveness of these discourses, there is little need – nor space – to retrace these debates here; suffice it to recall the close if not entirely indexical relationship between the modern (and postmodern) technologies of representation – photography, cinema, sound recording – and the imagined object, as well as their potential to toy with the viewer/listener’s perception of time, space, representation (Doane 2002, see also Kilbourn 2010).

Indeed, filmmaking in general functions as one mode of a culture's autocommunication, in the way that it produces individual narratives, making them collective through distribution and consumption. In some cases – “home-made” documentaries, films that use found footage, etc. – this is all the more evident: the public dissemination of this kind of material forges an explicit connection between what Radstone (2005; 2010) calls the “inside” – the family, the individual, personal experience – and the “outside” – society, history, the public semiosphere.

Of course, such texts can have different effects, confirming or challenging the representation of history as a collective memory. The case studies considered here stand out as particularly captivating instances in this regard: they seek to change the boundaries of the “us” that they represent and scrutinise, the “our” of the narrated biography, thus re-coding their information and nourishing the “dialectics of memory” (Lotman [1985] 2019: 133) on which their present is founded. Therefore, autocommunication in post-perpetrator documentaries could be understood as a particular form of testimony and memory construction between the individual and the collective, the family and the nation, but also – especially in films dealing with transgenerational memory in ambivalent post-conflict societies – between processes of inevitable, unguided forgetfulness and cases of imposed silence and oblivion (cf. Assmann 2019).

The non-fiction film presents an implicit pact, promising to provide fundamental evidence of “reality” or, if not, at least to offer alternative ways of seeing it. Beginning with this premise, the post-perpetrator documentary broadly realises what Carnet describes in relation to two Chilean post-dictatorship films: “these testimonies are often about traumatic historical periods suffered in the past by the community concerned, addressed by documentary film ‘in ways more forceful and poignant than are possible in other forms of media’” (Carnet 2019: 126, also citing Sorensen 2008: 344). However, when speaking of documentaries, it is nonetheless important to stress that what is at play is not the overly simplistic question of whether an image is honest or not, mimetic or not, but rather *how* it produces effects that enable various forms of agency in relation to the historical or social event that it seeks to re-present (Bruzzi 2006; 2020). The kind of visibility produced by documentary consists not only of the field explored by the gaze (the “as far as I can see” in its frame) but also the network of knowledge, the examination and the selection of the “screen images” that organise its vision (Breschand 2002).

Hence, between unrepresentability and representation, there is a path that relieves the image from the burden of authenticity, revealing the ways in which its truth is obtained, produced, used and understood. In precisely these terms, we propose the documentary as a form of autocommunication, therefore seeking to go beyond the naive idea of the document as an essential piece of evidence built on an idea of universal (e.g., legal, religious) truth (cf. Schönle 2006).

The two examples we examine here come from a contemporary documentary sub-genre, characterised by a *self- and meta-reflexive style*, which abandons the ideal of voyeuristic objectivity and embraces subjective representations that filter and at the same time re-distribute the knowledge of a particular collective memory. Not only does this type of documentary expose the relationship between cinema and reality, it also reflects on and elucidates the epistemological and aesthetic theses that are at the basis of its production (Nichols 1991, 2016; Demaria, 2012).

*El pacto de Adriana* focuses on the legacy of the Chilean military dictatorship. Directed by Lissette Orozco, who also appears in the film, it focuses on the involvement of her aunt Adriana (affectionately, *tía* Chany) in Pinochet's secret police, the DINA (*Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional*). Structured as an investigative film (Lazzara 2022), Orozco interrogates her aunt – who has emigrated to Australia, though other Chilean expats there request her extradition back to Chile –

on Skype video calls (which we see in the film). In this way it retraces the difficult transition of Chile after the dictatorship, tying it to the responsibility of her family – that Orozco herself has inherited – in the crimes committed.

*L'occhio di vetro*, on the other hand, deals with the transmission of the Fascist past in Italy. At the centre of the film is the director Duccio Chiarini, who, after the death of his beloved grandmother Liliana, begins his own investigation. In this case, he tries to unveil the reasons for his family's interest and involvement in Fascism, and for the repression of this history in subsequent generations. Searching through documents for information connected to the figure of his great-grandfather, Giuseppe Razzini and his children (including Liliana), the director inserts his private memory into a broader narration of the silenced memory of Mussolini's dictatorship.

Even though they belong to two different national contexts (Chile and Italy), and deal with different histories and collective traumas (the fascist and the military dictatorships), these films have many common aesthetic and narrative features. Most importantly, they are both directed by people who discovered at a certain moment in their life that a family member was involved in a dictatorship as a follower or active collaborator. Both documentaries propose a narrativization of the perpetrator or the collaborator as a family member and contribute to the development of the self of the “biographer”, the director, through different marks of enunciation and through specific rhetoric choices. This includes the use of personal childhood photographs, home movies, interviews, and the reproduction of historical documents, found footage and archival images. The directors realise a “memorial postproduction” of the documents through the montage of different kinds of private and public materials, connecting texts and creating a rhizomatic memory path that resemanticises the past with respect to how it was transmitted within the family. In these kinds of texts, montage is not the sum of two shots, instead their fusion creates a tentative and imaginative process of investigation as well as a new syntagmatic chain of events, a kind of alternative “montage” that gives new meaning to what had been hidden.

### **The positionality of the biographer of a perpetrator or collaborator**

In *Pravo na biografiju*,<sup>3</sup> Lotman considers the different social norms that define which subjects are considered worthy of being inscribed in the collective memory of a group and which, following the norms of a power system, are destined to be part of an “impersonal collective” that goes *without a biography*. Examining the lives of saints such as Theodosius of Kiev and Francis of Assisi, he discusses the paradigms and the social functions that defined these lives as “exceptional”, especially on the basis of their “unusualness” and exceptionality in relation to collective standards and ordinariness. The act of granting a biography is assumed, by Lotman, to be one of the main cultural modelling systems (Levchenko 2022, 260) that demonstrates how, within a specific community, the habitus and social norms are regulated (Violi 2020, 257), conceding narrative existence to certain characters with the aim of structuring collective memory codes. Indeed, biographies that are deemed “narratable” for any reason, regardless of their qualitative value – i.e. whether they are judged positively or negatively – compose the pantheon of recognizable and “existing” characters in a given culture that “uses” these stories as emblems and references (Lotman 1985, 182).

In discussing this paradigm, the Russian semiotician traces the intriguing profile of a third individual: the biographer. S/he always occupies a liminal position between those who have a biography and

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<sup>3</sup> First published in 1984. On this occasion, we refer to the Italian translation, reproduced in *La semiosfera* (1985).

those who do not, as the one who writes it. For this reason, this figure is particularly interesting for our reasoning.

If at first the function of the biographer is simply configured as a mediator and an accessory, “as the semiotic situation becomes more complicated”, writes Lotman (1985, 187), they assume a new position in the hierarchy of the narration. They are no longer a simple information carrier, an aseptic channel of transmission without the ability to filter, invent or alter the story. On the contrary, they are recognised as possessing creative and inventive capacities shaped by their tastes and interests. The acknowledgement of the biographer’s active role removes them from a condition of anonymity and enables them to acquire the right to their own biography; this, however, is not expressed in the production of a new text but in the act of “participating” in the history of another person’s life. In this sense, the biographer’s right to biography is obtained in relation to the position they hold: they write about another person, but do so according to their own inclinations and narrative will.

To write someone else’s story means to install a subjectivity and a point of view, it moreover also corresponds to a hermeneutic action that relays the life of the narrated person and the filters adopted by those who take charge of it. In the more specific context of the generational transmission of memory, and in particular in that of familial/social trauma at a textual level, the figure of the biographer takes on an even more salient configuration.

This is due to the diachronic implication (Rothberg 2019) of these subjects, as they construct an “other” who is not a stranger but a family member. In this scenario, the subject occupies a crucial position in the story, because what is externalised also affects their own character and personal representation. In those cases, in which the biography narrates the crimes of a perpetrator or collaborator in the family – especially if that narrative is conceived as a process of investigation that seeks to shed light on some traumatic events of the past, as in our case studies – it inevitably reshapes the meanings and emotions attributed to the family group.

The biographer can therefore provide the perpetrator or collaborator with “a voice”, but, at the same time, they remain conditioned by that new narration because simultaneously it constitutes a rewriting of themselves. In these textualizations, it is crucial to consider how “the writer” is emotionally involved, regardless of whether they accept or reject the family version of the past in their textualizations. The narrative that is proposed is “affected” both from a cognitive point of view (what can be said, what must be said) and from an emotional one. The author deals not only with his/her “haunting legacies” (Schwab 2010) (which of course could be interesting, but less relevant to a broader reflection in a semiotics of cultural memory) but also with the forgetting/remembering dynamics that are active in his/her nation. In this sense, the biographer is stuck between “personal response and social responsibility” (Moral et al. 2020, 3). This is clear, for example, in one of the first sentences that Chiarini speaks in voice-over in *L’occhio di vetro*:

I lived in a world of good partisans and bad fascists, but unlike my more fortunate friends, I had fascist grandparents. It was perhaps to compensate for the stain I felt in my roots that I started to provoke violent political disputes in my family, which I tried to drag my grandmother into. But she kept silent, leaving me alone to study that period, which had become an obsession.

Since these are private memories that stand out from the backdrop of a collective trauma, the subject who *writes* is constantly situated between the family and the national collective, with fluctuating affiliations to each. This is evident in the frictions between the familial semiosphere, in which the

perpetrator/collaborator and their relatives are a united “us”, and the public semiosphere, in which the later generations define themselves as significantly different to their relatives. In the case studies considered here, the self-qualification of the later generations as “anti-Pinochet” or “anti-fascist” challenges their “natural” blood bonds with the aim of working through a “phantom pain” (McGlothlin 2006, 5, in Moral et al. 2020, 6) and making visible what is not said, what remains in latency. The directors of the documentaries attempt to (re-)textualise a traumatic past, highlighting its traumatic consequences and, simultaneously, foregrounding and questioning their own condition as indirect “heirs” of it.

The semiotic work of granting the right to a biography to a perpetrator/collaborator, of remembering his/her experience from a micro and macro perspective (from a point of view that is connected to the family group but also to the contemporary history of Chile and Italy) is intertwined with the right claimed – also visually – by the director “to present him/herself as the author of the text” (Lotman 1985, 188). Their authorship is made evident not only in aesthetic choices, but also in the staging of the body in different ways: his/her physical presence on camera while conducting interviews, the use of his/her childhood photographs. This pervasive “intrusion” into family history is expressed not only in the documentaries but also in the paratexts linked to the them. Two publicity posters of the films (Figure 1 and Figure 2) present the same visual expedient: the figure of the author, represented in black as a silhouette, is placed in front of a monochrome photograph of the family member.



Figure 1 and figure 2: the two posters of the documentaries

In Orozco’s case, the director’s aunt is portrayed as she greets the photographer during a military demonstration, with officials of the Pinochet regime, in military garb, present next to her; in Chiarini’s case, the photograph depicts his great-grandfather Giuseppe in what appears to be an official photo: portrayed in profile, hinting at a smile and wearing military clothing. These images are emblematic of the intergenerational logics that relatives implement through artistic texts: they “face” the representation of their family members, positioning themselves as a part of them, albeit highlighting



a difference through chromatic codes. Through the use of frontal and profile positions as symbolic forms (cf. Schapiro 1973), the dynamics of the traumatic discovery of the implications of their relatives take on a specific expressive form. In Chiarini's case, the director looks frontally at the picture that stands *for* his past, precisely because, from the very first sequence of the documentary, he makes it explicit that his whole endeavour is to investigate, and "face", his family's fascist history. In other words, this past is not something he discovers as the text proceeds: he "confronts" it immediately, from the very start of the story he decided to tell. In Orozco's text, on the other hand, the shadow of the director is in profile, as if coming from an extra-textual zone, precisely because the family secret is unveiled as the documentary – which took almost nine years to shoot – is written, re-written, and changed, as Lissette's own past is re-investigated – or in the case of the viewer, as the film is watched.

We are presented a frame within a frame, that stands for the isomorphic relationship between the familial and social. The body of Orozco and Chiarini, represented as a shadow *on* the past, is a visible sign of the revindication of authoritativeness and competence as an author. It is the signature of their presence in the narration, but also it is the evidence that they intend their documentaries as self-portraits, as journeys of self-discovery and a redefinition (post-facto) of their ancestors' posterity (Lorusso 2020).

### **The biographer as investigator in *El pacto de Adriana***

Following Lotman's understanding of culture as a "very complex polyglot text which is isofunctional and isomorphic to individual intellect" (Semenenko 2012, 86), the texts that deal with biography are even more challenging because they connect the individual experience of the person with more complex political and social issues (cf. Levchenko 2022, 263). In our case studies, the post-conflict context also makes the invoked political issues particularly dense and obscure.

The first of these, *El pacto de Adriana*, is tied to the context of the post-dictatorship transition in Chile. Following the end of Pinochet's control, which lasted from 1973 to 1990, Chilean society has become rooted in a mode of reconciliation that is essentially founded on the impunity of the dictatorship's perpetrators (Canet 2019). Most notably, perpetrators were not only given immunity, but also maintained the privilege of remaining silent and never confessing, united in a "pact" that Orozco's documentary partly reveals.

If we think of conflicts as moments of explosion (Lotman 2009) that rearrange pre-existing systems of socio-cultural norms and control, not only in the first moments of violence but also, subsequently, when they encounter modes of historicization linked closely to unifying discourses of national identity (Demaria 2020), contemporary Chile is a very peculiar case of a failed re-arrangement.

Indeed, many citizens believed – and still believe today – that Chile avoided a civil war and a communist dictatorship thanks to the protection of the country's military, therefore continuing to impose a "binary cultural system" that informed the regime and hindering a polyglot dialectics of memory (Lotman [1985] 2019). This continued worldview therefore embodies the country's lack of reconciliation, negating a richer understanding of its history built on a multitude of perspectives and versions, all of which are neutralised in these self-excluding oppositions.

Nevertheless, at a grass-roots level Chilean culture has continued to produce a more nuanced or alternative memory narrative, emerging in memory sites, literature, performance, music, and documentary cinema. For scholars including, for example, Arenillas and Lazzara (2016), these alternatives have more effectively, unwaveringly, and vigorously rejected the binary, reductionist and restorative narrative of the democratic State's memory discourse. This has culminated, in recent

years, in a “boom” of non-fiction films made by and/or about the subsequent generations with family ties to perpetrators in the dictatorship (cf. Canet 2019; 2020). These films seek to further nuance and complicate this vision of history, scrutinising forgetting, guilt and shame as cultural emotions, questioning the cultural construction of an “enemy” and challenging family secrets through art (Kuhn 2002).

Towards the beginning of *El pacto de Adriana*, the director speaks a sentence, through a voice-over on a black screen, that encapsulates the essence of the investigative journey she is carrying out: “Every family has at least one secret. Mine is not the exception”. The use of the black screen is emblematic if we take into account the fact that, from a semiotic point of view, a secret can be thought of as a “reality that does not appear” (Volli 2020: 20). Looking at the “secret” from the perspective of veridiction theory (Greimas and Courtés 1979, Bertrand 2000, Volli 2020), we can see how it is closely linked to an (albeit interrupted) chain of communication. The subject receiving the secret must not disseminate the information to another recipient subject. To achieve this, s/he must not communicate; in other words, s/he must use silence or misdirection as rhetorical instruments to preserve the unmentionability of the secret’s content. Orozco’s text is antagonistic to secrecy, and precisely in the terms just described, since the distinguishing isotopy of the documentary is the activation of communication. Despite the reticence and lies of the family and her aunt’s constant denial, the director continually interrogates both human and non-human actors. Becoming the protagonist of a process of investigation, she *communicates* with her aunt, her family, journalists and activists. In the film, the mixing and intertwining of the director’s and of Adriana’s pasts and presents, along with those of the nation, is rendered with a clever montage of found footage, family videos and photographs, along with new shots of, for example, a pro-Pinochet demonstration in Santiago in 2012 or a commemoration of those who Pinochet tortured at the *Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos*.

Throughout the documentary, Orozco tries to break the wall of silence with knowledge, studying newspaper articles and pictures, official documents of the dictatorship and, even more interestingly, her own photographs from when she was a child. In order to allow the secret to be betrayed, thus eventually spoken and expressed, she interrogates both official and personal archives, staging – through the montage of the film – the power of those archives as a source for and of memory. This happens when she begins to doubt the veracity of the information her aunt keeps on giving her during their numerous videocalls on Skype:

I started to investigate, I looked for trustworthy people that had knowledge about these court cases. La DINA was led by Manuel Contreras, Augusto Pinochet’s right hand. It was the main tool for political repression in Chile, committing brutal human rights violations. I feel that in order to know her, I have to enter her worlds.

The investigation of the director challenges the autocommunication of tía Chany, whose self-presentations reflects that of many other perpetrators: the content of her communications is limited and one-sided: throughout most of the film it consists of her constant denial of any wrongdoing and a perturbing absence of visible shame. This is slowly put into perspective by the whole text, which presents further forms of autocommunication of the family and of the nation. This cognitive, emotional, and visual perspective is literally directed by Orozco. As she slowly assumes the position of a subject-investigator, she discovers that she also has become an antagonist that starts to see – and

make us see – Adriana’s “pact” of silence, which, in turn, sheds new light on the past of the nation and of her entire family.

At the beginning of the film, the director’s abduction process clashes with her family’s established narrative, one that Elisabeth Roudinesco would call an “authoritarian” family – albeit a matrilinear one – whose members support Adriana’s supposed innocence precisely because she is part of a clan that defends its unity and boundaries, no matter what. As the film progresses, the family is obliged to face Orozco’s discoveries and reveal itself as a “mutilated family [...], made up of private wounds, silent violence, [and] repressed memories” (Roudinesco 2004, 21, cf. Canet 2019, 127). Orozco can only see this mutilated family in relation to her mutilated country and society.

One scene addresses this combination of family and nation, of the “inside and outside” (of family, community, party, nation) explicitly: the director, increasingly suspicious that her aunt was indeed responsible for the torture and murder of regime opponents, starts calling Adriana’s former female colleagues and DINA members on the phone, asking for information about their own past and that of her *tía*. Via a voice over, the viewer listens to the director’s unsuccessful attempts to interview these other women, as they refuse to talk and are extremely vague and reticent. At the same time, the screen portrays a montage that alternates between pictures of Orozco’s childhood (figure 3) and “happy”, black and white photos of the women with whom she is trying to talk, in which they are depicted happily with one another or with other exponents of the Pinochet’s regime (figure 4).



Figure 3 and figure 4: stills from *El pacto de Adriana*

These sequences show the overall mechanism of memory reconstruction that does not affect only the biography of the perpetrator, but also that of the biographer, who is involved in a redefinition of her positionality as a family member, and a politically engaged Chilean woman of her “own” time. By “speaking out the other” (Schwab 2010), Orozco transforms the past into a process in the making, rejecting and resemanticising her legacy, “betraying” family loyalty through an artistic device. She therefore inhabits a liminal boundary between family and society, hoping to resolve the “memory ignorance” of both, which corresponds to the general cognitive and emotional incapacity to come to terms with the Chilean traumatic past.

### **The biographer as recollector in *L’occhio di vetro***

In memory processes, at individual and collective levels, there is always a selection of information, differentiating between what is considered useful or “marked as nonessential” (Lotman and Uspensky 1978: 216) for a culture. Something is put in latency, left to gather dust in the periphery or even forgotten, in an extra-semiotic space, outside the boundaries of the semiosphere where no semiosis is possible. In the context of traumatic family memories, the exploration on this filtering mechanism can say something more on the ways of constructing one’s own image as a social group (cf.

Halbwachs 1925; Erll 2011) by eliminating specific fragments of the past that may threaten internal stability of the family semiosphere.

As Umberto Eco (2014) has shown, however, even the most hidden information can be brought back to the centre of a group agenda. A subject that is “specialised” through the redistribution of information can thaw the frozen texts which, because of shame, suffering, fear or ignorance, have been made dormant by the family. When it comes to intergenerational reflections on implication, this specialization does not refer to some historical or scientific competence, rather it is connected to a need – perhaps even an emotional one – to find answers by “shuffling” one’s own family history.

This redistributive capacity and necessity of the “generation after” is quite evident in the documentary by Chiarini, where it is proposed in a partially different way to Orozco’s film. *L’occhio di vetro* proposes a reflection on a different kind of responsibility, and most importantly the collaborator is not alive anymore. Chiarini attempts to trace the genealogy of the events that linked Fascism to his family from the early years of Benito Mussolini’s dictatorship, using not the voice of the person directly involved, his great-grandfather Giuseppe, but a combination of the personal objects found in the attic of the family house in Florence, the vague testimonies of his parents, and pieces of fascist era newsreels from the *Archivio Storico Istituto Luce*, Italy’s largest audiovisual media archive. In this case, the mechanism of re-shuffling of the difficult past takes place between the third generation (represented by the director), the second (his parents) and through the re-discovery, re-contextualization and re-assemblage of material objects, family photos, official documents.

The private things seen in the film are intended not in their referential function, for what they represent, but for what they can document after greater contextualization with the fascist dictatorship. One scene that depicts this take place when Chiarini, at his parents’ house, is looking at and ordering old photographs of his relatives. He spreads the images on the floor in a sort of Warburgian atlas of his family (Figure 5), mapping connections between them not only for genealogical reasons, as in a family tree, but also for the ways in which they were united *by* fascist ideology. Initially the camera observes how Chiarini makes this atlas, after this the photos are edited into the film itself and the spectator can see in detail the photos of the director’s grandmother in her youth. All of this takes place with the non-diegetic soundtrack of the speech that Mussolini gave in Trieste in 1938, in which he proclaimed the racial laws against Italian Jewish people. This montage of private and carefree moments with the collective experience of the most infamous moments in Italian history simultaneously draws us into the family narratives, nevertheless characterising these young and attractive people as fascists and with a likelihood of having been involved in the persecution of the Jews, even if not directly.



Figure 5: a still from *L'occhio di vetro*

Recollection highlights how some texts/events are obscured from the (familiar, collective) semiosphere, placed in marginal areas of culture – precisely because it takes place usually many years after the end of a conflict when a narrative has already been established in the referring group. In other words, this mechanism can say something more about the passage and transmission of difficult memory and re-writings of history. Recollection happens inside the semiosphere, in the confrontation between centre and periphery. In this sense, we are not interested in what is “forgotten”, in what has no sign and is without semiosis outside its borders, but in what is stuck in the periphery and in other semiosphere areas that Lotman (Monticelli 2019) called the “semantic reserve”, which, we would argue, can also be conceptualized as a memory reserve.

The reserve refers to the idea that a group, like a family, can organise its peripheral knowledge into sections that – although in the shadow of the core of the semiosphere – serve as spaces from which it is possible to draw information, to generate internal implosions that can overturn common knowledge and redefine various memory priorities. It is a kind of space that is only seemingly weak, when in fact it represents countless future narratives. This theme seems also relevant to post-conflict societies in which there may be subjects who, for the most diverse reasons and at different times (in our case for reasons of family ties), act on past narratives, using diachronic translation to create a semiotic fracture between different temporalities.

In this sense, the reserve is an ambivalent space. Like the attic in a family house, it stores things that could potentially be forgotten, yet at the same time it can be a space for the reactivation of memory, from which subjects can recycle and reuse, intentionally or casually, elements and objects from the past. The prefix “re” in recollection indicates precisely this process of re-inclusion of texts in central narratives: from the attic to the living room, in a process that can augment meanings and re-size memory narratives. Again, the “re” stands for diachronic repetition, for rediscovery and relocation. From the reserve to the centre of the same semiosphere or even of a new one.

The metaphor of the house is not used casually, because the process of investigation that Chiarini carries out starts from a specific domestic space: the attic of his parents’ house, where he found documents and heirlooms from the fascist period that were related to the figure of his great-grandfather Giuseppe. In many scenes we see Chiarini rifling through old files and boxes in this “reserve” in order to piece together as much “proof” as possible about his family’s implication in the

regime. Paraphrasing the most emblematic scene is the one in which his mother finds Giuseppe's glass eye – the object that defines the film's title (Figure 6).



Figure 6: a still from *L'occhio di vetro*

During the First World War, Giuseppe was wounded, losing an eye that was replaced by this glass one. Within the film, specific resonances are attached to this peculiar object. First, it is simply another example of a family object that is rediscovered. Second, it is a symbol of the “mutilated victory” of the Italian army after WWI, that condition whereby Italy won the war but with a great cost in terms of human lives and territories. This broad dissatisfaction was a fertile terrain for Mussolini's fascist movement, which presented itself as a solution to the country's problems. For this reason, these events also marked the start of the Ranzani family's affiliation with the movement. Third, relatedly, the glass eye comes to represent the scopic regime of Chiarini's family memory: the object represents the great-grandfather's “vision” that was desemanticised, put in a box in the attic. At a metaphoric level, then, it is a history that was put aside by subsequent generations due to their incapacity to face it. Chiarini refunctionalises (cf. Lachmann 2022) the object, making explicit the topological passage of memory from the attic to the living room, centralising the uncomfortable object – synecdoche of the collaborator – even in the title of his artistic reflection of his family.

As *L'occhio di vetro* demonstrates, reserves are areas of potential *futurability*, where it is possible to draw on information deemed obsolete at the mainstream level and give it a new value and relevance in the geography of the semiosphere and in the biographies of the people involved. Reserves, therefore, speak to us of the possible semiotic future of culture (cf. Lorusso 2019), of new possible variations of memory.

On a final note, from a more historical perspective, not only does *L'occhio di vetro* represent very efficiently a particular type of collaborationism, it also has the merit of being one of the first audiovisual texts made in Italy which thematises family dynamics in relation to the fascist dictatorship and generational “guilt” for responsibilities of one's relatives. This is a subject that, in Italy, has so far received little attention in the media in general<sup>4</sup>. Chiarini's work highlights the remembering and forgetting mechanisms that characterised public discourse in Italy in the years following the end of

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<sup>4</sup> One further example is the novel *Stirpe e Vergogna* (“Ancestry and Shame”) by Michela Marzano (2021).



the WWII, highlighting the role that family as social group played in the construction of a national amnesia (on this see, in particular Forlenza 2012).

## Conclusion

By considering Lotman's approach to the trans-generational textualization of memory, in this article we have sought to demonstrate how the use of a cultural semiotic approach can indeed offer productive theoretical and methodological tools that can enhance the interdisciplinary debates of Memory Studies in relation to:

- the positionality of those who are implicated "by inheritance", through a family connection, and decide to "write" about it;
- the cultural and textual strategies one must adopt in order to understand the perpetrator or collaborator as semiotic actors, depending, also, on the national and local contexts in which they operate.

In this regard, the documentaries considered here offer an intriguing conceptualization of the family memory and the ways that subsequent generations redistribute knowledge to avoid oblivion (Lotman and Uspensky 1975) reconceptualising what "memory" should be for them. It is interesting to note, in this respect, how both of the directors end their cinematic biographies of other people with wider existential reflections. This transforms the documentaries – not by chance, in closing – from biographical to autobiographical texts; the author expressively changes its format, becoming the real protagonist of the story. The directors are "implicated subjects" (Rothberg 2019): they are intrinsically and emotionally involved in the past they are telling, sharing synchronic and diachronic responsibilities and suffering as a result. They therefore transform texts into therapeutic works that seek to respond to and ease this emotional struggle and suffering. At the end of *El pacto de Adriana*, Orozco explains that she did not find answers to all the questions she had about her aunt, but that she hopes others can advance the investigation that she began, continuing the same process of elaboration of the past in order to "heal", as she says in the final spoken words of the documentary. On the one hand, then, the film is thus endowed with an emotional value as the possibility to contribute to a healing process that, on the other, also goes beyond the personal case of the family: the end of the film therefore coincides with the moment when the personal-public investigation has reached its limit within this unit – other families, other transgenerational groups can pick up this mantle. A similar process occurs at the end of *L'occhio di vetro*, which also finishes with the director-narrator's "closing remarks", again in voice over as we see him lying on the grass in the garden of his grandmother's house. He says: "Even today, I still wonder how the lives of those of us who came afterwards would have been different if, instead of that deafening silence, we had started with a sincere account of those tragic years". In other words, he asks what his family would be like if their autocommunication had not been marred by imposed silences. This question is certainly personal and local, but its implication for the wider national dialogue about Italy's fascist past is also manifest.

*El pacto de Adriana* and *L'occhio di vetro* are able to assign new meanings not only at the level of Chilean and Italian cultures, but also at another, that of the transnational cultural memory of the victims, perpetrators and collaborators of the last century's dictatorships. This metaculture is nourished by narratives populated by new cultural figures that articulate and, potentially, problematise the personalities and positionality of the fundamental cultural actors that Lotman once called the "Barbarian" – the enemy – and the hero.

The documentaries succeed in recoding the positions of the perpetrator, collaborator and victim, not only adding to our previous knowledge of their doing, and of their very existence, but also redistributing its weights and measures, therefore attempting to change the hierarchical positioning, legitimacy, and veracity of what is recorded into our memory archives. In sum, they contribute to the continuous re-organization of the codifying system of our cultures. They register and render memorable what had not yet been translated, contributing to a different remembrance of difficult pasts, fighting against processes of imposed forgetfulness.

They face what Lotman and Uspensky (1975, 46) referred to as one of the “acutest forms of social struggle, that is the demand to forget specific aspects of historical experience” which, if not challenged, causes an oxidation of the mechanism of collective memory and a growing tendency to reduce its importance.

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