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Turning Spaces of Memory into Memoryscapes. Cinema as Counter-monument in Jonathan Perel's *El Predio* and *Tabula Rasa*

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Hiding into Landscape

A Semiotic Approach to Spaces of Memory

Edited by

Cristina Demaria and Patrizia Violi

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Turning Spaces of Memory into *Memoryscapes*

Cinema as Counter Monument in Jonathan Perel's *El Predio* and *Tabula Rasa*

Cristina Demaria

Abstract

How might cinema turn a space into a *mediated landscape of memory*? How can it interrogate *what* is remembered in a *lieu de memoire*, intervening in the porous borders that, simultaneously, separates and connects an event, its experience, and its representation? Could cinema's role be that of a monument or, even, that of a counter-monument? I shall address these questions through the semiotic analysis of the ways in which the 'ESMA – Space for Memory and for the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights', a memory site located in Buenos Aires, has been framed by two documentary films directed by Jonathan Perel: *El Predio* (2010) and *Tabula Rasa* (2013). Both films deal with the large, stratified, and troubled trauma site of the former ESMA compound – 'the Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada' (Naval Academy of Mechanics) the most notorious of the clandestine centres of detention, torture and extermination operational in Argentina during the military regime's 'Dirty War'. Both films stand as peculiar recordings of the making of ESMA's new 'identity' after the end of the dictatorship, and the many layers it is composed of, thanks to a challenging audio-visual enunciative strategy, a cinematic ethical gaze depicting the transition from a space of suffering, to, supposedly, a landscape of remembering.

Keywords: Documentary Cinema; ESMA – Space for Memory and for the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights; Jonathan Perel; Counter-Monument; Desaparecidos.

Landscape is a complex bearer of the possibilities of a plastic interpretation of emotion
Sergei Eisenstein

How might cinema turn a space into a *mediated landscape of memory*? How can it interrogate *what* is *there* remembered, and intervene in the porous borders that, simultaneously, separates and connects an event, its experience, and its representation – that is the multiple temporalities defining the very act of media witnessing? Could cinema's role even be that of a monument or, even, that of a counter-monument?

These questions guide my analysis of the ways in which the *ESMA-Space for Memory and for the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights*, a memory site located in Buenos Aires, has been framed by two documentary films directed by Jonathan Perel: *El Predio* (2010) and *Tabula Rasa* (2013). Both films deal with the large, stratified and troubled trauma site of the former ESMA compound – *the Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada* (Naval Academy of Mechanics) – arguably the most notorious of the clandestine centres of detention, torture and extermination operational in the capital during the military regime’s ‘Dirty War’ (1976–1983) (on this, see Sozzi *infra*). In this place, over 5,000 prisoners have been detained, of whom 90 per cent were murdered. The ESMA compound was also the departure point of the aeroplanes from which drugged prisoners were thrown – still alive – into the River Plate. The area covered by the site is huge (about 17 acres) and it contains numerous buildings with a similar architectural structure, separated by green spaces and wide avenues, and it is nowadays not only the largest, but also the best and widely known, memory site of Argentina’s dictatorship period.

The transformation of the ESMA compound into a space of memory is the outcome of a troubled history, strictly linked to the turbulent and divided Argentina *post*-dictatorship period. During the first years of democracy, as the country suffered a time of imposed amnesia favoured by the promulgation of laws such as the ‘Ley del punto final’,¹ ESMA still functioned as a military ground beyond the boundaries of which ordinary citizens could not trespass. In January 1998, the Menem government decided that ESMA had to be demolished for, in its place, ‘a monument’ to be erected in order to mark the ‘democratic co-existence among Argentines and their will to be reconciled with one another’ (Da Silva Catela 2015: 9). Yet, with no admission of guilt from the perpetrators, no public trials, and no collective working through of the trauma caused by a conflict that brought the military Junta to ‘disappear’ 30,000 people, there was no process of reconciliation at work and, consequently, no pacific will to co-exist; as a consequence, with the passing of this presidential decree, a heated battle for memory began. Human rights groups – amongst which the Madres and the Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo,² resorted to legal recourse to stop the demolition, and, thanks to the intervention of the municipality of Buenos Aires, in 2000 it was first suggested that ESMA should become ‘a space for memory’. However, it was only in 2004, under the government

¹ The ‘Ley del punto final’ (the Full Stop Law) was declared in 1986 by the then President Raul Alfonsín, and was followed, the year after, by the ‘Ley de obediencia debida’ (Law of the Due Obedience). Basically, they were promulgated in order to grant amnesty for all the crimes committed during the dictatorship and were revoked by President Kirchner. On this see also Crenzel 2012.

² The Mothers and the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo were the first to denounce, during the dictatorship, the disappearance of their sons, their daughters and their grandchildren through their peaceful rounds of the Plaza the Mayo in front of the Casa Rosada, the residence of the government of Argentina: see Demaria, Lorusso 2012; Demaria 2017.

of Néstor Kirchner – a president that embraced the cause of memory and justice as one of the central tenets of his political agenda (Andermann 2012a: 78) – that the ESMA site was proclaimed a ‘Space for Memory and for the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights’. Different proposals were sought from human rights organisations, artists, activists and intellectuals (see also Brodsky *et al.*, 2004) in order to answer questions such as: how could this former site of state terrorism be ‘adequately recovered’? In a still divided Argentine society, what could its ultimate purpose and function be? As Patrizia Violi summarises (2017: 255):

Various issues were the cause of disagreement, all of which mainly concerned the extension, and consequently the function, of the site. To turn all of the enormous area of the ESMA into a museum or only the clandestine prison? To permit the presence of other military and government installations inside it or to strictly exclude any activity? And again, to focus solely on a memory site in the strict sense of the term, connected with the memory of that place of detention, or to admit other more committed social and artistic activities?

What was in play was not so much ‘an operation of material restoration, as the reconstruction of a knowledge and a discourse that constitute the *very conditions of representability and narratability* of memory, a semiotic marking that attributes a signification to the place, symbolically restoring the indexical connection with the event’ (Violi 2017: 256). Then again, the debate over the conditions of representability and narratability of this memory did not stop in 2008, when the ESMA site officially opened as a space of memory. It took, for example, several more years to turn the *Casino de oficiales*, that is the actual *trauma site*, that is the building where people had been ‘disappeared’ and tortured, into the ESMA *Museo Sitio de la memoria* that was inaugurated only in 2015, its walls and rooms now tangible ‘evidence’ of the crimes perpetrated during the Dirty War.

El Predio and *Tabula Rasa* had been shot before the opening of the Museum, both focussing on the overall ground of the ‘ex’ ESMA, respectively two and five years after it opened to the public, as the first tentative re-occupations and re-appropriations of its buildings by artists, human rights organisations and governmental institutions were occurring. Hence, both films stand as peculiar recordings of the making of ESMA’s new ‘identity’, and the many layers it is composed of, thanks to a challenging cinematic ethical gaze (Nichols 1991, see also Nichols 2016) depicting the transition from a space of suffering, torture and extermination, to, supposedly, a landscape of remembering.

By adding to the case-studies analysed in this volume two films dealing with a trauma site, my wish is to describe how such a loaded space can be transformed into a perturbing cinematic landscape that, in its turn, calls into question the identity of the place it depicts.

After an introductory part on the relationship between cinema, semiotics and spaces of memory, I shall move to the analysis of the strategies at play in both documentary films, concentrating on how they weave the audio-visual texture of a troubled space of memory without either the use of

footage, of a voice over, or of testimonies/witnesses, or, apparently, of any other kind of explanations (graphic or otherwise). In filming a space that is allowed to ‘speak for itself’, Perel inaugurated what María Guadalupe Arenillas (2016) labels as a new paradigm that has emerged in several films dealing with spatial inscriptions of Argentina’s recent past. Allegedly, *El Predio* and *Tabula rasa* represent two seminal examples of a ‘nondiscursive turn’ of Argentina documentary cinema; a turn that I would rather label a *non-verbal* one since, following a semiotic perspective, both films mobilise enunciative strategies that define a very peculiar discursivity, as they re-interpret a space and recompose its spatiality and temporalities.

From a semiotic perspective, a discourse is that level of textual organisation whereby any language- verbal, visual, sound – participates in the overall construction of the spatial and temporal coordinates expressed by a text, and within which both the subjects and objects of its narrative are inscribed. Moreover, with their non-verbal filming, both documentaries not only distance themselves from post-dictatorship testimonial cinema, that has mainly focussed on familial relations and the human suffering experienced throughout the dictatorship, but also aim at constituting an example of counter-monument cinema. Yet, how do they do it? More generally speaking, how can a film become a counter-monument? In Perel’s own questioning:

Space can be regarded as a testimony. Cinema can be regarded as a cartographic work, a cadastral job. Cinema as a device to create space, a true fieldwork, on the field, in the field. [...] How do you break the didactic logic of a monument, the rigidity that condemns the viewer to a passive observation? How do you draw up a memory that won’t stay fixed and stable, once and for all? A memory that won’t try to endure, pristine/ignored, but will instead demand attention, incite its violation, regard the territory of memory as an unstable, weak, swampy topography.³

Moreover, how can space be turned into a testimony recreated by cinema on the field, in the field, in order to demand attention to the very construction of a post-dictatorship traumatic memory?

Cinema and Spaces of Memory

Contemporary audio-visual representation of spaces of memory participates in a media environment – a mediascape – whereby different kinds of texts and genres intertwine, from photographs displayed throughout a site, to snapshots one posts on social media during or after a visit. Concrete spaces of memories, such as museums or memorial sites, often display footage or visual testimonies of victims and survivors in order to enrich, support and, at times, stand as evidence of the events whose history they are supposed to tell. Out of the many semiotic layers and signifying practices that constitute a

³ This quotation is taken from a printed document written by Perel – and sent to me by Perel’s himself – of which I have not been able to find the appropriate references.

space of memory, its visual archive and the way it is displayed are part and parcel of its overall 'communication'. Different is the case of documentary films choosing to interrogate a space independently of the 'museological' discourse designed by the Addresser in order to predetermine the performances of individual and collective users. (see Pezzini *infra*).

With *El Predio* and *Tabula Rasa* we enter the realm of the relationship between cinema, space, and memory, that is, how a film interprets a space defining one form of its possible experience; or, else, how it intervenes in the construction of the memories of events one did not experience, but nevertheless comes to feel and remember as if they belonged to one's past – as Allison Landsberg's (2004) notorious category of prosthetic memory implies.⁴

As a semiotics of media suggests, a film fits *into the design our experience*, transforming the knowledge of the direct world through the mediated world it depicts (Eugeni 2015).

On a more general level, from Walter Benjamin's (1939) theory of cinema as a medium capable of producing new forms of modern subjectivity, up to Gilles Deleuze's (1986) reflections on cinema as a technology of memory,⁵ to give but two seminal examples, the role of moving images in the shaping of an imaginary of the past and its figuration has been repeatedly evoked, its power to project images unavailable to consciousness – through devices such as slow motion and close-ups – regularly investigated. Cinema as an optical unconscious mediates between the intimate and the public, between subjectivities and the cultures into which they merge and from which they emerge. As Susannah Radstone underlines:

For at moments, the figuring of memory by media, including the cinema, and of the cinema by memory have become key sites within which to explore, map, and radically critique the changing relationship between the inside and the outside, the personal and the social. *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. (Radstone 2010: 326; my italics).

What emerges from Radstone's statement is the importance of cinema, also, as a particular *semiotic space* of cultural and historical translation and transformation of narratives of the past, along with its forms of visualisation and enunciation, to which I shall soon return.

⁴ Landsberg work questions the ways in which 'modern technologies of mass culture', such as cinema, may challenge the distinction between individual and collective memory and introduce the 'experiential' as a mode of knowledge acquisition. Also, she discusses how might individuals be affected by memories of events through which they did not live, that is by a *prosthetic* memory.

⁵ See Benjamin's (1939) essay on Baudelaire, where he maintains that cinema not only provides a technological support for memory, extending the range of the *mémoire involontaire*, but also that the exposure to cinematic images might enable the spectator to withstand better the shocks of modern city life.

Moreover, cinematic imaginaries of spaces have played a crucial role in documenting memories of traumas and collective violence, that is, once the problem at stake had been not only that of representing what had really happened, *and where*, but also to articulate a memory archive through the accumulation and filtering of the visual knowledge of a trauma site.⁶ From the first motion pictures of the concentration camps liberated by the Allies and their re-appropriation as footage in many films afterwards, what has been offered as a way to remember has been repeatedly both revealed and guarded by specific images, by what they show but also by what they omit, in the haunting of the same or similar images, and in questioning to whom or to what they give a voice or a gaze. Testimonies of traumatic events seem thus to be dependent, at least in our contemporary transmedia culture, on recurring and comparable narrative and semiotic strategies centred on the power of images not only to represent the past but to evoke it within the present from which it stems (Guerin and Hallas 2010). The images of films such as *Night and Fog* and *Shoah* have become part of a shared inter-visuality (Mirzoeff 2002) of locations of terror, of an encyclopaedia (Eco 1984) made of powerful iconographic sedimentations that have marked the building of a visual cultural memory of places of violence.

However, *El Predio* and *Tabula Rasa* depart from this shared inter-visuality and, distancing themselves from the already mentioned Argentine ‘testimonial cinema’, attempt to create a signifying space able to function as a counter-monument that calls into questions the kind of place a site of memory is (see Salerno *infra*), by turning it into a landscape which potentially contains a deterritorialising force (Andermann 2012b). As counter-monuments, both films try to illustrate, to use James Young’s (1992: 268) formulation, the ‘possibilities and limitations of all memorials [...] In this way, [they function] as a valuable ‘*counter-index*’ to the ways time, memory, and current history intersect at any memorial site’ (see Panico *infra*).

Enunciation and *Aspectualisation*: Cinema’s Semiotic Gaze

From a semiotic point of view, the *counter-indexicality* of a film, the ways it creates its ‘traces’ and connects its spatial and temporal coordinates to memory and history, have to be contextualised within issues posed by the category of enunciation once it comes to audio-visual texts. Amongst the first scholars who applied to cinematic language the formal apparatus of enunciation is Francesco Casetti (1998) who, in order to describe how a film orients itself towards the actual viewer, proposed a

⁶ For a definition of trauma site see Violi 2017. More generally speaking, the debate on trauma as a crisis of representation has nowadays already a long and controversial story that it is not possible to summarise here: for its early formulation see Caruth 1996; for criticisms to Caruth’s position and more recent indications on and for the future of Trauma Studies, see Buelens, Durrant and Eaglestone 2013; Elsaesser 2013, Bond and Craps 2020.

semiotic framework of analysis involving three deictic categories: an I (the enunciator/Addresser); a 'you' (the addressee) and a 'she/it' (character or the film itself). From this he derived a typology of shots indicating how a film can say 'you', demarcating a place to be filled by the spectator. However, the recent tendency in both Film Studies and semiotics is to problematise the centrality of vision and voyeurism, in order to move towards attentiveness to perception, the body and the embodiment. The cinematic is not only the visibility but also its affective, embodied, haptic appeal. A film presents us with traces of a sensorial material that may take the shape of a subjective presence which does not only depend on the type of shots and points of view, but also on camera movements, angles and points of sound, on its rhythm and overall montage, that is on the basis of its diverse substances of expression.

The unravelling of an audio-visual discourse is, in other words, an oriented process that shows the world directly, albeit from different 'points of perception': it 'monstrates' it; it does not 'say' it, to recall André Gaudreault's (2008) term *monstration*. In doing so, it performs both a cognitive doing – a focalisation as relative to the circulation of knowledge – and a perceptive doing, that Jost (1987) divides into two instances: that of *ocularisation* (the visual anchoring) and *auricularisation* (the auditive anchoring).⁷

By embracing such a perspective, we can further specify the sometimes too-broad category of *gaze*, which, in its turn, encompasses that of point of view. Indeed, we can think of a cinematic gaze as semiotic processes of focalisation, ocularisation and auricularisation that depend on the textual inscription of an *actant observer*. Hence, when considering the gaze of a film, it is not only a matter of how it might install an objectifying gaze, as if an 'impersonal' and abstract eye depicts a space and a time; or a point of view shot, a subjective camera, but also, thanks to the overall act of discursivisation, how each text becomes a process the meaning of which is organised depending on a perspective that regulates how we perceive and interpret it: the syntax and semantics of its spatialities and its temporalities. Moreover, if we consider the temporality of a text, the actant observer is closely linked to how a text displays its aspectualisation, that is, how filmed actions are looked at: are they seized in their continuity and duration, or as they begin or end? Or, to put it even more simply: Do we see an action as repeatedly performed or in its completion? To consider the effects of aspectualisation is to look at how a process is observed, determining the rhythm of what we see, its overall meaning and value: as continuous or discontinuous, as iterative or punctual. The actant

⁷ On this see also Spaziante (2017); Armenio (2017:61), who rightly states: 'The formal apparatus used to analyse enunciation mediating structures must be specific. It is necessary to identify how an audio-visual discourse puts the time, place and subjects of the experience in relation with the time, place and subjects produced by the text. In other words, when we come to audio-visual texts, to reduce enunciation to a formal simulation of the production of meaning is reductive'.

observer is thus a category that mediates between enunciation and aspectualisation, its role being that of determining the overall gaze of a text, as the textual expression of a lived phenomenological time.

With the categories of the actant observer and that of aspectualisation as specifications of the category of enunciation, it is easier to understand how a filmed space can become a working through of a traumatic past as it is framed and contemplated, walked through and interrogated. The effects of a film, along with the semiotic competence it provides to its audience – what it makes us see, and therefore know through its focalisation, ocularisation and auricularisation – derive from the power images have to figure and display a cartography of a particular time/space, one able not only to turn spaces into places and sites, but also at times into a troubled *landscape of memory*. A semiotic gaze, the inscription of a peculiar actant observer, is what turns a concrete space into *a landscape*, since the very concept of landscape, first thought of within the history of painting and its techniques, then transformed by photography and cinema, implies that *there is a gaze framing it*.

In sum, the way a visual experience of a space may turn it into an emotional landscape lies in how a gaze and a viewing subject-position are inscribed, displayed and, also, displaced by the audio-visual text. Visibility is not only the field explored by the gaze (the ‘as far as I can see’) but also the network of perception and knowledge, the examination and the selection of the ‘screen images’ that organise vision:

In itself, the cinematic experience lies in the interval between the illusion of a practicable, accessible space – given by the movements of the camera, and the actual distance from that landscape observed by a subject-spectator, as in the case of pictorial spaces, a process that refers, also, to the wider and even more complex idea of territory. Cinema can be thought of as a practice of archiving places. (Minuz 2010: 14–15; my translation).

Filming a Site: *El Predio*

In an essay written with Daniel Feierstein (Perel and Feierstein 2014: 111, my translation), simply titled ‘La Esma’, the authors wonders, along with many other artists and scholars confronted with the trauma of *desaparecidos*:

What to do with those bodies of the disappeared that seemed to escape any possibility to be represented? How to make one see (*hacer ver*) what is par excellence un-representable? How to put in a productive tension the dichotomy between what is tellable and what is un-tellable? How to make present (*hacer presente*) what is un-imaginable, the extermination? And in ‘Cinema as counter monument’ he somehow answers his own questions: It’s not about showing – shooting – what is invisible, but to reveal what is missing and will be missing forever. What seems to escape language can be reconstructed by besieging what is missing and thus providing a meaning to absence.⁸

⁸ This quotation is taken from a printed document written by Perel – and sent to me by Perel’s himself – of which I have not been able to find the appropriate references.

I am quoting Perel's own writings as meta-texts that produce the complex textuality I am here analysing (Marrone 2010). As a semiotician, I am not specifically interested in what Umberto Eco (1990) called *intention auctoris*, that is what the author intended to say, based on his/her poetics and his/her own personal biography. I am interested, though, in how Perel's own meditations participate in the re-creation of the ESMA as a semiotic textual object. In the quotations above, for example, he reveals the main narrative programme the gaze/observer inscribed in the text maintains, defining its object of value, that is to make one see 'what is missing'. Here, the actant observer acquires the narrative role of the Addresser who 'manipulates' what we see, and the way we see it. Yet, how does the actual film provide a meaning to absence, or, better, *how is absence signified?*

As a non-verbal documentary, *El Predio* explores an apparently depopulated space – that of the ESMA ground – that becomes in itself an *archive*, probed and surveyed by what first appears to be a visual 'composition' that tends towards an extreme naturalism, rendered through a supposedly distant and detached objective point of view, with no filming subject ever visible or audible *within* the shots, both as an actor or a voice over. The film consists of fixed shots in natural daylight and deep focus of protracted duration: all of them of about 30 seconds duration, depicting the architectural spaces, buildings and rubbles of the ESMA ground during the process of its transformation, and very few subjects, with whom there is no direct engagement or relation, as if the very act of filming passes as undetected (Gerarhty 2018). Points of view and points of audition seems to be synchronised, with little, and often time distant and barely discernible, speech. However, since its first shots the documentary reveals the strong presence of an observer/gaze that slowly determines *what* we see of the filmed space, at which distance or closeness, and at what rhythm, carefully selecting the ways it creates not only its effect, but also its affect, making us see, feel, and ponder the images we are shown.

The very first shot, what the film begins to *monstrate*, is of a totally black screen: on one hand, as a still undetected frame, it works as a threshold between the cinematographic space and the diegetic one, as if one must pause and mourn before entering *el predio* as a place and as a film, all light and reflections absorbed by the *non-colour* that is black, the black screen becoming also a blank screen. On the other hand, the screen as the frame (see Marrone *infra*) within which the space will be represented stands as a warning for the kind of experience it is going to provide to the viewer: that of a mediated world contained within a screen and its imagining. The black/blank image ends with a jump cut, a visual punctuation of discontinuity that characterises – as I shall later argue – the montage of the whole film, followed by the only camera movement of the film, a travelling shot lasting more than three minutes, that places us directly *inside* the ESMA compound, moving along its alleys and tree-lined avenues, as we perceive muffled sounds of distant work in progress, of a lawnmower and of birds chirping. The sound then slowly recedes until it stops, as this 'introduction' ends again with

a jump cut into another completely black screen, on which only the title of the documentary comes into view: *El Predio*. Only through the next prolonged shot, framing an information plaque located on the outside part of the ESMA's enclosing wall, the viewer receives the first clue, albeit not so direct: the sign is for the people walking along the outside part of the wall to read, yet it is filmed from the inside, so that one is forced to decipher it back to front. It is thus that we learn that: 'Working for all Argentines – Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's Administration – Works: National Memory Archive – Former building of the Naval War College – Cost of the works: dollars 14, 763, 721.08 – Argentina is all of us'.

The inclusive nation-building rhetoric exploited by the politics of memory of Cristina Kirchner is not immediately readable from within the place we have been brought to: the 'us' *inside* a still uncertain collective subject. The first six minutes of the 48-minutes-long documentary set how the whole text plays with the distribution of both cognition and perception – with the semiotic competence favoured by its focalisation and ocularisation – provided to the viewer. We will have to wait until the final credits, projected yet again on a black screen, to learn that: 'The ESMA was used by the last Argentinian dictatorship as one of the main clandestine centres, for detention, torture and extermination. In 2004 'The Space for memory was created on these grounds. It is open to the public since October 2007 – Filmed within March and November 2009'.

Up until this last remark, the film avoided any explanation but the information provided by what the viewer, at times, manages to read on the signs and plaques that punctuate the filmed space, through an institutional, and most of all disembodied, 'writing'. As the film progresses, a select few human personages do emerge into the visual field, their activities not so much catalogued, but briefly registered, and not in their entirety: the work of a visual and plastic artist, a theatre production, several film screenings and a debate. Yet, there are important places that are absent, as the already mentioned 'Casino de oficiales', that is the actual trauma site within the ESMA ground, and a general external overview of the whole compound. With this filming, it is difficult for those who don't know the place to 'recognise' it, to pin it down. What place is it? Where are we? Also, alterations in light level make temporal identification challenging as the time of day or year appears to vary sporadically.

Yet, there is a rhythm, an overdetermination of the film's temporality (the already mentioned strategy of aspectualisation) that creates the effect of a slow transformation of a space into a landscape we are getting maybe not to fully comprehend, but to apprehend. In the first part of the documentary, for example, the emptying of one the building is shown through the objects once populating it, now discarded outside, amongst the weeds: sinks and fakes of plaster, rubbles and iron air pipes. Later in the film, with an editing that does not follow a chronological order or a cause and effect logic, we are presented with the beginning of a visual artist performance – a drawing on a wall, a first step into the

building's re-appropriation; towards the end of the documentary, the film explores the installation once completed. Yet, no action or performance is followed in its precise and linear development, and very seldom with the full presence of the actors involved, as when a shot indulges on the details of a hoe and a rake ploughing a tiny plot of land: and again first we are shown minor details of the action that is being performed, and only later – after several other shots of different corners of the ESMA grounds – we are able to read a sign that informs us that in that tiny plot of land an ‘action through art’ is taking place: ‘To harvest/To multiply – Action through art –to build a memory and create a future – Sowing potato into the soil of ESMA – Reproduce and harvest energy by Marina Etchegoyhen’.

With each frame, the viewer is invited to examine the tactile qualities of the objects, the texture of the interior chipped walls, with their holes and scratches; the brown colour of the soil into which the potatoes are sowed. This way of showing, accompanied by a very fragmented telling, is used also to make us read and learn about the narratives the agents of memory, now inhabiting the ESMA, are trying to inscribe in its space. This happens, for example, during a sequence filmed inside a spacious room turned into a cineforum where, with a *mise-en-abyme* – another screen is framed, projecting images of an unknown film whose soundtrack is a very popular song that condemns Argentina's recent past, affirming the persistence of its traumatic memory. What we are made to hear is not the complete song, but the following words: ‘The illusion of those who lost; all the vanishing promises; and those who fell in one war or another; all is kept in memory; Dream of life and history; the lies and complicity; of the genocidaires still free; the Pardon and Full stop....’.

The same strategy is used in another sequence, where several sheets of printed paper pasted to a wall of yet another unknown room, in another building, are eventually shot with a close up (the previous a medium shot that did not allow us to read their content): they reproduce the text of the sadly famous ‘Open letter from a writer to the military junta’ by Rodolfo Walsh, of which only the first sentence is made visible/readable: ‘Press censorship, the persecution of intellectuals, the raid of my house in Tigre, the murder of dear friends, and the loss of a daughter who died fighting you; some of those are....’. A jump then cuts the frame, moving us to yet another corner of *el predio*.

The film hence finds its ‘space’ in a fold, in a crease of time that allows the showing of interstices, before its complete institutionalisation, as it registers the on-going life of a space of memory *in the making*. *El Predio* thus became an audio-visual reasoning about the very possibilities of a space of memory, its meanings, functions, ways of transmission, education on and of memory. This overall effect is obtained through the intertwining of the kind of filming examined so far, *and* the *montage* of its protracted shots. Montage, as Eijzenstein theorised, is productive not only as a way to compose the frames, but also within a frame, as a principle of composition of any image. The

process of editing can be seen as general semiotic *dispositif* that is responsible both of the syntactic structure of moving images, and of their reciprocal articulation (see also Casetti 1999). In *El Predio* – but also in *Tabula Rasa* – a pragmatic *montage* (Lancioni 2019), which consists in the operations of selection and combination of shots within a narrative logic, is superseded by a cognitive *montage*, that is the way a narrative logic is dealt with, and sometimes disrupted. These two kinds of *montage* could be linked, Tarcisio Lancioni suggests, to the division between optical values and *haptical* values, that, in their turn, define two different forms of vision. With the optical vision the eye immediately catches the whole – the unity and integrity – of the framed phenomenon, while in the haptic one the eye has to move continuously, as if touching the object of perception. With the haptic vision, the total image of a compound like ESMA is the result of different and partial images, of parcels and details revealed by different points of view that will find their unity only once the viewer has engaged with all the elements adding up to the final composition of the film. While the optic montage values forms of narrative continuity, the haptic one plays with a discontinuity that rejects the logic of the chronological successions of images. This is what happens in *El Predio*, since only at the end the viewer gathers an image – yet not a ‘whole’ image – of this ground, the haptic effect further accentuated by Perel’s use of deep focus. However, *El Predio*’s cognitive montage and haptic vision are a trace of an active subjectivity that, with its argumentative connections, acts as a powerful configuring intentionality that, together with its strategies of ocularisation, determines the ways knowledge and affect are being distributed throughout the text.

The film so creates a powerful effect, a particular kind of overall image/imagining that with Gilles Deleuze we could call an ‘image-time’ (1989) of a *place whatsoever*: a shooting that makes us feel/perceive the duration, as opposed to the image-action, typical of a more classic cinema, where all the *mise-en-scene* is built around the continuity of movement. To perceive the duration, to make time something we feel, means to connect cinema to thinking, in order to reveal, and here I quote Perel again, ‘fragments of time in its pure state’. *El Predio*’s images oblige us to think, to meditate, to ‘listen’ to these spaces/corner, walls, trees, and to use our own imagination in order to provide meaning to absence. With this technique, *El Predio* makes the place ‘talk’. Yet, as I have already underlined, its speech is not fully and immediately understandable. As Niall Geraghty (2018:1) observes in his own extremely detailed analysis of this film: ‘Point of view and point of audition are reconciled throughout, but there is incongruity between what is seen and what is heard: stasis in the visual field, activity in the soundtrack. This disjunction between visual emptiness and sonic plenitude opens a space for the viewer to reflect on the process which is underway’.

This semiotic strategy produces another important effect, if we think of the ‘sinister methodology’ employed by the junta, which found its apotheosis in ‘the ‘disappearance’ of mortal

remains' which denied 'even the possibility of a posthumous reconstruction of subjectivity through mourning and remembrance' (Andermann 2012a: 79–80). *El Predio*, with its immobile gaze, the lack of soundtrack and active human subjects, re-projects into its landscape what many survivors of the dictatorship's Clandestine Detention Centres described when telling their experience of captivity, marked by 'darkness, silence, and immobility' (Calveiro 1998: 48).

The film thus appropriates, and at the same time inverts, several of the techniques employed by the dictatorship during its regime of systematic State terrorism, since its silence has a very distinctive quality, as Geraghty (2018: 4-5) affirms: 'the apparent 'emptiness' of Perel's films is a mere illusion, a method of demonstrating that '[t]here is no such thing as silence'', as John Cage (1961: 191) suggested. In his analysis, Geraghty demonstrates how *El Predio* could be thought of as uniquely musical work, where 'rather than containing the image, the atmosphere created by environmental sounds adds depth and draws the audience into the shot'.

Moreover, as still pointed out by Geraghty (2018: 5): 'The disconcerting arrangement of both sound and vision reflects the fact that the 'brutality of torture and rape was accompanied by techniques designed to further defamiliarise the space of incarceration, such as blindfolding prisoners and leading them on different routes around the prison to enhance disorientation'' (see also Scorer 2016). Perel, too, defamiliarises ESMA and disorients his viewer. However, where such techniques were utilised by the dictatorship as part of 'the pedagogies of disposal, destruction and reconversion of people' (González 2005: 71), Perel exploits them to record the same pedagogies being applied to the site itself.

Tabula Rasa

Tabula Rasa is a documentary that forms together with *El Predio* a sort of diptych. Yet, as it resorts to many of the semiotic strategies deployed in *El Predio*, *Tabula Rasa* testifies not to a construction but to a particular destruction, a 'ruining' of memory for another reconstruction, that of the Museum dedicated to the Falklands-Malvinas war as one of the memory sites of the ESMA compound. It films the demolition – the erasure (*tabula rasa*) – of housing modules (*módulos alojamientos*) erected at the rear of the compound during the dictatorship, in order to hide the view of what was happening *inside the ESMA*. Instead of a wall, the military chose to build a block of buildings for, supposedly, people to live and work in. The block was never actually lived in, and it has been abandoned and decaying since then. Between 2012 and 2013 it was eventually erased in order to provide space for a Museum dedicated to the memory of a war that is still an 'unfinished business' (MacGuirk 2007), and whose outcomes accelerated the end of the dictatorship. Despite the still on-going debate spiked by the museum's very nationalistic interpretation of the Falklands-Malvinas war, the story of what

once stood in its place is very little known, even among Argentines. *Tabula Rasa* not only shows this story, but also tells it, and in so doing makes the ‘presence’ of an observer, at times inscribing himself as an author/witness in the text, more tangible than in *El Predio*. Even though Perel still refrains from being part of the frame, traces of his work as a documentarist – not simply as a ‘director’, but as researcher – who has investigated the history of the module whose destruction we, in turn, shall witness, is here more pronounced. The bodiless and silent observer here leaves his enunciative traces not only in the ways the film’s gaze makes us ponder and look *again* at what is already there to be read and looked at, but also in the documents that have been selected to be shown in front of the camera, marked by his own handwriting and underlining. The competence we slowly acquire is thus not limited to information plaques and signs already located within the space: it comes from different sources that have been collected, studied, their information exploited to make us not only see but also learn about the purpose behind the building complex bordering the ESMA rear.

Hence, it is more of a silent dialogue between an enunciator and his addressees that begins from the first sequence, when the shot of a completely black screen – as in *El Predio* pointing to the screen as a space of composition – is followed by a frame depicting a working desk on which a computer screen shows different pictures of the modular building: architectural drawings and two photographs taken during the time the ESMA was still operational. With the already discussed technique of the jump cut, the next shot is that of a printed transcription of a testimony that only at the end of the film, in the ‘bibliography’ – Perel’s definition – inserted in the closing credits, we learn is a quote from Claudio Martyniuk’s book *ESMA Fenomenologia de la desaparicion* (2004). In what hence becomes a mediated and belated interaction with the viewer, here the traces of enunciation lie in the underlying marks, comments and notes made on the printed quotation, that bear witness to a subject studying it. What we learn from the writing of a still anonymous witness, who used to commute on a train that passed behind ESMA, just along the block of building, is the following:

The train came out of the tunnel from the Del Valle station, and then after crossing over the avenues of Libertador and General Paz, it passed behind ESMA. The Lugones highway was the only thing separating the train from ESMA. On the other side of the train there was an athletic field where the soldier of ESMA could be seen as they arrived.... Beyond that, the murky river. From the window of the train, over and again, I saw construction work progressing on ESMA, new construction of an ugliness that is difficult to describe. Cube-like structures were built one next to the other, covering the back part of ESMA. It was a strange mass. As soon as they finished the cube structure, the workers slowed their pace, as if the only thing that had mattered was raising this concrete curtain that blocked the view of the building inside, which covered up something worse, a view of a dreadful emptiness. They did not raise a wall in ESMA that would have shown they were hiding something. They raised barracks in order to show something else, using concrete to make invisible the kidnapping, pillaging, tortures, births, and nightmares. The factory of pain. Today, looking at these buildings from the train, the anguish and uneasiness persist.

After this rather protracted first sequence, that sets the viewer into an emotionally charged position evoked by the isotopes of anguish, dread and pain permeating the witness's words, we enter yet again our 'predio', only now dwelling at its borders. Yet again what we learn about the place comes from the shot of a panel with a map of the compound, and the information: 'The ESMA Clandestine Centre for Detention, Torture and Extermination operated on this site during the last military dictatorship (1976–1983)'.

After these first two long sequences, Perel films the destruction of the building by concentrating on the bulldozer with 'tedious and long shots of the production of rubble' (Arenillas 2016); by, apparently, 'simply' shooting the very process of ruination. The slow and pensive visual framing and *montage* of this whole process starts with two shots of the still intact modules, and of Avenida Lugones with passing trains, probably a landscape very similar to the one described in Martyniuk's quotation. The next shot informs us about their fate, with a close up of a document of the 'public tender' – we read – for the 'complete demolition of the precast building'. And then with a jump cut we are placed again within the ground, with a sign on a fence surrounding the block warning us: 'Danger demolition site'. The ambient sound of the demolition comes before the actual images of a ruination carried out by bulldozers and cranes that, for the next twenty minutes of the film, become its main 'actors'.

Even though in very few shots we glimpse the human subjects operating them, it is their mechanical arms, dozers, buckets and grabbers looking like a large animal talons and jaws that dominate the frames: dogging cranes whose plier resembles the claw and pincer of huge and scary dinosaurs, or big bird predators. Shots after shots – some lasting more than 60 seconds – we are almost hypnotised by these machine-figures that incessantly and implacably *attack* and destroy the block of buildings. Thanks to camera angles from below, the use of deep shot and of a light that softens the contours of the filmed objects, the tower crane demolishing the walls with a boulder, and the dogging crane's plier removing the debris, *are trans-figured*, turning the very act of demolition into a ritual of powerful and definitive 'natural' erasure. This almost 'photographic' filming plays with the (im)personal whereby a machine, a 'bird' creature, but also a 'dinosaur' – such a dinosaur of dictatorship – is subjected to an erasure, emphasising also the ephemerality of construction.

These long sequences of demolition are then followed by a series of 'still life' shots: medium long shots and close ups of steel planks jutting out of broken blocks of concrete, of scattered debris and rubble. However, the *still life* here depicted is not so much that of a *natura morta* (still life being the English rendering of the Italian expression, literally translatable as 'dead nature'), but of a *cultura morta* (dead culture), as the animal-like machine destroys the working of men. *Tabula rasa's* landscape is thus the juxtaposition of the stillness of death, but also of movements: movement in

nature (trees, birds in flight, birdsongs); movement in culture: traffic; routine, everyday 'norms'; trains both viewed and viewing, therefore shuttling between visibility and invisibility.

Dealing with a destruction, *Tabula Rasa* contrasts the suspended temporality of the photographic image, that of a past returning to the present but always punctuated, in Barthes's terms, by the future preterite of a death that will have already occurred, with the mobile take of cinema, which is not so much temporal but spatial (Andermann 2012b). Yet, if we follow Avery Gordon (2008: xix), the film provides, at the end, a now 'free' vision of the inside, the spectres that inhabited the ESMA as a factory of pain now roaming freely into the emptied space: 'spectres and ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomised is no longer contained or repressed or blocked from view'. The film allows us not only to spectate, but to speculate, on the spectral effects; with the flattening (demolition), the erasure, the *deconstruction*, of Place, of Memory. And again, as in *El Predio*, the very I that is filming is dislocated, and silenced, albeit, again, a very loud silence.

What is at stake in *Tabula Rasa* is the constitution of an 'ethical gaze', as discussed by Bill Nichols in his meditations on the relationship between ethics and film. In trying to describe the moral implication of the diverse ways of looking inscribed in, and solicited by, non-fiction film, Nichols proposes the category of *axiographics*, which derives from the semiotic category of *axiology*, that is the study of values. The *axiographics* is 'the attempt to explore the implantation of values in the configuration of space, in the constitution of a gaze, and in the relation of observer to observed' (1991: 78). I have already pointed out how in the configuration of space, and especially in the relation of observer to observed, *El Predio* makes us not only see, but also feel the absence at play in the *memoryscape* it visually reveals. Yet *Tabula Rasa* digs even deeper into how an historical space might be turned into a cinematographic ethical landscape that makes space for the dead and for the pain they suffered. However, these values – here the very value of memory, its truths and the ways it mixes with the building of a national identity – are not discussed or debated: they emerge from a style of filming and a point of view; in sum, they are revealed by the way the film makes us see, with its haptic gaze and *montage*, as with the very values the block of building stood for, blocking the view of a factory of pain that was supposed to serve the idea of *Patria* and order, along with their transvaluation within a space of memory.

Not by chance, after the sequence of a 'still life' with rubbles, with a long travelling shot of the now empty ground, cleared, levelled, and ready for the new construction, the viewer is able to stare not only at an erased space, but also at the ruins of a past that still needs to be disposed of. The curtain made of concrete has been 'disappeared', crashed and mashed, to leave room for a new place that will soon be inhabited not only by the spectres of the *desaparecidos*, but also by the ghosts of the young soldiers that died in the Falklands-Malvinas conflict.

Ultimately, and in contrast with what happens in *El Predio*, here the time and *tempo* of a destruction is followed in its progression, in its beginning, but most of all in its terminativity. This process is briefly and ironically re-performed in the last sequence of the film where, back to the filmmaker study, we are shown Lego bricks scattered on a desktop. With an animation technique, the next shots show first the bricks re-arranged in the shape of the modules and then, with a fading, only the green base with no blocks, the *tabula* for the second time erased in order, as a writing on the screen informs us, to make space for the Museum: ‘The Malvinas Museum and Memorial will be constructed on this site – Filmed between July 2013 and January 2013’. What is being eradicated ‘becomes’ a reconstructed sign of the Museum dedicated to a war. The ephemerality not only of memory, but also of any construction, is thus evoked in the ludics of Lego, in the legacy of textuality, of constructivity on a *tabula* always potentially *rasa*.

To Conclude

I shall end as I started, that is with a quotation from Perel’s essay ‘Cinema as a counter monument’:

If monument-cinema creates a *map*, counter-monument cinema proposes a *journey* [...] A map refers us to that omniscient, distant, fixed point of view of static visualisation that tends to unification –which corresponds to monument-cinema. But the journey of counter-monument cinema challenges this map with the notion of an itinerary, a tour that creates space as it goes along, in the diversity and multiplicity of its possible orientations.⁹

The journey envisaged by *El Predio* and *Tabula Rasa* does indeed distance itself from the ‘omniscient...fixed point of view of static visualisation’ of the map, and it takes shape as we follow the itinerary of an invisible, yet embodied, observer into a fragmented landscape of memory. As Andermann (2012: 166) notes – writing about recent films from the Cono Sur–, it is a landscape that is not exhausted by a merely rhetorical or figurative dimension: the movement in space it offers us, in both documentary a movement given by the composition of the images and by *montage*, ‘is also the concrete, tangible form taken on by the work of mourning’. Andermann himself comments on how films such as *El Predio* and *Tabula Rasa* maintain an interest in the *present of enunciation* that points to the ‘nomadic tendency’ in new Argentine cinema. In producing such a landscape, both documentaries represent a critique of monumentality in their very construction of cinematic time and space, depicting, citing Deleuze again, a *place whatsoever*, where affect becomes available, loaded with an investment that is at once emotional and political. A *place whatsoever* is the opposite of a monumental place bearing clear markings and everlasting inscription of ‘the past’; and it is so not because it erases the marks of violence and loss that happened there, but because it radically questions

⁹ See footnote n. 3.

the ways in which they are rendered visible and public. Memory itself gets displaced, questioned and dispersed, re-inscribed in small details and sounds; its fragments avoiding the adding up to an easy 'reconciliation', but to 'perambulation and dissent'.

In sum, these two documentaries stand as counter-monuments, to return to James Young's formulation, not so much since they 'take their place in the landscape' but, as they provoke and challenge the very place they recount, interrupting its spatial continuity and the historical teleology of post-dictatorial narratives of transition.

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